

Orientations: Resting on Night¹

“The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object’s] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present unboundedness, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality.”

EMMANUEL KANT²

“The manifoldness of being lies between two nights, without support. It rests on nothing . . . and it ends in nothing.”

G. W. F. HEGEL³

In this essay I would like to offer several reflections about the limits of philosophical ethics, poetics, and persons today. My main suggestion will be that articulating such variegated and complex matters in our own times requires catching sight of something importantly similar yet finally different from what Hegel, in 1801 in Jena, while looking back on the philosophical turn of another century, called “the force of the negative absolute.”⁴

1. The Crime in Granada

To begin these Orientations, recall some lines from one of Antonio Machado’s (1875-1939) central poems, the elegiac lament for Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1939) “The Crime was in Granada.”

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He was seen, surrounded by rifles,
moving down a long street
and out to the country
in the chill before dawn, with the stars still out.
They killed Federico
at the first glint of daylight.
The band of assassins
shrank from his glance.
They all closed their eyes,
muttering: "See if God helps you now!"
Federico fell,
lead in his stomach, blood on his face.
And Granada was the scene of the crime.
Think of it – poor Granada –, his Granada. . . (LIII) ⁵

This 1936 poem still moves some readers deeply. Like the even greater "*llanto*" Lorca himself wrote for his friend, Ignacio Sanchez Mejias, fatally gored in a bullfight in Manzanares in August 1934, Machado's elegy exhibits an evocative verbal richness of sound and sense. The poem's multiple phonetic, syntactic, semantic, and even pragmatic aspects entrance most thoughtful readers immediately, and almost unwittingly, in a work of understanding and interpretation.

That work is multi-faceted. But at least three initial concerns are the focus of attempts to interpret the poetry of suffering here and elsewhere in modernist work: questions about meaning – what does the particular poem say? – questions about objectivity – how can any right answer here be genuinely independent of mind and language? – and questions about truth – is what the particular poem says right? For without some sense of the bases of meaning, objectivity, and truth, however we finally parse these freshly problematic terms today, we cannot even begin to account for this poetry's often almost apocalyptic hold on our imaginations.

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However provisional any response must remain in the ceaseless succession of creative and interpretive communities, Machado's poem – like so many other works on the unthinkable immensities of suffering in twentieth-century European high literary modernism – immediately challenges its readers to articulate a meditative response.

To recognize this challenge, we need only return to its conclusion. For whatever the many questions the poem's complex representations and rhythms raise both as a whole and throughout its parts, Machado's lament concludes even more enigmatically with a stark injunction to its implicit readers:

He was seen walking . . .
Friends, carve a monument
out of dream stone
for the poet in the Alhambra,
over a fountain where the grieving water
shall say forever:
The crime was in Granada, his Granada. (LIII)⁶

Part of what makes this conclusion enigmatic is the elusiveness of just what the attentive reader is to understand by the sense of time here, the memorial "dream stone," and the significance of where the monument should stand, "in the Alhambra,/ over a fountain. . . ."

Moreover, the recurring images of dreams and water suggest not only the central theme of time in the poetry of Machado but important contrasts as well. One such contrast is with the much more traditional ending of an earlier elegiac poem Machado wrote in 1915 and its very different prophecy for Spain:

Let his heart be at rest there
in an oak's pure shade,
where the wild thyme draws
the fitting yellow butterflies . . .

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Up there the master dreamed one day
that Spain would flower again. (CXXXIX)⁷

But we know today that Spain's Granada did not flower – “the crime was in Granada.” More puzzlingly, Machado ends his lament for Lorca with no traditional elegiac reconciliation as in the terrifyingly prescient ironies of the toast at the end of Machado's “*Siesta*” (CLXX), dedicated to the memory of one of his imaginary selves, the poet-philosopher, Abel Martín, fictive author of Machado's own sonnet “*Al Gran Cero*” (“To the Great Nought”).

By this glass filled with darkness to the brim
and this heart that's never full,
let us praise the Lord, maker of Nothingness,
who carved our reason out of faith. (CLXVII)

Of the many questions that the non-traditional ending of Machado's elegy raises for its interpreters, at least one insists on an answer. Can we know whether Machado was right in the reasons for his ironic and bitter condemnation, if not of the “maker of Nothingness” or even of Spain herself, at least of Granada? For without answering that question, Machado's interpreters can come to no reasonable account of the central enigmas of register, tone, and voice in this elegy's non-traditional ending.

In cases like these, interpreters often turn to literary and historical critics for help. But even in work that incorporates the intentional and new historicist corrections to the mistaken formalisms of the “New Criticism,” little agreement is to be found among even the most distinguished interpreters of one's own time and place. Consider the contrast between Machado's own interpretation of Lorca's murder and that of Ian Gibson, Lorca's most successful English biographer.⁸

Machado himself believed that Lorca's murder resulted both from the political considerations that motivated his Fascist oppo-

nents and from the complacency of the people of Granada. "Could Granada have defended its poet?" Machado asks in an undated letter from 1936 or 1937. And he answers unequivocally: "I think so."

Machado finds in his own poem, he tells us, "a feeling of bitter reproach, which implies an accusation against Granada. "For the fact is," he continues, "that Granada . . . is . . . one of the stupidest cities in Spain, one of the most self-satisfied in its isolation and through the influence of a depraved and idle aristocracy and hopelessly provincial middle class."

But with the benefit of hindsight and his own exhaustive research, Lorca's biographer disagrees with this judgment. Lorca's murder was the result not of political scheming and bourgeois apathy but of a "personal vendetta." Interpreters therefore can make a rational decision here, one based on careful empirical examination of the available background materials.

The particular question then as to how we are to interpret Machado's non-traditional ending for his version of the classical form of the elegy can be resolved in large part by an appeal to historical circumstance. Moreover, perhaps part of the negative, although nuanced, judgment Machado himself made of his own elegy for Lorca – "not very highly elaborated aesthetically," he writes in the same letter – can also be taken as a function of Machado's mistaken views about the cause of Lorca's murder.

But this reasonable response to a particular interpretive question invites reflection on a more general question. Just what understanding of rationality and reason, we may ask, is at work in this representative instance of a highly plausible interpretation of a modernist work?

On the evidence of how particular hermeneutical conundrums in Machado's poetry and that of so many other modernist poets are often resolved, I suggest that the primary understanding of reason

here is itself modernist – a modernist view of reason as preeminently “instrumental.”

An instrumental view of reason – one with modern origins in Locke’s (1632-1704) protracted quarrels with Descartes’ (1596-1650) views about the relative value of belief or knowledge, probability or certainty – construes the nature of reason in functional terms.⁹

Reason accordingly is both a capacity to order goals and their interrelations as well as a capacity to select efficient means for the realization of such goals. More specifically, an interpreter or critic may be said to be acting rationally under an instrumentalist view of reason when he or she either exhibits internal consistency in the actual choices of the goals and means for an interpretation, or acts in such a way as to maximize the interests that guide interpretation. In the first case, instrumental rationality is centered on a consistency of choice, whereas in the second, the accent falls on a correspondence of choice with aims.¹⁰

In both cases, this instrumental understanding of rationality focuses on the choice of effective means for the realization of goals already on hand. Moreover, in both cases an instrumentalist understanding of reason necessarily objectifies interpretive goals and means as a condition for their subsequent representation as a function of a binary relation. In neither case, however, does the understanding of reason extend to the identification, description, articulation, appraisal, and selection of the goals themselves.

In the interpretation of much but not all modernist works of literature, such as we find in the example here of recourse to historical circumstances for interpreting the untraditional ending of Machado’s elegy, interpretive procedures are seen as rational mainly to the degree that they succeed in objectifying linguistic functions in the literary work while allowing both flexibility for con-

sistent variation and permutation within the domain of the work itself. Features of the work are objectified in the sense that they are isolated for description within the work.

And the key to an interpretation's rationality or reasonableness is the restriction of putative representational and referential elements of the work to verifiable intersubjective inspection. Most if not all of what lies beyond the work itself and the objectified elements of its linguistic structures is construed as not strongly pertinent to the kind of rational reflection taken as most relevant for interpreting literary works of art.

Interpretation of modernist literature is rational then to the degree that it is genuinely instrumental. Such an instrumentally rational hermeneutic involves reference, representation, and objectivity. And these are understood as not completely restricted to the linguistic domains of the work itself.

Nevertheless, each is taken as strongly determined by actual linkages believed to hold mainly among the elements within the work. Only an interpretation that construes reference, representation, and objectivity in strongly textual terms – implicitly claiming that these are the understandings of interpretation most suitable to modernist work – can be properly justified.

In short, reason properly understood in instrumental terms can indeed elucidate literary works of art. And reason in interpretive practice has sufficient warrant to explore at least some of the putative interactions between literary works and the world. The goals of reason here center primarily, however, on the perspicuous exhibition of linguistic functions of the literary work itself, and then only secondarily (if at all) on their problematic referents in the actual world. And the various means of rational interpretive practice encompass a wide spectrum of contemporary versions of what is still called "close reading."

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Now, we must grant that providing a rational interpretation of the non-traditional ending of Machado's elegy and its link with the causes of Lorca's murder is not without some difficulty.

Still, we need to question whether any satisfactorily plausible interpretation of Machado's elegy can be expected from even accomplished interpreters when, with just this instrumental understanding of reason, they confront today such allusive and polysemous narrative sequences as, to take a final example from Machado's lament, these lines describing Lorca's murderers:

They all closed their eyes,
muttering: "See if God helps you now!"
Federico fell,
lead in his stomach, blood on his face.
And Granada was the scene of the crime.
Think of it – poor Granada –, his Granada . . ."

Several features of these lines could make a plausible interpretation difficult to articulate: the nature of this kind of peculiar narrative, the presentation of characters through tableaux, the disparate pragmatic effects of repeating the last two lines from other places in the elegy. I would want however to stress here just one deeply problematic feature, the deeply interrelated questions of meaning, sense, and significance.

For just how we are to parse the extraordinarily dense and embedded direct quotation of Federico's homophobic murderers, itself a presumably unwitting direct quotation of malicious onlookers at the crucifixion of Jesus – "See if God helps you now!" – is still at issue. Why should God be expected to help Federico? Is Federico in some sense Jesus? Does the suffering of Jesus encompass in mysterious ways the suffering of Federico? Is that suffering, in spite

of the mockery, mysteriously redemptive even of the mockers? In short, what construals of meaning, sense, and significance would be appropriate for interpreting reasonably such examples of fictive utterances as these elegiac lines?

Before recalling several of the underlying philosophical questions about the satisfactoriness of this instrumental construal of reason in modernist understandings of the interpretation of modernist works, I would first like to consider a very different view of rational interpretation, one operative in a postmodernist context.

2. Renewing Philosophical Ethics

In general, I have come first to suspect and then to argue that, at the end of the bloodiest of centuries and still at the beginnings of another, one fundamental pattern for attempting to comprehend the totality of everything that is – call it quite roughly, “the twentieth-century scientific and technological worldview” – has come rightly under increasing philosophical scrutiny.

Such a comprehensive pattern of intelligibility, rationality, meaning, truth, objectivity, and significance can leave nothing unchanged. Consequently, our understandings, however various, of philosophical ethics today have also come increasingly into question.

I would like to bring into sharper focus several aesthetic and metaphysical considerations that might not improperly be taken as part of our common task of rethinking the nature of philosophical ethics today.

In view of so many horrendous historical tragedies in the last two centuries, Hegel proposed a negative reflection on such general questions. “Good Friday,” he proposed, “must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its Godforsakenness.” Today, perhaps one positive form of such overly general reflections

about the nature of philosophical ethics might run: just what are we to understand as the cardinal subject matter for a renewed philosophical ethics?

In other work to this point, my proposal has been threefold. The cardinal subject for a renewed philosophical ethics today, I have argued (with the help of some late Kantian (1724-1804) philosophical fictions, the hinge on which some ongoing investigations into contemporary philosophical attempts to integrate of normative and metaethical ethics¹¹ should turn), is what I have called “the negative sublime.”

The negative sublime may be taken speculatively as the cognitive realisation of the “supersensible” nature of the mind through the experience of the inexorable, unending, yet impossible attempts to conceptualize both the unthinkable magnitudes of suffering and the unthinkable magnitudes of the powers that wreak such suffering. Only the mind, Kant asserts, is sublime; only the mindfulness of suffering, I have argued, is negatively sublime.¹²

If the subject for a renewed philosophical ethics for our own times may be taken as a negative sublime, then some investigations into such obscure matters, I have also argued, may yield “ethical truths,” but truths of a special order, which I have termed “truths of suffering.” That is, if we are to talk properly about “truths” in historical and not merely philosophical contexts, we will need to think twice about sophisticated contemporary versions of both correspondence and coherence theories, not of the criterion of truth, but of the nature of truth.

In other words, justification of proposals about supposed “ethical truths” of this kind will need to rely strongly on some quite careful version of a mixed theory of truth. Moreover, articulating such ethical truths will require as well a careful and sustained attentiveness to the linguistic resources of metaphorical and symbolic uses of figu-

rative idioms and not an exclusive reliance on the uses of “literal” language.

Such speculative investigations into the nature of a renewed philosophical ethics for our own times may yield thoughtful glimpses of what ceaselessly summons all of our philosophical understanding, the still ungraspable truths of suffering.

To realize, even if not to grasp, such truths of suffering is to apprehend the darkening borders of ethical reflection itself. In other words, realizing the “supersensible” nature of the mind in the varied experiences of a negative sublime in our own dark times – meditating the sufferings of a Srebrenica, a Rwanda, a Kosovo – make possible in turn a second, more difficult realization. This second realization concerns the cutting edge of finitude, that is, the necessarily limited nature of any substantive philosophical inquiry into the metaphysical status of the referents of such putative ethical truths as “the truths of suffering.”

Understanding this species of contingency, of non-necessity, I have been arguing, is an “apprehension” of the limits of philosophical ethics today in a double sense. Such a philosophical understanding is an “apprehension” in the reassuringly clear sense of being a conceptual articulation of those limits. But such philosophical understanding is also an “apprehension” in the disquietingly obscure sense of being what our English dictionaries call neither a foreboding, nor a misgiving, nor even, echoing early drafts of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a Fichtean (1762-1814) “presentiment.”

Rather, “apprehension” here is “a fearful anticipation that something adverse is going to happen,”¹³ that something more than philosophically but something unthinkable evil will continue to expand the universe with the dark matter of the unfathomable abysses of suffering.

Three points, then, we must consider: the negative sublime, the truths of suffering, and apprehending the limits of reason.

More simply, I have come to the reasoned but deeply upsetting and still confusing conviction that a renewed philosophical ethics today, whether an eco-ethics or an ethics of the negative sublime or some other ethics, must recover a speculative and not merely formal and material aspect, a truly lined and no longer airbrushed countenance, the no-longer remembered face and annihilated aspect of a philosophy of suffering.

In trying to elucidate such speculative proposals a bit more clearly, I begin once again with several of the many unforgettable verbal images of our distinctive twentieth-century's poetry of suffering, words whose inadequate philosophical reflections might still bring the idea of a philosophical ethics today beyond the limits of conceptual understanding to the only darkly intuited borders of reason itself.

3. Interpretation and Rationality

In trying to answer this question we do well to clarify here our central expressions, "interpretation" and "rationality."

Two basic senses of the ambiguous word, "interpretation," come clear in their modern uses at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the seminal period in modern aesthetics, art history, and criticism. In his essay, *Alciphron* (1732), the Irish philosopher, George Berkeley (1685-1753), writes of interpretation as primarily a process, "a way of . . . explaining," he says.¹⁴ Almost a generation earlier, however, in the periodical, *The Tatler* (1709), the English essayist and poet, Joseph Addison, takes interpretation primarily as the result of a process, "a construction put upon action," he says.

This early dichotomy between Berkeley's philosophical stress on the interpretive process and Addison's literary accent on the interpretive product involves two points. The first has to do with view-

ing the process in terms of explanation; the second with taking the product as a construction.

More recently, the process of interpretation – the mental acts the expression “to interpret” is taken to denote – has come to include the varied notions of explaining the meaning of something, construing the significance of something, a critic’s conceptualizing the meaning of a work of art, and a performer’s rendering a distinctly personal vision of, say, a musical piece. For our purposes we may say that a composite view of contemporary and modern historical understandings of interpretation as both process and product comprises at least the following four components.

An interpretation is (1) either the capacity for performing acts of elucidation, explication, and explanation, or the product of such acts. Second, interpretation is (2) a process or way of performing such acts. Sometimes, “interpretation” (3) includes the normative idea of the way in which some processes are to be performed, or the ways in which some things are to be elucidated, explicated, or explained. Finally, interpretation can be taken, richly, as (4) a construal, a rendering, even, in Addison’s very suggestive word, as a “construction.” In what follows I will take the word, “interpretation,” mainly to denote the product of the interpretative process.

Much more of course could be said about the uses of “interpretation.” Some would elaborate on interpretation as explication by looking to practices of parsing in the teaching of the Greek and Latin classics, or to “*explication de texte*” in French pedagogy, or to nineteenth-century German practices of biblical exegesis. Others would link talk of interpretation as elucidation to Wittgensteinian (1889-1951) philosophical practices. And still others would explore contrasts between interpretation as explanation and interpretation as understanding in Dilthey (1833-1911) and Weber (1864-1920) or in the still proliferating species of explanation in the various sciences.¹⁵

What then of our second key term, “rationality?”

Generally, rationality is a goal-directed process, a matter of “the effective and efficient achievement of the goods, desires, and ends that people have.” The rationality of a belief, we say, is its “responsiveness to the reasons for and against” the belief. And the rationality of an action, we say, is the reliability of a “process by which these reasons are generated” (107).

Thus, the rationality of a belief or an action depends on two essential features: one, the reasons for holding that belief or performing that action, the other, the reliability of the processes either for producing the belief or performing the action (65). Although closely linked, however, reasons and reliability are probably not jointly sufficient for generating the rationality of a particular belief or action. This lack of joint sufficiency suggests that the rationality of beliefs and actions allows of degrees.

With respect to those beliefs that make up an interpretation, we may distinguish between the rationality of interpretive beliefs and their reasonableness. The rationality of the constituent beliefs of an interpretation concerns what is sufficiently reasonable for the interpretation; this rationality is not a matter of degree. By contrast, the reasonability of the constituent beliefs concerns the relative strength of the reasons for each belief; this reasonability therefore is a matter of degree.

Concretely, we can then say that an account of a representative instance of the twentieth-century’s distinctive poetry of suffering, Antonio Machado’s “The Crime Was in Granada,” is an “interpretation” when that account articulates the results of a series of diverse mental processes as a product of more or less probable sets of interpretive beliefs about the sense and significance of the poem. Likewise, we can say that an interpretation such a poem of suffering is “rational” when that interpretation is sufficiently reasonable,

i.e., when it exhibits the relative strengths of the reasons for each of its constituent beliefs.¹⁶

When we construe too strongly the rationality of an interpretation in the various domains of the arts, when for example we interpret the distinctive twentieth-century poetry of suffering with an exclusively instrumental, procedural, and relativistic understanding of reason and rationality only, our interpretation runs the serious risk of imposing on such shadowy yet greatly significant work conceptions of meaning, truth, and objectivity that are, whatever their own problems, far too strict, far too clear. What calls for interpretation in such poetry often vanishes “in an excess of light.”

When, by contrast, we think of the reasonableness of such interpretation with a more substantive, constructionalist idea of reason and rationality in mind, one that offers looser, more speculative accounts of objectivity, truth, and meaning, we often can catch a glimpse of what is at stake in such extraordinary work, not as elements of some overarching explanatory epistemic “theory” of literary interpretation, but as “aspects yellowing darkly.”¹⁷

How to interpret reasonably, and not just rationally, such aspects yellowing darkly, at the end of time like these, times still of night and fog, remains of course only part of our continuing philosophical task today.

These elucidations of the central uses of the expressions, “interpretation” and “rationality,” are helpful in a modest way. They do enable us to answer the question as to what would count as a reasonable interpretation of a piece of verbal art such as “The Crime Was in Granada,” for we now have some clarity about the senses of the key terms in the question some philosophers continue to ask. The problem, however, is that these elucidations do not seem to touch in any way on what “reasonable interpretation” should open out onto, and open us out into: a “metaphysical space.”

Are we to understand then that talk of “metaphysical space” simply does not belong in the same kind of rational discourse as talk of “reasonable interpretation?” No. I want to hold, to the contrary, that understanding what counts as “reasonable interpretations” of such works of verbal art as “Psalm” depends upon antecedent philosophical investigations into certain speculative construals of “metaphysical space.”

4. The Force of the Negative

Several ways are available for making philosophical sense of the speculative notion of “metaphysical space.” One notion of “metaphysical space,” for example, may be linked to one of the final stages of an interpretive process. At this stage a synthesis of the various aesthetic judgments that have accompanied each of the preceding stages of interpretation is achieved; it is in connection with this synthesis that the notion of “metaphysical space” may appear.

The word, “synthesis,” here refers to the process of bringing together into a conceptual unity the disparate and scattered judgments that the interpreter has come to in the course of his or her systematic reflections on the sense and significance of the verbal artwork. But just as we saw with the notion of “interpretation,” so too the notion of “synthesis” refers to the product of these processes.

When taken as a product rather than as a process, the synthesis of different antecedent and particular aesthetic judgments reveals a particular “entelechy” of the verbal artwork itself. This “entelechy” is said to appear inside a “metaphysical space.” “All the [previous] aesthetic judgments,” the modern Japanese philosopher Imamichi Tomonobu (1920-2018) has written,

are concentrated in a metaphysical space beyond the imagination in order to acquire a single interpretation in which the en-

telechy of a poetic work is revealed. . . . There is not a multitude of interpretations; there is a figural variety of one single absolute form of the interpretation on which the human spirit, having been revealed and illumined by the [particular] aesthetic judgments at the antecedent stages, undertakes a voyage to the idea of the beautiful, an intellectual search.¹⁸

These remarks about interpretation in the domain of the verbal arts are speculatively rich, deserving close attention. Without claiming to exhaust the suggestiveness of these remarks, I would like to underline for the moment several points only.

The particular judgments that the previous stages of the interpretive process have yielded are described here as being concentrated in a synthesis, one located in what is called a metaphysical space. This space itself is explicitly described as lying “beyond the imagination,” that is, situated in some domain beyond the reach of any interpreter’s imaginative powers, however extensive.

For reasons that are nowhere stated, the synthesis can come about only in this domain of metaphysical space. And when the synthesis of particular judgments does occur in the metaphysical space, the “entelechy” of the poetic work is able to become manifest in one, single interpretation. But just what does this claim mean?

Recall that, for the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, actually doing something is contrasted with potentially doing something. In some contexts when discussing “actually” doing something, Aristotle sometimes uses various grammatical forms of the word, “*energeia*,” and sometimes forms of the word, “*entelecheia*.” That is, in some contexts, Aristotle seems to use these different expressions synonymously. In other contexts, however, Aristotle seems to be suggesting a nuance between the different expressions, such that in English “actuality” usually stands for Aristotle’s expression “*energeia*,” while “*entelecheia*” is usually rendered as “realization”.¹⁹

With the help of this historical reminder perhaps we may now gloss part of Imamichi Tomonobu's speculative claim that in the metaphysical space, the "entelechy" of the poetic work becomes manifest in one, single interpretation in the following way. The potential sense and significance of a particular poetic work that is subject to a particular interpretive process is "actualized" in one interpretive product only: namely, "actualized" in just that set of interpretive beliefs that succeeds in "realizing" the work's sense and significance. «*Tous les jugements esthétiques se concentrent à l'espace métaphysique au-delà de l'imagination,*» Imamichi Tomonobu writes, «*afin d'acquérir une seule interprétation, en quoi entéléchie d'une oeuvre poétique se révèle.*»

But what about the "metaphysical space" itself, the domain that makes possible both the actualization and realization of the sense and significance of the poetic work?

This domain, we observed, is said to lie "beyond the imagination." And, farther on in the same passage translated above, Imamichi claims that the single interpretation in which the sense and significance of the poetic work is both actualized and realized becomes a vehicle for the human spirit in its quest for the idea of the beautiful.

The work of interpretation in the storied realms of aesthetics is largely a work of understanding and imagination; but the implication here is that such a work must be as well one of reason and the spirit. How would we understand such interpretive work in the particular case of the twentieth century's distinctive poetry of suffering as one of "reason" and "spirit?"

We need not involve ourselves here either in detailed historical investigations or in the difficult but finally necessary analytic work of conceptual description about the nature, kinds, and relations among our various intellectual capacities and intellectual activities as human beings. But a word more, in perhaps a related but differ-

ent speculative idiom, may prove helpful in trying to elucidate this talk of interpretive understanding, imagination, reason, and spirit.

In the very early pages of his 1801 *Differenzschrift*, Hegel writes initially of his own “historical view of philosophical systems” and of “the need of philosophy.” He then proceeds to offer a series of general comments about the transition from the need of philosophy to that peculiar instrument for the practice of philosophy that he calls “reflection.”

“Philosophical reflection,” he claims, “is the mediation of this contradiction.” That is, philosophical “reflection” mediates the contradiction between the positing in reflection of the Absolute as the unlimited, and, simultaneously (since such a reflective positing would necessarily limit the unlimited Absolute), the cancelling of this improperly limited position.²⁰

Hegel, however, distinguishes between two senses of “reflection.” The first is what he calls “reflection in isolation” as a limited capacity; the second is what he calls “reflection as reason” in reason’s connection with the unlimited Absolute. “Reflection in isolation” posits opposites, whereas “reflection as reason,” Hegel claims, “nullifies itself” because it connects all limited entities to the unlimited Absolute.

Are we then to entertain seriously the idea that when “interpretive understanding” is more than just interpretive understanding, it may be taken as “interpretive reflection” – indeed, as “reasonable interpretive reflection?” But this is too hasty; let us first turn to further details.

Every individual entity, “every being,” as Hegel claims, “because it is posited, is an opposite, it is conditioned and conditioning. The intellect completes these limitations by positing the opposite limitations as conditions. These need to be completed in the same way, so the intellect’s task expands *ad infinitum*.”²¹

In these respects what Hegel is calling “intellect” here seems very much the same as “interpretive understanding.” The notion of

an infinitely expanding task opening up before the understanding, however, suggests a special role here for what Hegel is calling “reason.” What then is this special role?

“Reason,” Hegel writes figuratively in the same place, “raises the intellect above itself. . . Reason seduces the intellect into producing an objective totality. . . Reason makes the intellect boundless. . . .” But how does reason accomplish all this?

Hegel continues:

“. . . in the very positing and determining that have occurred there lies a non-positing and something indeterminate, and hence the task of positing and determining recurs perpetually. If the intellect fixes these opposites, the finite and the infinite, so that both are supposed to subsist together as opposed to each other, then it destroys itself. For the opposition of finite and infinite means that to posit the one is to cancel the other. When reason recognizes [may we say “realizes?”] this, it has suspended the intellect itself. Its positing then appears to reason to be non-positing, its products to be negations.”

As Hegel writes in summary: “reflection, the faculty of the finite, and the infinite opposed to it are *synthesized* in reason whose infinity embraces the finites within it” (my emphasis).

In the context of these remarks of Hegel, I would like to propose that the “metaphysical space” in which alone a synthesis of aesthetic judgments can come about in such a way that one, single interpretation both actualizes and realizes the sense and significance of the verbal artwork – this metaphysical space is not the space of interpretive understanding but of reasonable interpretation. And it is only this speculative kind of reasonable interpretation that can both quicken the human spirit and embark the human spirit on a voyage of discovery not just of beauty but of truth and oneness as well.

But the “reason” under discussion here is not that pale shadow of functional and relativistic reason that continues to inform so much

of our philosophical thinking about ethics since Descartes and Locke. This “reason” is something else altogether.

“Reason” here, the reason that would aspire to the simultaneous actualization and realization in one, single interpretation of the sense and significance of the verbal work of art today, presents itself in an almost unimaginable way. “Reason,” Hegel writes cryptically, “presents itself as the force of the negative Absolute, and hence as a negating that is absolute...”²²

May we say not improperly that metaphysical space then is the space between the two nights in which “the manifold of beings” and philosophical ethics itself is suspended? The first night is the night of a philosophical understanding that aspires to cancel itself at the dark borders of ethics today. The second night is the night of a philosophical reason that succeeds in negating whatever opposites philosophical understanding cannot help but posit. “The manifoldness of being,” Hegel claims in the same passage where he speaks of reason as the force of the negative absolute, “lies between two nights, without support. It rests on night . . . and it ends in nothing.”

Are we then to ask figuratively that the renewal of philosophical ethics today, at the end of the bloodiest of centuries and still at the beginnings of yet another bloody century, must find suitably philosophical means for dealing with something that is doubly benighted, ethics as a kind of inquiry resting on night and ending in nothing?

5. Metaphysical Spaces?

Recall one of the poems of Paul Celan (1920-1970):

Psalm

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

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

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose.
With
our pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.

When we listen to and read more closely at a poem like “Psalm,” in the context of so much other later twentieth-century poetry that is preoccupied with the genuine and difficult intellectual work of representing the limits of incomprehensible suffering, we notice immediately in the very title and the apparent genre of such an utterance, deeply veiled allusions to a now intellectually almost inaccessible yet still barely remembered and shared Jewish, Christian, and Islamic vision of human creation in a spiritual universe.

The central and terrible play of language in this piece is not theological; it is a logical sleight-of-hand with negative personal pronouns, so familiar, even in translation, from Alice’s linguistic misadventures with a “no one” in a wonderland lit up repeatedly with all of the linguistic pyrotechnics of an excellent logician.

In the second part of “Psalm,” however, the uses of the expression, “no one,” are intertwined with the parallel uses of the expression, “nothing.” If a “no one” is poetically presented as moulding human beings out of dust, what “no one” moulds is finally not a thing; it is a “no-thing,” a “nothing.” More specifically, “no one” moulds something.

This ‘something,’ the poet (in the extenuating struggles of his verbal wrestlings with the impossible angel of a strict literalness here and throughout his work) restates – first, neither indefinitely as “a nothing,” nor just definitely as “the nothing,” but definitely and incompletely, in the gaping punctuation of a voiceless, hence unutterable, unperformable hyphen, as “the nothing-, the. . .” Successively, we have “the nothing-,” a sequence of definite article, incomplete substantive, hyphen, comma, even breath, then the single word “the” in a sequence comprising repetition of the definite article, line break, hiatus, run-on to another substantive, itself a silent, unquoted, citation. For, immediately running on, we overhear in our minds Rilke’s epitaphic “rose, oh pure contradiction, joy / of being no-one’s sleep” (*Niemandes Schlaf*) becoming Celan’s “the nothing-, the / no one’s rose” (*Niemandrose*).

The poet concludes by taking up the earlier images of human lives as heliotropic flowers, where Montale’s sunflowers become thorny roses though no less tropic, glimpsed now as “flowering towards” no sun, no god at all. Rather, the flowers turn inexorably, the shapes and colors of their own powers of reproduction towards whatever might be surmised in the play of a pronoun become a proper name, “your name,” says the poet, in the most unstuttered of his several mother tongues, “*Niemand*.”

The organs of the flowering rose are “soul-bright” yet “heaven-ravaged,” and the rose’s corolla is “red.” It is “red,” the poem ends, not with the crimson, purple colour of a fading now drooping red

rose. The corolla is “red with the crimson word which we say / over, O over / the thorn” – it is inexorably, unutterably red, it is “red with the crimson word”.

This work is neither a modernist work nor a postmodernist text. To preserve its profoundly alienating intimacy I have referred to it earlier, all the more abstractly, as “a piece,” a piece of language, a piece of verbal art that takes away our peace, that first brings pain, then stirs up in us what Kant called those “intellectual feelings” that may compel recognition of our radical contingencies.

“Reasonably interpreting” such a piece seems here too ambitious a description for the struggle just to apprehend this thing, this kind of saying which is and which is not a psalmic singing. We need then to set aside questions about genre – as if the shattered, mineralized tesserae of language that so much of this poet’s posthumous work uncovers could be sorted – for it is neither elegy nor lament nor even, with its desperate and almost despairing blasphemies, psalm.

And we must disregard the endless syntactical play of proper noun, pronoun, and paradox, the definite and the indefinite, pass by the changing transpositions of the negatives, the syncopated rhythms in the voicings of the fractured lines, the rests the *accelerandi* and the *ritardandi* in the broken punctuation, the unvoiceable hyphen, and so much else. Rather, we need to focus, in concluding, on the final subject in the cadenza, “. . . the crimson word which we sang / over, O over / the thorn.”

I do not think we can succeed in apprehending what such a piece exhibits here by any appeal to the usual understandings and practices of rational interpretation that so many critics deploy so fruitfully in reading closely such European high modernist poems of suffering as, for example, Antonio Machado’s “The Crime Was in Granada.”

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“He was seen, surrounded by rifles,
Moving down a long street
And out to the country
In the chill before dawn, with the stars still out.

...

They all closed their eyes,
Muttering: “See if God helps you now!”
Federico fell,
lead in his stomach, blood on his face.
And Granada was the scene of the crime.
Think of it – poor Granada –, his Granada . . .²³

Most often these understandings of rational interpretation imply an understanding of reason and rationality unduly restricted to the choice of suitable means for achieving interpretive goals already agreed upon antecedently. Means must be chosen consistent with prescribed ends, and the means chosen must correspond to those prescribed ends. These interpretive means, once determined in light of an instrumental view of reason, are then applied in such a way as to maximize the interpretive outcome. Once agreed antecedently that the linguistic features of Machado’s non-traditional unreconciling conclusion to his elegy for Lorca may allow of psychological and historical clarification, appropriate scholarly and historical means are chosen to yield the required results.

But if Machado’s un-elegiac conclusions in such lines as “The crime was in Granada, his Granada” may require an understanding of rational interpretation that implies an instrumentalist account of reason, apprehending “the crimson word” must imply something very different. For in this case, but not in Machado’s, our aims or goals or purposes in meditating such pieces are not captured at all by talk of explanation or understanding.

Apprehending “the crimson word” does not seem to be a work of interpretation at all. Whatever “objectivity” such an apprehension could have must surely require second thoughts about what we usually call objective. Quite provisionally, then, I have called such efforts to apprehend so obscure a matter as what is on exhibit in this piece “a desire of reason.”²⁴

Similarly, I do not think we can succeed in apprehending “the crimson word” by any appeal to a strongly relativistic account of interpretation and truth as plausibility. This is the view that arises from privileging concerns to adjudicate the incongruent claims of differing interpreters when they make critical judgments about such postmodernist texts as, for example, some of Josef Brodsky’s celebrated poems.

Most often these practices imply an understanding of rational interpretation and truth that unduly restricts our concerns to assessment and appraisal. The qualities of the text are to be identified, their relations charted, and, after many peregrinations, their effects on communities of competent readers articulated as artistic value judgments. Delivering a rational interpretation comes to deploying a particular understanding of reason as internally relativistic so as to be able to account finally for the plausibility and compatibility of those incongruent judgments on which dissenting interpretive communities might finally achieve consensus.

But once again, if rationally interpreting Machado’s repeated orchestrations of tone and voice in his lament for Lorca implies an idea of reason and rationality that centres on the power to adjudicate the truth-like values of equally plausible but not equally true incongruent judgments, apprehending “the crimson word” requires something else altogether.

In Celan’s case, but not in Machado’s, we are most often not even able to articulate whatever we may be tempted to qualify as true.

“The crimson word” eludes assessment and appraisal just as certainly as it eludes explanation and understanding. Therefore, the bases for judging such a word rightly can be “objective,” if at all, only in some non-standard ways.

“The crimson word” is no utterance at all. “The crimson word” in the piece we have been considering is a broken phrase only, like a broken line on a stone entablature destroyed with the Second Temple, a momentary interruption only in some unending quasi-psalmic singing inside an “impossible possible” spiritual world. And, if apprehending the crimson word is not a work of understanding, it does not seem to be a work of reason either.

Instead and again provisionally, with an echo only of the ecstatic strains in the apophatic poetry of a Teresa of Avila or a John of the Cross, perhaps we may call the fruitless attempt to apprehend what makes itself heard in “the crimson word” an ejaculation of the spirit, “a spiritual ejaculation.”

The attempt to interpret reasonably “the crimson word,” and more generally the distinctive twentieth-century’s poetry of suffering, may be called a desire of reason because it can be but a residue of the mind’s ineluctable drive to comprehend what can lie only beyond the limits of the mind. And the attempt to reasonably interpret the crimson word, and generally the poetry of human suffering, may be called an ejaculation of the spirit because it can be but an intermittent discharge only of that aspiration towards a completeness for which the world can provide no instance.

Envoi: The Dark Bounds of Ethics

In times like ours, in what often seems an incomprehensible metaphysical space at the dark borders of ethics today – night and fog – where the possibility of a renewed philosophical ethics

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is hardly to be imagined, how could such reasonable desires, such spiritual ejaculations, be taken as philosophical?

Only when reason and spirit discover the dark borders of ethics today, the bounds between two nights. Because only at such dark boundaries where limits are finally divined, can philosophical reflection be irremediably and harshly cancelled by the overwhelming force of an absolute negative, by Hegel's strictly philosophical Good Friday, speculatively re-established at last in its "Godforsakenness."

Endnotes for Orientations

- 1 This text is a revised version of a paper first published as “Resting on Night and Ending in Nothingness: Philosophical Ethics Today.” *Revue internationale de philosophie modern* (Tokyo), 17 (1999), 199-216.
- 2 Akademie Ausgabe (hereafter AA), V, p. 244; tr. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 98.
- 3 *Theorie Werkausgabe* (hereafter TW), II, pp. 432-33; tr. W. Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 191
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Antonio Machado, *Selected Poems*, tr. A. S. Trueblood (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 262-65. The Roman numeral in the text refers to the numbering of groups of poems in the last publication of his work that Machado himself supervised in 1936. This numbering is carried over into the definitive text edited by Oreste Macri, *Poesie de Antonio Machado* with Italian translations facing the Spanish text (3rd. ed. Milan: Lerici, 1969). This edition in turn is the basis for Trueblood’s English translations cited here.
- 6 Machado, *Selected Poems*, p. 153.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 303 and 303-304 respectively.
- 8 Ian Gibson, *The Assassination of Federico Garcia Lorca* 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1983).
- 9 See for example, P. McCormick, *Modernities: Histories, Beliefs, and Values* (Nordhausen: Bausch Verlag, 2019).
- 10 *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: PUP, 1993), p. 65. More generally, see the useful discussions in S. Nathanson’s *The Ideal of Rationality*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), especially pp. 215-228. And for an important contrasting account, see G. G. Granger, *La Raison*, 10th ed. (Paris: PUF, 1993), esp., pp. 21, 72-75, and 119-24.
- 11 Among many examples of such contemporary work see Stephen Darwell, *Philosophical Ethics* (Westview: Boulder, Colorado: 1998), especially the first two chapters, pp. 3-27.
- 12 For the especially important Kantian text see Tanehisa Otabe, “Three Aspects of Being Aesthetic in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment: Becoming Aesthetically Conscious, Aesthetic Magnitude, and Aesthetic Ideas*,” *JTLA [Journal of the Faculty of Letters]*, (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo, Faculty of Letters), 42/43 (2017/2018), 61-67.
- 13 See, for example, the uses, etymologies, and extensive discussion of synonyms under the entry, “apprehension,” in the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
- 14 For this citation and the several others about the history of the word “interpretation,” see the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary.

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- ¹⁵ For the Dilthey-Weber connections see, among others, R. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Sciences* (Princeton: PUP, 1975), p. 320. For the very many uses of explanation in the sciences see Wesley C. Salmon, *Four Decades of Scientific Explanation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), esp. pp. 180-86.
- ¹⁶ For an elaboration of these points please see my earlier International Taniguchi Symposium of Philosophy paper, "The Oblivion of the World: Eco-Ethica, Aesthetics, and the Primary of the Metaphysical," *Revue internationale de philosophie moderne*, 15 (Tokyo, 1997), 189-226, esp. pp. 205-215. In summary, the reasonableness and not just the rationality of a sufficiently warranted literary interpretation includes considerations of ratification and not just explanation, externalism and not just internalism, and perspectives on aptness and not just on justification.
- ¹⁷ Eugenio Montale writes in his *Ossi di seppia* (1926):
*Gloria del disteso mezzogiorno
 quand'ombra non rendono gli alberi,
 e piu e piu si mostrano d'attorno
 per troppa luce, le parvenze, falbe.*
 [Glory of the spread out midday sun
 when shade is not rendered by the trees,
 and more and more all around appear,
 In too much light, aspects yellowing darkly.]
- ¹⁸ See T. Imamichi, «Pour l'entéléchie de l'expérience esthétique au cas de la poésie,» *Journal of the Faculty of Letters* [University of Tokyo], 5 (1980), pp. 64-65; my translation.
- ¹⁹ See, for example, the "Glossary" of T. H. Irwin and G. Fine, the English translators of the *Nichomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).
- ²⁰ The English translation is that of H. S. Harris and W. Cerf, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 94. Here, and throughout my citations I have slightly modified the translation. For example I sometimes write "entity" for "being" and "reason" for "Reason," etc.
- ²¹ *Differenzschrift*, p. 17; tr. p. 95.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 17; tr. pp. 94-95.
- ²³ Antonio Machado, "The Crime Was in Granada: To Federico Garcia Lorca," tr. A. S. Trueblood, *Antonio Machado: Selected Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982), pp. 263-265. See the notes on this poem in A. Machado, *Lands of Castile and Other Poems*, tr. P. Burns and S. Ortiz-Carboneres (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 2002), p. 118, where the translators indicate Machado's many clear evocations in this elegy of lines from several of Lorca's own poems on death.
- ²⁴ See my 1995 Taniguchi International Symposium of Philosophy paper, "Eco-Ethica, War, and the Negative Sublime," *Revue internationale de philosophie moderne*, 14 (Tokyo, 1996).