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IN SEARCH OF NEW BEGINNINGS: ON POETRY AND HOPE

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According to Spinoza's (2000) definition, love is 'nothing but pleasure with the accompaniment idea of an external cause' (Part III, proposition 13, scholium). Ever since I encountered this phrase some fifteen years ago, I have been carrying it with me. What struck me then, and what I still find so appealing about it, is its rationalist simplicity – which, of course, yields to Spinoza's 'geometrical' mode of philosophy. A masterpiece of seventeenth-century Enlightenment thought, the most striking feature of *Ethics* is its array of definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations and corollaries. Starting from basic definitions and propositions, Spinoza rigorously develops his theory of affects. However, far from confining itself to 'psychology' or 'emotions' in a narrow sense, Spinoza's theory is crucial to both his ethical thinking and epistemology, thus placing affects and emotions at the very core of his rationalist system.

The topic of this essay is neither geometry nor love but rather an attempt to draw a connection between poetry and hope. As a work of language striving for

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new sensations and interruptions of the habitual, poetry is always a search for new beginnings. Derived from the Greek word *ποίησις* ('creation'), one might even say that poetry encapsulates the idea of 'natality', which Hannah Arendt identifies both as a precondition for action and as commitment towards the other. However, instead of getting ahead of ourselves, I would like to start by asking a very simple question: is poetry an expression of hope? And if so, whose hope does it express? That of the poet? The reader? Of language as such? In some respects, it certainly is. I mean, how are we to perceive the many poems of fighting and resistance that blossom in periods of war and disaster if not as expressions of hope? And what about religious poetry or poetry of love? Even more modest poems fumbling with everyday experiences are often anticipating the desired outcome of a future event. However, poetry does not limit itself to articulating abstract emotions and sensations; it also generates these affects in me as a reader. Thus, poems may also be seen as catalysts, 'prime movers' that enable us to access these deep emotions of love, joy and hope.

Still, treating poetry as an expression of hope will quickly lead us into a series of paradoxes and troubles. First, how can we attribute hope to poems of merciless despair? Such a reading not only seems to be missing the point but can even be considered offensive to the poems (or poets) considered. I mean, what 'hope' could possibly be expressed in the most despairing poems of Paul Celan or Sylvia Plath, both of whom were masters in giving the sense of despair an almost universal expression? Second, how can we be sure that our idea of the poem is an adequate one? Instead of seeing literature as a continuation of our own concerns (thus contributing to the larger 'solutionism' where art, education and mental health practices are being mobilized as responses to various crises and threats), we should start by asking ourselves what the poem asks from us. Methodically, this means we should approach poetry in much the same manner as we meet newcomers – that is, in an attentive attempt at a 'close reading' of their wishes and desires.

Being human today tends to demand a strong capacity to cultivate hope. When orientating ourselves in the world, we cannot but acknowledge that some of the most important foundations of our existence are under attack. Just to name some of the most obvious challenges: on an ecological level, the planet's ecosystem is believed to be at a tipping point, threatening to spin into a destructive trajectory with little to no hope of recovery. On a political level, the liberal western democracies are moving fast towards an aggressive surveillance capitalism fuelled by our ever-increasing dependency on modern media technologies. However, lending our subjectivity to the big data corporations not only exposes us to unwanted attention

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from the authorities. One might also argue that it narrows down the possibilities of subjectification and becoming (what this book refers to as an 'arrival of the I'). And as the current war in Ukraine has made clear, the Russian invasion is not only a disaster for the present population in the region. It also threatens to escalate into a full-range nuclear Armageddon wiping out the human condition of natality which Arendt (1998: 9) considers 'the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting'.

Truth content and poetic form

Faced with these concerns, it seems more adequate to feel fear and sorrow than hope and joy when orientating ourselves in the world. However, what is fear and what is sorrow? Again, we might turn to *Ethics* for clean-cut definitions: while Spinoza (2000) holds *laetitia* ('joy') to be 'man's passage from a less to a greater perfection', *tristitia* ('sorrow') is considered 'man's passage from a greater to a less perfection' (Part III, proposition 11, scholium). The simplicity of these definitions reveals a symmetry foreign to modern thought, where the idea of language as a transparent medium for exposing axiomatic truths has been thoroughly questioned, not least by poets. Reading *Ethics* in the wake of 150 years of poetic modernism highlights a linguistic optimism in Spinoza's geometrical reasoning. Moving on in the Spinozist catalogue of affects, we learn that *spes* ('hope') is 'an inconstant pleasure which has arisen from the image of a thing that is future or past, about whose outcome we are in doubt' (Spinoza 2000: Part III, proposition 18, scholium 2). Compared with joy and sorrow, this definition is far more complex. Not only is hope an inconstant emotion prone to doubt and instability, but it is also subject to the temporal dimensions of the past and the future. Furthermore, hope is generated by *imagine rei* ('the image of a thing'), which again ties it to the imagination.

What separates hope from the more immediate affects of joy and sorrow, then, is a whole set of conditions that involves not only an anticipation of the future but also the mediation of a given 'thing' in and through the imagination. At least to me, this is part of the link between poetry and hope, where the possibility (or lack thereof) of an imagined future resides. An illuminating example of this can be found in Nadezhda Mandelstam's (1983) book *Hope against Hope* – which was written in memory of her late husband, the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. The story not only resonates with the threatening figure of the present autocrat in the Kremlin but also says something crucial, I think, about poetry, hope and resistance.

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In the book, Nadezhda (a name that means 'hope' in Russian, providing a pun in the title) recounts the years of terror and despair under Stalin's rule that led up to Osip's imprisonment and death in a Soviet prison camp in 1938. Before his arrest, Mandelstam had tried to compose an ode to Stalin in order to clear the air with the authorities. Working on the poem, however, he was so paralyzed with fear that he had to change all his writing habits to overcome his inner obstacles. For instance, he would not allow any eating at the dinner table he used for work, thus forcing Nadezhda to take her meals at the windowsill. Often while writing, he would suddenly jump up and begin cursing himself. As Nadezhda recalls, he would then pace through the room mumbling to himself, as if he were under the direct command of Stalin's 'Evil Spirit'.

In the end, he was able to produce an ode which Nadezhda labels 'an artificially conceived poem' (1983: 200). Readers familiar with the standard eulogizing poems of the genre will easily recognize the canonical features of the poem: the father figure, the warrior, the wise ruler who leads humanity into a future where he both shapes and divines. These are the opening lines of the poem's first stanza, translated from Russian by Greogy Freidin:

> Were I to take up the charcoal for the sake of supreme praise—
> For the sake of the eternal joy of drawing—
> I would divide the air into clever angles
> Both carefully and anxiously.
> To make the present echo in his features
> (My art bordering on audacity),
> I would speak about him who has shifted the world's axis.
>
> (Mandelstam cited in Coetzee 1991: 74)

More chilling and uncanny than glorifying, this stale piece of official poetry does not live up to the vividness and clarity of Mandelstam's other writings. Far from expressing the joy produced by 'man's passage from a less to a greater perfection' (Spinoza 2000), the poem portrays the fantasies of absolute power.[1] Commenting on her husband's agony, Nadezhda Mandelstam writes that a 'poet's understanding of reality comes to him together with his verse, which always contains some element of anticipation of the future' (1983: 198).

I believe that poetry and hope merge in anticipation of the future through the medium of the verse. Surely, it is not a prophetic ability of the poet but rather a

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question of expressing a specific 'truth content' (to borrow an expression from Adorno) in poetic form. Truth in art is not so much a question of stating the right propositions or articulating logically consistent syllogisms. Instead, what we should look for in an artwork is a kind of anticipation of that which does not yet exist – or in more elegiac modes, what has ceased to exist. Contrary to the truths of philosophy and reflexive reasoning, truth content in art remains non-propositional or even 'negative'.[2] The role of the reader, then, is to extract and unfold this truth content into an emotional state, which can then be the starting point for more conceptual thinking. To pursue this line of thought further, I will now move on to reading a short poem by the Norwegian writer Tor Ulven. As we shall see, what is expressed in a poem is not stated in a propositional manner. Instead, it reveals itself as the inner content of the poetic form.

Language, action, natality

A major figure of Scandinavian post-war literature, Tor Ulven (1953–95) is generally perceived as a dark and pessimistic poet who centred on motifs of death and disappearance. Like Sylvia Plath and Paul Celan, he was not unfamiliar with sorrow and despair. Also, like them, he tragically ended up taking his own life at the age of 42. Before committing suicide, Ulven spent several years in self-imposed isolation in his apartment in a suburb north of Oslo. Reflecting on this situation later in life, Ulven (2013) looked back at it as an experience that allowed him to 'read a terrible number of books'. Being indeed an exceptionally well-read writer and at the same time standing outside the academic orthodoxies of his time, his work bears the mark of a highly original and rather idiosyncratic imagination. Owing a lot to the philosophical pessimism of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Leopardi, many of Ulven's texts harbour the wish to escape individual consciousness and subjectivity. Often in search of liminal experiences, his work has been interpreted as an investigation into the posthumous condition, which he sardonically refers to as 'the darkness at the other end of the tunnel' (Ulven 2013b: 433).

In his only published interview, conducted in 1993 when he was in the midst of a poetic raptus that resulted in a series of genuinely innovative books, Ulven stated that he is 'principally interested in writing unpleasant books; books that trouble the reader, afflict him' (Ulven cited in Hagen and Schram Hoel 2013: n.pag.). At the same time, his work expresses a strong sensation of sympathy and relief when confronted with death. Does this mean that Ulven himself saw hope in death and

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finality? Well, it surely depends on what we mean by hope, but I think it would be unwise to exclude the possibility. If we return to Spinoza's definition of hope as an inconstant pleasure arising from the image of an unknown future or past event, we may find the following poem by Ulven to be an expression of hope in the face of finality and death:

> Come sit
> with me
> my dear,
>
> tell me
> about the time
> when I no longer
> exist.

(Ulven 2013a: 191)[3]

What a strange scene! Someone (let us refer to it as 'the poetic I') asks the beloved one to sit by their side and talk about the future in which they are no longer present. While the first stanza signals a tenderness towards the beloved one, the second transforms this tenderness into a caring curiosity for an unknown future. When faced with its own death, the poetic I does not flee into despair or aggressive self-subsistence (which seems to be the inner law of all horrendous aggression and imperial warfare). Instead, it opens itself up to a time when it will no longer play a part.

When faced with the finality of the self, the poetic I turns to the future of the beloved one. As such, the poem echoes the ethical position developed by Arendt in her discussion of natality. Picking up on Augustine's distinction between *inititum* ('the beginning of man') and *principium* ('the beginning of the world'), Arendt stresses the fundamental meaning of that which is shared between all humans: the world as a common middle ground. To Arendt, this distinction between the individual and the common precisely underlines the ethical commitment towards the beginning of the other. As the poem suggests, every beginning is also a beginning in language, as language itself is seen to be the other side of all action that transcends mere production or work: 'This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness' (Arendt 1998: 180).

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Furthermore, the hope expressed in the poem is not aimed at any specific outcome or goal. It is not a hope for anything; it does not conform to the formula of a wish. Instead, the poem expresses what we might call an 'intransitive' hope – that is, a hope not having or containing any direct object. Commenting on Spinoza's (2000) understanding of hope in *The Ethics*, Deleuze (2007) focuses exactly on this kind of intransitivity. Contrary to ideas, Deleuze (2007) says that hope should not be regarded as a secondary expression of a primary affect. While ideas are 'a mode of thought defined by its representational character' (expressing something outside themselves), affects are a mode of thought 'which doesn't represent anything' (Deleuze 2007: n.pag.). Deleuze (2007) goes on to say that there is 'an idea of the loved thing, to be sure, there is also an idea of something hoped for, but hope as such or love as such represents nothing, strictly nothing' (n.pag.). To me, this non-transitive modality of hope comes close to pointing out the truth content expressed in the poem. As Nadezhda Mandelstam writes, a true poem always 'contains some element of anticipation of the future' (1993: 198). Returning to our initial question of whether poetry should be considered an expression of hope, we may want to 'conclude' by affirming the assumption, at least when it comes to a poem such as Ulven's. Reading it in the light of the current disasters and sufferings in Ukraine and elsewhere, we could even answer by rephrasing it into a proposition: *the poem hopes*.

Notes

1. South African novelist and Nobel Prize laureate J. M. Coetzee even goes as far as saying that the ode *expresses the madness* of Stalin. In an article commenting the ode, he writes that the

   > task in reading Mandelstam's ode should not, then, be a task of searching it for an ineffable sincerity or insincerity, but of searching for the nature of its madness and, more importantly, for signs of reflection within the ode upon the ode's own madness.
   >
   > (Coetzee 1991: 74)

2. As Gerhard Richter has pointed out in an essay on the non-propositional truth content in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, what Adorno

   > wishes for in the work of art as well as in philosophy is […] a mimesis of what does not yet exist, the negative traces of a futurity that can be neither predicted nor programmed in advance but that nevertheless inscribe themselves into the art work

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and into the philosophy that enters a relation with that artwork, as a nonidentical and negatively charged otherness.

(Richter 2006: 129)

3. My translation. Ulven's (2013a) Norwegian original, which was first published in his book *Søppelsolen. Memorabilia* in 1989, reads as follows: 'Sitt hos meg/ kjære, fortell// om den tiden/ da jeg ikke// finnes mer.'

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