

THE RISKS OF THE PRESENT: BENJAMIN, BONHOEFFER AND CELAN

Ugo Perone (Università del Piemonte Orientale)

*The following remarks try to trace a scenario of twentieth-century philosophy, which in my opinion shows a new interest in the issue of time. Many have underscored that nineteenth-century philosophy replaces the paradigm of Nature with that of History as an historical *a priori* in Foucault's sense, that is, as the horizon within which the problems are to be located and solved. The issue of identifying the dominant nineteenth-century paradigm—further complicated by the declining resort to the great narratives of this “short century”—is still open, so I do not believe it improper to point out that many twentieth-century philosophers suddenly reconsidered the issue of time as a way of defining the nineteenth-century paradigm of time in a new manner.*

1. Time in the Philosophy of the 20th Century

The following remarks try to trace a scenario of twentieth-century philosophy, which in my opinion shows a new interest in the issue of time. Many have underscored that nineteenth-century philosophy replaces the paradigm of Nature with that of History as an historical *a priori* in Foucault's sense, that is, as the horizon within which the problems are to be located and solved. The issue of identifying the dominant nineteenth-century paradigm—further complicated by the declining resort to the great narratives of this “short century”—is still open, so I do not believe it improper to point out that many twentieth-century philosophers suddenly reconsidered the issue of time as a way of defining the nineteenth-century paradigm of time in a new manner.

Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger addressed this topic. Bergson extended the temporality of consciousness to the entire universe by proposing to make duration the common fabric of the world and consciousness, and by resolving space into temporality. In line with Bergson's phenomenological method, Husserl tried to grasp the pure experience of time, looking for it within the internal consciousness of

time. In turn, Heidegger attempted a grandiose reconstruction of time capable of explaining both its vulgar conception and its authentic nature. In so doing, he used just one movement to give the nexus of finiteness and temporality ontological consistency and to critically render illegitimate all previous conceptions of time. Let us now address these two aspects separately and in a necessarily brief manner.

First of all, Augustine's concept of time already connected finiteness and temporality, since it shifted the interest from cosmological time as the measurement of succession to time as distension into systoles and diastoles of consciousness, as attention through which a soul applies itself to things. Augustine, however, holds that the time of stars and calendars—God's time—stands behind the time of finiteness, so that one thousand years are the same as one day and one day is the same as one thousand years. In other words, he holds that the temporality of finiteness exhausts neither finiteness itself, which is always much more than itself, nor being. Heidegger, however, states that *Sein ist Zeit*, since the only entity concerned with the issue of Being is *Dasein*, but the existentiality of this *Dasein* is time as the modality whereby it exists. For Heidegger, originary time is finite time, and it is from here that the time that is neither originary nor properly finite, but a pure stream, like a sort of eternal movement, can and must be comprehended.

Heidegger's criticism of all previous conceptions of time is not merely deconstructive, but also underscores the theoretical intention that guides his analysis positively. It is, in fact, a question of overcoming the opposition between the two concepts of time over which philosophy has polarised itself, namely, the opposition between Augustine and Aristotle, for whom, respectively, time is correlated with consciousness and the world.¹ Account must also be taken of Hegel, whose philosophy attempted to overcome this split. In fact, since there is some coincidence with Hegel's thoughts as far as results are concerned (and despite his intentions go in quite opposite directions), Heidegger allows extensive room for discussing Hegel's findings.²

¹ See M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1927), §78.

² See *Ibid.*, §82a, where Heidegger not only completes an in-depth confrontation with Hegel, but also reserves an unusually lengthy note (probably the longest of the whole book) to comparing himself with Hegel. It is no less significant to note that he makes no mention of Husserl in this context, though he had good

In this brief review of our critical reference points, two issues appear important: first, Heidegger's re-composition effort directed at a simultaneously experiential and ontological conception of time, and second, his complete silence on Husserl (whose *Lectures on the Internal Consciousness of Time* Heidegger himself had edited), as well as his merely marginal references to Bergson—that is to say, the absence of two of the philosophies I have identified as examples of renewed attention to the issue of time.

The fact is that the attention to time that developed during the 20th century is, for Heidegger, a one-sided relapse into the subjective dimension of time, albeit extended to measure the universe, whereas for him, the issue is more precisely that of overcoming the strange swaying (*merkwürdiges Schwanken*)³ between the subjectivity and objectivity of time, between its existential dimensions and factual objectivity, and lastly, between authentic temporality—that is, the temporality of finiteness—and inauthentic temporality—that is, objective calendar temporality—albeit explaining how the one derives from the other.

2. Heidegger's Perspective

Since I can dwell no further on such a complex and technical issue, I will take the risk of making Heidegger's perspective essential. For Heidegger, in full agreement with Husserl, and also with Hegel and Aristotle, time consists of "nows." These *Jetzt* can, however, be classed neither as a point (that is, the now and here), nor as a sort of present time that can accompany any time (that is, the meanwhile). This is due to the simple fact that a *Jetzt* is always both. Now is "now" but also immediately "then," that is, it is any "now." Now cannot be dated, as it is now, at the very moment it is lived; yet it can also be dated, like the vocation of the disciples, whose "now" was the tenth hour, according to John's Gospel (See John, 1:39). In other words, the adverb "now" cannot be separated from the nouns "the now" or "the hour," which means that authentic and ordinary time intertwine indissolubly.

Are they the same thing, then? Certainly not, because everyday

reason to, and to whom, in my opinion, many of the remarks therein could be attributed.

³ *Ibid.*, §78.

time is a levelling off (*Nivellierung*) of authentic time. Besides, the very impossibility of achieving a now preserved in its authenticity—since it is now always made to be objective and external—is the indication of what Heidegger sees as the deepest aspect of time: that it is not a *continuum*, but the manifestation of a radical fragmentation or finiteness and discontinuity. The time in which *Dasein* gives itself presents some holes. But all of this reveals something decisive—that temporality is structurally ecstatic: it is always open and its opening is always a stretching outside itself. So, time is an advent and is never within reach. Decision takes place within such a condition; that is to say, decision is, within the instant of the perception of the now, the choice of recognising its unavailability and of accepting its decisive dimension of anticipation. In the now, there occurs a future that will never feature availability, whence the decisiveness of death for authentic time.

Even though we did not have enough time to address it as required, let us now leave Heidegger's treatment of time,⁴ though not without underscoring what he has left us. Temporality is finiteness that always returns but is never infinity; it is ecstatic finiteness that is always outside itself and never *vorhanden* (present at hand). In an unexpected and somewhat surprising upset, Aristotle's *nûn* and the instantaneous now that seemed to be the *present* foundation of temporality give way to the primacy of the *future*, of the advent; the event-like horizon of the possible replaces the forgetfully reassuring horizon of onto-theology. In essence, the outcomes of Heidegger's analysis are: temporality is finiteness; finiteness is where Being gives itself; the ensuing ontology is an ontology of possibility. Not only does the accent on time abandon the emphasis on the primacy of the historical paradigm, but it also develops this paradigm in the direction of a finite structural precariousness. Within time, all is risky.

Is this the real situation, though? Several reasons lead to doubt. To invoke Celan's threefold division into acute, grave and circumflex accents, I believe it can readily be said that Heidegger's conception of time belongs under the sign of the circumflex accent. For him, the word that should have been said never was, nor could it ever have been, said. When, in fact, the respect for the event-like character of time is ensured

⁴ For further, more detailed notes, see U. Ugazio, *Il ritorno del possibile. Studi su Heidegger e la storia della metafisica* (Turin: Zamorani, 1996).

by its unavailability due to the primacy of the future, which can impose itself as a transcendental condition only thanks to the clause of never being real but always only possible, time has been dissolved. Each concrete now crumbles in the horizon of the hour of death, which is the foundation of authenticity because it is never real but always only possible and is, consequently, such to show the impossibility of each actual now. The non-availability of time is achieved by extension—the circumflex accent—via a transcendental possibility, the outcome of which is measuring each actual event on a scale of impossibility. Far from completing the connection between Aristotle and Augustine, between the time of the world and the time of consciousness, between “now” as the punctuality of now and “now” as the prospect of the meanwhile, which is the present, Heidegger inaugurates the horizon of an ontology of the possible as nullifying the actuality of the real, thereby sacrificing the insurmountable consistency of that time that one never has, not even when it happens to me.

To simplify, time is precariousness, caducity, finiteness and danger all together *en bloc*, in a take-it-or-leave-it situation that only allows an extremely thin difference between a decision in favour of or against, a decision that opens up to authenticity or levels down into inauthenticity, albeit *de facto* changing nothing. The philosopher no longer speaks his own, human words, but rather, decides to let an originary word, coming from elsewhere, speak through him.

3. Beyond Heidegger

This is presumably the reason that leads us to a different consideration of time. It looks for a different orientation and a different axis around which to have our thought rotate, even though nurtured by Heidegger’s premises, that is, conscious of the finite and possible character of time and aware of the structural dimension of risk that crosses time (within which all is decided in exposure to the absolute of the authentic and the inauthentic). Such a different axis is the indispensable importance of the present and the today, the acute accent of this January 20th, the dialectical image that at the very moment of risk stops the flashes of what is passing. Despite their differences, Bonhoeffer, Benjamin and Celan share this same sensitivity. By turning toward them, we will share a more advanced consciousness of time and attain a view that not only

describes today's perception of time in a more phenomenologically adequate manner, but also opens up a possible meaning for it. All three authors propose the central role of the present within the general view of a non-continuous perception of time.

3.1 Bonhoeffer's Today: The World has come of Age

Theologically, Bonhoeffer, in his letters from prison, addresses the issue of "What is Christianity, and indeed what is Christ for us *today* [emphasis added]?"⁵ In this first of the three formulations of his theoretical proposal, "today" plays a central role, and is further articulated in subsequent formulations. His second formulation states "The question is, Christ and the newly matured world,"⁶ thereby indicating that today is the time of a world that has drifted away from God in a secularised manner, where a discourse on God cannot be based on a religious pre-understanding. The third formulation attributes to Christ the today, defined as "Christ's claim on a world that has come of age."⁷

Two items should be underscored in this context. The first relates to the central passages of *Ethics*,⁸ in which Bonhoeffer analyses modernity from the double standpoint of decadence and heritage. If the paradigm of history develops according to the notion of continuity, one cannot avoid interpreting modernity as the process whereby human beings free themselves from and replace God, that is, as a process through which the absolute is replaced by a relative, made to become an absolute in its turn, and thus constantly menaced by ever new replacements, increasingly reductive and unavoidably subjected to nihilist dynamics. However, if continuity is replaced by discontinuity, any time, to use Benjamin's words, can always be mentioned again, so that the secular condition does not exclude the possibility of a new and different relationship with God, as distinct from the one to which history

⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung, Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, in *Werke*, vol. VIII (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 402.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 479 400 (letter dated June 8).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 504 417 (letter dated June 30).

⁸ See D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, in *Werke*, vol. VI.

has consigned us. Instead of being the mere outcome of an already-written history, the present thus becomes a time when anything can occur anew, though never in the same way, as the outcomes of history make up no chain of continuity and cannot be simply travelled backward. The outcomes can nevertheless relate to the intentions of a past time, similar to a decision that leads to resuming an interrupted path, though differently. Tradition thus becomes a claim responsible for the present without being levelled down to the present time. What can be defined as theological radicalisation—that is, the extreme honesty (*letzte Redlichkeit*) to which God himself compels us—offers an unexplored capability to reinterpret the *intellektuelle Redlichkeit*, which Bonhoeffer described as typical of modern Enlightenment, thus enabling the acknowledgement of a possible legacy underlying its destructive outcomes.⁹

The second aspect worth reflecting on is the connection Bonhoeffer creates between “today” and “for us.” Today is the time for us, the time that was assigned to us, not a time available for us to use. Had we been in a position to choose, we might have perhaps preferred some other time. This is a time, as Bonhoeffer knows full well, for biographical reasons as well, where vacuum replaces fullness, pain replaces joy, anxiety replaces hope, and evil triumphs over good, but this is the time we have been given. Here, one can appreciate that Bonhoeffer’s perspective has completely shifted from the paradigm of history to that of time. In fact, history is not a thing for us; it has its own logic, origin and future. In the best of all cases, we are allowed to take part in its glorious moments or, as Benjamin would put it, to open the way for free grandchildren. History is not for us—it is something external to us, in which we are. But, time is for us: it is something that defines us intimately, even though it does not belong to us. Today is

⁹ Here I refer to issues already covered in U. Perone, *Storia e ontologia. Saggi sulla teologia di Bonhoeffer* (Rome: Studium, 1976), 60ff. I consider Bonhoeffer’s use of the expression *letzte Redlichkeit*, contained in the letter dated July 16, 1944, very significant, as it is such as to justify contamination between inheritance and decadence, where an analysis is made of honesty (*Redlichkeit*), and the theological development of last (*das Letzte*) and penultimate. Last is more extreme (just as the term *letzte* can also be translated), which does not deny the penultimate, but allows a different interpretation of it.

simultaneously mine and not mine; it is mine because it defines me down to my most intimate fibres; and it is not mine because I am not its master. So, must I hope that others—God, in a theological perspective—will give it back to me? As Bonhoeffer explicitly notes in his *Letters*, a theological claim is not directed at ensuring temporal caducity for the absolute; rather, it enables keeping open vacuum and absence, as well as interruption and pain, in God. As he states: “It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap: he does not fill it, but keeps it empty so that our communion with another may be kept alive, even at the cost of pain.”¹⁰ A theological claim does not archive the vacuums of history, nor does it enter them into a framework of sense; rather, it resists enrolling them in a process of decadence toward non-sense. The present is, perhaps, a weak point of resistance to nothingness.

Bonhoeffer uses this notion to hold onto the objective consistency of the present; he does not enter it into a given horizon of continuity, but grants to God or the theological principle the beneficial and respectful power to keep even history’s vacuums and interruptions open.¹¹

¹⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, 255 and 246 (letter dated Christmas Eve, 1943).

¹¹ A separate issue that would, however, be outside the purposes of this essay might be to compare Bonhoeffer’s and Heidegger’s concepts of time. The former’s *Akt und Sein* is the most important essay in this connection. We know Bonhoeffer’s judgement of Heidegger’s theological uselessness (See D. Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein. Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der systematischen Theologie*, in *Werke*, vol. II, 66, tr. by B. Noble as *Act and Being* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961], 65), but there is also the important fact that, for many reasons, he attempts to proceed beyond Barth’s concept of temporality, with reference to the topic of time. The section entitled “Revelation’s Mode of Being within the Church” is especially important for comparison with Heidegger. Here, Bonhoeffer tries to keep together the contingent features of revelation (exteriority, reality), man’s involvement (decision and the questioning feature of revelation) and the overcoming of an individualistic concept of the act. By anticipating elements we have dwelt upon, here Bonhoeffer elects the “present” as the real site of revelation. Should revelation only be the “past,” it would have nothing to do with man’s current existence. The past, as something having already taken place, is changed by the announcement as present, since here we “are faced with” an event that involves us “continually.” It thus is “advenient”;

3.2 Benjamin's *Jetzt-Zeit*

Benjamin too, in his *Passagenwerk*, acknowledges that the present has an important role to play: “It is the present that polarises events in a pre- and post-history”¹²—not just in the sense that it is the “divider” separating the past from the future within time, but also because it contains time within itself as in an epitome.¹³ History, as interpreted by Benjamin, is an always menaced constellation of *Jetzt-Zeit*; it is not a homogeneous and empty time, but a time filled to explosion, not the *continuum* of a succession, but a law court for condemnation and salvation, where the

otherwise, it would not be a revelation. In this sense, however, and perhaps not without influences from Heidegger even more apparent in the section dedicated to children, the past not only becomes a “future”: “Of the Christian revelation it may be said that the annunciation of Cross and resurrection, determined by eschatology and predestination, together with the event effective within it, serves even to raise the past to the present and, paradoxically, to something future, yet ‘to come.’ It follows, therefore, ... that for man living in the Church, in the present, this unique occurrence is qualified as future” (*Ibid.*, 108/120), but “it is only out of the future that the present can be lived.” (*Ibid.*, 158/182) In a note, Bonhoeffer states that “This could be the starting-point for a philosophy of time peculiarly Christian in comparison with the concept of time as something reckoned by physical motion” (*Ibid.*, 108/120), with obvious reference to Aristotle, but perhaps also with a corrective intention to Heidegger’s understanding of Aristotle. For a philosophical reading sensitive to Heidegger’s project, see L. Bagetto, *Decisione ed effettività. La via ermeneutica di Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Genoa: Marietti, 1991); the issue of Heidegger’s relationship with Bonhoeffer was more recently covered by C. Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and “Bonhoeffer on Heidegger and Togetherness”, in *Modern Theology* 8, 263, 2008. Finally, I recommend S. Plant, “In the Sphere of the Familiar: Heidegger and Bonhoeffer,” in *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation* (ed.) Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 301–327, especially for references to possible Heideggerian influences on Bonhoeffer.

¹² W. Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, (ed.) R. Tiedemann e H. Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 588.

¹³ See R. Bodei, *Le malattie della storia. Dimensioni e paradossi del tempo in Walter Benjamin*, in *Walter Benjamin. Tempo, storia, linguaggio* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1983), 220.

present is no passage but a dangerous and precarious stop, like a pendulum that is only balanced for and at a moment. To refer to Focillon, whom Benjamin quotes, the *achmé* of the Greeks is similar to the yoke of a scale that only oscillates weakly. “I do not expect to see a balance again weighing over to one side, and even less the moment of its absolute fixity, but the imperceptible light wobbling to prove it is alive, in the miracle of this hesitating immobility.”¹⁴

“Though it may sound weird, this present is the subject of a prophecy,”¹⁵ writes Benjamin, as it contains both an active and recognised inheritance and a germinating future. Contrary to Heidegger, who in the moment sees the anticipation of possibility annihilating the moment’s content, and who therefore gives primacy to the ecstasy of the future, Benjamin considers the present as the subject of a prophecy that marks it as containing the possibility of reclaiming the past and freeing the future, not because some continuity is generated, but because a tradition is built: “While the representation of the *continuum* razes everything to the ground, the representation of the discontinuous is the foundation of authentic tradition.”¹⁶

The present contains both messianic and apocalyptic features; it is the time for a possible salvation that, like the Messiah, does not come at the end as a final act, but appears suddenly as an interruption that generates a constellation in a moment fixed by a dialectic image. This constellation connects the past and the future,¹⁷ and it is a salvation, because, like a “tiger leaping into the past,”¹⁸ it disrupts history’s presumed and violent continuity. So the present is also always judgement day. Recalling a passage of the apocryphal gospels in which judgement on whatever action is being completed affects everyone,¹⁹ and which features a Kafkaesque image that compares judgement with a hasty

¹⁴ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, p. 1229; vol. VII, p. 494.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1250.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1236.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1242.

¹⁸ W. Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, 2.

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, 3, p. 1245: “*worüber ich einen jeden treffe, darüber will ich ihn richten*”; 510: “I shall judge each person on the act which I find such person in,” which can perhaps be better said: “Actions found are what I shall judge each person on.”

court-martial prosecution (*Standrecht*), Benjamin offers his own view of the present: “Each instant is the moment of judgement on certain instants prior to it.”²⁰ Judgement day, which saves and condemns, is any moment in time. Like Moses amid the waters, the present separates the before from the after, and condemns and saves by judging.

Enough would not, however, have been said were we merely to limit ourselves to what has been said thus far, were we to oppose Benjamin against Heidegger only in the way that the acute of an instant opposes the circumflex of the eternal.²¹ Benjamin is far more ambitious.²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Critics have expressed their opinions several times on the issue of the relationship between Benjamin and Heidegger, even when based on somewhat uncertain material. Though both attended lessons by Rickert during the same years, they presumably never met personally; even Heidegger’s readings of Benjamin are quite limited, despite his declared intentions, shared with Brecht, to proceed with the “destruction” (W. Benjamin, *Briefe*, (ed.) G. Scholem and T. W. Adorno [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978], 514). Among those who identify affinities between the two, one could mention W. Van Reijen, *Der Schwarzwald und Paris: Heidegger und Benjamin* (Munich: Fink, 1998), and G. Soussana, *Aura de l’œuvre et être-œuvre*, in *Global Benjamin*, tome 2, (ed.) K. Garber and L. Rehm (Munich: Fink, 1999), 1186–1192. Usually, however, Benjamin and Heidegger are regarded in opposition to one another, at least on individual points and generally with reference to specific issues of politics and works of art. See N. Bolz, *Prostituirtes Sein*, in *Antike und Moderne. Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, (ed.) N. Bolz and R. Faber (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1986), 191–213; S. Knoche, *Benjamin–Heidegger. Über Gewalt. Die Politisierung der Kunst* (Wien: Turia und Kant, 2000); F. Desideri, *Benjamin und Heidegger, Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, in *Global Benjamin*, tome 2, 1193–1205 (where the opposition has dialectically beneficial shock aspects). This view is somehow not shared by L. Heidbrink, *Kritik der Moderne im Zeichen der Melancholie*, in *Global Benjamin*, tome 2, 1207–1228, underscoring opposition elements, but seeing a source of self-criticism for Celan in Heidegger and marking the common matrix in interpreting modernity (ending up however by losing important specific aspects of Benjamin’s proposal, in my view at least).

²² See the splendid work on Benjamin by G. Schiavoni, *Walter Benjamin: Il figlio della felicità. Un percorso biografico e concettuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), with whom I agree on many points. I also note that Schiavoni quite rightly draws analogies between Benjamin and Celan on “the commitment to save the

His completely theological language is also totally and radically secularised. As he writes: “My thought relates to theology just as blotting paper relates to ink. It is completely imbibed. But no writing would remain were it only for blotting paper.”²³ He is even more radical than the radical Heidegger in this secularisation.. He is not content with abstract salvation as it is given in Heidegger, with Heidegger’s vain belief in having saved history by shifting to “historicity”²⁴ and time by referring to temporality. Benjamin is firm on the most radical immanence without, so to say, turning it into worldhood; he wants to preserve this immanence to such a degree as to make it a sort of saved history, by referring to it in the present tense in his dialectical updating. As Enrico Guglielminetti writes at the conclusion of a complex and acute book on Benjamin: “The passing instant is that in which one *can* save oneself. If this instant is left to pass, salvation is lost; otherwise one is saved *forever*.”²⁵

This radicality leads Benjamin to again attempt to follow Heidegger’s way and to search for a renewed unity between the time of the world and the time of consciousness, whence, perhaps, his preference for the astrological reference²⁶ as the figure for a natural and ordinary time containing, however, the trace of a differential within itself, that is, as something that brings it nearer to the time of consciousness. In its present time for me, the light of a star that reaches me during the night in fact belongs to a planet that disappeared long ago, which is why, as Benjamin remarks, “Distance in space can remain instead of time, in popular symbols. This is why a falling star in the faraway infinity has become the symbol of a satisfied demand.”²⁷ Yet in such present time, it has something that not even objective time can erode.

original language core.” (60)

²³ W. Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, N 7a, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, N. 3, 1.

²⁵ E. Guglielminetti, *Walter Benjamin. Tempo ripetizione, equivocità* (Milan: Mursia, 1990), 220.

²⁶ On this topic, see W. Bock, *Walter Benjamin und die Sterne. Anmerkungen zu magischen Elementen in Benjamins Teoria der Mimesis und der Aura*, in *Global Benjamin*, tome 1, 409–424, and the classic by S. Moses, *L’Ange de l’Histoire. Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

²⁷ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, 3, p. 1178.

3.3 Today's Acute Accent in Celan

Though a stout admirer of Heidegger, twenty-seven writings by whom he is reported to have read and whose extraordinary *limpidité* of language²⁸ he readily acknowledged, Celan, too, seems to move away from him because of a different and more dramatic perception of time in its meaning as real and present time. This is why I consider it proper to apply to Heidegger and his conception of time Celan's statement opposing the circumflex accent (considered as an extension of the eternal) to the acute accent of the present.²⁹

Two items support this claim. In his speech for the acceptance of the Büchner prize, Celan carefully noted the dates marking Lenz's history: It was "on the 20th of January [when Lenz was] walking through the mountains" and it was "in the night from the 23rd to the 24th of May, 1792 [that] Lenz was found dead in a street in Moscow."³⁰ We know that for Heidegger a date is a form of inauthentic time. Here, on the contrary, art, in all its "presence and imminence," is given the task of containing within itself its own January 20th (and January 20th, 1942, was, as we all know, the date when the so-called "final solution" was decided on at Wannsee). "Perhaps the newness of poems written today," Celan goes on to say, "is that they try most plainly to be mindful of these kinds of dates? But do we not all write from and toward some such date?"³¹ Celan's message is not directed at rebuilding history; on the contrary, it trips over the present time of dates. Our fate is at stake in a given and still-present time; that is, it is face to face with horror—since such dates are dates of horror—that the chance of maintaining meaning is at stake. We know that the missed dialogue with Adorno, which, after all, generated the brief *Conversation in the Mountains*, is the painful claim

²⁸ In this connection, and more generally also for bibliographic information, I wish to refer to my work, U. Perone, *Incontri e incontri mancati. Celan e i filosofi*, in *I silenzi della poesia e le voci della musica*, (ed.) L. Forte (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2005), 91–109; also published in *Arte, estetica e memoria*, (ed.) L. Bottani (Vercelli: Mercurio, 2005), 83–100.

²⁹ Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden [W]*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), vol. III, 195; tr. by Rosemarie Waldrop as "The Meridian," in *Paul Celan: Collected Prose* (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 1986), 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 194/45–46.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 196/47.

that even a battered and upside-down ego—that is, even the ego that finds itself only as lost and after having been lost—contains a still lit trace, and withholds dates and memories that still hurt but thereby assert their being signs of life. The grave accent of history, which may weigh oppressively, relived in the present time of an ego that remains a non-cancellable residue, is again today's acute accent.

Todtnauberg, the well-known poem that echoes the meeting with Heidegger in his *Hütte* in the Black Forest village bearing the same name, again features the acute accent of history, with the architecturally central word *heute*. Let us read these verses once again: “*Arnika, Augentrost, der/ Trunk aus dem Brunnen mit dem/ Sternwürfel drauf, // in der/Hütte, // die in das Buch/ – wessen Namen nahms auf/ vor dem meinen?—/ die in dies Buch/ geschriebene Zeile von/ einer Hoffnung, heute, // auf eines Denkenden/ kommenden/ Wort/ im Herzen.*” In English: “*Arnica, eyebright, the/ draft from the well with the/ starred die on top, // in the/ hut, // the line/ —whose name did the book/ register before mine?— / the line inscribed/ in that book about/ a hope, today, // of a thinking man’s/ coming/ word/ in the heart.*”³² In referring to the message he himself wrote in Heidegger’s book—the book that collected the sayings of celebrated visitors to that place—Celan clearly mentions the three temporal ecstasies. The past is preserved inside the pages of the book that we know also contains embarrassing names of the regime. The future is a thinker’s word to come. It is today, however, in the line demanding such a word, that history can turn from the past to the future. Heidegger did not understand this, though he continually returned to this poem by Celan, of which he even made a present to his wife, and he failed to say the very word. Is it too much to suppose that he had no sense of the present’s acute accent, of the urgency of a today that cannot be postponed?

For Celan, Heidegger’s word-that-never-came confirmed that, despite their proximity, Heidegger “had not listened to him properly,” as Celan is reported to have said when commenting on Heidegger’s way of taking part in his poetical readings.³³ This meeting, too, was missed, even more than the non-meeting with Adorno; both are under the sign of an

³² *Ibid.*, vol. II, 255–56; tr. by Michael Hamburger as “*Todtnauberg*,” in *Poems of Paul Celan* (New York: Persea Books, 1988), 293.

³³ See U. Perone, *Incontri e incontri mancati. Celan e i filosofi*, p. 22.

alternate experience of time. For Adorno, the past weighs so heavily as to leave no room for a possible present, while for Heidegger, the mission of temporality makes him insensitive to the wounds of the present.

4. The Possible Present

Let us recall the results acquired so far.³⁴ After and beyond the paradigm of history, the 20th century again proposes the importance of time. Based on a shared interest, Heidegger attempts his most ambitious move: to build an ontology modelled on temporality after overturning Hegel's intentions. This allowed him to reach a series of results that became the starting point for all subsequent thinking: the statement of the finite character of time and the ensuing close entanglement of temporality and finiteness; the disclosing of a horizon of time that is never granted as it is thrown open to both non-authenticity and authenticity alike. The price paid for all of this is, however, quite remarkable. The primacy of the future, which becomes a sort of transcendental condition of the present, can fulfil the functions identified above only if the future does not relinquish its condition of possibility. Such a future is not destined to occur, but only required to inscribe all the data of reality into a horizon of possibility. The future of death is never mine; likewise, all historical events have no consistence in themselves, but receive it only as opportunities for decision for or against authenticity. All is temporal, but in such an extended stretching as to lose all temporal roughness.

Either explicitly or implicitly, Bonhoeffer, Benjamin and Celan accuse Heidegger of this temporal indistinctness; well aware of the limits of time, they each still attempted to move from today, even from a painful present, as a real condition for researching the meaning of time.

We must start again here. The present is certainly directed at us but is never ours, as it escapes our control and disappears; it is not a fullness from which to derive horizons of meaning. Nonetheless, the present is a remainder no one can take away from us, under penalty of the contextual cancellation of the self. In modernity, the subject has abandoned the function of ground, but is still a remainder we cannot do without. Similarly, time, too, should no longer be aligned with the

³⁴ See U. Perone, *Il presente possibile* (Naples: Guida, 2005), for the theoretical framework that underlies this text.

paradigmatic horizon of temporality and should more accurately be investigated in its own intimate finiteness, that is to say, in its always being in risky relation to a me that cannot, however, be its master and owner. Time, and eminently the most acutely temporal time, namely the present, is a wound that inscribes me without my being able to circumscribe it, a joy that fills me up without my being able to explore it fully, a pain that hits me without my being able to master it. Time is for me, but is not mine. Reciprocally, this time—which is finiteness—passes and declines; it does not exist in itself, except in its being for me. There is a twofold reciprocal directionality of the finite ego to time and of finite time to the ego, without either ever achieving mastery over the other.

This time is given to us today, tomorrow not yet, and yesterday no longer. Today is now and perhaps never again. Today is already declining or just dawning. All this, however, is precious, even with the risk of tomorrow. It is no more than a small fragment. Anyone willing to venture the proposal of a horizon of sense—in what is no more than an interpretation of the mutual assignment of subjectivity and temporality—can only start from here, from this non-removable minimal fragment. It is a difficult and uncertain task, having the purpose of developing today, which is given to us, by protecting its intimate reality. Protecting time does not mean isolating or enclosing it in an ultimately maniacal fixation; rather, it means leading today to its transformation into another today, where the tradition of discontinuity mentioned by Benjamin can, however, recognise and find itself.

It is, however, certain that each yesterday and each tomorrow, which are not intended to protect a today that is given to us, are times of illusion and falseness.

ugo@yellowspace.net