Professional paper
Strokovni članek

DOI: 10.32022/PHI29.2020.114-115.6
UDC: 801.73

The Movement of Truth
On the Revealing of Poetry

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Abstract

The paper discusses the poetic function of language in light of hermeneutics. It argues that the everyday referential way of using the language, in which self-contained terms and concepts stand for something other than themselves, is not sufficient to bear witness to the richness of human experience, and, therefore, contrasts it with poetry. Drawing mainly from the thought of Martin Heidegger, it stresses the revealing aspect of poetry and shows how poetry's expressive character brings forth what is

not called into presence by the everyday language. It argues that the poetic mode of speaking is the most natural and primordial way of using language and that its main significance lies in its allowing for the movement between what is concealed and unconcealed to happen. As such, poetry is what allows the human being to assume its natural disposition, that is, the hermeneutic openness towards interpreting and understanding the world.

Keywords: hermeneutics, poetry, truth, understanding.

Gibanje resnice. O pesniškem razodevanju

Povzetek

Članek pesniško funkcijo govorice obravnava v luči hermenevtike, pri čemer izpostavlja, da vsakdanji referencialni način uporabe govorice, znotraj katere samostojni têrmini in pojmi zastopajo nekaj drugega od sebe, ne zadošča za pričevanje o bogastvu človeškega izkustva, zaradi česar ga vzporeja s pesništvom. Navdihujoč se zlasti pri misli Martina Heideggra, avtor poudarja razodevajoč vidik pesništva in pokaže, kako ekspresivni značaj pesništva odstira tisto, česar vsakdanja govorica ne priklicuje v prisotnost. Zato prispevek zagovarja mnenje, da je pesniški modus govorjenja najbolj naraven in prvenstven način uporabe govorice in da njegov poglavitni pomen leži v tem, da dopušča dogajanje gibanja med skritim in razkritim. Pesništvo kot tako, potemtakem, dopušča, da človek privzame svojo naravno stavo, se pravi, hermenevtično odprtost za interpretiranje in razumevanje sveta.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, pesništvo, resnica, razumevanje.

Introduction

There is not much room for things in our speech. We are content with speaking of, and using, concepts and terms, claiming that they refer to the things, of which we really want to speak. But is it enough for the objects to be present in our speech only through the means of reference? After all, can we really claim to be speaking of some things when what we actually utter are words that are meant to stand for those things? This "standing for something" should be examined more carefully. There is something questionable in our readiness to replace the presence of objects by the presence of concepts that are, by the simple virtue of being parts of language, something other than what they are replacing. Is there really anything in our terms that guarantees that they stand for described objects in all truthfulness? Why do we believe that these concepts, when used even in a simple descriptive sentence, give an accurate account of the things, to which we are trying to refer? I think that treating this "standing for something," which is at the heart of every concept, with a dose of suspicion will allow us to understand our use of language more clearly, and shed a new light on other linguistic devices as an alternative to this referential mode of speaking. In this paper, I will examine the above questions by highlighting the revealing role of poetry in the work of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida.

Language and revealing

The usefulness of terms and concepts in everyday speech cannot be denied. They allow us to point to that, which is common in our experience, and use it to convey meaning, to refer to the objects we experience. Such reference is recognized almost instantly—objects belonging to a certain group share a name, and the same concept can stand for them. All pieces of furniture with four legs and backrests are chairs, all featherless bipeds are human beings. We could say that they share a name by virtue of sharing their essential qualities, but perhaps those essential qualities are even more banal than those presented in the previous sentence—perhaps, to the point of circularity, all chairs are chairs, because they share the quality of being a chair. In this view, a concept can stand for some things because they share an essence, and that essence is

what is described by this concept. However, the essence of a chair is something altogether different than that chair, or, as Martin Heidegger notes when he asks for the essence of technology, "technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology. When we are seeking the essence of 'tree,' we have to become aware that That which pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree that can be encountered among all the other trees" (Heidegger 1977, 4).

A difficulty can already be seen here. If a concept describes only an essence of a thing and not a thing itself, how can it stand for that thing in a sentence? There is, perhaps, something of an abuse, or misuse, in that standing for. I would not deny, that there is a certain degree of accuracy in every term and concept, a certain truthfulness, or a faithfulness to its referent object, but, as Heidegger mentions in *Being and Time*, the common, superficial understanding of a spoken sentence (as in the cases I described above) does not necessarily entail the understanding of and reference to the being of things that are being discussed (Heidegger 1996, 157–159). There is actually something revealing, to use Heidegger's word, in every term and concept, but what I call their exacting (extracting) and definite aspects work against that revealing. It would be best to clarify what I understand by this.

Heideggerian revealing has much to do with the bringing forth of something from concealment into unconcealment.[1] As he clarifies: "The Greeks have the word *aletheia* for revealing. The Romans translate this with *veritas*. We say 'truth' [...]" (Heidegger 1977, 11–12). I would agree, in that sense, that the concept brings forth a certain truth of the object it names, it reveals something. On the other hand, it subsequently ruins this revealing by extracting (separating) from the object what it has previously unconcealed. A concept not only discovers the essence of a thing it names, but also distinguishes it, differentiates it, by making it stand on its own in that concept. Heidegger accurately notes, that the essence of a tree pervades every tree—its being is contingent on there being trees, but at the same time, the essence itself is not enough for there to be a tree. There is always something more, something else, than the essence in every object that makes it impossible for just the essence to constitute the object on its own. The exacting aspect of every concept extracts the essence from the

1 For an extensive analysis of Heidegger's notion of unconcealment cf. Wrathall 2010.

thing and makes it stand on its own. Yet, it makes it stand not for itself (as the concept is not used, at least in the case I describe here, to refer to itself), but for the thing it only partially reveals. There is nothing wrong with such a partial revealing—full revealing, as I will discuss later, is actually impossible—, but in this context, it brings the object back into concealment, as the concept is intended to be adequately replaceable with the object. That, which was brought forth in the revelatory work of the concept, is claimed to be all that can be brought forth. And that is simply not true. In that sense, the concept challenges (again, in Heideggerian words), or exacts from the object to be just what the concept describes—it prompts us to look at the object through the exactness of the concept, instead of presenting to us the essence it revealed in the object (that essence can be common to other objects as well). This exactness can be understood as an instrument of uniformization—a means of shaping the described objects into something useful with regards to the concept.

The exactness of the concept is closely related to its definite aspect. For a term to be general, its potential of meaning must be limited. The concept describes a thing it names in that it regulates how this thing can manifest itself. I would propose here to use the word "concept" interchangeably with the word "term," which perhaps more immediately illustrates what I mean. For something to be a term, it needs to have clear boundaries—for example, we also use the word "term" to speak of time in the sense of *chronos.* A term would then impose borders on the thing it describes, so that it would make it possible for the thing to be referred to only if it were to fit in the boundaries delineated by that term. This is the definite aspect of the term I mentioned earlier. Interestingly, similar elements can be observed in the word "concept" when we consider its etymology.

The English word "concept," just as "conception," comes from Old French "conceveir," which itself comes from Latin "concipere." It means "to take in and hold" and "become pregnant." In that sense, we could read the concept as something that takes in and holds (or becomes pregnant with) the truth of something else. But the first noun created on the basis of "conceveir" (which in English was then simply "conceiven") was "conceit," which initially denoted something formed in the mind, but quickly began to stand for a fanciful idea (sometimes, like in Shakespeare, a plan, or a scheme), and later vanity,

through a shortening of “self-conceit.” “Concept” itself was meant to retrieve the original meaning of “conceit,” while abandoning its negative connotation, and we could ask whether such retrieval is at all possible. But even if we forget its evil twin, there is still a risk associated with the word “concept,” and that is a risk of it not merely taking in and holding the truth of the object, but of taking it over, of appropriating it. Due to such appropriation, a concept can dictate what is appropriate, that is, what fits within its boundaries. Instead of the process of revealing, of *aletheia*, dictating the shape of the concept, it is the concept that defines the object. The definite aspect of the term thus delineates borders of objects associated with it, while its exactness exacts from those objects to conform to those borders and only to those borders. Taken “at their word,” concepts can trivialize and limit our experience of the world. As Charles Guignon puts it in his analysis of Heidegger’s notion of unconcealment:

> […] when the aspects of things that show up in the clearing are taken for granted as the last word about the way things are, we are set adrift in the assurance that there are no real alternatives to what presents itself as self-evident and commonplace in the current world. (Guignon 1989, 54–55)

But there is never an object that is fully described by its concept, or one that fits in its entirety inside its terms. Objects are always characterized by a certain excess in regards to the words. They are always something more than the words that are meant to describe them, and regardless of how much a word brings forth from unconcealment, there always remains something concealed. We could blame that on the very essence of the language itself, but I would propose here to refer to Jean-Luc Marion’s analysis of phenomenology of givenness, and focus on his idea of a saturated phenomenon.

While analyzing how things are given to us, in phenomenological sense, Marion rejects both Immanuel Kant’s and Edmund Husserl’s ideas of a phenomenon, and proposes instead to orient his argument around a saturated phenomenon, which is a “phenomenon taken in its full sense” (Marion 2002, 219), or a “phenomenon’s normative figure, in relation to which the others are defined and declined by defect or simplification” (ibid.). For Marion, such a

phenomenon is characterized by excess and is "invisable (unforeseeable) in terms of quantity, unbearable in terms of quality, unconditioned (absolute of all horizon) in terms of relation, and finally irreducible to the I (irregardable) in terms of modality" (ibid., 218). Such a definition, to put it simply, is a definition of a phenomenon that appears (or gives itself) not without conditions, but on its own conditions. It can never be grasped by the seeing I in its entirety, because there is always more given (and to be given) than can be grasped. What happens in the experience of a saturated phenomenon is something that Marion calls a counter-experience, in which the phenomenon can perhaps be seen in some way, but cannot be gazed upon. This "gaze" is a translation of French *regarder* that is used by Marion to denote a keeping gaze of a guard, in which it is the subject that designates possible ways for the phenomenon to appear. The seeing, but gazeless counter-experience blurs the object-subject dichotomy and instead leaves the seeing I as a witness of the givenness of the phenomenon.

I believe the excess described by Marion to be the same kind of excess I invoked before. There is always more given and to be given in a saturated phenomenon than can be seen,[2] just as there is always more to bring forth from unconcealment than the words can describe. And just as it is impossible to extend this guarding gaze over a saturated phenomenon, it is not possible for a concept to fully define and exact from the thing it stands for. There is always something in the object—and I understand the object and the thing in phenomenological terms, as I have understood it from the very beginning—

2 It is worth reminding that the word "see" has a broader meaning than just sensory perception. As observed by Heidegger, seeing "lets the beings accessible to it be encountered in themselves without being concealed" (Heidegger 1996, 138). This has a significant meaning for the present discussion as it indicates that no phenomenon can be fully "seen"—there always remains something concealed that could be potentially disclosed in another perception or interpretation, while in the case of a saturated phenomenon, the infinitude of possibilities being present all at once would also be impossible to grasp. Interestingly, Heidegger pointedly notes elsewhere that the inability to see, blindness, can also be a result of a different kind of excess—that "of frantic measuring and calculating" (Heidegger 2001a, 225–226), which in its desire to control and predict precludes the possibility of seeing things as they truly are. The possibility of seeing seems to lie between two extremes—a fantasy of absolute control and a situation of a complete lack of control.

that escapes description. There is always more to be revealed than can be revealed in any single act of revealing as some possibilities of being are disclosed, while others are concealed and excluded in the clearing in which the truth reveals itself (Wrathall 2010, 24–25, 32–34; Heidegger 2002c, 30). The fault of the concepts and terms lies not in their failure to overcome this saturation of things, but in the implication that such a saturation does not exist, or, at the very least, that it is negligible in the context of language. Concepts become inadequate not when they reveal a part of an object and take it in and hold it as its essence, but when they extract it from the object and make it stand on its own and represent the object in its entirety.

Poetry as revealing

But is it possible, some may ask, to use the language in a way that would allow us to overcome the (perhaps self-imposed) limitations of terms and concepts? I would like to argue that such a way exists and lies in something that is not substantially (at least in the most basic instances) different than the way analyzed above. I believe that the limitations of terms and concepts can be overcome by poetry.

I do not understand poetry here as a genre of literature, but rather as a mode of speaking and writing. While it is possible, and quite likely, for a poem to exhibit poetry, it can be completely devoid of it. Poetry can also be found in literary prose, scientific articles, blog posts, or everyday speech. I will understand poetry here in terms of the poetic function of language, which I believe, following Heidegger's work, to be the primary device of *aletheia*. Heidegger writes that "once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*. And the *poiesis* of the fine arts also was called *techne*" (Heidegger 1977, 34). Even more so, not only did *poiesis* belong to this that revealed, but it was also the highest form of revealing: "the poetical brings the true into the splendor of what Plato in the *Phaedrus* calls *to ekphanestaton*, that which shines forth most purely" (Heidegger 1977, 34).

I believe poetry to not be some separate function, or a mode, of language, but something that happens in language naturally—with great effort, but with almost no difficulty. Even more so, I believe poetry, understood in this way, to

be at the foundation of language. I have shown that terms and concepts share in the revealing that is characteristic of poetry. To a certain degree, even they are poetic, or they are poetic originally, but they somehow lose some of their poetic nature with use, when instead of keeping unconcealed what they have revealed, they define and exact, and thus cover the true from "the splendor of that which shines forth most purely." Despite the substantial similarity between concepts and poetry, poetry is different in how it brings forth that, which is concealed.

This can be well explained on the basis of the childlike fascination with words and with naming. I believe that it is there where all poetry originates, and it is also the foundation of *aletheia*. When children discover language, their vocabulary is limited. Although they are aware of the multitude of distinct things that can be named, they do not know their *proper* (common) names. Sometimes they ask adults the ever-repeating question "What is this?", but more often than not they invent their own names and use them in their speech in a natural way. Even though those original, and often ingenious, names hardly ever survive the first few years of a child's life (as they are replaced by the commonly used ones for the sake of the ease of communication), there is no denying that they serve their purpose. They allow the child and people around it, to locate what is named. As Hans-Georg Gadamer says while discussing the poetic language, naming is the original possibility of the everyday speech. He follows that with an important remark: "To name something is to always call it into presence." (Gadamer 1986a, 135) That does not only mean that using something's name merely turns our attention towards it, the way pointing does. It is even more substantial—naming something is a crucial part of the process of revealing, of *aletheia*. A thing's name calls the truth of that thing into presence, makes it readily available to us, and opens an engagement with it (cf. Heidegger 2001b). Names enable us to enter into a relationship with a thing—to interpret it and to include it in our field of vision and understanding. Language can be seen as a condition for our experience of the world (cf. Heidegger 1971, 63, 126–127).

The child's naming of its world can provide more insight into this. As I said earlier, child-made names are not useless—they too allow us to turn our attention to that, which is named, but the simple fact that no explanation on the part of the child is needed for us to be able to grasp what it means by such

and such name should tell us that there is an even greater process at work here. A name, if it is applicable to a thing and if a thing is recognizable in that name, is closely linked to the process of revealing in that it is both the result and the necessary condition of that revealing. A name does not describe the object it names—that may come only later, when the definiteness and exactness make it stand on its own and for the object—, but it expresses something inherent in that object, it expresses some truth of that object. As Heidegger describes it, "language beckons us, at first and then again at the end, toward a thing's nature" (Heidegger 2001a, 214). That does not mean we are always able to recognize this beckoning and reach the nature of a thing in linguistic terms, but that there is always a possibility for the truth of the thing to shine through the language. I believe that this is the source of possibility for all poetry as well, which is rooted in the childlike fascination with language and naming (or is perhaps a return to it) and, consequently, the process of expressing the truth of being is what is central to all poetry, if it is indeed poetry. The fundamental nature of this process, although discussed in existential terms, is further thematized by Heidegger in *Being and Time,* where he presents the discovery and disclosure of the truth of being as our essential capacity and primary activity (Heidegger 1996, 196–211).

We sometimes speak of poetic expression to denote those turns of the phrase often found in poetry that leave us in awe of the insight of the poem. But is the phrase "poetic expression" not a pleonasm? Is not all poetry expressive and all expressions poetic? This expressiveness is twofold. On the one hand, if poetry is truly a return to the childlike fascination with naming, all poetry calls something into presence, that is, it recognizes what is inherent in the object, with which it is concerned, and expresses it as accurately as possible. On the other hand, it always gives an account of a personal experience of that object—a thing never gives itself in the same way to different observers (or even to the same observer in different instances of observing), but there is always something more, an excess that stretches beyond the experience and can only be grasped in endless revisions, but never fully. Poetry expresses that exquisitely, in that it is not meant to present all possible experiences of a single object, but a certain, fragmented and local experience. This is illustrated by Heidegger in an essay entitled *The Origin of a Work of Art*, where he elaborates

on a question of the movement between unconcealment and concealment that is fundamental to truth: "Each being which we encounter and which encounters us maintains this strange opposition of presence in that at the same time it always holds itself back in a concealment." (Heidegger 2002c, 30)

For him, whenever something is present, or is brought into presence, in one way, it also remains hidden in another. He chooses an example of a stone that we weigh on a scale, in order to understand its heaviness—we get a numerical value relating to its weight, but we lose the feeling of how it feels in our hand. It is similar with color, which shines clearly, but is lost when we try to analyze its wavelength.[3] This cannot be understood simply as shortcomings of the scientific way of describing the things we encounter, but a fundamental characteristic of truth that happens precisely in this movement between what is open and what closes itself off from us. As Heidegger notes in *The Essence of Truth*, where he discusses truth as "letting things be" (which can be contrasted to exacting from things to be something specific), when something is unconcealed, it is done so only in one particular aspect, whereas its other aspects and its being as a whole remain hidden (Heidegger 1998, 148). To put it simply, in seeing a forest at night, we might not notice all the details that are plainly visible in sunlight, but on the other hand, we will see this same forest in a way that is not possible on a sunny day. Andrej Božič points to a similar phenomenon happening in poetry when he looks at Gadamer's notion of it. He says that poetry

> […] lets us hear also the unuttered, the unsaid, which is, as an expectation, an anticipation, an expectant anticipation or an anticipating expectation of sense, of a significance, a meaning, presupposed and by the poem itself called into existence, if only to be, it the final consequence, broken or even betrayed, disappointed and dismayed. (Božič 2015, 170)

What poetry brings forth is not merely what is already present there in the expressed object, but, maybe even more crucially, it also brings our attention to what is concealed and not available in that very moment. It gives a certain comfort by showing that there is something that can be understood and grasped, but at the same time points to everything that is left unsaid, undisclosed, and unknown. As such, poetry cannot be understood only as something comforting,

something simply allowing us to find our bearings in the world and to establish a non-problematic relationship to things. It calls us to constantly reorient ourselves and rethink our suppositions and presuppositions by showing us both a ground, on which we can firmly stand, and at the same time an even greater area that is outside of our reach, that shifts beneath our feet.

A similar intuition is expressed by Gianni Vattimo who, in analyzing the aesthetics of Heidegger and Walter Benjamin in relation to modern art, writes that "art is constituted as much by the experience of ambiguity as it is by oscillation and disorientation" (Vattimo 1992, 60). I think that this comment just as readily applies to poetry as to visual arts. In its *aletheia*, poetry disorients the reader accustomed to comforting, simple, and definite concepts and puts them in a state of oscillation that forces them to constantly reinvent themselves and readjust their relationship to and understanding of the world. In poetry, a reader cannot just look in one direction at what is described, but has to broaden their perspective, and accommodate in their understanding everything that was previously not admitted and in the poetic expression became unconcealed or made noticeable in its concealment. While presenting what is revealed and what is not, poetry also, perhaps most importantly, brings forth the reader as a subject capable of understanding and called to understanding. In the presence of everything that comes to the reader in the poetic expression, they have no choice but to make an attempt, over and over again, at understanding. The reader that is brought forth by poetry is one that is most in line with the hermeneutic disposition of a human being, which is always capable of and oriented towards understanding and communication of that understanding (cf. Heidegger 1996, 134–156; Gadamer 2004, especially part two and three).

The movement between the concealed and the unconcealed also points to another characteristic of poetry, which can be called, following Vattimo's remarks on art, its ambiguity, but also its potential richness, its multiplicity of meaning. While what is expressed can always be recognized by another person, a reader or listener, this does not mean that what was given to the poet is necessarily also being given to that reader or listener. Poetry opens us to the Other and to the experience of the Other in that it expresses not something that is readily available to anybody, but something that is there in the thing it describes, even if it can be seen by some only through the medium of poetry.

An example would perhaps make this clearer. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* opens with one of the most memorable phrases in the English language:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain. (Eliot 2001, 5)

This cruelty of April invoked by Eliot is instantly recognizable, while remaining strange at the same time. It is not that any reader can actually see what is so cruel about April without reading *The Waste Land*. Perhaps for some readers, April is a month of joy, the end of winter, devoid of any cruelty. Perhaps to some readers April is given just as that. But that does not mean that they are unable to recognize that there is something more to April (especially the April discussed by Eliot) once this something more is expressed by somebody else to whom April, for various reasons, is given differently. Through the medium of poetry, they are able to grasp what would otherwise remain concealed for them—it may be that what poetry does best in its calling into presence is promoting understanding of what was previously unnoticed and that its true significance lies in pointing to the "additional something" lying beyond our everyday experience and maybe beyond the common meaning of the words used in the poem (cf. Gadamer 1986b, 33–34). Nothing present in *The Waste Land* is seen and understood the same after reading this work and I believe that all poetry works this way—as noted by Heidegger and evidenced by the reference to the quoted passage from Eliot, "the communication of the existential possibilities of attunement, that is, the disclosing of existence, can become the 'true' aim of poetic speech" (Heidegger 1996, 152).

Using such a masterpiece as an example might have perhaps implied that poetry happens only in the spectacular, genius, and unique. This is simply not the case. Poetry can also be found in everyday language, in proverbs, in ingenious turns of the phrase, but it is also in the everyday language that poetry can be most easily lost, when habit or ease of communication prompt us to speak as if what is revealed in these poetic expressions is all that there is to reveal, as if that what is being called into presence is present in its entirety.

It is time to return to this "standing for something" that opened this essay, and ask a question of what does poetry stand for?

Once again, I would propose to refer to the words of Gadamer, whose analysis can hopefully shed some light on the matter at hand:

> [Everyday] language never stands for itself. It stands for something we encounter in the practical activities of life or in scientific experience, and it is in this context that the views we express prove themselves or fail to do so. Words do not "stand" for their own account. Whether they are spoken or written, their meaning is only fully realized in the context of life. Valéry contrasted the poetic word with the everyday use of language in a striking comparison that alludes to the old days of the gold standard: everyday language resembles small change which, like our paper money, does not actually possess the value it symbolizes. The famous gold coins used before the First World War, *on the other hand*, actually possessed as metal the value that was imprinted upon them. In a similar way the language of poetry is not a mere pointer that refers to something else, but, like the gold coin, is what it represents. (Gadamer 1986a, 132–133)

Poetry allows the possibility for the things to be present in our language. Poetry's calling into presence is not a mere reference to things outside of the expressions we use. The things are actually present in some way in the expressions—poetry brings forth some indispensable aspects of things and *expresses* them in the form of language. An expression results necessarily from the nature of the thing it expresses, and makes that thing recognizable (often in a strange, unfamiliar way) in the phrase. While the everyday language stands always for something else and never for itself, poetry stands for itself and refers to itself as it accurately, and always accurately, if it is indeed poetry, expresses the truth of the thing, of which it speaks. Although, like in the case of everyday language, the poetic expression is something else (by virtue of being a part of language) than the object it expresses, the truth of this expression is also the truth of the object—in that sense it *is* what it represents. The risk associated with poetry, and as such with all language, is the risk of our taking it for granted, of our agreeing not only that it represents what it expresses, but that

it represents it fully, that it is interchangeable with it and that it can stand for it. To refer to Gadamer's monetary metaphor, it is the risk of recognizing the value that it holds, while agreeing that this is the only value that can and should be held. The risk of becoming a concept is inherent in every expression—in fact, concepts and expressions are not as dissimilar to each other as it appears at first glance.

For Gadamer, this expressive characteristic is applicable not only to poetry, but to the language of philosophy as well, and I believe that this can be extended to all forms of language, as long as we do not let them stand for things that they represent. He writes that

> […] both the poetical and philosophical type of speech share a common feature: they cannot be "false." For there is no external standard against which they can be measured and to which they might correspond. Yet they are far from arbitrary. They represent a unique kind of risk, for they can fail to live up to themselves. (Gadamer 1986a, 139)

This "failure to live up to themselves" is crucial to understanding what Gadamer means here. Poetry and philosophy can never be false, because they are always local, they are always an expression of what is given to that particular person in that particular moment. There is nothing external to the observer and to the phenomenon that should influence the truth value of the expression. However, it is possible for the expression not to be expressive enough, and thus not accurate enough, by not giving a comprehensive account of that, which is given. Gadamer points to poetry that mimics other poetic phrases or everyday phrases and to philosophy that repeats empty arguments. He says that in such cases, the word "breaks," whereas elsewhere he notes that the ambiguity inherent in poetry (even if one meaning of the expression can normally be pinpointed) as well its potential multiplicity of meanings that remain undisclosed are what safeguards language from flattening out into the used up phrases commonly used in mass media—what could in my view also be labelled as "broken" words (Gadamer 1997b).

It would be worth noting here the difference that can be observed between poetry and philosophy, which, in my view, is noticeable in

Gadamer's comment about repetition that presents a great danger to poetic and philosophical language. In my reading, poetry would have more to do with the form of language and a specific way of using it, as elaborated earlier, whereas philosophy relates rather to the content of the expression. While it can be argued that great poetry is philosophical (i.e., it is interested in our experience, our understanding of the world and its structures) and that great philosophy is poetic (i.e., it discloses something on a linguistic level that would not have been noticeable otherwise), this does not have to be the case. Some philosophers have made it their point to develop their arguments in the plain, common, or strict language, which I contrasted with poetry, without necessarily sacrificing their ability to elaborate on some aspects of our experience and understanding, whereas some poets are content with focusing only on the purely aesthetic dimension of their perception, without discussing themes that could be labelled as "philosophical" (which does not mean their poetic phrases are uncapable of disclosing anything).[4]

When the word does not "break," and the repetition and unoriginality are avoided, there occur instances "where the word fulfills itself and becomes language," which means that "we must take it at its word" (Gadamer 1986a, 132–133). Taking the word at its word happens when we take what is given

4 It has to be noted that the distinction between philosophy and poetry as understood in this essay is not clear at all. For example, Heidegger characterizes philosophy as "especially the stern and resolute openness that does not disrupt the concealing, but enters its unbroken essence into the open region of understanding and thus into its own truth" (Heidegger 1998, 152), a description that could be just as well applied to poetry. Vattimo (2002) identifies the similarities between philosophy and poetry as arising from their shared interpretative character. He views the relation between philosophy and poetry today as a shared dialogue about a common subject matter, which can be characterized as what is being disclosed and remains undisclosed in acts of unconcealing. This, however, has problematic consequences for the delineation between the two disciplines as there is no clear distinction between them that can be pointed out, other than the fact that they cannot merge into one activity because of the baggage that they both inherit through our shared, metaphysically-loaded intellectual tradition. In light of Vattimo's comments, my decision to treat philosophy and poetry as separate, although similar entities perhaps cannot be justified by anything better than the sentence: "they have always been treated as distinct." The only significant differences seem to be formal, but even they are negligible in light of contemporary poetry's abandonment of traditional forms.

to us and recognize its inherent value. David Vessey writes that for Gadamer "poetry doesn't report, it testifies; it stands on its own words" (Vessey 2010, 166). This brings us once again to the autonomy of the poetic language, but also reminds us of something else that is just as important. Vessey writes that according to Gadamer what happens in a poem is a certain testimony. I have called it an account, and it is worth examining this more closely.

Poetry as an account

This peculiar characteristic of poetry is perhaps best expressed by Jacques Derrida in his analysis of the poetry of Paul Celan. Derrida writes there that "the poem bears witness" (Derrida 2005b, 87). Of course, we cannot forget about the context of this remark that locates it directly in the scope of bearing witness to the Holocaust, but I think there is something to be gathered here that relates to poetry in general.[5] Earlier in his text, Derrida elaborates on what he understands as this bearing witness, and the importance of his reading should be grasped momentarily:

> "I bear witness"—that means: "I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, sense-perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, you have to believe me, because I engage myself to tell you the truth, I am already engaged in it, I tell

5 A reviewer of the paper rightly suggested that a clarification could be needed here regarding the connection between witnessing and interpreting. Although, admittedly, the processes of witnessing and interpreting are not identical, a witness always expresses a certain interpretation of the events they encountered. The existence of a certain interpretation of the events or phenomena is then a necessary condition for any witnessing. I take interpretation as something that occurs whenever somebody needs to understand a certain phenomenon or event, whereas witnessing comes when that interpretation is to be given a linguistic character and expressed in a certain form to oneself or others. I would argue that a witness expresses themselves in their testimony similarly to how *Dasein* expresses in statements itself and the truth it discovers (Heidegger 1996, 205–206). Moreover, since some interpretations may compel the interpreter to express them (as noted below), witnessing can be understood as a natural extension of the process of interpretation. It moves what is disclosed through interpretation from the personal to the interpersonal level (as either communicated or communicable expression).

> you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me." (Derrida 2005b, 76)

An echo of what I have written above can be heard here (or perhaps, more aptly, it is the other way round). The process of bearing witness, of giving a testimony is rooted deeply in the personal experience of the one who is the witness, who testifies, who can be held accountable. It is a certain engagement with the truth of that, which is waiting to be told. It would be wise to return here to Marion's phenomenology of givenness and remind that for him, in light of a saturated phenomenon, there is no subject perceiving an object, but a witness guided in their fragmentary perception by this phenomenon.[6] Perhaps in the case of poetry, we too should not think of a mouth describing something, but of a *mouthpiece* engaged with the truth of something and indebted in its speech to that truth that is now being expressed through it. It is not the subject prescribing certain words to an object, but a witness laying out, expressing, what is given to them in their experience of that object. Any revealing can only happen through a witness, but it always originates in that which is revealed.

Following Derrida, I would claim that all acts of speech have this testimonial character (Derrida 2005b, 86), all expressions are a bearing of witness to the truth of being. But if poetry is a testimony, should it not be possible for it to be false? Once again, in Gadamerian sense, it cannot be false—it is only when the witness stops saying "This is what I see," or "This is what I saw," and claims that their words have a sense of urgency that should be common to all experiences of what they bear witness to, that their testimony can, and should, be considered false. But if the witness does not resort to such bold claims, there is nothing that can be seen as false, nothing provable, and nothing questionable. There is no third instance that can look into what the witness tries to express, and say: "No, this is not the case." However, at the same time, there is also no instance that could support the testimony by saying "Yes, this

6 Interestingly, when discussing the poetry of Celan, Gadamer compares it to singing and describes a reader as guided by the song expressed in the poem and compelled to join in the singing (cf. Gadamer 1997a). Heidegger, in turn, describes how the language, by bringing closer the things it names, prompts the human being to respond to what is spoken (Heidegger 2001b).

is true, without a shadow of a doubt." The only recourse of the witness is to that appeal with which Derrida ends the paragraph quoted above: "Believe me. You have to believe me."

The success of that recourse is related to the witness's special engagement with the truth of that, on behalf of which she testifies. It is not only that she can be asked to give an account of her experience, but also that she can be held accountable. The believability of her testimony is dependent on her character, on her bearing witness not only to her experience, but also on her giving witness to her engagement with the truth.[7] It has to be noted that this engagement is particularly strong, as perception can be characterized, after Heidegger, by a desire to fully immerse oneself in the object of the perception and take in as much as there is possible to be taken (Heidegger 2002b, 147–153; Wrathall 2010, 88)—we are "always striving to establish a particular understanding of ourselves and the world by using the entities we encounter in the world" (Wrathall 2010, 91). I would argue that this striving compels the witness to not only absorb and interpret phenomena, but also express what these phenomena have imparted upon them.

Derrida stresses the fact that witnesses are often asked to make an oath that they are telling the truth and nothing but the truth. This oath is an indication of their special relationship with that, to which they are bearing witness. For Derrida, even somebody who commits perjury, is and remains a keeper of truth, as it expresses itself within him over and over again and is something that he has to be mindful of: "he has to keep, self-present, the meaning or the true meaning, in its truth, of what he is concealing, falsifying, or betraying—and of which he can then keep the secret. Keep it as such—and the keeping of this safekeeping is the movement of truth." (Derrida 2005b, 80) Once somebody enters that special relationship with the truth, once the truth expresses itself through them, they are always guided by it, even if they attempt to escape that bond. They become a witness—no longer a speaker, but a mouthpiece. Our belief in their testimony stems from our recognition of their special character—once we recognize that they do, in fact, keep a certain truth, we

7 For some scholars, this engagement is not enough, which for them makes witnessing suspect in its relationship with the truth (cf. Sandomirskaja 2011).

are able to hear not only their expression as an expression standing on its own and just for itself, but an expression standing as that, which it expresses. Here, through poetry, the expression does not stand for something, that is, in place of something as is the case with terms and concepts, but in line, or together, with something and it is given directly by this something. It bears witness in that it in itself holds the truth and can relay the truth to whomever is ready to listen to the testimony.

To better understand all the implications of what I have written, I would propose here to look at some statements made by Derrida in an interview with Évelyne Grossman. He says that "all words, from their first emergence, partake of revenance. They will always have been phantoms […]" (Derrida 2005a, 105). Elaborating on that remark, he says that "whoever has an intimate, bodily experience of this spectral errancy, whoever surrenders to this truth of language, is a poet, whether he writes poetry or not" (ibid.). Finally, he adds:

> I call a "poet" the one who gives way to events of writing that give this essence of language a new body, and make it manifest in a work. I do not want to take the word *work* in any easy sense. What is a work? To create a work is to give a new body to language, to give language a body so that this truth of language may appear *as such*, may appear and disappear, may appear as an elliptic withdrawal. (Ibid., 105–106)

A bit earlier, he equates being born into language with inheriting it, and there is a lesson to be learned in his remarks. It is far too easy to find oneself in a language and accept it as such, without realizing the burden and the duty that comes with any inheritance, with any heritage. It is not simply a matter of preserving that heritage, but of giving it a new life, a new sense of urgency and validity.[8] The truth giving itself, revealing itself, through poetry needs its

8 This is akin to Vattimo's concept of *Verwindung*—the conscious efforts to re-evaluate and transform our cultural tradition without engaging in any clear breaks as it is impossible to completely distance oneself from one's past and cultural inheritance (cf. Vattimo 1991). Gadamer expressed this belonging to a tradition being later, in hindsight, ingeniously re-examined and reshaped when he wrote in *Truth and Method*: "[…] we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e.,

keepers. It needs to be recognized and bore witness to in a way that would leave it present in every word of a testimony. This truth, once realized, cannot be abandoned for the sake of brevity or efficiency of communication, but needs to be given a body so that it could manifest itself and withdraw over and over again. To honor our heritage would not simply be a matter of repeating names given (first to the things and then to us, passed on to us) by our predecessors. This is not enough, and if those names were simply to become general terms that can be freely substituted for what they represent, it would mean that we strayed from their truth, that we allowed ourselves to forget the importance of the childlike joy of naming. Being true to our heritage, and to the heritage of every poet who has ever expressed anything, would require making room for things in our speech by restoring their presence there.

Conclusion

Gadamer could not have been more right when he saw the close parallel between the language of poetry and the language of philosophy. The task of philosophy should be to further poetic language in our everyday speech, to replace the question of "What does it stand for?" with "What does it express?" The task is not to simply repeat used-up phrases, but to recognize the expressionistic character of all names, of all words, and see that, which they express. If poetry manages to return in our speech over and over again, even in an everyday context, that means that we have not strayed too far from the childlike naming. What is necessary, here, is what philosophy, to a large extent, has always done, that is, to look at our inheritance and ask the questions of where did it come from, how did it come to belong to us, and has it always appeared the way it now appears to us?

In those questions lies a great educational project for philosophy to undertake, if we understand education, after Gadamer, as the promotion of understanding and self-understanding. There is a great deal to be learned

we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenuous affinity with tradition." (Gadamer 2004, 283)

through reinvigoration of the childlike joy of naming and awareness of that process. The task of philosophy would be then to turn our attention to naming, to what is being called into presence by naming, and how it happens. Even more than that, philosophy should first and foremost turn our attention to what is calling us to bear witness, to what is waiting to be called into presence—to truth, to *aletheia*.

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