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WAYS TO DEAL WITH CONTINGENCY VIOLENCE AND DIALOGUE

ABSTRACT

In this paper contingency is estimated as an essentially identifying trait of the (modern) world emerging from the radical upheavals of the late 18th century and the beginnings of the 19th century. If contingency is the mark of the (modern) world *as* world, the question arises how human beings should, or merely could deal with it. For the purpose of discussing this issue, the usual alternative of violence and dialogue is considered. Nevertheless, the intention is not merely to oppose violent to rational conduct. Taking recourse to two authors who had a particularly acute sense of contingency, Heinrich von Kleist and Paul Celan, the aim of this paper, on the one hand, is to discuss a concept of violence that is not merely instrumental, nor attributable to merely subjective intentions, but that has the significance of the principle of overcoming contingency by way of absolutely forcing order or absolutely renouncing to it. On the other hand, it involves discussing a concept of dialogue that is essentially different to what may be called the institution of Western dialogue, characterized by the disembodiment of the word, and therefore to suggest the concept of a radically embodied dialogue as a way to positively deal with contingency.

Keywords: Contingency, violence, dialogue, language, body.

At the beginning of the 19th century a certain sense of general instability seemed to sprout among people; the work of many authors attests to it. The turmoil of the previous century in its last decades, first and foremost the French Revolution, deeply shook the confidence in the order of things, in a completely different way to the shocking occurrence of the Lisbon earthquake in the mid-eighteenth century, which after all, and notwithstanding the intense debate it provoked, was a natural disaster. The revolution showed that the order of human things could undergo a radical upheaval by human agency, cutting history, so to speak, in two. This astounding disruption confirmed in an overwhelming man-

ner that there was history. If the Lisbon earthquake aroused the most pressing doubts about the belief in a world wisely governed by a loving God, and—as Voltaire would have it—about the Leibnizian idea of the best of all possible worlds, exposing humankind, as it seemed, to the vicissitudes of an immanent and indifferent nature, the French Revolution evinced the human power to radically transform all the social, political, and economic order that was, until then, taken for granted.

But another seism in progress needs to be mentioned, which made all reliance on human capacity to know the order of things waver, and this was—if I may term it so—the withdrawal of the thing in itself brought about by another disruption: the Kantian revolution, which was in more than one sense related to the epoch-making one in France.

It may seem meaningful to cover all these acute changes drawing on the concept of contingency. For their general effects were uncertainty, unpredictability, and the difficulty to locate events and emerging circumstances in familiar, inherited frames. All domains that are relevant for human beings, whether natural, historical, or epistemological, entered into a state of variability.

Of course, the question of contingency can be addressed in many different ways: logical, epistemological, ethical, political, and metaphysical. In a certain sense, what I am going to say could be subscribed under the last heading, because the issue that interests me here is the idea of irreducible contingency of the world as such. However, I am not going to tackle this subject in general terms. This idea of irreducible contingency, although it may be traced back across the centuries of philosophical tradition, acquires its sharp cutting edge with the dawn of modernity, when the glorious conceptions of subject grounded on certainty and a nature obedient to necessary laws—not to mention a lasting social order—began to fluctuate and collapse. The sense of the term “world” became essentially problematic. We are heirs to this quandary.

A host of brilliant heads sought to deal with these challenges. Friedrich Hölderlin, for instance, when discussing the difference between ancients (Hellas) and moderns (Hesperia), and considering the tragic “categorical turn” as the germination of the modern spirit, spoke about the condition of the tragic hero’s understanding, as she goes silently “wandering below the unthinkable” (Hölderlin, 1988, 111). His confrontation can be considered one of the most radical ones with the aforementioned challenges. Keeping this in mind, I will rather cling to one whose shining brilliant head was shadowed by somber hues just as Hölderlin’s. This is Heinrich von Kleist. The Earthquake and the French and Kantian revolutions nourish his thought and writing.

VIOLENCE

If there is a German word that could be held over the entirety of Kleist's work as a sort of watchword, it is the term "*Zufall*." Chance, coincidence, fortuity, accident: all the meanings packed in this word speak of a certain event—or of a set of simultaneously concurring events—which is unforeseen, unexpected, or unintended, and which for that very reason cannot be referred to a chain of known or conjecturable causes. And this is, of course, the standard conceptualization of what we call "contingent," insofar as it opposes what happens by necessity. You may turn to Aristotle's discussion of *tò endekhómenon*, Thomas's explanation of *contingens*, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's little essay *De contingentia*, or the Kantian framing of *Zufälligkeit* under the reflective principle of purposiveness, and you will find that all of them agree in the opposition of contingency and necessity. This happens to undergo an essential alteration in Kleist's oeuvre.

Kleist's world is the Newtonian world governed by the law of universal gravitation, and that means that everything in it is subject to the irresistible propensity to fall. But Kleist complicates the physical fact of the fall—which is indeed omnipresent in his works—suggesting, on the one hand, a sort of suspended fall that seems to announce a catastrophic outcome, and, on the other hand, linking it to the theologico-moral resonances of the term, that is, persistently alluding to the proverbial fall, the original sin. Such co-implication defines what constitutes the core of Kleist's dramatic production and narrative, and this is the *event*. The event, which is at the same time spontaneous and sudden, abrupt, has a chiasmatic character, insofar as it is the crossing of two essentially heterogeneous series, the physical one and the moral one, being the event the blind (and vertiginous) spot of the crossing itself. So, the event appears to be intentional (for instance, it may be conceived as a design of Providence), but it retains its merely physical inertia, indifferent to all attribution of meaning, thereby suggesting an incommensurability that defies the agent's comprehension. In this sense, the ascription of a meaning to the event is nothing but the expression of perplexity. Physical and moral causality are both interpretations, human conjectures to deal with what happens. In Kleist's terms, everything is contingent, and we are embarrassed to give it a meaning whatsoever, either by way of knowledge or by way of our own existence and fate. This means that the human point of view coincides with the blind spot of the event. Knowledge cannot cope with the multiple possibilities latent in the event, so that their determination, predictability or explanation remains essentially problematic. Hence the phrase that could be read as the statement of a principle: "probability is not always on the side of truth (*die Wahrscheinlichkeit nicht immer auf Seiten der Wahrheit ist*)."¹ You cannot expect what used to be expected.

¹ The phrase stands in *Michael Kohlhaas* and in the short text "Improbable Truths."

Kleist's fundamental philosophical reference was Immanuel Kant. Indeed, when at the beginning of his twenties he came to learn that according to Kant there is no access for human beings to things as they are in themselves, he suffered a crisis that led him to abandon his scientific purposes. Kleist's acquaintance with the Kantian critical project was surely very limited, but the traces left by this shocking revelation are deeply marked in his work. In this sense, what is interesting is that Kant was perfectly clear about contingency as the general scheme of everything that experience offers. The transcendental legislation of understanding cannot descend into the particularity of cases, which demands another type of frame in order to determine the compatibility of singular events with the use of the subject's faculties. To that end, he brings back final causality.

As it is well known, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant develops an argument based on the acknowledgement that, for human understanding, the existence and functions of organic beings cannot be explained merely by mechanical principles: they are essentially contingent. The intelligibility of such beings requires a different conceptual frame. The epistemological way to deal with the contingency of existent things and, in the end, with the "contingency of the world-whole (*des Weltganzen*)" (5:398) is the subscription of everything contingent under the principle of purposiveness, conceived as the mode according to which the thing whose existence and operation cannot be explained by mechanical causality becomes intelligible, comprehensible, for human understanding. And, of course, this teleological principle—which is extensible to everything singular, as can be seen from the first part of the third *Critique*, devoted to the aesthetical power of judgment—is especially relevant for Kant, because, given the constitution of our cognitive faculties, it proves that such a world "cannot be conceived in accordance with any other principle than that of an intentional causality of a highest cause" (5:399), which, of course, is not a sufficient proof of the existence of this highest cause, but just indicates the human need to draw on it for the use of the power of judgment.

The point that is particularly relevant in Kleist is the suspension of the possibility of ascribing such kind of comprehensibility as a unifying principle to what happens in the world and to what happens to be in the world. It is not that purposiveness is denied, on the contrary: final ends (and efficient causes as well) are part of the game, but, as was stated earlier, their attribution to events, the ordering of events according to them, is the expression, not of comprehension, but of perplexity. This has critical consequences for the concept of "world" and for the way in which the subject relates to it. The expression that summarizes these consequences speaks of "the fragile order of the world (*die gebrechliche Einrichtung der Welt*)."¹ This fragile order means that the substance of the world is contingency, which means that there are no substances in the world. What we call substance (or a thing, or a subject, or what we utter as "I") is a temporary densification—by intensity—of many events coinciding at a certain point. This intensity defines singularity, and this singularity is marked

by an index of temporality. Nothing is fixed, as dear old Lichtenberg would say: you cannot state that what is true *is* true² (where the second “is” refers to some sort of permanence and invariability, while the first applies to a determinate state of affairs as long as it retains a specific set of characteristics). Whatever happens in such a world is in itself impenetrable for human understanding; you could say, as seen from a Kantian point of view that what happens—the event—is a trace of the thing in itself. But if understanding cannot solve the quandary of events, it is existence that has to be involved in order to come to terms with it. The world’s contingency—its fragile order—insofar as it is effective in the event, frustrates any possibility of symbolization that could tell the truth about it.

Zufall is the force and structure of the event. Kleist’s event has an air of the Epicurean clinamen. As you know, clinamen is the name that Lucretius gave to the minimal and unpredictable swerves of the atoms in their rectilinear fall through the void, which are responsible for the generation of the plurality of things and worlds³. Of course, Epicurus and Lucretius were convinced supporters of mechanic causality, but they were not prepared to acknowledge an exhaustive determinism that would suppress any hint of freedom, not just in a human sense, but as an unforeseeable and undeterminable cause of everything that has been, is or may be. Now imagine that in the universal fall that characterizes the Kleistian world every event is a sort of clinamen, so that unpredictability prevails at any moment, in every place: the necessity that may be at work in these multiple changes of causal direction would be absolutely unfathomable for the agent or the patient. There would be no assistance of reason or understanding to solve the objective riddle. You could only risk your own existence in order to come to terms with it. And this is precisely the point where violence enters the scene.

I can think of many places in Kleist’s work that may confirm this. Take as a particularly relevant instance *Michael Kohlhaas*, but also *The Earthquake in Chile*, *The Foundling*, *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo*, *St. Cecilia or the Power of Music* among the stories, and then *The Schrockenstein Family*, *Prince Friedrich of Homburg*, and most remarkably *Penthesilea* among the dramatic pieces; the little note *Sentiments Before Friedrich’s Seascape* could be added. Let me linger briefly on the story of *Michael Kohlhaas* and on *Penthesilea*.

The first is based on historical facts: a certain horse-dealer, a model of honesty, suffers an outrageous abuse at the hands of a nobleman. He seeks justice resorting to the courts of Saxony, but the nobleman’s high-ranking relatives

² “Stop your chattering. What do you want? If the stars are no longer fixed in their places, how can you continue to say that truth is still truth?” (Lichtenberg, 2012, 68 [E 139]).

³ “... when bodies fall through empty space / Straight down, under their own weight, at a random time and place, / They swerve a little. Just enough of a swerve for you to call / It a change of course” (Lucretius, 2007, II 219–220).

hide the suit. After many unsuccessful attempts, one of which costs him the life of his devoted wife, Kohlhaas embarks on a campaign with many followers to obtain justice persecuting the offender and causing havoc all over the country. He declares himself a surrogate of Archangel Michael on Earth and defies the whole state of Saxony. At last, he receives double justice: the complete reparation of the offense and a dignified death on the scaffold of Brandenburg.

Penthesilea's tragedy stages the incursion of the army of the Amazons during the war of Troy, in order to capture brave warriors, who are to become progenitors of a new breed for their kingdom. When confronting one another, Penthesilea and Achilles fall in love. The sequence of various vicissitudes ends with Achilles's fake defeat, which turns horribly real as Penthesilea, seconded by her dogs, tears with her teeth her beloved groom's beautiful body. Coming to herself, and realizing her awful deed, she explains herself appealing to a verbal ambiguity: kisses and bites (*Küssen und Bissen*) sound alike, and it is known that a true lover uses to say that she would want to eat her beloved out of passion. In the end, queen Penthesilea renounces the Amazon law and kills herself with an "annihilating sentiment," which is nothing other than the words she finally utters.

You can take both, the equivocation as well as this strange kind of suicide, as a key. It points toward language. In these texts—as in Kleist's other works—the outburst of violence, of extreme violence indicates a structural insufficiency of language. I say structural, because it is not that, incidentally, for lack of words a certain agent resorts to violence driven by wrath or exasperation. Just as knowledge cannot penetrate the bundle of possibilities that the event entails, language fails when it comes to sheer existence. "I don't know what I *inexpressible* man (*unausprechlichen Menschen*) ought to say to you. —I would like to tear my heart out of my body, wrap it in this letter, and send it to you. —Foolish thought!"⁴ It is the representational character of language that impedes the expression of existence.

Of course, these instances are different. In the case of *Michael Kohlhaas* it is—allow me to put it this way—the dream of a transcendental violence that would have the power to stabilize the "world" by producing it at every moment. Not aimed merely at order, it postulates the identity of violence with justice, or else it equates the order that violence instates with justice. This violence seeks to overcome contingency definitively, but its exercise cannot but confirm in the crudest manner the contingency of every form of social, political, and legal organization.

In the case of *Penthesilea*, justice is not at stake, but love. The radical question is: how do you say, "I love you"? The Amazon queen finds a way, the most dreadful of all. It is also a dream, the dream of an absolute love in the ma-

⁴ Kleist, letter to his older half-sister Ulrike, March 13 (and 14), 1803.

terial union of two bodies accomplished by eating the beloved one. This love denies law and justice and can only be fulfilled with the surrendering of one's own life.

In both cases, violence is not an instrument, but a principle. In both cases, the breach that opens itself in language and that has violence as its essential trait is the trace of the thing in itself: justice, love.

DIALOGUE

The opposition between dialogue and violence seems to fit the idea of different ways of dealing with conflict much more than the question about dealing with contingency. But in fact, conflict is made of contingency through and through. Anyway, as I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, I am interested in a concept of contingency that may serve to determine of the conditions of the relation to the “world” in a context of general instability. And in this context the alternative between force and language appears as the—let me say so for the time being—opposition of fundamental forms of producing and establishing a sense of “world” and “order” where there is neither an overarching principle nor an ultimate foundation to which such sense can be referred to. This means that it can only be performatively constructed. Regarding language, the question that may be posed about this performative construction concerns dialogue: dialogue as a fundamental form of bringing forth a “world,” and indeed, a shared “world.”

Snow Part, published in 1971, is a posthumous collection of poems by Paul Celan, probably the greatest poet in 20th century German language. In its fourth section you can read the following piece:

“A LEAF, treeless,
for Bertolt Brecht:
What times are these
when a conversation
is nearly a crime,
because it includes
so much being spoken.”⁵

The poem is a response to the beginning of the second stanza of Brecht's *An die Nachgeborenen* (*To Those Who Follow in Our Wake*):

⁵ “EIN BLATT, baumlos, / für Bertolt Brecht: // Was sind das für Zeiten, / wo ein Gespräch / beinah ein Verbrechen ist, / weil es soviel Gesagtes / mit einschließt?” Paul Celan, *Snow Part* (transl. Jerome Rothenberg). (Translated by Scott Horton); <https://harpers.org/blog/2008/01/brecht-to-those-who-follow-in-our-wake/>

“What times are these, in which
 A conversation about trees is almost a crime
 For in doing so we remain silent about so much wrongdoing!”⁶

The word for “conversation,” in the original version of both poems, is *Gespräch*, the properly German word for “dialogue.” It sounds here like a distant reverberation of these other verses: “Much, from the morning onwards,/ Since we have been a discourse and have heard from one another,/ Has human kind learnt; but soon we shall be song.”⁷

“Since we have been a discourse,” *ein Gespräch*, reads the beginning of the eighth stanza of Hölderlin’s *Celebration of Peace*. You may measure the distance that separates Hölderlin’s noble expectation (almost a promise) from the destitute claims of Bertolt Brecht and Paul Celan. If their testimony is granted, we should conclude that a major transformation—a crisis, indeed—has affected the status and the very reality of dialogue. I would say: a crisis that affects the institution of dialogue, of Western dialogue.

Certainly, there are many forms of dialogue, dramatic, narrative, didactic; but when speaking of an institution of dialogue I am thinking of the form of the philosophical dialogue, the dialogue committed to knowledge and truth, a form that—allow me this conjecture—underlies all other forms. And this form has certain characteristic features, one of which interests me especially in this juncture.

The many instances of philosophical dialogue that we have reveal a certain common trait, consisting in the general omission of bodily presence and action. Philosophical dialogues use to be made almost exclusively of verbal performance, subordinated to the development of argument. Of course, there are some (limited) exceptions. Plato—the father of the form—is a salient one, whose consideration of the body you may not attribute exclusively to his dramatic talent (the legend goes that in his flourishing youth he dreamed of becoming a tragedian), but to his interest in the intellectual control of appearances and sensations, which have the body as their locus, their *topos*, and their cardinal vehicle. Take for instance the opening scene of *Phaedo*, as it is described by the character that gives the dialogue its title, who is one of the witnesses of Socrates’ last day: Socrates is sitting on his couch, one leg bent under the other; he rubs one of his legs that is aching because of the shackle, and makes an observation about how strange is the relation of pain to pleasure; they seem to follow each other ineluctably.⁸ The “strange thing” (*atopon*) is left without conse-

⁶ “Was sind das für Zeiten, wo / Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist / Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!” (Brecht, 2006, 70f. Translation slightly altered: “remain silent instead of “maintain our silence”).

⁷ “Viel hat von Morgen an, / Seit ein Gespräch wir sind und hören voneinander, / Erfahren der Mensch; bald sind wir aber Gesang” (Hölderlin, 1990, 234 f.).

⁸ The passage is the following: “Some of Crito’s people started to take her [Xanthippe] away, crying and beating herself in her grief. But Socrates, sitting up onto his couch, bent his leg and gave it a hard rub with his hand, and as he rubbed it he said: ‘What a peculiar thing it seems to be,

quence in this dialogue, although a mixture of delight and sorrow colors it in its entirety, motivated by Socrates' death and his grandiose temper in facing it. The theme returns in *Philebus*, in connection with the discussion of mixed pleasures, where pain is the other element of the mixture.⁹ In a certain sense, mixture is the disturbing sign of everything bodily, and body the *topos* of the *atopon*: it is marked by an index of strangeness. Therefore, it is perhaps possible to state that the crucial instance of Plato's dealing with this strangeness is the bitter confrontation of Socrates and Calicles in *Gorgias*. Calicles, the hero of *parrhesia*, who says what he thinks and thinks what he desires, and dares always to desire more (which is the logic of desire and body) receives Socrates' argumentative punishment, which for the first time infinitely separates body from soul, desire from thinking, and pain from pleasure. It is the birth of metaphysics; it is, at the same time, the birth of what I am calling the dialogue's institution and, in some sense, the death of dialogue itself.

Plato could be considered the most theatrical of all philosophers, if there were no Diogenes of Sinope, who substitutes verbal acting for bodily performance, with or without assistance: "And once, when he [an orator named Anaximenes] was discussing some point, Diogenes held up a piece of salt fish, and drew off the attention of his hearers; and as Anaximenes was indignant at this, he said, 'See, one pennyworth of salt fish has dissolved Anaximenes' discourse'." Diogenes' performance vindicates the rights of the body against the exclusive priority of the spoken word: language does not end in verbal action. Therefore, he gladly accepts to be exposed at every moment to contingency: the body—the vulnerable body—is the locus of this exposition and so the bearer of contingency. He does not recognize the privilege of the spoken word, which presupposes that it is the fundamental way of communicating one's own impressions and thoughts, ignoring the importance of non-verbal manifestations. And this is an importance that is indebted not only to the fact that they do not merely contribute to the contextual aspects of communication, but are essential to communication itself and to what is at stake in its process. It is fundamentally indebted to the fact that such manifestations, bodily manifestations, interrupt communication, momentarily cancelling the illusion of a continuous flow of discourse, opening it to exteriority, singularity, and contingency.

my friends, this thing that people call "pleasure." What a surprising natural relation it has to its apparent opposite, pain. I mean that the two of them refuse to come to a person at the same time, yet if someone chases one and catches it he is pretty much forced always to catch the other one too, as if they were two things but joined by a single head. And I do believe, he said, that if Aesop had reflected on them, he would have composed a fable: that they were at war, and that god wanted to reconcile them, and that, finding himself unable to do so, he joined their heads together, the result being that if one of them comes to somebody the other too will later follow in its train. That is precisely what seems to be happening to me too. Because pain was in my leg from the fetter, pleasure seems to have come in its train" (Plato, 2011, 60bc).

⁹ "... we could never produce an adequate examination of pleasure in isolation from distress (*lype*)" (Plato, 1975, 31 b ff.).

The privilege of the spoken word is what Plato's dialogue is committed to establishing and safeguarding: the privilege of a disembodied word, in both senses of the expression: a word that is severed from the body in which it resonates; a word whose body is to be obliterated under the constraint of that very privilege. Such constraint is a furtive and sustained violence exercised against the body for the sake of keeping the soul or the subject protected from contingency as much as possible. This is what I am referring when I speak of the institution (a Western institution) of dialogue.

Of course, there are other philosophical models. I would say that hermeneutics has been the main contemporary enterprise aimed at a reconstruction not only of dialogue itself, but of its transcendental conditions. Certainly, the fruits yielded by the hermeneutical endeavor have been abundant, mainly because hermeneutics has succeeded in combining the transcendental dimension with a historical approach, and that means, with a careful sensibility for singularities. Yet hermeneutics inscribes this sensibility within a teleological framework, whose transcendental principle is that there will always be meaning. The silent work of contingency and its stubborn secrecy, its resistance to meaning, and the interruption that body and the singular bring with them, are again restrained. The question of another kind of dialogue remains open.

I began the second part of this talk quoting a telegraphic poem of Paul Celan, which responded to, as an echo modified by time and by the most abysmal experience, some verses by Bertolt Brecht. Certainly, Brecht's verses bore testimony to the nefarious times of the rise and prevalence of Nazism, on the eve of the war; Celan's response attests to the horror that this prevalence left behind. One case concerns silence; the other (I would say) concerns verbiage, chatter. In a sense, both border on crime: in the first case, because the omission of any word that could be said to denounce abominable outrages becomes complicit with these very offenses; in the second one, because so much talk obliterates the only thing that should be said: and—we may add—of which language falls short. Finally, both suggest, as mentioned above, an essential crisis of the inherited form of dialogue.

In Celan's speech on the occasion of his acceptance of the Georg Büchner Prize for literature in 1960, entitled *The Meridian*, the poet, in keeping with the tradition, referred to the work of the outstanding dramatist after whom the prize is named. A central theme of the speech concerns the difference—in fact, a radical difference—between art (particularly, the art of modernity) and the poem, whose essential character is its absolute singularity. After alluding to Büchner's comedy *Leonce and Lena*, Celan focuses on the drama *Danton's Death* and on the conversation between Danton and Camille Desmoulins, not long before they are taken to the guillotine. Lucile, Camille's wife, who will meet the same fate, is present. I read the passage that interests me:

“Art, ladies and gentlemen, with everything that belongs to it and will yet belong to it, is also a problem, and as you can see, a mutable, tough and long-lived, I want to say, an eternal problem.

A problem that allows a mortal, Camille, and someone who can only be understood from his death, Danton, to string together word upon word. It is easy to talk about art.

But whenever there is talk, there is also someone present who ... doesn't really listen.

More exactly: someone who hears and looks ... and then doesn't know what the talk was all about. But who hears the speaker, who 'sees him speak,' who perceives language and shape, and also—who could doubt it here, in writing of this order?—breath, that is, direction and destiny.

That person is—and you have known it all along, for she comes, often, and not by chance often quoted, she comes to you year after year—that person is Lucile"¹⁰ (Celan 2011, 2 f.).

Büchner's Lucile, commented on by Celan, shows these remarkable traits: she attends the dialogue, but doesn't pay attention to what Camille and Danton are speaking about; she sees her beloved talking, she hears with her eyes, and she has to confess that she does not know what he has said. Camille and Danton forget themselves in the course of a conversation that "string[s] together word upon word," and which "could be continued indefinitely, if nothing interfered" (ibid.). It is not Lucile's case. She offers herself from her own bodily presence as a time and a place of appearance for another presence; she opens herself to this presence, as an existence that comes to meet another existence. This, I would say, is a different kind of dialogue.

I mentioned that the point that Celan wants to stress is the difference between art and poem. The highlighted scene of *Danton's Death* should be a paradigmatic instance of this difference. It could be said also that it is a paradigmatic case of the difference between two types of dialogue. Camille protests against a form of art that is mere artifice, a destitute copy of life, and the people's preference for this form makes them neither hear nor see "[c]reation, red-hot creation [that] thunders and lightens in and around them at every moment" (Büchner, 1998, 122 f.). Danton agrees, alluding to Jacques-Louis David and his hasty portrayal of the murdered Septembrists: "He sketched them in cold blood and said: 'I'm catching the last spasm of life in these scoundrels'." (Büchner, 1998, 123) What is at stake in *this* dialogue, against the background of a revolutionary violence that will finally drag along both friends and Lucile too, is another kind of revolution, an artistic revolution that would give rise to an art of life, a living art. This, perhaps, was the last dream of modernity.

¹⁰ The passage to which Celan refers to is on on Act II, Scene III:

"CAMILLE. What do you say, Lucile?

LUCILE. Nothing, I so love watching you when you speak.

CAMILLE. Do you listen as well?

LUCILE. Of course!

CAMILLE. Well, am I right? Do you really know what I said?

LUCILE. To tell you the truth, no." (Büchner, 1998, 123 f.)

Lucile, who is awake, with eyes, ears, and heart open to the other, silently and tenderly counters the direction of this dialogue. She knows that there cannot be any continuity between art and life, between discourse and existence. And then, she consummates the interruption. It is the end of *Danton's Death*. Lucile is sitting on the steps of the guillotine. She calls it quiet angel of death, cherished cradle, and death knell. A patrol appears: "then Lucile, one who is blind to art, the same Lucile for whom language is something person-like and tangible, is there once again, with her sudden 'Long live the king!'" (Celan, 2011, 3). She is arrested; in a few days she will walk up the stairs where she was sitting. Referring to Lucile's sudden declaration, which is not to be mistaken for a defense of the *ancien régime*, and which so absolutely opposed the many words spoken by Danton, Camille, Fevre, and their companions at the feet of the scaffold, Celan exclaims, "—what a word! / It is the counterword (*Gegenwort*) [...] It is an act of freedom. It is a step" (ibid.).¹¹

This counterword, this *Gegenwort*, would open a very different kind of dialogue in contrast with the one I have tried to sketch, and which I deem to be a matrix for what I called the Western dialogue. This germ of a dialogue is a welcoming of singularities and of contingency. It breaks the homogeneous present, the simple *Gegenwart*, in that it runs to an encounter with what transcends it. It is akin to the poem.

Dia-logos: through logos toward what is beyond logos: call it existence, singularity, the unthinkable.

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¹¹ In a certain sense, it could be said that Lucile is a sort of counterpart of Penthesilea, just as Kleist meant of his *Käthchen von Heilbronn*: "she is the reverse side of Penthesilea, her opposite pole, a being that is as powerful through submission as Penthesilea is through action" (letter to Marie von Kleist, Dresden, late autumn 1807, Kleist, 1997, 398). In similar terms speaks Kleist in a letter of December 1808 to Heinrich Joseph von Collin: "they [Penthesilea and Käthchen] belong together like the + and – of algebra, and they are one and the same being, only considered under opposing relations" (Kleist, 1997, 424).

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