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**«With Masts Sung Earthwards / the Sky-Wrecks drive».
And You are This Song**

With masts sung earthwards
the sky-wrecks drive.
Onto this woodsong,
you hold fast with your teeth.
You are the songfast
Pennant
[P. Celan].

The Editorial of the issue of “Logoi” I, 3, 2015, *Playing and Thinking (Is it Barbaric to Write about Playing in the Era of Migration?)* ended with this poem. It was inevitable that we picked up from here, when opening this issue of *Thinking Migrations*. Clearly, we will not repeat what was said on that occasion, because basically that Introduction was already a premise to this dossier. But it is clear that that question and that answer were, are and remain crucial. Indeed, only if we are aware that writing about migration is likely to be an act of complicit barbarism, and only if we assume that risk – certain that not thinking about it and not writing about it would be even more barbaric and more complicit – we can release a number like this.

Therefore, Paul Celan, a Jewish native speaker of German, comes to our rescue again. By his existence and with the faint *breathturn*¹ of his poetry, he tried to show that writing poetry after Auschwitz was not barbaric, but a necessary act². He returns to incite us today, asking us if ‘song’ and ‘languages’ (poetry, literature, philosophy, art, music, cinema) are only useless and fragile relicts, or the possibility to hold on, making pennants, and bridges toward a ‘you’.

We will follow, on a first level, the philosophical interpretation of H. G. Gadamer³ and try to weave ‘onto’ it the questions that the current scenarios provoke and lay bare. «In the space of three short verses the scene of a shipwreck is described, but from the beginning it becomes an unreal image. It is a shipwreck that takes place in heaven» – writes Gadamer, who associates the poetic image to the pictorial one of the painter Caspar David Friedrich: *The Sea of Ice*⁴.



¹ See P. Celan (*Atemkristall*), *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. by P. Joris, Farrar ed. – Straus and Giroux, 2014.

² «Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric»: T. Adorno, *Prisms*, Eng. Transl. MIT Press, USA, 1983, p. 34. The first essay is entitled *Cultural Criticism and Society* (1949). About this topic, see my [Is it Barbaric to Write about Playing in the Era of Migration?](#)

³ *Gadamer on Celan. 'Who Am I and Who Are You?' and Other Essays*, trans. by R. Heinemann, B. Krajewski, Suny press, New York, 1997.

⁴ *The Sea of Ice (Das Eismeer)* is also called *The Wreck of Hope (Die gescheiterte Hoffnung)*. It is an oil painting of 1823–1824.

Immediately, however, what strikes the eye is the contrast between real/unreal and the awareness of how difficult it is to establish boundaries, even here. Indeed, the unreal/metaphysical scene, the representation of the collapse of Hopes (in Celan and Friedrich) begins, as we know, from a real, historical experience. In Friedrich's time, it was the sinking of one of the first expeditions to the North Pole. And also the tragic experience of the Second World War and the extermination 'his' people was all too real for Celan!

There is no symbolic level which does not start from the 'word'. There is no universal/unreal representation that does not vibrate with the real. And perhaps there has never even been metaphysics that was not rooted in the 'physics' of physical things (*ta physikà*).

So, inevitably, our reality and our present overlap with these poetic and artistic images. And we 'see' not the North Sea, but the seas of our South. Not a cemetery of ice, but waves, coastlines, beaches. No skeletal pieces of large ships, but living skeletons on ships that are always too small. Not an immense landscape, dominated by lonely snows, but a swarm of bodies, faces, hands. Not an anonymous and hostile Nature that almost punishes the man who is too bold in his challenge, but a human world (human all too human) that runs away from other human worlds: with no audacity, no heroism, even without a sense of tragedy. Only absurd need: from a desert to a beach, from a war to a wall. And it is already, in any case, a shipwreck. Even when the boat does not capsize and the barbed wire does not stop them.

Then, yes, the title 'added' to Friedrich's painting – the evocative/symbolic one (The Wreck of Hope) – is the most true. But it is not the sailors and their hopes that are shipwrecked (or, rather, not only them). It is 'us'. We know it from the sense of frustration, resignation, with which we continue to count landings and the dead. Because even for us it is just absurd need: from a sense of removed guilt which has roots in the past (because it is never our fault if this happens; it is always others who have erred and triggered this mistake) to another sense of removed guilt, which has the flavor of reassurance for the future (because it is never our fault if nothing is done to limit all this: the whole is beyond our control). And here our conscience is shipwrecked, even before our hope. And our thinking, even before we act. We measure our helplessness, as intellectuals, teachers, thinkers, philosophers, scholars, artists, poets. And we measure it as we measure the meters of barbed wire. With the same inevitable coldness and distance.

It becomes interesting, in this context, to rethink another symbolic interpretation of Casper's framework, which would see it as a representation of political denunciation, of a shipwrecked Germany; almost in counterpoint with that other well-known real/symbolic painting by Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* and its representation of the



T. Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819, 491 x 716 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre

wreck of Napoleonic France.

On the other hand, however, we cannot not remember what the biographers of Friedrich narrate: how that shipwreck was also his personal plunge, his ‘descent’, his depression, the loneliness of the end of his life.

Art does not redeem. Beauty does not save the world. Nor the artist.

While Géricault could even – laughably for us – write on the frame of his painting ‘*The only hero in this poignant story is humanity*’, we are no longer even able to write on our frames: *the real shipwreck in this absurd story is that of humanity*. Because perhaps the word humanity is the first word to which we struggle to give a meaning.

Today it seems even more of a mockery, that the ‘pennant’ (a handkerchief? A rag?), at the top of Géricault’s raft, is waved by a black man. Is it mockery? Or a prophecy? «You are the songfast pennant»; you are the strongest pennant of the song – glosses Celan’s Lyrik. And we know how Celan plays on this ‘you’. Paraphrasing Gadamer, we might ask who is this ‘you’, and who is his ‘I’ (his ego)?

In the poem with which we opened – we can go back to it, now – the ‘you’ is immediately that of the poet.

With masts sung earthwards
the sky-wrecks drive.
Onto this woodsong,
you hold fast with your teeth.
You are the songfast
Pennant

The ship’s masts are ‘sung’ (*gesungenen*): they are the poet’s songs. And they are uprooted, upside down, in a new announcement of the death of God, which is more and more clearly the death of the subject, that «lose his way like a child; (...) he is hiding; (...) has gone on a voyage or emigrated» – to quote Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (Section 125, *The Madman*).



M. Chagall, *Man with his Head Thrown Back*, 1919

This is the death (the shipwreck) of the song. The Poetry is «perpetually falling (...), backward, sideward, forward, in all directions»? (ibid.) And the trees of the ship are ‘earthwards’ (turned to the ground, rather than raised to the sky), because «there is any up or down left» (ibid.).

Then, the shipwreck is not so much (or only) that of otherworldly hopes. It is not so much (or just) a wreck of Heaven, in Heaven, which forces us to turn to earthly songs, with earthly hopes. Gadamer perceptively points out what Celan says in *Der Meridian*: «he who is upside down sees the sky beneath him as an abyss.»⁵ The sky an abyss. The earth an abyss. In any case: wreckage, fragments. Ev

everything is wrecked.

Another inapt and inapposite transposition is possible: from the death of God to human death in our seas.

He is dead (...) and remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has

⁵ Gadamer on Celan. ‘Who Am I and Who Are You?’ and Other Essays, p. 99.

bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? (...) Here the madman fell silent and again regarded his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern to the ground, and it broke and went out⁶.

Fragments of light. Wrecks of the sky. There are no festivals, games, songs for this blood: real and not metaphysical.

And we can no longer even – as did the ‘beautiful souls’ after the opening of the extermination camps – divide the victims from victimizers. The fragile breath (*Atemwende*) of the ‘Western’ and ‘European’ song is now even more fragile, because they are compromised.

The song dies in the blood. And we are its murderers. And we can no longer even – «like one who is sinking [and] does not abandon the life raft, which is floating and is his last foothold, [and] he clings to it ‘with tooth and nail’ – ‘clings to singing’,» writes Gadamer⁷, interpreting Celan. Indeed, today, here, the Subject is both victim and perpetrator, and its wood-song (*Holzlied*) is both the cross and the staff. And there is no more ‘strength’, we are no more ‘fast’ (*Fest/fast* – with strength, tenacity, decision – is the only German word repeated in this Poem of Celan). Today there is only weakness. The migrants are exhausted. Those who welcome them are exhausted. The resistant are exhausted. The West and Europe are weak (as much in refusal as in integration). The ‘ad-veniens’ is weak, driven only by the impact of despair.

The desolate and cold shipwreck of Friedrich’s hopes suddenly appears, in his ‘an/annulment’ of the human, more prophetic than the same hope of Celan. At the top, there flies no pennant, but a sharp point: ice or wreck as it may be.

«Onto this woodsong, / you hold fast with your teeth. / You are the songfast / Pennant». You, Celan. *I, no. We, today, no. Not anymore.*

Gadamer says that this ‘you’ «indicates not only the poet and his perseverance in hoping, but indicates the extreme hope of all creatures, (...) because there is no border between the poet and the man who keeps his hope up with extreme effort.»⁸ However, even in this case: *I, no. We, today, no. Not anymore.*

In this, Adorno was right again: «the price of hope is life»; we do not deserve hope, we who do not risk our lives. It is no coincidence that Adorno refers to the final of the known essay by Benjamin on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, «only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope» and comments: «it is the paradox of the impossible possibility.»⁹

Here, then, suddenly, the regrettable synopsis between Celan and Géricault takes a different turn. And we understand why in that painting it is the most derelict of the derelicts (the black man) who waves the shreds of fabric (that cannot even be called a pennant or flag). And we understand why he, paradoxically, remains hopeful.



Murales by Blu (Messina, Teatro Pinelli Occupato): see N. Al-Mousawi, *Aesthetics of Migration. Street Art in the Mediterranean Border Zones* (in this issue of “Logoi”)

⁶ Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (Section 125, *The Madman*).

⁷ Gadamer on Celan. ‘Who Am I and Who Are You?’ and *Other Essays*, p. 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ T. Adorno, *Prisms*, Eng. Transl. MIT Press, USA, 1983, p. 241.

Obviously, the metaphor (doubly improper) we are creating does not refer to ‘that’ shipwreck described by Géricault, but to ‘those’ without-hope who sail into our seas (the *mare nostrum*) every day: in search of ... what? An «impossible possibility.»

They *are looking for* hope. No, they *do not have* it. But they *seek* it. And that, paradoxically, raises them up, to the top of the ‘painting’, with their rags/pennants (calls for help): higher than us.

Here then is the new ‘you’, at the center. Not that of the poet, but that of the migrant.

«You are the songfast / Pennant». You do not know it, but it is you. The price of your hope is life. Your search for life is in itself the sign of your hope. And, in this way, even the last vestiges of elitism that could still affect the poetry and art of the postwar period collapse. Songs are not written to resist. One does not write because «the poet with his song is the last one to express a message and a promise of life, (...) and keeps the last hope alive.»¹⁰

‘We’ are not the source of the song-hope. Not anymore. «Only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope». Only for the sake of those who have no more poetry are we given poetry. Only for the sake of those who ‘have no’ song, but ‘are’ song (hope at the cost of life!), we are still allowed to sing.

So, a new overthrow is necessary. Even stronger than what the pain and penetrating vision of Celan were able to «hold fast with his teeth».

Gone are the days of metaphysics. Our problem is no longer «the high or the low».

However, also the era of nihilism has ended. Our problem is no longer cry for a meaning that does not exist, or to look for it, or to rebuild it, or to let ourselves float adrift in its liquidity.

It is the era of migration. And ‘we’ are the problem. Our inability to grasp this new era, to feel it on our skin, to live it ... even before thinking, singing, painting, portraying, writing about it. To take off our armor which prevents us from ‘suffering’ this era. To take us off of that pedestal on which our belonging (as Western, European, sons of the logos, philosophers, artists, poets, intellectuals) has placed us. To realize, painfully, that really, now, our words are empty. And we no longer have anything to ‘say’, because we are no longer able to ‘do’.

But also, conversely, we do not know what to ‘do’, because we have become incapable of ‘talking’ and ‘thinking’. We are the real castaways. And we avoid admitting it to ourselves, because - if we took ourselves seriously in this observation - perhaps we would have to ask ourselves where to go and what to do with our things and our homes. And if all our West and our Europe and our Logos have failed and are failing, perhaps we should really ask ourselves what to do with our philosophy and our languages. Because their impotence, when it is no longer a discourse on being and non-being, but of looking at the shipwrecks and derelicts, is so blinding that not to recognize it is disingenuous.

The overthrow, then, is this: «You are the songfast / Pennant». You, not me. Not me-West, not me-Europe, not me-philosophy, not me ... art, music, literature, poetry. You. You without West, you without Europe, without philosophy, without our art and poetry, without the Logos: you apparently speechless (*a-logos*). You and your voiceless rag. That defies death, shouting life, and does not know it. And shoots to hell all the disquisitions of



¹⁰ Gadamer on Celan. 'Who Am I and Who Are You?' and Other Essays, p. 99.

logic, ethics and metaphysics, without even knowing what they are. It silences all questions: because it already has the only answer. What we have lost: life.

The foreigner's face burns with happiness. (...) Happiness seems to prevail, in spite of everything, because something has definitely been exceeded. (...) If one has the strength not to give in, there remains a path to be discovered [J. Kristeva]¹¹.

What is the overthrow, then?

'Second' philosophy: not only because «philosophy is always a second degree work» (to quote Ricoeur), but because there is a 'first' to be re/learned (*primum vivere deinde philosophari*).

Philosophy that spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk: not only because history precedes it, but because there is a whole world to hear, first: before you even try to stammer what it 'is', what there is.

Thinking migrations. Which also and more vastly means: to return to rethink the present, because if we do not think about this ... what meaning will thinking ever have?

Thinking migrations: not to pretend to understand them (with the Concept, with philosophy, art, literature, poetry ...).

Thinking Migrations. And, in this overthrow, the object becomes the subject. Migrations make us to think (*donne à penser*), make a gift to the thought, forcing it to deconstruct itself and get going again.

As long as we believe we can 'think' about migration and 'manage' it (with the work of 'thought' or that of 'arms', by 'force' of mind or that of politics) we will remain within the framework that is exploding in our hands. «We are not going toward our thoughts, they are coming toward us» - Heidegger said, with a subtle hidden truth.

Thinking migrations: migrations thinking.

We are not the ones who have to (and can) think about the migrants [and what sense would that have? thinking about migrants as you think about the difference between substance and mishaps, or as you think about the deconstruction of phonologocentrism?].

No: Migrants are the (new) thought that comes toward us. They ask us to think of them. Not in abstract and conceptual terms, but as 'a given' (and a gift). A given before which even the most advanced theory of bodies demonstrates its bankruptcy.

Because while we are reflecting about 'what a body can', there are bodies that cannot ... and they are knocking at our doors without even asking us why they cannot.

And while we are reflecting about transitions, there are bodies that transition and drown and are beached and are thankful if they reach ground, and they certainly do not reflect on what they are doing.

And while we wonder how understand (philosophically, culturally, socially, politically) what is happening, there are desperate people who question us about 'our' hopes.

And so this is our duty (perhaps the only one that we can still recognize and assume, because «only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope»): give voice. Give voice to the voiceless. Say that they are 'first' and not 'second'. That they are a gift to thought (*donne à penser*) and not the proof of its impotence.

This is our duty: to question our lack of hope and life.

There will be, tomorrow, an 'Owl' that will be able to write a 'philosophy of migration'. Tomorrow. Not today. We are not yet allowed this 'falling of the dusk'.



Photo by Maria Pansini: see this issue of "Logoi": *Temporary Homes*

¹¹ J. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1991, pp. 3-5.

Only to become migrants, to become *foreigners ourselves*: this is allowed to us. And this is due to us, perhaps.

This is not, then, an Issue that collects philosophical writings on migration (or literature on migrations, and art on migration). It is an Issue that has sought out (and seeks) thoughts that, starting from the experience of migration, take a challenge. And that have helped us (i. e. the Editorial staff) to take a challenge. Thoughts that we hope will challenge all those who want to read and think: letting themselves read, experience and *think about Migration*. Because this ‘*thinking migration*’ is you.



ESCIF, *Dematerialization*, 2012 Melilla, Spain. See N. Al-Mousawi, *Aesthetics of Migration. Street Art in the Mediterranean Border Zones* (in this issue of “Logoi”)