

Memory in Language: Walter Benjamin and Giuseppe Ungaretti Paolo Bartoloni¹

1. *Berliner Chronik*

On April 7, 1932, Walter Benjamin boarded the steam freighter *Catania* in Hamburg *en route* to Barcelona. From Barcelona, Benjamin made his way to the Island of Ibiza, where his friends the Noeggeraths were waiting for him. In 1932, Ibiza appeared to Benjamin archaic and pristine:

The most remote of places [...] cut off from the world and civilization [...] (*die Insel wirklich seitab des Weltverkehrs und auch der Zivilisation*). Just as farming and animal husbandry are still carried on here in an archaic manner (*Wie Ackerbau und Viehzucht hier noch archaisch betrieben werden*) – there are not more than four cows on the whole island, as the peasants keep to their tradition of goats, no agricultural machinery to be seen and the irrigation of the fields is done as it was centuries ago with water scooped up by wheels turned by mules (*die Bewässerung der Felder wie vor Jahrhunderten durch Schöpfräder geschieht*) – so the interiors are also archaic: three chairs against the wall opposite the entrance confront the visitor with aplomb and gravity, as if there were three Cranachs or Gauguins on the wall; a sombrero hung on the back of a chair creates more effect than precious Gobelin tapestries. (Benjamin, letter to Gerhard Scholem, 22 April 1932. *Briefe*, Band 2, 1966: 548, English translation by Anthony Stephens.)

¹ This article is the continuation of my “The sound of Memory: Thoughts on Benjamin’s *Berliner Chronik*”, *Cultural Memories* (2006). See also my forthcoming book *The Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing* (2008).

In the tranquillity of the house that he rented for “one mark and eighty” (1966: 549), Benjamin found the space and serenity to start sketching one of his most illuminating reflections on time: *Berliner Chronik* (*A Berlin Chronicle*).

The late 1920s and early 1930s had proven quite taxing and traumatic for Benjamin. He had recently divorced from his wife Dora and, as a result, he had lost virtually all of his material property, including most of his beloved library. He moved from rented flat to rented flat and his famous love for travelling, which continued incessantly even in these troublesome years, increasingly became a form of escapism. In travelling, Benjamin was not only finding refuge from a personal life in disarray but also from a highly volatile and menacing political situation. It is rather fitting and quite just – in a life otherwise characterised by gross miscalculations and bad luck – that the money Benjamin needed to travel to Ibiza came to him thanks to Goethe’s anniversary celebrations and the work he produced in honour of the occasion. In effect, Benjamin’s life as a wandering, exiled intellectual began to take shape and form in those early years of the 1930s. Far from coincidentally, Benjamin felt the need to pause during this unsettled period and to write once again about his childhood and Berlin. He conceived of this work not only as a gift to his son Stephan but also as a kind of intellectual and spiritual will.

Language [writes Benjamin in *A Berlin Chronicle*] shows clearly that memory (*Gedächtnis*) is not an instrument for exploring (*Erkundung*) the past (*Vergangenheit*) but its theater. It is the medium of past experience (*Es ist das Medium des Erlebten*), as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging (*Wer sich der eigenen verschrütteten Vergangenheit zu nähern trachtet, muß sich verhalten wie ein Mann, der gräbt*). This confers the tone (*Ton*) and bearing (*Haltung*) of genuine reminiscences (*Erinnerungen*). He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter (*Sachverhalt*); to scatter (*auszustreuen*) it as one scatters earth (*Erde ausstreut*), to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a

deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure (*wahren Werte*) hidden within the earth: the images (*die Bilder*), severed from all earlier associations (*aus allen früheren Zusammenhängen losgebrochen*), that stand – like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery (*wie Trümmer oder Torsi in der Galerie des Sammlers*) – in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding (*unserer späten Einsicht*). True, for successful excavation a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam (*dunkle Erdreich*), and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one’s discoveries, and not this dark joy (*dunkle Glück*) of the place of the finding itself (*Ort und Stelle des Findens selbst in seiner Niederschrift bewahrt*. [Note that reference to the “writing down”, *Niederschrift bewahrt*, of the dark joy is omitted in the English translation]). Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner (*sondern im strengsten Sinne episch und rhapsodisch*), assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers (1978: 25-26; 1996: 372).

2. “*Il porto sepolto*”

In a poem written in the trenches of World War I, on 29 June, 1916, the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote: “*Vi arriva il poeta/ e poi torna alla luce con i suoi canti/ e li disperde/ Di questa poesia/ mi resta/ quel nulla/ d'inesauribile segreto.*”² (“The poet goes there/ then returns to the light with his songs/ and scatters them/ Of this poetry/ there remains to me/ that nothing/ of inexhaustible secrecy.”)³ The title that Ungaretti gave to this poem is emblematic of his poetics, and bears a profound resemblance to Benjamin’s imagery: “*Il porto sepolto*” (“The Buried Harbour”).

“Scattering” (*disperdere* and *auszustreuen*) is the key verb in Benjamin’s understanding of memory and in Ungaretti’s description

² Ungaretti, Giuseppe, (1981: 26) *Il porto sepolto*, Carlo Ossola (ed.) (Milan: Il Saggiatore).

³ Ungaretti, Giuseppe, (1990: 26) *The Buried Harbour*, trans. Kevin Hart, Canberra: Leros Press.

of an experience which is both mnemonic and metaphysical. The poet in Ungaretti, like the archaeologist in Benjamin, makes his way in the darkness of a spiritual as well as temporal suspension. The diving evoked in the title "The Buried Harbour" suggests a suspension of breathing and the a-temporal silence and stillness of human life enveloped by the depth of water. And it is the re-emerging to the surface - the returning to the light - that restores the subject to temporality and life and, at least in Ungaretti's poem, to language (the scattering of songs).

Memory, the theatre of the past, is the exhibition in the "prosaic rooms of our later understanding", of those "fragments" and "torsos" that the excavator found as he dug. Memory brings to light the ruins of the past and sets them on the stage of the present. What is left of poetry (the past with all its spiritual and metaphysical attributes) are poor remains. And yet, as remains, they are rich with an "inexhaustible secrecy".

3. *Memory in Language*

The interpretation of Benjamin's and Ungaretti's texts may appear simple, direct, obvious. Yet it would be an incomplete interpretation that falls into the trap of focusing on some textual aspects, leaving others in shadow. Does not Benjamin himself invite us to dig deeper and to tire not in returning "again and again to the same matter"?

"Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument ...", with this remark Benjamin draws our attention to the relation between language and memory; in fact, to memory as a performance in language. (It must be remembered here that in a series of lectures delivered at Jena in 1803-1804, and subsequently published in 1932 with the title of *Realphilosophie I*, the young Hegel wrote: "the idea of this existence of consciousness is *memory*, and its proper existence is language."⁴) Memory is pure performance, pure production (*produzione*), insofar as its communication and transmission can only take place as a form of narrative, be it through storytelling, music, painting, cinema, poetry or prose. The most

⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., (1932: 211) *Jenenser Realphilosophie I, Die Vorlesungen von 1803-1804*, J. Hoffmeister (ed.) (Leipzig, 1932). English translation in Agamben, *Language and Death*, 1991: 42.

immediate and common way of passing down memories, even in the case of the self bequeathing a memory to itself, is through spoken or written language. Whenever we share our memories, whenever we scatter (*disperdere* to echo Ungaretti) our remembering, we also tell a story. If we attend closely to the process of telling and its scattering, as Benjamin and Ungaretti urge us to do, we are confronted with the image of dissemination. Memory makes sense, memory can be actualised, when it erupts from the cell of the individual and, potentially, enters the collective domain.

The movement of the subject *in* language is also a movement of the subject *toward* language. Any movement implies a departure, a displacement of the self from itself, be it a hypothetical exit from a mythical existence without language, or, perhaps more appropriately, the continuous movement which brings about the dynamic self-fulfilment and wholeness of the self. The approach of the self to language is not a betrayal of originality but rather a constant struggle for originality. The staging of memory is one of such replenishing movements by which the self narrates memories to itself in order to achieve a kind of fullness.

By contrast, the present does not need to be told, it can exist as the uninterrupted narration of the past (through memory) or of the future (through expectation). The present needs language only insofar as it needs to narrate its having been or its intention to be. The only reason we move in the present is that we move backward, toward the past, and forward, toward the future. The language of the present is simultaneously a borrowed language and a shared language, the linguistic threshold where past and future meet in the language of potentiality, *qua* the language of storytelling.

4. *Disperdere*

As the self approaches memory in language, it moves closer to attaining the potential to disseminate but also to dissipate its past - the Italian *disperdere* and the English *scatter* imply both dissemination and loss. As we remember we also place ourselves in a position to forget, to lose memories. It follows that our urge to know better is also marked by an irreparable loss and an inevitable

forgetfulness. As we narrate memory we also consign something to oblivion, to darkness.

It is perhaps this process that Giorgio Agamben had in mind when, in the introduction to *Infancy and History*, he described written books as the death masks of a never penned *ergon*.⁵ It is what Benjamin was referring to when he spoke of memory as a gallery of torsos and fragments, whose significance is as great as that of their missing parts.

Memory is narration – it is language – and as such it also owes its existence to its negativity which is ultimately nothing other than memory as the untold, the non-narratable (the potential existence of which lingers in the very potential to narrate memory). And it is because of this negativity that we scatter our memories in the hope that someone or something else will be able to translate them, supplementing our narration by filling the gaps, by adding to our incomplete and maimed images.

If it is true that we often lose ourselves in order to find ourselves, it may also be true that we expose our forgetfulness to allow it to surface in someone else's narration. The exposure of forgetfulness is its absence, its not-being-there; it is those areas of emptiness which might appear to the eye as part of an incomplete picture. What we see, what we narrate as memory, represents itself, but it also gestures to what is missing. It does so in a continuous performance in which there remains something that can only be implied, evoked, speculated upon, but never seen or articulated.

The power of poetry and memory, their beauty, lies in revealing the untold through the told. Language says what it says by digging deep, by divulging the invisible to the surface through the visible: "there remains to me/ that nothing/ of inexhaustible secrecy". Ungaretti "digs", and then "scatters", remaining in ecstatic contemplation of that plentiful nothing which shows itself so vividly in language.

⁵ Agamben, Giorgio, (1993a: 3-10) *Infancy and History. The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron, London & New York: Verso.

5. *Rhapsody*

The fact that, for Ungaretti, the “poet ... returns to the light with his songs (*canti*)” rather than his words (*parole*) is significant and is not without analogy to Benjamin’s reference to the rhapsodic art. When Benjamin outlines the proper strategy for remembrance he writes that: “Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and *rhapsodic* manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers.” (My emphasis)

The word “rhapsody” is derived from the ancient Greek *rhapsodia*. The *rhapsoidos* recited epic poems in public by suturing together (*rhaptein*), various songs (*oide*). In its original meaning rhapsody signified the recitation of new compositions made by fusing together memories and reminiscences of old, usually popular, songs. This recitation was performed by singing the poem or by alternately singing and declaiming. The original meaning of the word has descended to our time almost unchanged, with the exemption that it is now chiefly used in reference to musical composition. While we have retained the performative and melodic elements in the word rhapsody, we have perhaps lost sight of its mnemonic and linguistic origin. Rhapsody is nothing other than memory in language and, as such, it is a narration of fragments, remnants, odds and ends found by digging deep, then scattered on the surface of the present. Memory, in its original sense and *habitus*, was not spoken but sung; more than language, it was song. It is in this sense that the Ungarettian *canti* is not merely synonymous with “words”, it is, rather, a definite and necessary reference to *rhapsodia* and to the performance of the *rhapsoidos*.

6. *Renunciation*

In *On the Way to language* (1959. English translation, 1982), and more specifically in the essay “Words” (*Das Wort*), Martin Heidegger turns not for the first time (see also “The Nature of Language” in the same volume) to Stefan George’s poem “Words” and to its last, ambiguous, stanza “So I renounced and sadly see:/ Where word

breaks off no thing may be" (*So lernt ich traurig den verzicht:/ Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht*). Heidegger engages fastidiously with these two troubling lines in an attempt to think through and reflect further on the relation between word and thing. What strikes Heidegger is not only the apparently interdependent connection between word and thing emphasised by and in the last line of the poem, but also by the meaning of that "renunciation" of which the poetic "I" speaks.

"The insight into the poet's experience with the word", writes Heidegger, "that is, the insight into the renunciation he has learned, compels us to ask the question: why could the poet not renounce Saying, once he had learned renunciation? Why does he tell precisely of renunciation? Why does he go so far as to compose a poem with the title 'Word'?" (1982: 147) Why does the poet continue to write at all after he has learned language's mysterious and unfathomable inadequacy? In order to save from oblivion, one might answer, the little of the world that is sayable. If it is true that only those things that can be said can exist, then the logical course of action would be to say as much as possible. But as we know, in saying we also expose what is unsayable, and by viewing we are also exposed to the invisible. It is in this sense that the act of poetry is also and inescapably an act of renunciation before the unspeakable.

In saying, the poet is also confronted by that which is invisible, must also "see" it and renounce it. This is the richness but also the insurmountable limitation of language and knowledge: saying and knowing necessarily cause their opposite. If the limitation is found in concealing through knowing, the greatness lies in generating and exposing, in bringing forth, the unknowable through knowledge. By renouncing the unsayable and, in doing so, exposing it, we can hope to place it on the way toward a state of becoming. Becoming must be here understood in the sense Heidegger gives to it, as that which "come[s] forth in presence".

"When Heraclitus", writes Heidegger, "thinks *gènesis* in *ginoménen*, he does not mean 'becoming' in the modern sense; that is, he does not mean a process. But thought in Greek, *gènesis* means

'to come into being', to come forth in presence."⁶ The "hope" to place the unsayable underway must be understood as the possibility of saying it by withdrawing it. In other words, our hope can only be brought about and maintained by renouncing the utterability of the unsayable through its presentation in language. This allows us to grasp Agamben's claim that "possiamo avere speranza solo in ciò che è senza rimedio"⁷ ("we can have hope only in what is without remedy"⁸).

7. *The Irreparable*

It is now possible to approach straightforwardly Benjamin's remark that "it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discovery". The true significance of memory lies not just in what is visible and communicable but also, and perhaps more importantly, in its halo, in the trace of the missing now engaged in dialectic with that which can be told. It is this dynamic interplay that affords memory its power and fascination, but also its pain. The same is true for language and its engagement with the "no-thing-may-be" at the moment of language's breaking. The renunciation of language is a *rhapsodic song* in which the reminiscence in language exposes not only the stitching together of fragments but also the inevitable gaps. The poet's song is ultimately a celebration of the "irreparable", here literally intended as that which cannot be repaired to its expression.

Once again, it is Heidegger who clarifies the meaning of the renunciation of language, and at the same time the renunciation of memory in language: "Saying attains to a different articulation, a different *melos*, a different tone. The poem itself [George's poem], which tells of renunciation, bears witness to the fact that the poet's renunciation is experienced in this sense - by singing of

⁶ Heidegger, Martin, and Fink, Eugen, (1993: 8) *Heraclitus Seminar*, trans. Charles H. Seibert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

⁷ Agamben, Giorgio, (1990: 74) *La comunità che viene*, Turin, Einaudi.

⁸ Agamben, Giorgio, (1993b: 101) *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.

renunciation"⁹; and again: "The renunciation thus learned is no mere refusal of a claim, but rather the transformation of Saying into the echo of an inexpressible Saying whose sound is barely perceptible and songlike."¹⁰

8. *Dark Joy*

It is now time to add the last section to that fundamental passage in Benjamin's reflection on memory quoted above: "... it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discovery, and not *this dark joy of the place of the finding itself*." (My emphasis) What strikes the reader first is the spectacular oxymoron "dark joy". The adjectival phrase yokes together the lightness natural to joy, its brightening effect on the subject who experiences it and the surrounding space, with darkness, the enveloping quality of loss, disorientation, pain, not knowing. Two opposites are united in a simultaneous exchange of knowledge and lack of knowledge, bliss and pain, visibility and invisibility. This dark joy is either a joy that does not shine and remains blissful in its ignorance (a joy that does not illuminate the causes of its joyfulness) or a joy that proceeds in the deepest darkness, bringing to visibility only what is immediately adjacent to it. It is a locative, a joy in the dark, or simply a nominative, a dark joy. It is moreover *this dark joy*, the present joy, here and now, that adheres to the language of the speaking "I" as the only true companion. Its genitive, the place to which it belongs, is the "place of the finding itself".

Once again the comparison arises between "this dark joy" of Benjamin and Ungaretti's "this poetry", whose shining light is the "nothing of inexhaustible secrecy". In both Benjamin and Ungaretti, "this" is not only a demonstrative standing for time, "the now", but also and more importantly for space, the "here". It is the joy that "remains" after the journey (of excavation), to the "place of the finding itself". It is the space of the "here" as opposed to the space of

⁹ Heidegger, Martin, (1982: 147) *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 1982: 150.

the "there"; and as such it implies in Ungaretti a return from darkness to light. But in Benjamin, too, the moment of digging, and the place that this digging has uncovered, is paired with a sequel; both the "inventory of one's discovery" and "this dark joy" are "preserved as a record" of the tillage of memory. Is "dark joy", then, really the mixture of light, knowledge, the known, the familiar, on the one hand, and the unfamiliar, the unusual, on the other? Can we not read "dark joy" simultaneously as a nominative and a locative?

Ultimately, memory is the record of an irreparably lost time, a darkness, and the joy of its "singing" in the present. But for Benjamin it is also the locus of a complex, dynamic spatial game in which the "place of the finding itself" is also a potential *torso* and *ergon*, a mnemonic language which, in being "here", can expose the inevitable renunciation of memory. For Benjamin, memory in language is not merely the result of remembering, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in the space of the self. It is also a mixture of mental and physical journey in which the personal images of the past are matched, confronted and indeed triggered by the space of the past. It is no accident that Benjamin had a passion for collecting post-cards of places he visited.

A Berlin Chronicle is the emblematic example of a mnemonic narrative which recreates the past in and through the spaces of the past; that is, the streets, squares and buildings of Benjamin's Berlin childhood. But even more problematical and fascinating is the feeling that these spaces of the past are not statically crystallised in a given time. They are instead constantly engaged in a temporal as well as spatial dialogue with different ages to the extent that the same building is compared through time, emphasising the intrinsic dynamism of urban spaces. They are caught in their essence of incessant worksites, endlessly developing.

Space modifies itself in time as the self transforms itself in time, and the narration of this transformation is also its remembrance shaped by a language that can only emphasise the relevance and the significance of its openness. If memory in language exposes the dark gaps of the past, it also exposes space as a cluster of ruins, half finished sites, rubble-strewn lots, whose existence testifies to their

missing parts and dark gaps. The archaeological metaphors that underpin Benjamin's reflection on memory could not be more appropriate and precise, more telling and suited to his dealing with the past. Memory is in constant flux, moving back and forth, like edited sequences of a film, in which the self exists not only against the backdrop of space but also as a result, as a product of space. It may be that this ever-changing space, this space always under construction, is itself what renders manifest, what brings to being, the self in memory.