

## ALLEVIATING A SHARED BURDEN

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*for Alexander García Düttmann*

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Note: This essay was initially written for a private collection celebrating the 60th birthday of Alexander Gracia Düttmann (a Festschrift of sorts). The essay was composed in winter of 2021 and book was published and presented in May of the same year.

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There is an understanding of power that moves unyieldingly through the human. It is the power of an absolute, trans-historical reason. Power in this understanding requires at least two things that are not exactly distinct. On the one hand, it requires a seemingly well-defined oppositional structure, which is to say, a structure and something unaccounted for. On the other hand, and by the same token, it requires a well-defined past. In the case of the latter, pertaining to the movement of history, a well-defined ‘past’ serves to ground power’s capacity for reconstruction, which is the general movement of Progress. Progress is an empty form limited to the movement of construction’s need to define and be well-defined. To the extent that progress is *telic*, that it moves on the basis of finality, we might also assume that power is destructive. It is destructive at least to the extent that its drive towards definition and certainty represses what cannot be taken up in each step of its movement, such that, in building upon itself, it appears to produce an increasing reservoir of what remains out of its constructing.

Let’s suppose that ‘education’ follows such a model of empowerment. In this case the educator holds a well-defined past that is transmitted and transformed through the conduit of youth, or uneducated, ‘who’ initially stands outside the order of any current regime of knowledge. In this model of education, knowledge *progresses* through these two figures. Standardized knowledge is reconstructed as it is appropriated by the youth. The youth is the conduit for the continuity of Progress. This is one mode of transmission. A problem, of course, is what makes a past, or anything, well-defined, since this will in turn ‘define’ the oppositional structure needed for Progress.

I’m going to move on from these observations to a few brief comments on the poetry of Georg Trakl, his figure of an ‘extinct youth’ (Elis), and its relation to a different understanding of power and transmission. These comments follow the formulation: “Das

Lob der Jugend/die Jugend ist tot”.<sup>1</sup> I will begin by quoting the poem *Abendlied* in full (my translation). Lines from other poems will be found at times parenthesized in the original German.

Evening when we move on dark paths,  
our pale forms appear before us.

When we thirst,  
we drink the white waters of the pond,  
the sweetness of our sad childhood.

*Extinct* we rest under the elder bush,  
gazing at grey seagulls.

Spring clouds climb above the sombre city,  
silencing the more benign times of monks.

As I took your slender hands  
softly you cast round eyes,  
what is long passed.

Yet when dark euphony afflicts the soul,  
you appear white in the autumn landscape of  
the friend.

I have italicized the word ‘extinct’ or ‘the extinct’ (*Erstorbene*). This word could not be read without the ‘rest’ that accompanies such extinction. Rest is understood here as

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<sup>1</sup> This ‘formula’, which is my own, is adapted from motifs of Alexander García Düttmann’s recent publication, *Lob der Jugend* (Diaphanes, 2021). It is formulated here as a chiasm.

remaining out of or subtracted from the movement of construction, as not progressing. What ‘extinction’ and ‘rest’ name may be essential to the entire vision of Trakl’s poetry, though these remarks cannot claim any systemic reconstruction of his entire work. My remarks will be purely hermeneutic and preliminary in nature, focusing predominantly on the figures of death and/or extinction as they pertain to the figure of youth.

What can be said of such death and dying out that is not a banal or exaggerated romanticization? How can extinction be understood as or in the place of thought, or better, of a seeing or vision? The relevance of a vision that is of or from the extinct (*Erstorbene wir...schauen wir zu*) in Trakl’s poetry could be questioned in relation to what appears to be its exact opposite: movement and animation, growth and decay (*Wie scheint doch alles Werdende so krank!*). All of this, everything becoming, can be referred to generally as articulation (*Gewaltig bäumt sich ein schwarzes Pferd*). The relation between extinction and articulation seems to be one of enablement, that there could not be the particular mode of articulation captured in Trakl’s poetry without extinction or the extinct. A cohering of the everything, which is never an all-form, occurs in the poem and offers an ‘enigmatic’ indication (*dunkle Deutung des Vogelflugs*) that ‘forms’ in the place of an extinct youth. It is this that is transmitted through the secondary offering of the copulative, what Adorno refers to as the ‘pale afterimage’ of the conceptually alienated ‘is’.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to suggest that the death considered here is what might be called an ontological death.<sup>3</sup> It indicates a need to conceive of the human and its environment outside the constraints of occidental ontology, an ontology founded on the power of construction, the Progress that produces and reproduces an ontological register for things. Trakl’s extinction is a withdrawal or subtraction from Progress. It is the death of the human that strives – following the above-given logic of power – for universal knowledge, towards a mastery of the laws of the universe in a single and standardized form; it is the conquering human that seeks to dominate through the subordination of itself to a particular regime. This is a philosophical and anthropological human that cedes itself to this movement rather than to its *matter*. At the end of *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 277-278.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of death considered here is developed at length in my book, *Nature as Limit* (Brill, 2022).

Strauss writes that humankind is a machine “whose activity hastens the disintegration of an initial order and precipitates a powerfully organized Matter towards a condition of inertia which grows ever greater and will one day prove *definitive*”.<sup>4</sup> The forward march of knowledge leads a powerfully organized matter – *prima materia* – towards inertia and terminus. Lévi-Strauss follows this with a rather strange analogy between a seemingly human mode of organization, namely the standardization of knowing, and entropy, a physical theory indicating disorganization and randomness. Standardization crowds out by transferring to a ‘single place’. This might also be called the anthropologization of the universe.

Trakl’s extinction initiates a quasi-reversal of life and death that outstrips the entropy produced by the human. It sets the inevitable death of the individual out in advance of itself. In doing so, it relieves humankind of its own machinery when that machinery is such as Lévi Strauss describes it. Extinction provides for the “leisure, recreation, and freedom, and peace of body and mind” (*ruhen wir ... schaun den grauen Möven zu*) that every society longs for.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Lévi-Strauss’s fortuitous synonyms show, such reprieve and leisure is not without its own task, namely that of re-creation. Trakl’s figure of the extinct youth is the ‘site’ for the preservation, or better put, safe-keeping of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘powerfully organized Matter’, the site of its multiplication and thus of its ever-renewed ‘life’. It is the site of what remains unavailable to the anthropologization of the universe. This ‘ever-renewed life’ is referred to by Adorno as a ‘pale afterimage’. The ‘conceptually alienated’ copulative does not produce an existential judgment – it does not convey what *is* – but only its ‘pale afterimage to the point of negation’.<sup>6</sup> Though it is less a ‘negation’ than it is a ‘subtraction’. This is to say that the cohering formed in the poem cannot or does not belong to the categorization of things or the standardization of knowing and to suggest that the ‘position’ of the dead youth is essential to ever-renewed life: a ‘positive appropriation’ of the copulative alienated from the apparatus of power that enchains it is its subtraction from it.

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<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of Levi-Strauss that follows can be attributed to both a Heideggerian register and to Bernard Stiegler’s reading of Lévi-Strauss. See Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 397 (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 398 (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, 278.

Trakl's extinction is what allows for everything in his poetry that could be considered in terms of Being's movement – its articulation (*Ein Dornbusch tönt,/Wo deine mondenen Augen sind.*). Death marks the capacity for vision. But articulation does not occur as a progressive becoming towards some inevitable terminus (maximum entropy/total standardization). Time in Trakl's poetry is not indicated by a slow, arduous march forward, but by the turnover of the seasons, the repetition of the completed year. The 'place' of these poems is a stillness that sees the partition, the completion of days, seasons, and years that 'return' rather than move on. It is the place where those laws of motion lost or destroyed by progress persist. It is thus a stillness that works with an infinity that never 'is' or 'exists' as such. It can never have a well-defined past – *prima materia* remains, in a certain sense, 'unknown' –, though it may suggest a rationale that undoes or frees all well-defined pasts. The vision of the extinct is the vision of a constant trans-figuring of *prima materia* that follows the cyclical temporality of an almanac. The localized, cyclical nature of time here is the reason that the vision Trakl speaks of is 'round'. The round vision of the extinct youth (*Erscheinst du, Elis, ein Ruhender mit runden Augen*) corresponds to what is unavailable to anthropic vision (*Rund schweigen Wälder wunderbar*) by maintaining it against the flow of Progress. The leisurely and recreational human has a time which is more its own, which is not burdened by the impossible time of a coming finality and so the 'endless' march of Progress. The 'end' has already arrived. The round vision of the poet therefore also has a labor-time which is more its own.

The vision of such extinction, which is the vision and perspective of Trakl's poetry, is praised by way of the figure of a young boy, Elis, who is dead (*An den Knaben Elis*, et al.). What causes Trakl to make the link between death or extinction and the figure of youth, to give them the same place, which he then praises or eulogizes? The link between death and 'ever-renewed life' already suggests a nascency of what is articulated in Trakl's poetry. Language, when it is subtracted from the standard in some way, is new, young, nascent. The vision that allows for an ever renewed-life, that is therefore youthful, is one that has ceded its 'ontological being' in advance to this task. The most fundamental and rudimentary sense of language always functions in this way, as subtracted from Progress and thereby 'new', whereas Progress threatens to present us only with 'dead

languages'. In fact, when I first set out to offer some reflections on the formula "Das Lob der Jugend/die Jugend ist tot", I thought to write about the 'perpetual nascency of language' using the same references to Trakl's poetry.<sup>7</sup>

The extinct youth that 'safe-guards' a 'powerfully organized Matter' belongs to or is conditioned by the so-called finitude of the *logos*. 'Language', understood here as the bond between the labor of the poem and a 'powerfully organized Matter' is finite. Language transfers or conveys something 'whole', but incomplete, where 'incomplete' refers to its distinction from the hypothetical totality produced by Progress. This is necessary to minimize the entropy produced in re-creation. The language of the poem is removed, or subtracted, from the process of language's standardization. To say that the language of the poem is nascent is to say that it is emergent and cannot be fully explained by any standard. It relates more intimately to that upon which the standard is based, that is, *prima materia* (*und leise rührt dich an ein alter Stein*). It is the nascency of an 'old' or 'already'. The best example of this regarding Trakl's poems occurs when their 'content' reflects a 'locality' and its specific 'laws of motion'. This presents a world both full unto itself and distinct from world history. Its subtraction sets the extinct upon an infinite work (*Wahrlich! Ich werde immer bei euch sein*).<sup>8</sup>

The reflection of a locality and its specific laws occurs through a concession. They can only appear through the round vision of the extinct youth (*Ein Dornenbusch tönt,/Wo deine mondenen Augen sind*).<sup>9</sup> The intimacy of the poem with a 'powerfully organized Matter' lies in the fact that extinction, the death of the youth, is a concession to it. An 'extinct thought' provides *prima materia* with its stillness, its place apart from Progress. Conceding to death is a recognition of finitude that disrupts the labor of the standard. This is indeed an old story, access to the infinite as a journey through the finite. Yet finitude here is what preserves the place of the infinite, safeguards it from the inertia of Progress. Lévi-Strauss refers to the labor of the standard in terms of the imposition of

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<sup>7</sup> The source of the 'ever-renewed life' that represents the safe-keeping of *prima materia* is named in *Abendlied* as "the white waters of the pond/the sweetness of our sad childhood".

<sup>8</sup> On the topic of impending doom, which we wish to talk about without actually registering, perhaps there is still time to choose what sort of 'extinction' we want.

<sup>9</sup> It continues: "O, wie lange bist, Elis, du verstorben./Dein Leib ist eine Hyazinthe./In die ein Mönch die wächsernen Finger taucht./Eine schwarze Höhle ist unser Schweigen./Daraus bisweilen ein sanftes Tier tritt/Und langsam die schweren Lider senkt ("An den Knaben Elis").

the “concentric circles” (the structure or organization that is standardization) of “[h]istory, politics, the social and economic universe, the physical world, even the sky”. To escape from this totality he must “concede to each [circle or layer] *some* part of my being”.<sup>10</sup> This manifold concession is necessarily a localization. It is a recreation of ‘powerfully organized Matter’ that does not move towards the ‘definitive’ that Lévi-Strauss so fears. It is a recreation in the sense that it is a unique slice, a rounding off (an ‘approximation’?), of some configuration of everything becoming, making no hard distinction between what belongs to Progress and what is left out, reflecting only what is offered to vision’s concession.

And here an intervention can be made against the suggestion of literary theorists who have it that Trakl is an expressionist that would ‘distort’ reality towards the individual-subjective, filtering it through the individual’s moods.<sup>11</sup> Reality, which is never captured by Progress, will always look distorted from the perspective of the power to construct. It might be more correct to say that ‘localities’ and their ‘laws of motion’ and ‘transfiguration’ are the becoming-subject of worlds subtracted from Progress. The youth has ceded its existence or ontological register in the sense that its claim to ‘live’ is not through obtaining recognition for itself, or its subjective position, but rather in belonging to the re-creating of Matter. The ‘already’ of the extinction does not suggest the eternal life of the individual, but rather the ever-renewed life of recreation that is already implied in the cycles of life and death (the days, seasons, and years of Trakl’s time). It is a constant re-inscription, perhaps. The extinct youth remains absent in every way except for in the ‘pale’ reproduction of itself in the poem (*Erscheinen unsere bleichen Gestalten vor uns*). Its ‘life’ is therefore neither higher nor lower than the powerfully organized Matter to which it belongs.

One (who is this?) appears then in the “autumnal landscape of the friend” which is afflicted by a “dark euphony”, that of the “soul”. I will attempt to go no further than these final lines of the poem. They present, I think, a question of communication or transmission that is not that which aids or begets Progress and its entropic movement. I have attempted to combine some old and lingering considerations of Trakl’s poetry with

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<sup>10</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 396 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* 90.

the themes of both your recent book and our recent discussions. I do not know how you will situate them and hope they remain somewhat approachable outside of the context provided by this particular occasion. In the best of cases there is something among these exchanges – to which I now add this obscure nugget – that works against the torpor so often produced in contemporary spheres of education. As the lines between working ourselves to death and boring ourselves to death become increasingly blurred, it is all the more important to consider the question of transmission. It remains essential that we continue to educate the youth and do so, perhaps, youth to youth in preserving an old stone.

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