“Med istidens utdødde stemme”

A Contextual Introduction
to Tor Ulven’s Poetry

Magnús Sigurðsson

Spring 2012
Master’s Thesis
Supervisor: Dr. Niklas Schöler
Abstract

The following paper discusses the ideological and aesthetic contexts discernible in the poetry of the Norwegian author Tor Ulven (1953–1995). Generally considered the major Norwegian poet to emerge after the Second World War, Tor Ulven was, in his own self-taught way, a “poeta doctus,” although his extensive knowledge – of European literary traditions, languages, philosophy, music and paintings – rarely if ever burdened his knife-sharp poetic images. Nonetheless, in order to better understand and appreciate Ulven’s work, I believe it to be of considerable importance to identify the rich and manifold traditions underlying his poetry. That is the aim of the following discussion, which in many regards remains a subjective reading of certain aspects and characteristics of Ulven’s poetry. The paper argues that these aspects and characteristics share, in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s formulation, a certain “family resemblance” with a number of Ulven’s predecessors – fellow writers and philosophers alike whom I elaborate upon in my discussion. I agree with and write from the American poet and translator Rosanna Warren’s belief that “poetry is, finally, a family matter, involving the strains of birth, love, power, death, and inheritance.” (Fables of the Self, 11) The two major books yet on Tor Ulven’s authorship – Janike Kampevold Larsen’s Å være vann i vannet and Torunn Borge and Henning Hagerup’s Skjelett
og hjerte – point to and emphasize a different lineage than the one accentuated in the pages to follow. This does not mean that any one approach or emphasis has, to a degree, got it wrong. Rather, it is an indication of the wealth of influences and contexts to be found in Ulven’s poetry – contexts which the growing scholarly industry around Ulven has yet to map fully. A direct interpretative analysis of Ulven’s poetry as such therefore comes second in my discussion. Furthermore, to balance the somewhat subjective approach taken in this paper – relying as it does more on the free associations of personal responses than a fixed, theoretical framework – I interweave my discussion throughout with Ulven’s own comments on his work. These were given in an extensive interview to the Norwegian literary magazine *Vagant* in 1993, two years before Tor Ulven’s self-inflicted death. Together with my own suggestions on the context(s) of Ulven’s poetry, these authoritative (in every sense of that word) comments form the backbone of my discussion.
Isolation and Circulation

The Norwegian writer Tor Ulven (1953–1995) belongs to a group of such 20th century poets as Paul Celan, Sylvia Plath, Cesare Pavese and others whose lives were cut short by suicide, and who have since risen to a near legendary status among readers and scholars alike, who continue to champion their works. As an indication of the overwhelming literary industry surrounding these poets, roughly two thousand titles are now available on Paul Celan’s poetry alone. More often than not, however, these authors are read from the easily deceptive vantage point of their tragic demise, in search of answers. The suicide becomes a hermeneutical tool, an all-purposeful master key unlocking the most obscure secrets – and, of course, interpretative difficulties – presented by the work. But the driving force behind the poetry of these ill-fated authors is life and its possibilities, for sadness and joy, rather than personal death, which in every person’s life is of course an inevitable fact but never a reality to which there can be a witness. To differentiate between ‘death in poetry’ and ‘death as such’ is therefore a necessary distinction. For poetical death – death as a theme or inspiration – is always a confirmation of life and its condition, whereas death by suicide is the permanent rejection of life, and thus of any conceivable poetic utterances attempting to describe it. To read Celan’s, Plath’s or Ulven’s works solely in terms of their tragic demise is therefore a questionable – and, indeed, a very limited – method. And in most cases it provides no reliable answers, no more than a full stop at the end of an unfinished sentence discloses its content.
By the time of his death in 1995, then only 41 years of age, Tor Ulven was already considered among the more noteworthy authors of his generation. Time has now secured his position as one of the most significant writers in Norway in the latter part of the 20th century. Ulven’s books have still to reach a more general circulation, however, when compared to other key authors before him, such as the poet Olav H. Hauge or the short-story writer Kjell Askildsen, who both continue to enjoy a wide readership. Ulven is still very much a poet’s poet – or, even, as the American poet John Ashbery said of Elizabeth Bishop: “a poet’s poet’s poet,” such is the cult-like status he has among fellow writers.

Admittedly, Ulven’s world view is darker and his approach more ‘inhuman’ – in the amplest sense of that word – than that of Hauge or Askildsen, Ulven’s grim emphasis perhaps accounting for a less widespread reception than his work deserves. The natural world which existed before man’s emergence as a species and which will continue to exist after our disappearance, is one of Ulven’s central themes; his stern, ikke-menneskelige subject-matter accounting for my use of the word ‘inhuman’ here above. By no means is Ulven’s poetry obscure, however. Death, love, time and nature are recurring subjects throughout, such basic and fundamental themes accounting for the majority of Ulven’s poetry.

Ulven’s importance as an author lies in the detailed and comprehensive world view expressed in his poems – reiterated imaginatively from work to work with penetrating insight into the human condition – and in his language; the linguistic concentration and imagery of his works having few if any equals in Norwegian poetry. References to current events in Norwegian society, or direct allusions to his own life, are rare in Ulven’s authorship. Little can therefore be gathered about daily life in Oslo in the second half of
the 20th century from Ulven’s books. It should also be mentioned that Ulven spent most of the 80’s closed off from the outer world, unable to leave the confines of his apartment due to a severe anxiety disorder.

Such isolation – in his childhood home in suburban Oslo, which Ulven inherited after his parents died and where he lived until his suicide – did not entail complete disconnection from the outer world, however. On the contrary, Ulven kept abreast of social and cultural matters, both in Norway and internationally. He also possessed a comprehensive knowledge of European literature, art and philosophy. Ulven was a self-taught francophone, translating among others the poetry of René Char into Norwegian. In terms of formal education, Ulven did not acquire any university degrees or diplomas – other than his license to operate a crane, which was Ulven’s livelihood as a young man, along with other kinds of construction work. He was also a skillful harmonica player, earning a reputation as such while performing with a small blues band in the pubs of Oslo before his psychological illness aggravated, forcing him deeper and deeper into a world of anxiety and despair – a world which Ulven finally did not escape.

Background

From day to day, Ulven’s place of relief was to be found in books, as well as in works of art and music, both of which play a significant role in his poetry. As to Ulven’s love of music, the blues harmonicist Little Walter was a particular favorite and, according to Ulven, a source of constant inspiration – as perhaps is fitting, considering the instrument. Many of Ulven’s poems also
draw heavily on representational art, in their quietude and sharp imagery referring both directly and obliquely to particular works of art, as Janike Kampevold Larsen has pointed out in her book on Tor Ulven’s authorship, Å være vann i vannet (2008). As stated before, few are Ulven’s equals when it comes to linguistic accuracy and the striking vividness of his poetry, attributes which undoubtedly can be traced back to his passion for, and comprehensive knowledge of, European art.

More importantly, however, when accounting for Ulven’s economy of expression and rich imagery, is the tradition of modern poetry under which his work falls. A tradition which preached maximum concentration of language, as well as emphasizing the fundamental part played by the poetic image in reaching the desired density of expression. No word should be superfluous. The linguistic ornamentation, lushness and sentimentality characterizing earlier traditions was done away with, establishing accuracy and objectivity as the two central qualities of modern poetry, achieved through clear and hard images. Ulven’s poetry does correspond to such aesthetics, although he is of course “his own” author, adhering only to his own poetics. Yet the mark of modernism can certainly be seen in poems such as the following, appearing in Ulven’s third collection, Forsvinningspunkt (1981), which established him as one of the most noteworthy poets of his generation:

Være vann i

vannet.

Være stein i

steinen.
In the later stages of his writing career, Ulven turned to prose, focusing mainly on lyrical short-fiction but also producing the highly fragmentary 'punktroman' *Avløsning* (1993). Turning from the minimal nature of his concentrated verse to the larger breathing spaces of prose proved a relieving shift for Ulven. In an extensive interview published in the Norwegian literary magazine *Vågant* (4th issue, 1993) – the only interview Ulven ever gave, appearing roughly two years before his death and spanning more than 30 pages – he describes the transition thus:


*Essays* (1997), published posthumously, is a collection of nineteen essays providing a comprehensive view both of Ulven’s learning as well as his literary and artistic influences. Containing pieces on European painters and composers, in addition to Ulven’s coverage of such influential Norwegian
authors as Tarjei Veesas and Kjell Heggelund, it is perhaps his discussion of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and the Italian poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi which are of most interest. Both were known – infamous, even – for their dark existentialism, and are generally considered among the principal advocators of pessimism as a philosophical and existential tradition. The critical reception of Ulven’s work has more often than not branded his poetry with the same label. Ulven himself, however, emphasizes quite strongly in the previously mentioned interview that a pessimistic outlook is less a subjective, individual Weltanschauung than a rational conclusion about the conditions of human life – a conclusion reached if one does not shy away from acknowledging the multitudinous facts of human misery and the vulnerability of human existence in light of man’s “appetite for destruction,” to call the Cold War nuclear policy of mutual assured destruction (MAD) that:


By the same token, Ulven refuses to define Schopenhauer as a pessimist, but considers him rather an “ahistorisk humanist og rasjonalist.” Ulven undoubtedly wished for his own works and ideas to be grouped within the same tradition of rational humanist thinking, emphasizing as he did that the foundations of his thought lay rather within the realist strand of European modernism than pessimism as an existential and/or literary approach. “Jeg er ikke kulturpessimist eller apokalyptiker,” he firmly states in the Vagant
“Å henvise til virkeligheten”

Judging from Ulven’s varied collection of essays as well as the wealth of education he displays in the Vagant interview, one can deduce how wide a scope of his own art he possessed and how comprehensive his reading was. Despite such erudition, however, Ulven’s poetry is never bookish nor pedantic. Correspondingly, his voice is never overblown nor his diction pompous. Ulven’s style is rather characterized by plainness and aversion to superfluous ornamentation. The content of his expression is more often than not arrived at from an unexpected corner, with a matching originality of imagery deriving its impact from Ulven’s peculiar *Galgenhumor*:

Stille

i salen.

En utgravd kjeve
lener seg over
mikrofonen

og skriker

med istikens
utdødde

stemme.

*(SD, 96)*

Asked about his yearlong seclusion among books and how reading had
affected his thought and poetry, Ulven is quick to answer resolutely that his writing requires no particular erudition on behalf of the reader. Ulven’s extensive answer also reveals a good deal of his *ars poetica* when discussing – in Ulven’s opinion – the fundamental opposition existing between *learning* and *life* when it comes to writing, and how this incompatible dichotomy connects morally to artistic expression. As a realist poet, one is therefore tempted to conclude that the following response contains to a great extent the essence of Ulven’s moral aesthetics:

Ulven’s poetry is in keeping with what he urges for here. It is a direct report on reality – with a particular emphasis on the suffering and bleakness of life everywhere apparent, if one chooses to look. By no means, however, does Ulven’s poetry flirt with suffering in a theatrical manner. Unlike the Romantics, who could not decide whether suffering was a blessing or a burden while celebrating their Weltschmerz in song, Ulven’s position towards pain is clear. In every person’s life, tragedy is unavoidable. Not as an isolated exception to the rule of an otherwise happy life, but rather as the fundamental state of human existence – exemplified by the misery of each day and inherent in each person’s final demise, but also in the predictable extinction of the human race. A view which Ulven – this broadest of time-oriented poets – is adamant to declare a living reality, here and now.

By expressing such a fundamentally dark-infested world view, one’s language runs the danger of becoming vague and abstract, and, perhaps more importantly – the bane of every writer – dull and teeming with platitudes. Yet Ulven’s knife-sharp and often highly idiosyncratic descriptions – of bones and skulls, insects, fossils and other traces of life, ancient and recent – never succumb to mundane banalities. Life and death; Ulven renders both visible through his matchless imagery, more often that not delving into the world of the dead, into the fossilized layers of our subterranean prehistory.

But the aim of such descriptions is not to shock or abuse the reader with their possible morbidness:

Ulven’s method, to write “distansert” about the disquieting, endows his poetry with placeless and timeless qualities. As stated before, little can be gathered from his work about the quotidian details of Norwegian society. Direct biographical references are rare, and of a general nature when certain ‘lived’ instances do seem to lie behind the poetry. To give a contrasting example, Ulven’s personal history is by no means the point of departure for his poetry in the same manner as daily life is for the American confessionalists, authors such as Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell and John Berryman who describe broken marriages, mental breakdowns and personal sorrow with relentless honesty – sadomasochistic brutality, even – in their works. Despite the pain which dominated Ulven’s life, his poetry is not personal in the traditional understanding of the word that it presents the interior monologue of a soul filled with sorrow – a monologue to which the reader is an intrusive listener. In Torunn Borge’s and Henning Hagerup’s words:

Tor Ulvens forfatterskap er likevel ikke en protokollføring over hans egen sykdomshistorie, like lite som for eksempel Schopenhauers filosofi er en dokumentasjon av en privat Weltschmerz. Ulvens bøker er preget av hans pessimistiske syn på tilværelsen, samtidig som de qua kunst installerer denne pessimismen i tid-rom-forhold som i en uhyre grad
Contrary to self-absorption, Ulven’s poetry is extroversive and dialectic – not least, I would claim, because of his predilection for the 2\textsuperscript{nd} person pronoun \textit{du} in his poetic language.

\textit{Ulven and Gunnar Björling}

Through Ulven’s use of the grammatical second person as an addressee of his poetry, one is tempted to see a poetics aimed towards illustrating our shared destiny. As such, by invoking so frequently the unspecific receiver inherent in Ulven’s \textit{du}, the personal world view expressed is opened up and rendered communal between reader and writer. Not least is this the case when Ulven’s poetry refers to the fundamentals of human life – to time, nature and death, themes which appear over and over in his works. Every \textit{du} may therefore allude both inward – to the implicit lyrical I operating behind the poem – as well as outward, to the reader, grammatically identified as an addressee through the personal pronoun. As a consequence, more often than not in Ulven’s poetry do speaker and listener seem addressed simultaneously, and are as such both present at the same time:

\begin{quote}
Din egen stemme
på lydbåndet,
det er
speilbildet

som forteller
at også du
\end{quote}
hører til

i en steinalder.

(SD, 174)

The addressee of Ulven’s *du* becomes less clear in his more enigmatic poems. Its scope broadens, as Ulven so to speak attempts to capture what lies beyond words. In such instances, his poetry bears a considerable resemblance to the syntactically shattered yet condensed lyrics of Gunnar Björling, the Finnish-Swedish modernist who never enjoyed public perusal but was, like Ulven, highly regarded among his fellow poets. Björling’s work has also greatly influenced later generations. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Ulven has taken a pointer or two from Björling’s experimental verse, the Finland-Swede widely regarded as one of Sweden’s most influential and innovative practitioner of modern poetry in the first half of the 20th century. Admittedly, Björling’s work is a good deal brighter and its near-religious celebration of the miracle of life at odds with Ulven’s dark and godless worldview. Yet the enigmatic sometimes apparent in Ulven’s poetry does have a certain affinity with Björling’s serene nature imagery and its ability to capture the near-inexpressible.

Björling’s penchant for the 2nd person pronoun – apart from fragmentary yet condensed syntax, nameless sequences of interrelated poems and clear, nature-derived imagery – is another structural device in common between the poets, with Ulven here endowing his *du* with the same mystical properties so characteristic of Björling’s poetry. The following poem closes *Etter oss, tegn* (1980), Ulven’s second collection of poems, indicating the tone and subject-matter laying ahead in the three masterpieces which followed – *Forsvinningspunkt* (1981), *Det tålmodige* (1987) and *Søppelsolen* (1989):
As in Ulven’s corpus, one finds in Björling’s poetic arsenal instances of quite unorthodox love poetry, its striking tone more often than not resulting from the peculiar and near-mystical relationship existing between the lyrical I and the du so frequently addressed in Björling’s work. Accounting for the nature of this relationship is difficult – unless, perhaps, one goes straight to the source. A telling example is the following poem, from Där jag vet att du (1938) – the ubiquitous du, incidentally, appearing in the very title of Björling’s book:

O visst finns det,
och var människa

—du
och har ett ansikte.

Jag — och förrän jag lägger mig
jag — att ett ord
jag — att med ditt anlete
Aldrig såg jag
som när på morgonen
jag
dig

Som ett före vaknandet
ditt anlet
ren-gestalt

This is poetry at its most economic (although, as will be discussed later, a certain poem by Emily Dickinson shares Björling’s linguistic concentration, albeit in a different manner), each word here carrying “en vanvittig tyngde,” as Ulven claimed characteristic of the merciless nature of poetic form, his remark undoubtedly referring first and foremost to the frugality of Modernism – the poetic form which Gunnar Björling was among the first to practice and establish as a tradition in Scandinavia.

_Ulven and Paul Celan_

Another poet with which Ulven shares a considerable ‘family resemblance’ is Paul Celan. A Jewish Romanian by birth, suffering persecutions after the annexing of Romania under Nazi Germany in 1940 and seeing both his parents killed, Celan emigrated to France after the war but wrote his poetry almost exclusively in German – his mother tongue, but also the tongue of his oppressors. Widely regarded as one of the major European poets to emerge out of the Second World War, it was to a great extent due to Celan’s poetry that the German sociologist Theodor W. Adorno would later revise his (in)famous dictum claiming that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.

As is characteristic of Ulven’s poetry, Celan’s work is likewise rarely
bound to a particular place or time. “Todesfuge,” maybe his most famous poem, is in many ways an exception to this rule. Celan’s later dislike of the poem, however, is perhaps an indication of how drastically his poetics changed as his writing progressed. Indeed, Celan became to resent the poems’ popularity, refusing re-publication in anthologies, as he considered its references and diction too lucid and interpretations thereof too nonchalant. This happened in tandem with the ever-increasing condensation of Celan’s language and further obscurity of his imagery. Yet the occasion and aim of his verse remained the same – to attempt an understanding of “det ubehagelige,” in Ulven’s words, and to express the reality of horror and suffering which human cruelty – and therefore the world itself – is capable of bringing about.

Celan was a Jew writing in German, his mother tongue, about his own experience of the Holocaust and its consequences. Such a background is undeniably a more pertinent cause for the pain running through his poetry than Ulven’s working class surroundings. Yet in terms of subject-matter and existential outlook, both poets share a similar point of departure in their bleak yet realistic poetry. If we understand one despair, we understand every despair, according to the American poet and short-story writer Raymond Carver. As such, we feel the same pain as humans, although the cause thereof is different. The quiet despair lurking behind Ulven’s and Celan’s lines is therefore similar, despite different origins.

Despair is also the origin of words, a driving force born out of horror and destruction – destruction which the poetry of both Celan and Ulven attempts to express, in order to fathom its meaning and even endow it with life, again. The following poem is from Celan’s second book of verse, Von Schwelle zu Schwelle (1955):
Welchen der Steine du hebst –
du entblößt, die des Schutzes der Steine bedürfen:
nackt,
erneuern sie nun die Verflechtung.

Welchen der Bäume du fällst –
du zimmerst
die Bettstatt, darauf
die Seelen sich abermals stauen,
als schütterte nicht
auch dieser
Äon.

Welches der Worte du sprichst –
du dankst
dem Verderben.

In her book on Ulven’s authorship, Å være vann i vannet, Janike Kampevold Larsen points to further similarities between the works of Tor Ulven and Paul Celan:

[Vi finner] overalt i forfatterskapet teksttykker og dikt der sanseorganene er desentralisert og i bevegelse mellom det menneskelige og det materielle. Øyne, munn, stemme og ører figurerer både som artikulasjoner av en slags sanseoppsmerksomhet og som spor etter betydning og uttrykk. Som hos Paul Celan, der munnen, lepper, hender alltid er gestiske, oftest mangetydige – de er tegn til eller spor etter uttrykk – er disse singulære kroppslige bestanddelene del både av et ahistorisk, instinktivt felt og av en sporsettende betydningsbevegelse. (64)

Numerous examples of such body imagery can be taken from Ulven’s poetry, reminiscent of similar images in Celan – the poet who wrote about almond
eyes and lips made out of stone. In the following prose-poem, from Ulven's 'archeological' Etter oss, tegn, his subject-matter also overlaps with Celan's – here, too, stones are rolled over, and what lies beneath them is given a voice (Björling's ansikte should also be kept in mind):

**Obligatorisk undervisning**

Du snur en stein som ligger på den fuktige bakken fordi du liker å se maurene, de gulbleke markene og saksedyrene som det ventelig vrimler av under dem; alle disse småkrypene du er den første til å oppdage, til å gripe på fersk gjerning. Men på undersiden av steinen er det denne gangen et ansikt, og dette ansiktet begynner å snakke med grøtet stemme, mens små jordklumper løsner omkring munnen. Etterhvert forstår du av den knirkende, men bydende talen, at det er din tur til å ligge med ansiktet ned mot jorden, helt til noen kommer og snur deg, nokså tilfeldig, i et anfall av barnslig nysgjerrighet. (SD, 60)

Larsen also points out Celan's and Ulven's recurrent metamorphoses of stones and faces (161). Yet for this particular reader, the biggest kinship between the poets lies in their disciplined imagery and extreme concentration of language. Each word occupies an unassailable position within the syntax. Enjambments, rhythm, word order and other syntactic constructions of any given poem are determined with utmost sensitivity to form – a quality which makes the poetry of both Ulven and Celan very fragile and hard to reproduce when it comes to translation. This in addition
to the semantic density of both Celan’s and Ulven’s work, the latter claiming as previously mentioned that “[l]yrikken er en nådeløs sjanger, hvor hvert ord må bære en vanvittig tyngde.” In light of translational difficulties deriving from such careful and dense compositions, it is perhaps fair to say that T.S. Eliot’s claim that free verse is a misleading term – due to all the metrical ’formulas’ still at work in modern poetry – is corroborated. But these formulas differ from one poem to the next, not to mention between languages, when a poem needs to be re-shaped again and re-formed, in the strictest sense of the word. In many ways it is therefore fitting to speak of gjendiktning – re-poetizing – as the translation process is sometimes so appropriately referred to in the Scandinavian languages.

Finally, to conclude this hasty comparison between the poetry of Ulven, Björling and Celan, the similar function of the 2nd person pronoun _du_ in their works is worth mentioning as well. The address entails a wish for company, uttered by the speaker to the listening reader. As a result, the poetry attains an aura of shared human experience. Unlike the particular and personal lyrics of the American confessionalists – to use again the same counterexample, although confessional poetry is of course not exclusive to American letters – the poetry of Celan, Björling and Ulven expresses a general world view, growing in scope and persuasion with every new work, steadfastly communicating a personal yet mutual sense of being – the mutuality of which is attained primarily through their recurrent use of the 2nd person pronoun _du_. Furthermore, these poets all rely on a basic vocabulary, with certain themes and even key words cropping up time and again in their work. The imagery of stones, body parts, earth, geological layers, water and prehistoric time to name a few of Ulven’s central tropes, many of which in fact overlap with the poetry of Gunnar Björling and Paul
Celan, who wove their poems out of similarly elemental patterns.

II

*Man and Nature: Leopardi’s Influence*

Perhaps it is not so far-off to claim that the *desire to understand* is the driving force behind modern poetry. A colossal work such as Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* is one man’s attempt to grasp – and portray – all the fundamental patterns of human civilization, patterns which all times repeat, from one culture to the next. Not surprisingly, it is Homer’s Odysseus who is one of Pound’s central heroes, Odysseus who – according to Dante’s *Divina Commedia* – became a victim to his own unquenchable thirst for wisdom when he attempted to sail past the Pillars of Hercules, denoting the limits of the human world and human knowledge. Disobeying the gods thus, his ship is sunk and his entire crew drowned, in sight of Mount Purgatory.

Odysseus’s haughtiness, his *hybris*, becomes his downfall. Ulven’s desire for knowledge is of a different kind, and his view on man’s place in the natural world in fact contrary to the proto-humanist tradition inherent in Odysseus’s words when he eggs his men on for the perilous journey ahead, appealing to their origin – and thus duty – as men and not animals: a position which would find its echo in the rhetoric of Renaissance humanists later on. In Canto XXVI, Odysseus says:

> Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.

Call to mind from whence ye sprang:
Ye were not form’d to live the life of brutes,
But virtue to pursue and knowledge high.

Ulven’s position, in comparison to the humanist idea of man’s centrality in
the world, is different to the extent that he refuses to make as clear a
distinction between man and nature as Odysseus/Dante here above, a
distinction which one could construe as supercilious towards the life man
puts himself over. Quite the opposite, man’s evanescence in and to nature is
one of Ulven’s central themes, from the point of view that no distinction can
be made between them. The traditional, Western perspective – from Genesis
and onwards – that man’s role is to have dominion “over the fish of the sea
and over the birds of the heavens,” is turned on its head in Ulven’s poetry,
which as a result is in many ways more ‘inhuman’ than that of other poets in
the sense that man does not occupy center stage alone. Rather, he shares the
spotlight with non-human nature in a more democratic manner than we, in
our self-absorption, are used to. With stones, water, grass and other sorts of
ikke-menneskelig nature, which we nonetheless are an inseparable part of, as
Ulven points out time and again in his poems:

Det kreves
støvler av svartjord,
embetsuniform av lav,
panykk av myrull,

for å stå ubevegelig
her,

og vente til en blir
The influence – or resemblance, rather – of one particular poet comes to mind in terms of Ulven’s ’inhuman’ lifestance: that of the Italian poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, generally considered one of Italy’s greatest poets, second perhaps only to Dante. As stated before, Leopardi’s poetry and thought influenced Ulven to a great deal, with “Randbemerkningar til Leopardis uendilighet,” Ulven’s essay about his fellow poet and brother-in-thought, appearing in Essays. Leopardi’s ideas cannot be fully accounted for here, but a small specimen from his work might serve to illustrate his position towards man and nature, a position which Ulven would later adopt and express in his own poetry.

Iceland, in fact, has a small role to play in this example, with Leopardi – a notorious devourer of books like Ulven – acquainting himself with Iceland and its lava-spewing volcanoes, the alleged portholes to Hell, through old travel literature. Having read as well in the works of Voltaire that no place on earth provides its inhabitants with a more dreadful habitat than Iceland, Leopardi set about writing a small essay titled “Dialogo della Nature e di un Islandese,” in which Mother Nature and an Icelander engage in a philosophical conversation.

The Icelander blames Nature for her cruelty and ruthlessness towards human beings. But Nature answers promptly, asking whether he thinks the natural world has been created for him, and other humans, alone. In a way, this succinct answer epitomizes Leopardi’s philosophy, free as it is from the ancient and persevering human centrality of Protagoras’s dictum that man is the measure of all things. It has now become apparent that this sort of
'human-ism’ can endanger our Earth, should we continue to believe it a right to place our own short-term interests above the interests of the ecosystem as a whole. The ruinous effect of such thinking goes without saying. But the cause thereof, as suggested above, might go as far back as to Christianity’s justification for a free entrance to Nature’s smörgåsbord – that man, as the crowning glory of creation, has dominion over “every living creature that moves on the ground,” and thus over nature as a whole.

This hierarchy, as noted, serves as an argumentational backbone in Odysseus’s pep-up speech addressed to his crew mates, emphasizing that it is their destiny as men to subdue nature and overcome her limitations. Leopardi’s stance is the opposite. Nature, and not man, occupies the hierarchical zenith of creation. Man falls victim to Nature’s caprice, injustice and random cruelty. And should he – in his arrogance – attempt to subjugate her will under his own, he will soon be put in his place by Nature herself.

Yet the Icelander perseveres, claiming that it is not through his own will that he has been born into existence. Rather, it is through the doings and volition of Nature herself that he has come to exist – through a natural creation of which he is undeniably a part. Is it, then, not her obligation to prevent her own creation from suffering, much in the same way a host is responsible for the well-being of his guests? But midway through his speech for fairness on behalf of the natural world, demanding human dignity, the Icelander is devoured by two lions. For human dignity is scarcely any concern of Nature. Such concepts are man-made and, in Leopardi’s opinion, hardly anything we are entitled to.

The critical reception of Ulven’s work has pointed out how “illusjonløs” his poetry is – how severe and disinclined to wishful fancy. In this regard, Ulven goes one step further than Leopardi, who in his Zibaldone – an
enormous diary containing the majority of his thought – claims that, because of life’s futility, illusions are as real as anything else in a person’s life; not least because of their capacity to console and provide comfort. Yet Ulven also points out, in the Vagant interview, that Leopardi revealed the futility even of this kind of false consolation:


*Optimism as Blindness*

Ulven’s position is more ruthless, in a sense more belligerent, than Leopardi’s, hoping as he does for his poetry to be a wake-up call from the drowsiness of illusions and false ideas. False ideas about man and his position towards nature, but also about man’s position in a world where
every day is “en katastrofe,” a world in which “[h]elvete er en levende realitet.”

In the past, such gadflies were accused of corrupting the minds of the young. In recent times, it has proved easier to deal with – do away with, in fact – the pessimistic world view as squabble and unreasonable negativity. The fierce polemic following the publication of the Finnish-Swedish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright’s book *Myten om framsteget* (1993), might serve as an indication of how alien – if not straight-out insulting, considering the controversy of Wright’s book – the idea is to many that despite numerous technological advances and alleged progress, man does not automatically tread the path of “virtute e canoscenza,” towards a better life. I do not refer to Wright as a particular sympathizer with Ulven’s ideas. For that their emphases are too different, although their skepticism towards man’s possibilities is comparable. Rather, I wish to point out the intensity and attempts to silencing with which the pessimistic point-of-view is more often than not met with, irrespective of how realistic or reasoned that view is. In the Vagant interview, Ulven says himself:

Ulven wipes out the distinction usually made between man and animal, in religion as well as by culture, both before and after Darwin. For if Darwin’s theory of evolution has done away with fundamental creationism, one can say that out of the ideological ruins of a supernatural creator there has emerged a new kind of religion – this time replacing the idea of god with a belief in man himself and his potential, thus reinstating the old idea of man as superior creation, occupying a greater role on Earth than other creatures. In his poetry, Ulven deconstructs this self-ordained apotheosis of man. His position is not grounded on eco-philosophical principles proclaiming the sanctity of all life, no matter how simple and primitive. Rather it is a direct (and, when closely considered, mundane) result of certain facts – for example that our intelligence is traceable back to “reptilenes biologiske intelligens,” as Ulven says above. Discussing man’s existence in light of geological time – or, rather, existence before and after man as species – he adds:


The origin and destiny of every life form is mutual – we share a certain “skjebnelfellesskap,” as it says in the following prose-poem, taken from Stein og spil: mixtum compositum (1995), the last book Ulven completed for publication:

Utstilling LIII

(objet trouvé)

Ulven is to a great extent what might be called an *evolutionary* author. As a result, the time scope of his poetry is exceptionally broad – indeed, almost as broad as can be imagined, by spanning everything from Earth’s earliest geological era to the distant (although impending) death of the solar system. As mentioned here above, Ulven wanted to react against how “nåtidsrettet” our society – and thinking – has become. In fact, some of his best poems are those who jolt our habitual sense of time, by offering unusual perspectives and through trenchant imagery:

I luften, i vinden
på vei
fra et
forsteinet vingepar
til et annet
svever fuglen

*(SD, 284)*

A trademark characteristic of Ulven’s sense of time is the double temporal perspective so often at work in his poetry. In the preceding poem, the image denotes both an instant (a snap-shot, as it were) as well as spanning millions of years. The poem occupies two temporal dimensions at once, constantly at play on the boundaries of both – “gliding” between them, yet resting in neither. As Torunn Borge and Henning Hagerup claim in *Skjelett og hjerte*, their book on Ulven:
Det klaraste metaperspektivet i Ulvens diktning dreier seg om kunstens evne til både å fryse øyeblikket og fastholde øyeblikkenes suksjesjon – og selvfølgelig om umuligheten av det samme. (12)

Furthermore, the speaking consciousness of a Tor Ulven poem frequently finds itself both in an unspecific present as well as reaching beyond the death of the lyrical speaker. Consequently, time and death are usually indistinguishable in Ulven’s poetry, as head and tail of the same temporal-existential poem-coin:

Sitt hos meg
kjære, fortell

om den tiden
da jeg ikke

finnes mer.

(SD, 191)

Discussing such temporal distortion, Janike Kampevold Larsen writes:

Denne opplossningen og vendingen av den lineære tiden går igjen i hele dikttorfattetskapet til Tor Ulven. Språkets tempus vendes mot verden og etablerer vanskelig sansbar temporalitet. [...] 

Det er mange kommentatorer som har vært opptatt av at Ulvens diktning griper tilbake til det fortidige, til en urtid – at den henplasser mennesket i en tid da det ikke fantes. Men toposen er mer kompleks og interessant enn som så: Det dreier sig ikke om en entydig tilbakeskriving av mennesket til en jordisk urtid, det er her overhodet ikke tale om en regressiv bevegelse. Vi har heller å gjøre med et jeg som forskyttes
mellom tider, tider som er markert gjennom verbalformer som er uforenlige innenfor et normalt tempussystem. Vi vet at det vanlige er at grammatikken etablerer tempussystemet fra et jeg-her-nå-perspektiv. Det er dette prinsippet Ulven bryter med, neglisjerer og spiller ut mot verden. Tidsforkyvningene er mange, og de har det til felles at de alltid overskriver det talende nåtidsøyeblikket. Den som snakker, og den som ser, er ikke festet i én tid – det er et jeg i fri bevegelse mellom epoker.

(79)

Ulven of course is not the first poet to have his poetry refer beyond “det talende nåtidsøyeblikket.” The following kortdikt, by the Swedish poet Verner von Heidenstam, is of a similar kind. Taken from Nya dikter (1915), Heidenstam’s last book, the poem is – in its tone and perspective – a certain indicator of what was to come in the works of the modernists who followed:

*Om tusen år*


Apart from early signs of increased density of expression appearing in Heidenstam’s language, his distrust of ornament and emphasis on clearly composed imagery, the biggest similarities between Heidenstam and the modernists who followed in his footsteps (Ulven included) are probably most noticeable in terms of form – Heidenstam being an early herald of the economic kortdikt as a form for modern poetry. For as a poet, Ulven is first and foremost a writer of short lyrics, the minimal nature of his verse finally forcing him towards prose as mentioned before. Before the transition,
however, Ulven had so to speak honed to perfection the qualities of modernist poetry characterizing its European tradition – density of expression together with knife-sharp imagery. Such traits go hand in hand with the modernists’ penchant for the visually charged short lyric, from Ezra Pound’s imagist poetry in the beginning of the 20th century to Tomas Tranströmer’s haiku lyrics in *Den stora gåtan* (2004).

But there is more to it. For if the short lyric was Ulven’s favorite form, there is little doubt that death – in one form or another – was his favorite theme. As the poetry scholar Niklas Schiöler points out in his book *Begränsningens möjligheter* (2008), a certain connection between the short lyric as a literary form and death as a poetic theme might exist:


Schiöler’s words, that death is “det enda gemensamma vi aldrig delar,” are reminiscent of French theorist Jacques Derrida’s writings in books such as *Donner la mort* (1992) and *Apories* (1995), in which he contemplates the borders and boundaries death imposes onto our language – the same
boundaries one could say Ulven attempts to blur through the double time perspective of his poems. In Schöler’s concluding words about the brusqueness of death, one could also – with good intention – detect an echo of the famous last lines ending Samuel Beckett’s early short story “Dante and the Lobster” – a similar kind of hopefully hopeless Galgenhumor in the face of death often being employed by Ulven:

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.

Well, thought Belacqua, it’s a quick death, God help us all.

It is not.

Traces and Absence

As is the case with other authors and scholars referred to here above, I mention Derrida and Beckett as ‘books’ in the library which one can expect to lie behind Ulven’s work, directly or indirectly. The purpose of such roll calling is not to emphasize Ulven’s authoritative knowledge. It is rather an attempt to determine the literary and theoretical context of this author – an author very much his own, but undeniably also a part of a rich, European tradition. As stated before, direct references to other literary texts are rare in Ulven’s oeuvre, despite a comprehensive familiarity with a number of literary traditions (Norwegian, French, Swedish, Italian and English in particular). Any kind of roll calling – whether it includes Gunnar Björling, Paul Celan or Giacomo Leopardi – is therefore only one reader’s personal response to different elements in Tor Ulven’s work. Another reader might summon different authors, as in fact Torunn Borge and Henning Hagerup do in Skjelett og hjerte, when discussing his literary kinship in a Norwegian
context but also in terms of a wider, European tradition.

In the much-quoted Vagant interview, however, Ulven’s conversance with Derrida is established, not least his ideas touching on traces and absence, both in a linguistic as well as an existential sense. In the interview, Ulven couples these ideas to his own view on the nature and role of literature. I quote him therefore at length:

prosjektet er dømt til å mislykkes. Likevel gir man ikke opp å granske sporene etter det fraværende. For eksempel gjennom litteraturen.

The invisible bond between absence and presence is one of Ulven’s ever-recurrent motives, in his poetry as well as in his lyrical short-fiction. As an example, the following are the concluding lines of one of Ulven’s prose vignettes from *Fortæring* (1991), describing a man’s arrival to an island for a banquet. Once there, however, he realizes that nobody has showed up. The man therefore returns to the shore, where an old rubber sandal, embedded in the sand, captures his attention:

Mennesket (en kvinne?) som hadde brukt sandalen var på en måte uhyggelig nærværende […] og samtidig helt fjern, jeg tenkte at jeg aldri ville få vete hvem det var. Bølgene slo stadig inn mot stranden, etterhvert litt nærmere fottene mine, forekom det meg. Kanskje flødde det. (8–9)

Ulven is an archeological writer, interpreting the traces and ruins life has left behind. As mentioned before, Ulven was critical towards society’s tendency to become too “nåtidsrettet,” to the point that one “så å si drukner seg i nået.” Ulven’s exceptionally broad temporal perspective is therefore to some extent a reaction to shortsightedness and the irresponsibility of momentary hedonism. By no means, however, is Ulven a self-righteous preacher of morals in his poetry. For that, his poetry is too objective. Ulven is an ögonpoet, describing what appears before him – not without sympathy, but with a fair amount of bluntness nonetheless. He sees the crowd flow from the
underworld, and knows, contrary to Eliot, that death really has “undone so
many.” As a result, his unforgiving vision abhors all illusions, as they cast a
veil over our eyes, making us blind towards the (right) nature of things – just
as optimism does.

But as stated before, the pessimist often speaks to closed ears, expressing
a lifestance which – admittedly – is no particular gospel, in the etymological
sense of that word as good news. Yet behind the alleged pessimism of such
writers as Arthur Schopenhauer, Giacomo Leopardi, Georg Henrik von
Wright and Tor Ulven is a fair amount of sympathy and human interest.
There is also reason to believe that between the pessimistic temperament of
the depressed and a realistic world view – i.e. a more realistic and ‘illusion-
free’ position towards life than is generally the case – a certain connection
exists. As an example, in her essay on the characteristics of depression in the
poetry of Lorine Niedecker, the American poet Rae Armantrout (who herself
is not a stranger to the black dog) writes:

Depression could be described as the opposite of grandiosity. The normal subject perceives herself through notoriously rose-tinted glasses; the depressive does not. The depressive’s view of self and world could be conceived as merciless realism. (Collected Prose, 63)

Here it is also of importance to mention that Paul Celan, as did Ulven,
regarded his poetry as “moments of realism” rather than dark abstractions –
or as he says in a letter to a friend in 1962: “I have never written a line that
was not connected to my existence – I am, you see, a realist, in my own
manner.” (Selections, 35, 180) Celan’s remark is of course reminiscent of
Ulven’s claim, mentioned here above, when he says that “[l]itteraturen er i siste instans mest interessant i den grad den formidler erfaringer som har
Ulven’s call for a broader temporal perspective manifests a certain ethical weight inherent in his poetry, considering the often-trod path between shortsightedness and irresponsible hedonism – and the results thereof, of which natural devastation is only one recent example. Yet the millions of years at the center of Ulven’s poetics and world view are rather grounded on existential and ontological principles than moral ones, deriving in part from Ulven’s reading and understanding of geology, ice age history and paleontology. One also wonders whether the very landscape of Norway, so evidently sculpted and formed by the ice age glacier – didn’t affect Ulven’s thinking and influenced his interest in man’s – and life’s – prehistory. Such prehistory dating all the way back to Earth’s most distant past, yet it is still a part of our present. We cannot escape our origin; our reflection reaches 2,500 million years back in time:
Unlike such time-oriented poets as Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam, who both emphasize the importance of a certain cultural co-memory – a never-ending, cultural *conmemorance* – Ulven directs his gaze further back, to a time in man’s history of which there is no memory kept: to the time existing long before culture (in the agrarian sense of the word), to the biological time of nature which continues to condition our existence, no matter how civilized our society becomes. No matter how, as it were, super-natural.

Undoubtedly, many will find such a view on man’s advance – from his hunched infancy to the technical knowledge of modern times – rather anti-humanist. Yet could not Ulven’s central stance towards our *skjebnesfellesskap* as well be termed “human, all too human?” By refusing to give in to the myth of man as higher creature, and by reiterating time and again in his bleak yet sympathetic poetry the ontological conclusion inevitably drawn from the ’bigger picture’ of nature – when all the tall tales have been told, and nothing is left except our “klomerker:”

Når forsvinningen lyser
sterkt nok

kan vi tolke
våre egne
klomerker.

I mørket
blir vi
dumme. Nær
mineralriket.

Forsvinning
er
dannelse.

(DS, 125)

Death is key to learning – to “dannelse” – in Ulven’s poetry. From the unearthed jaw screaming with “istidens / utdødde // stemme” into the sound system of some lecture hall, to this prose-poem from Ulven’s fourth poetry collection, Det tålmodige (1987), with which he established his reputation as one of Norway’s most important writers to emerge after the Second World War:

(Smådyr og måner forflytter seg uten at det merkes. Er noen spor viktigere enn alle andre? Er våre spor de mest kunstferdige? Er våre spor våre?) (DS, 172)

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned a group of poets whose lives were cut short through suicide, and the effect such biographical evidence can have on the interpretative industry which ensues, looking for answers. Yet instead of death casting a final light on the poetry, death itself is more often than not scrutinized in the works of these writers; writing as they do in the light of death, which the American poetess Rosanna Warren believes to be the essence of “all real poetry” (Fables of the Self, 13). But nowhere is this scrutiny
Ulven and Emily Dickinson

As a final point of thematic and structural comparison, it might seem too far-fetched to equate Ulven with Emily Dickinson, the American poetess who made death and eternity her ‘immortal’ themes. Nonetheless, there are interesting similarities between these two unique poets. Both in terms of their poetical universes, so rich in idiosyncratic nature imagery, as well as in their life histories – similarities which almost demand comparison. For both Emily Dickinson and Tor Ulven are known for having closed themselves off from the outer world for years on end, within the walls of their parental homes, where they disappeared into the world of books and into the making of their own poetry.

As mentioned before, Ulven’s isolation was caused by a psychological illness. Before he met his sad end, however, he managed to overcome his anxiety somewhat – to the degree that he resumed nurturing his friendships outside the home, and would do so the last few years of his life. Dickinson on the other hand never broke her isolation, whatever the reason behind it was. Instead, she continued – silently – composing her verses, without attempting publication. In fact, Ulven was to do much the same, working on three different manuscripts during his isolation which he never published. In addition to the five books of poetry published in Ulven’s lifetime, three nearly finished collections were published posthumously: Som fossile bølgeslag, Museets teater og Uutgravde fløyter.

The many different theories proposed as explanation for Dickinson’s self-
imposed seclusion (one of them reasons that a skin disease kept her indoors) might, however, not have to look further than to the disciplined anguish so often lurking behind her lines. For even though I want to refrain from drawing a clear line between poetry and suffering (joy and the beauty of life find its most impelling descriptions in poetry, too), it is nonetheless a statistical fact that poets, as a group in society, are most at risk to suffer from mental illnesses – depression first among them. (A further discussion of this fact is to be found in Kay Redfield Jamison’s monumental book, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*.)

A serious depression is perhaps not a fully satisfactory explanation for Dickinson’s near-total disappearance into a world of poetry and letters – and certainly not as exciting as many of the others. Yet it is difficult not to acknowledge the pain expressed in Dickinson’s poetry, although that pain is more often than not clothed in such mastery of style and form that we as readers are prone to overlook it, amazed by the formal and linguistic aspects of the poetry – the lot of Paul Celan’s “Deathfugue” for example, whose critical reception for a long time contained only formalistic readings, disregarding the difficult content. For in many of Dickinson’s best poems, striking descriptions of pain are offered – such descriptions which, considering their powerful effect, one presumes only a lived experience is capable of creating:

    I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
    And Mourners to and fro
    Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
    That Sense was breaking through –

    And when they all were seated,
    A Service, like a Drum –
    Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –

The meaning of Dickinson’s peculiar ‘funeral’ poem is far from obvious. By looking at her choice of verbs, however ("beating," "creak," "toll," "broke," "dropped," "hit"), the immense racket here described becomes apparent. Treading, beating, creaking, tolling – the noise forms a crescendo, rising from one stanza to the next, reaching its culmination in Dickinson’s magnificent image of the ultimate noise; when space begins to toll:

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,

An indication perhaps of the accuracy and utmost linguistic and metrical condensation employed in these two vivid lines, is the fact that a satisfactory rendition of the image, while retaining its linguistic density, has proved impossible in my work with the poem in an Icelandic translation.

But here I have fallen prey to the same temptation as many, by celebrating Dickinson’s technical brilliance while snubbing her content. For
the intensifying of this inner noise (the poem takes, after all, place within the speaker’s brain), finally reaches a disturbing magnitude. Indeed, many have read Dickinson’s poem as a description of the descent into madness, of losing one’s mind: a manner of speaking which corresponds to the dropping self plunging from world to world in the last stanza.

As mentioned before, a clearly personal pain is rare in Ulven’s poetry, his emphasis rather falling on our co-human lot. As such, the same trope – the image of a falling self – becomes in Ulven’s case a vehicle for expressing in a sense what cannot be captured: the very beginning of existence, and thus of our own origin. “Ingen / får / det siste / ordet” it says in Ulven’s poem which follows – but nobody has the first word, either. Which the ensuing poem approaches nonetheless; perhaps in a similar manner to Achilles when chasing after the tortoise – without ever reaching his goal:

Jeg faller og
faller
ned gjennom
sjakten
i meg selv,
forbi lag
etter lag
av ruinbyer
hvor bare en sovende fangevaktare
er igjen,
forbi førstpråklige boplasser
og huleveggen med avtrykk etter
den første hånden: din hånd.
Faller. Faller.
Bunnløs
er jeg likevel
ikke.
Men også bunnen
faller. Og fallet
faller. Ingen
Contrary to Dickinson’s poem, which after the racket of the first four stanzas falls completely silent (“And Finished knowing – then – “), Ulven’s poem continues to fall, for ever as it were, which Ulven also indicates by (uncharacteristically) dropping the final period of his poem. Form reveals content here.

“Det siste / ordet” is not expressed either in Dickinson’s poem, with its highly abrupt ending. Moreover, in its powerful prosody, the last “plunge” (“And hit a World, at every plunge,”) is in fact expressed through the unusually heavy metrical and semantic emphasis Dickinson has her final word carry, surrounded by her famous dashes:

And Finished knowing – then –

In Dickinson’s final word, her poem comes crashing down ever so abruptly – and then falls completely silent. As such, one can freely admire Dickinson’s formal brilliance here, as the metrical weight carried by the poem’s last word also connotes the very content of the poem as it is usually interpreted: the blow suffered when a person’s reason breaks apart, when the mind comes crashing down and darkens after a psychological collapse. Again, form reveals content.

III
Conclusive Words

Ulven’s observation in the Vagant interview, that poetry is a “nådeløs sjanger, hvor hvert ord må bære en vanvittig tyngde,” will hardly find stronger representatives than Emily Dickinson’s poem here above, as dense and semantically pregnant her language is. As mentioned before, Ulven found it necessary to break free from his own “nådeløs” writing style as a poet in the middle of his career, turning to the more flexible nature of prose writing. For although many of Ulven’s poems seem relatively simple on the surface, the discipline behind their composition becomes apparent on closer inspection – with translation perhaps comprising the closest possible reading of a literary text.

My translation work of Tor Ulven’s poetry into Icelandic has revolved around endowing each word with the same weight it carries in the original. A common refrain is that modern poetry is little more than prose chopped up into lines – but how one divides is of utmost importance, then! Ulven’s careful enjambments always intensify the clarity and focus of his images, his simple yet measured syntax posing all sorts of challenges to a translator.

In Baklängesöversättning (2011), his book on translation practices, the Swedish linguist, translator and poetry scholar John Swedenmark proposes that the phrase is the fundamental building block of modern poetry – a metrically and semantically isolated unit, spanning everything from one-syllabic words such as Dickinson’s “then” here above, to an extended run of syntactically coherent lines. Swedenmark’s theory, for which he offers convincing arguments in his book, is in fact reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s words in The Pisan Cantos (1948), his masterpiece of poetic composition and a
landmark of modernist poetry, when Pound looks back to the triumph of modern free verse over traditional meter: “To break the pentameter, that was
the first heave,” (Pound’s line, incidentally, a pentameter itself). As has been
duly cataloged in various works of scholarship, the modernists challenged
the rule-bound forms of Victorian poetry with their highly fragmentary
compositions, thus shifting the emphasis from the metrical line to a more
free-floating scansion, relying – in Swedenmark’s opinion – on the linguistic
and musical phrase as a central building block of poetry.

Semantically, Ulven’s poetry is nowhere as fragmental as that of his
predecessors. On the other hand, the typographical lay-out of Ulven’s poems
on the page – frequent enjambments, lines varying greatly in length – is a
clear example of the ‘invisible’ laws of composition at work in modern
poetry, no matter how free it may otherwise seem. For nothing is haphazard
in Ulven’s poetry. Each word occupies a fixed place, determined by a poem’s
overall rhythmic and semantic make-up. Metrical automatism and linguistic
decoration is done away with, a feature which characterizes the exigent
discipline of modern poetry. As a result, each word comes to carry increased
importance – increased weight, which Ulven believed to mark the ruthless
nature of this genre.

Before he turned his focus to lyrical short-fiction, Tor Ulven wrote some
of the most beautiful and haunting poems to appear in Norwegian literature
in the latter half of the 20th century. But it has been the aim of this discussion
to place Ulven’s poetry in a wider context, within a European tradition of
modern poetry, comprising such authors as Paul Celan and Gunnar Björling,
and before them such predecessors as Giacomo Leopardi and Emily
Dickinson – a tradition which Tor Ulven deserves to be considered an
intricate and important part of. In Torunn Borge’s and Henning Hagerup’s
words, Ulven “tåler å sammenlignes med de helt store.” (Skjelett og hjerte, 19–20)

Tracing such ideological and aesthetic kinship between Ulven and other better known authors has hopefully revealed some interesting family resemblances, although my discussion remains, inevitably, limited to the subjective response of one reader only. As such, there are of course “ennå […] mange uløste gåter,” as it says in one of Ulven’s poems, the “riddles” lying outside the scope of this dissertation consisting of a more direct interpretative analysis of Ulven’s poetry, all the while keeping in mind the rich tradition underlying his work. For as is the case with all major authors, a collaborative effort is needed in order to illuminate the many aspects and nuances of the work. Hopefully this subjective, reader-response introduction to Ulven’s poetry and its ideological and aesthetic background has been of some minor value towards that aim.
Bibliography


*Vagant*. 4th issue, 1993 (special edition on Tor Ulven’s authorship).
