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# “Med istidens utdødde stemme”

*A Contextual Introduction  
to Tor Ulven's Poetry*

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## 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.

## I

### *Isolation and Circulation*

The Norwegian writer Tor Ulven (1953–1995) belongs to a group of such 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

Eller elske hånden  
som griper steinen

under vannet.

(*Samlede dikt*, 113)

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 *Vagant* (4<sup>th</sup> 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:

[J]eg har sluttet å skrive lyrikk. Jeg fikk etter hvert følelsen av å ha skrevet meg inn i et hjørne. Begynte å kopiere meg selv. Og da er det selvsagt noe galt. Jeg begynte å eksperimentere med mer fyldige dikt, og oppdaget i ettertid at de var kamuflert prosa. Siden har jeg omarbeidet dem til kortprosa. Det store spørsmålet ble så: kunne jeg skrive prosa? En sommer gjorde jeg et forsøk, og resultatet ble *Graavgaver*. Etterpå har det blitt prosa. Overgangen var befriende, man får plutselig så forbløffende god plass! Det var som å flytte fra et utkikkstårn til et palass. Her kunne man ta med alle assosiasjoner, sidesprang – alle parentesene! Lyrikken er en nådeløs sjanger, hvor hvert ord må bære en vanvittig tyngde.

*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 Veeras 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 advocates 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:

Hver dag er en katastrofe. Hver dag er dommedag. Det er bare å se på nyhetene. Helvete er en levende realitet, for å si det slik. Det har alltid vært her. Hvis det er noe som kjennetegner vår tid spesielt, så må det være at destruktiviteten har fått en utløsningsknapp for en bombe i hånden, istedenfor en stridsøks. Det øker selvsagt dumhetens og ondskapens potensiale betraktelig.

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*

interview.

*“Å henwise 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 istidens  
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:

Det er riktig nok at jeg har lest en del bøker, blant annet om litteraturteori og filosofi, og det er en nyttig ballast å ha med seg. Men jeg går ikke uten videre med på det implisitte stempellet "stuelærd". I min ungdom hadde jeg en rekke forskjellige jobber – jeg har faktisk sertifikat for tårnkran – og erfaringene fra arbeidslivet drar jeg innimellom nytte av som forfatter. Litteratur er for meg hverken ateoretisk naivrealisme eller cerebral konstruksjon – det er begge deler, eller noe tredje. Som leser er jeg helt uinteressert i litteratur som *bare* henviser til annen litteratur. Jeg vil ikke sammenligne meg selv med en eller annen kjemiprofessor som sitter alene i sitt laboratorium og lager væsker som bare går rundt i retorter og kolber og rør, og kommer tilbake til utgangspunktet, kanskje med en annen farge, men det var det hele. Litteraturen er i siste instans mest interessant i den grad den formidler erfaringer som har med den virkelige eksistensen å gjøre. Derfor finner man praktisk talt ingen allusjoner til andre bøker i det jeg skriver. I utgangspunktet krever jeg ikke noen lærd leser. Man kan kanskje trenge en fremmedordbok og et leksikon, det er det hele. Deretter kan man i prinsippet lese bøkene mine forutsetningsløst. Det ville selvsagt være naivt å tro at det blir slik i praksis. Men som forfatter vil jeg ikke fremstå hverken som anti-intellektuell eller som en ultralitterær figur. Litteratur er selvsagt språk, men ikke bare språk; den forutsetter i mange tilfeller en utenomspråklig erfaring. Derfor er det litt forskrekkende – og kanskje imponerende – når enkelte forfattere skriver romaner med bakgrunn i himmelstrøk hvor

de knapt har satt sine bein. Dersom språket var et lukket system, var det greit. Men litteraturen – kunsten i det hele tatt – kan ikke la være å henwise til virkeligheten og den konkrete erfaring.

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 than 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 morbidity:

Jeg er ikke interessert i å være morbid eller makaber. Det har kanskje forekommet unntaksvis, men bare unntaksvis. Døden som makaber og konkret realitet er ikke mitt felt. Jeg skriver distansert om det ubehagelige fordi jeg vil forstå det, ikke flørte med groteskeriet omkring det, eller svelge i uhyrligheter. Altså døden som betingelse, ikke som spesialeffekt. Det er det tragiske som opptar meg.

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

transcenderer det private. (*Skjelett og hjerte*, 13)

Contrary to self-absorption, Ulven's poetry is extroversive and dialectic – not least, I would claim, because of his predilection for the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun *du* in his poetic language.

### *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 *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 *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:

Din egen stemme

på lydbåndet,  
det er  
speilbildet

som forteller  
at også du

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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):

Løyrunene

i svaberget,

navnet.

Men du er i bølge-  
slagene, som tålmodig  
sletter ut  
merkene etter innsiktens kaos,  
og igjen gjør stein

til stein.

(SD, 85)

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 tekststykker 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 sanseoppmerksomhet 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 vrirler 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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,  
parykk av myrull,

for å stå ubevegelig  
her,

og vente til en blir

sporløst  
født.

(*SD*, 108)

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:

Leopardi mente jo at menneskene ble lykkeligere jo flere illusjoner de hadde. Men selv var han en illusjonsnedriver av dimensjoner. Han skrev om antikken, da folk trodde at skogen var befolket av nymfer og dryader, og vannet var befolket av Neptun, nereider og najader og denslags. Leopardi var en innbitt motstander av den romantiske litteraturen, fordi den lot som om verden fortsatt var humanisert. Han ironiserte voldsomt over dem som skrev som om vinden bokstavelig talt blåste på trærne – som en personlighet! Man hadde jo forlengst avslørt at det ikke fantes guder i skogen og havet. Det er et desillusjonens standpunkt. Men i prinsippet mente han som sagt at jo flere illusjoner folk har, jo bedre har de det. Det er kanskje riktig. Men de fleste av disse illusjonene er vi i alle fall berøvet. Imidlertid prøver vi hele tiden desperat å skape nye. Se bare på all den billige kioskmefafysikken som er i omløp for tiden, hvor de mest absurde ting hevdes i fullt alvor. Det trengs en motstand mot denslags dumhet, denslags fortrenkning av eksistensielle grunnvilkår. Derfor er det grunn til å pukke på forgjengeligheten. Blant annet. Vi har stadig illusjoner å miste.

### *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:

Alle spør hvorfor pessimistene er pessimister. Men aldri spør noen hvorfor optimistene er så optimistiske – hvordan de kan ha fått et sånt lyst syn på livet, trass i all erfaring med det. Man blir fortere forblindet av optimisme enn av det motsatte. Det er dette perspektivet jeg vil ha frem: Vi kommer ikke forbi at vi er underlagt et grunnleggende prinsipp – vi lever alle med reptilenes biologiske intelligens. Eller for den saks skyld de encellede dyrenes, de som bare ville overleve. De trengte ikke å grunngi det – de bare delte seg. Mens vi er nødt til å grunngi vår eksistens, forsøke å gi den en mening. Likevel er forskjellen ikke så stor, kvalitativt sett. I det rette perspektivet er vi ingenting. Det er kanskje nødvendig å påpeke denne dimensjonen i et samfunn som er veldig nåtidsrettet. Man så å si drukner seg i nået. I våre hjerner kan vi ha et perspektiv

som går millioner år bakover, forsåvidt også fremover. Men det hjelper oss ikke. I en viss alder er vi like klare for krematoriet, uansett.

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:

Dette tidsperspektivet er noe vi prøver å glemme hele tiden. Den individuelle døden tilsvarer på sett og vis den kollektive. Og dette prøver vi å skyve unna. Jeg har lest litt paleontologi, altså om studiet av fossiler. Nå husker jeg ikke disse tallene nøyaktig lenger, men arten Homo sapiens har eksistert en forsvinnende liten del av jordens historie. Du har dette berømte eksemplet med en film som viser jordens historie, den varer i 24 timer, og de siste tre minuttene opptrer menneskelignende vesener, og det siste halve minuttet omtrent, det moderne mennesket i biologisk forstand. Den tiden dette mennesket har eksistert som art, og det er vel rundt 40.000 år, den er en bagatell. Det er helt latterlig. “Så lenge man snakker om mennesket, er det meningsløst å

snakke om noe evig,” sier Heidegger, sitert etter hukommelsen. Jeg synes det er grunn til å minne om dette. På den annen side finnes det for tiden en masse tankeløs og sentimental naturromantikk, som synes å prioritere den såkalte naturen foran mennesket. Dette fører til en hjelpeløs form for anti-humanisme. I boken *Mennesket blir til* påpeker den berømte arkeologen Richard Leakey tørt at “Bare én prosent av alle dyrearter som noensinne har eksistert, er i live i dag. Dette viser klart at utryddelse er de fleste arters endelige skjebne.” Det betyr ikke at det er fornuftig å utrydde dyr. Men det antyder at man i hvert fall skal være forsiktig med å idyllisere naturen.

The origin and destiny of every life form is mutual – we share a certain “skjebnefellesskap,” 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)*

For femogtredve millioner år siden ble en edderkop og en gresshoppe sittende fast, ved siden av hverandre, i den samme kvaen, som hardnet: en ravklump. Et skjebnefellesskap, om man vil. De sitter fremdeles fanget der, man kan se dem begge inne i den varmgule, lysgjennomtrengelige steinen. Samt en luftboble, femogtredve millioner år gammel luft. Jeg kunne tenke meg å lage et smykke av ravet, og henge det rundt halsen din. En gave fra før mennesker fantes, til deg. Jeg liker tanken på millioner år gamle insekter nær huden din. Spør mig ikke hvorfor.

*Death, Time and the Imagist "kortdikt"*

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 suksisjon – 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 oppløsningen og vendingen av den lineære tiden går igjen i hele diktforfatterskapet 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 seg 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. Tidsforskyvningene er mange, og de har det til felles at de alltid overskrider 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*

En dallring i en fjärran rymd, ett minne  
av gården, som sken fram bland höga träd.  
Vad hette jag? Vem var jag? Varför grät jag?  
Förgätit har jag allt, och som en stormsång  
allt brusar bort bland världarna, som rulla.

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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:

I en kort dikt uttrycker man än sammanfattande, än blyxtbelysande, än ljudligt ordavvägande. Man diskuterar eller argumenterar inte, man ges inte utrymme för flera scener, kan inte bereda plats för ett persongalleri, man gör inte det eller det. Likväl förefaller det möjligt att fåordighet kan tala om det som mångordighet inte når. Man ställer sig invid det ospråkliga, särskilt invid det vi känner till att vi inte känner till: döden. Döden är en förkortning. Den är livets begränsning. Och diktens möjlighet.

Döden må vara ett universellt poetiskt tema, i korta dikter är det ytterligt vanligt. Döden är det enda gemensamma vi aldrig delar. Därför alstrar den sådan konstnärlig produktivitet, därför diktar man på gränsen till det som inte bär något språk. I en kort dikt är döden därför säkert kort. (235)

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 Schiöler'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:

Vi må alle forholde oss til noe fraværende hele tiden. Det er noe helt dagligdags: den man selv en gang var, er borte, den man elsker eller elsket er ikke den samme lenger, om høsten er sist sommer fraværende. Men disse tingene er til stede som minner. Når man har gått i postkassen og hentet avisen, så er man strengt tatt ikke den samme når man kommer tilbake. Men la oss si at det har regnet, og at veien til postkassen er bløt og leirete, da står sporene igjen. Og sporene forteller både om et nærvær og et fravær samtidig. For litt siden var det jo virkelig noen som lagde disse sporene, og uten vedkommendes nærvær ville det ikke vært noen spor der. Men det faktum at bare sporene står igjen, vitner om et fravær. På samme måte innbiller jeg meg man kan se litteraturen. Ordene på boksiden vitner om at noen – forfatteren – har "vært der". Men de hevder med like stor styrke at forfatteren er fraværende. Det gjelder også det man skriver *om*. Ta et elementært ord som "grantre". Når man skriver det i en bok, peker det mot det virkelige fenomenet "grantre". Men det er bare et ord i en bok, og betegner altså treets fravær også. Litteratur er å sette spor. Det er en fascinerende dobbelthet i dette. Og så vidt jeg kan skjønne dreier det seg om noe helt fundamentalt, faktisk tiden og rommet, som ikke ville finnes uten at noe var fraværende i forhold til noe annet, både i tid og rom. Dette er tanker som har sitt utspring i en Derrida-lesning, skjønt jeg tar alle forbehold om misforståelser. Hvis jeg først skal gi meg til å feillese Derrida, så må det neste bli å gjøre ham til eksistensfilosof. Ifølge Derrida opererer nemlig alle mennesker, mer eller mindre ubevisst, med et behov for nærværsmaksimering, alle leter etter et definitivt nærvær – for eksempel en gud – som skal døyve all lengsel. Men dette

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 fjernt, jeg tenkte at jeg aldri ville få vite hvem det var. Bølgene slo stadig inn mot stranden, etterhvert litt nærmere føttene 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

med den virkelige eksistensen å gjøre.”

The European realist tradition within which Ulven considered his poetry a part, and the importance he placed on a temporal vision reaching beyond the living moment, also coheres with Celan’s emphasis that the past be rescued from forgetfulness. Yet perhaps Celan’s ultimate realism lies in his sad knowledge that such forgetfulness *will* be the case, sooner or later. In “Aschenglorie hinter,” a poem from *Atemwende* (1967), one reads these well-known lines:

Niemand  
zeugt für den  
Zeugen.

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:

Fra det blikkstile

brådypet  
skal bunnsteinene  
stige opp

gjennom speilbildet ditt:

I dag  
er det prekambrium.

(SD, 115)

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 *commemorance* – 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.

(SD, 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?) (SD, 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



as steadfastly performed as in the works of Tor Ulven.

### *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 *Uutgravede 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 sovande fangevoktare  
er igjen,  
forbi førspråklige 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

får  
det siste  
ordet

(*SD*, 68)

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.

### *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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.



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