# THE REITERABLE CIRCULARITY OF BEING: POETICS, SELFHOOD, AND THE SINGULAR WITNESS THAT IS 'I' Julian Wolfreys

The poem has always hoped...to speak also...on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other.

Paul Celan

The heavens [have] no diversitie or difference, but a simplicity of parts, and equiformity in motion continually succeeding each other; so that, from what point soever we compute, the account will be common unto the whole circularity.

Sir Thomas Browne

## 1. ONE IS (NOT)

### Nonetheless, metaphor.

Where does one begin with circularity? Does one begin at all? These are not idle questions, especially when one notes that Sir Thomas Browne has already done away with any pretence for beginning, observing as he does that the account will be common, wherever one is (in) this figure. Wherever one is, there is where one begins. Write this in a number of ways, more than one: one is; one is. In a certain fashion this is to say, and yet not to say, I am; to say it without saying it, in fact and in principle. To present the simulacrum of a subject, to play on the verb of being, without giving face to the singularity, groundedness, or being of (a) being—quite. In this, the verb doubles that which is already stated in the number. One. Is. Is announces nothing other than that which One has already staged, after a fashion. Whether posited in the form of question or assertion, the remarking of the apparent fact, one is, says, after a fashion, 'one exists'. It implies or perhaps whispers from within its articulation, as the other of the ostensibly disinterested observation of the self in and as an other location, that one has access to the circular reflection of one's existence in the act of saying that one exists. This is of course not the same as existing, not the same as being the existing one who says that one exists; though not the fact, it figures an analogy for the fact that announces both the fact and the principle. Though neither the fact—as in the commonplace phrase the fact is—nor as such, but available through that testimony of apprehension, the fiction of the as if that the work of analogy enables.

Circularity, circulation, circumlocution, reiteration and return: all announce that where one is, there, already, always, there—and there—are two. One begins only as the return of the consciousness that one is, as that consciousness returns to one, returning to one the idea that one is in fact one and is expressed as one in the remembrance that is also a forgetting of the circulation of being that divides the self against and from within it-self. Thus to risk periphrasis: one is; yet one is not. One is-not in the very affirmation one is, the circular return against and from within. And this takes place as the return of (the other in) itself in its articulation. It cancels the unity of the itself, crossing through and erasing in the very instant of coming-to-being, in the illusory event of the becoming-one (that one both is and is not) by that doubling and division remembered and forgotten, remembered and dismembered. Articulation, then—and as disjointing.

Such circular propositions imply a temporality having to do with anamnesis as the very possibility for any reflective, yet displaced and displacing, effectively self-differencing statement of existence. However what is the nature of this temporal condition? It cannot be claimed with any certainty or assurance that what returns is simply a prior moment as such, a fixed precedent or conceptual one, an ontological O that encircles as it de-scribes and thus gives ideal form to the concept of being a priori. What returns is what already is and was and yet which never is, if the verb should be taken mistakenly to indicate the figure of the sole subject. But what was is inseparable from what is (even though it always remains other), from the one is that is more than one. There is here a simultaneity that is impossible in stricto sensu. One is thus announces the very possibility of the impossible, figuring impossibly this impossible possibility that is one's (self-) consciousness to itself.

Aspects of this conundrum are spoken of in one of the papers of Immanuel Kant gathered in the collection called *Opus Postumum*. Kant makes the following remark on the effective manifestation of the *cogito* given in the words *I am*. 'This act of consciousness (*apperceptio*)', argues Kant, 'does not arise as a consciousness of something preceding (as, for instance, if I say to myself: I think *therefore* I am) for otherwise I should presuppose my existence in order to demonstrate this existence—which would be a mere tautology'. Haunted as it is by the ghosts of Leibnitz and Descartes in the traces of the *apperceptio* and the *cogito*, the Kantian proposition traces the circle of conscious reflection that marks and re-marks a distinction between mere perception and apperception. One is conscious of one's own existence and of one's own perceptions, not least those perceptions concerning one's own consciousness. The announcement of consciousness, which is always a self-consciousness, is not of something preceding the act of coming to consciousness. It is not informed by a presupposition or an *a priori* constant outside the circulating reflection of the act that returns to itself as its own first principle, deconstructed-in-itself.

One therefore apprehends oneself through that apperception which is always already a misperception, expressed as 'the knowledge of oneself as a person who constitutes himself as a principle and is his originator'. This misperception is not however a flaw. It appears (as) a necessary, ineluctable process in the structuring of consciousness. One *must* orient oneself. One must orient the *itself* even if with such orientation is the motion entailing one's own disorientation. The structural motion of the circular logic of being's apperception to itself is a necessary, and indeed perhaps inevitable detour—the *detour* that makes possible the *retour*—so that one has the possibility spatially and temporally to 'orient oneself in thinking', as the title of another of Kant's essays has it. As Kant expresses it in spatial terms that also acknowledge the temporal *retour* of memory, 'in the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I *remember*'.

The figure of *retour* that I have called up is important here. This hardly used, somewhat archaic English word expresses the necessary spatial and temporal conditions of that return that in returning disrupts even as it makes possible the articulation of *one is*. One traces and retraces the completion of a circle already inscribed, and with that the return to any supposed starting place always and in a particular, apparently paradoxical manner that is inescapable. This gesture announces in the performance of its own articulation its own division, which in turn and *by analogy* allows indirectly for one's perception or intuition of the other as being other and yet the same. I stress *by analogy* in order to alert the reader to a circulation that escapes the purely logical in the movement of the analogical as the temporal deferral and spatial differentiation. Figurally, correspondence, relation, agreement come to take place. They come to pass *where one is*.

In returning to where I am, where one is who both is and is not the 'I' of I am, the motion of retour as the movement of conscious reflection affirms the other within the one—correspondence occurs as both agreement and communication or intercourse. Retour has also certain juridical senses relating to propriety and property, in the sense that what returns to one is what is properly the property, what is proper, to that person. But what we see returning to one, what is properly one's own, what one has the right to, is, properly understood, improper to oneself; the is-not is the only proper condition of that which one is, the other is the most proper-improper aspect of one's self. To make the point once more, Orientation in thinking is disorientation, but disorientation is the necessary, if circular act of tracing if one is to apprehend the others that one is. Thus there is communication and correspondence. And yet this communication fails to arrive properly in its arrival.

What inscribes or perhaps circumscribes the necessity of disorientation in and yet other to orientation? What makes the proper improper? It is, as Kant admits, 'a *subjective* ground of differentiation'. The subjective ground of differentiation that comes to appear is however groundless. In being announced as subjective, the ground gives way. This is not to say that the effect of differentiation—and we would argue deferral—is not there, not experienced or perceived, but rather that the subject projects the simulacrum of a ground in order to give ground to the groundless differentiation. If there were a ground to subjectivity it would not be of the order of a foundation so much as it would be a motion, a figure recircling, turning back, folding itself upon itself in its rhythm of unfolding—as if it were a ground bass in fact. Difference is that motif, the musical recurrence of which gives to the subject the illusion of a structure. Difference moves over the ground only to erase the very idea in tracing and reiterating it. That which comes to appear in fact reappears. It returns in its circular fashion, to articulate that which is properly improper to the self. Neither self nor not-self it arrives to reappear as a *revenant* trace in memory revealing the *one is* and the *one is-not*, and playing between the two. We thus apperceive the apparition to the self of the trace of the other, apprehended as 'appearance, intuition, immediate revelation, or whatever else one wants to call such a presentation'.

#### 2. OSTINATO

#### An interlude.

Kant's apparent rush here—whatever else one wants to call...— is as amusing as it is instructive. He seeks to dismiss the problem of naming the phenomenological apperception of that which is nothing as such, and which as such is irreducible to any properly oriented naming in the impropriety of

its slippage along a spectral chain of ghostly analogical signifiers, Naming is everything and yet nothing. Its very articulation only communicates its failure, its spluttering, stuttering inadequacy in the unformed, potentially endlessly reformulated subjectivity. *One must name*. This is the imperative, and yet no name will do. *One* appears to name. In its appearance it appears to name. It seems as if it names in its appearance; it appears as the name, by analogy. And one must name. Here is the directive to being, to a being conscious of itself as itself, as corresponding with *and* to itself. Yet, again, and in every inflection, there is the failure to communicate finally. So the philosopher's resources are exhausted, as that *whatever else* admits. Every term gestures in the direction of the naming of the meaning of being while at the same time pointing us in another direction, in other directions that might be seen simultaneously as either towards or away from that which resists identification; hence orientation as disorientation in the very act of perception itself.

Thus, we might say that the philosopher becomes impatient in the face of the other's obstinacy, in coming face to face with the iterable *ostinato* of being. The basis for reiteration, the *ostinato* informs being as the rhythmic pulse of being. Yet even in that affirmation, an affirmation of difference and the difference that is affirmation—*yes, yes*—there is a performative resistance or, perhaps better, obstinacy to becoming fixed. The presentation of being is *obstinate*: it appears, and in appearing appears to gesture both towards and away from itself. It takes a stand (*stare*) towards and against (*Ob*), and this disorienting duplicity announces itself in the undecidability of the prefix (*ob*-) that orients the stance.

It could be argued that the *substance* of being is just this *obstance*. And in this double, and thus undecidable, gesture, being slips away and returns. Circulating endlessly, the *ostinato* of being varies within itself as not-itself, as not-self in the performance of a difference that *differance* makes possible. Moving in a continuous-discontinuous weave that produces the illusion of a ground, of a finite subjectivity—*one is—ostinato* projects the illusion of closure in order to open to another reiteration that announces once more the 'becoming-space of time, and the becoming-time of space'. *Ostinato* therefore forms no true ground at all but a ground only in a perceptual sense, in other words as 'substance' of being. And it is this forming / deforming that informs Kant's remark. For in admitting the inability to name finally the ground, Kant's sentence provides a performative illustration of perceptual motion as that very possibility of its own utterance and articulation. Such performative irony is where *one is* in circularity and where *one returns* in the circularity of being.

#### 3. CORRESPONDENCE (CIRCULATING POSTCARDS)

The *retour* of the poetic.

Two comments in three languages at least concerning where one is (the emphases are added):

| Da                 | There     | Then    |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|
| war ich            | was $I$   | I still |
| noch ganz          | yet whole | Was     |
| whole <sup>8</sup> |           |         |

and:

Il faut redire en altérant le même / One must repeat while altering (it all) the same.

Notwithstanding what Paul Celan has called 'the inalienable complexity of expression', <sup>10</sup> with reference to a certain necessary responsibility that persists in the articulation and attestation of post-holocaust German poetry—and which phrase is applicable to either of the above quotations—we must take responsibility for what appears to be reiterated in the two locations. Despite their different languages, something circulates between the two citations from, respectively, Paul Celan and Michel Deguy. Something of the circularity of being appears here and there, now and then *as if* there were an attempted communication, as if something were passing, were coming to pass, were appearing between the *one* and the *other*, without admitting of any precedence or priority on either hand. If anything at all can be said of what *comes to pass* between both reflections on the subject, of the coming to pass of being as it announces its own passage, then it is undeniably a matter of temporality, and perhaps also tempo. It appears *to be—and as—* a question of tempo because both mediations of being mark time—the time of a being's reflection on itself; and within that, the motion, the *retour* and *ostinato* of the not-self, of an other. The matter of temporality is nothing as such, yet it is everything here. For the self does not reflect on some exterior temporality.

What might come to be seen and read here is that the subject's reflection on itself does not admit of a fall into any vulgar concept of time, thinkable as being external to the subject. 11 Both remarks serve to illustrate the 'originary temporality' of being and with that, the circulation of that temporality, inseparable from being, in a motion 'from time to time, one time into another'. 13 In this, being is read as a 'becoming-temporalization'. This is a 'becoming-temporalization' that always already is, and which, in this paradoxical though nonetheless inescapable and possibly unbearable condition, puts 'itself' invisibly, repeatedly under erasure as the erroneous assumption of its being the sign of where one is—hence the deconstruction of a unity that the Kantian perplexity reveals.

In the case of the second citation from Michel Deguy, time is the time of a necessary repetition as the sign that iterability transfigures any movement into a *now* which is to come and which is irreducible to the *now* of the *one*. In Deguy's apprehension of being, time is both continuous and discontinuous. It is simultaneously the motion of time and two temporal punctuations—*now* and *now* implicit in the acknowledgement of the inescapable iterability that proves singularity. In the case of the first quotation, from Paul Celan, the subject is apprehended, re-membered even; and perhaps mourned also in that apparent nostalgia for an impossible unity that has never taken place, and yet which haunts the language of subjectivity, being, and ontology. The subject is recalled nevertheless, called to and remembered in a single location that is already, irrevocably doubled, split, The division announces itself; it performs itself, from within the single word, and does so spatially—*there* (*da*)—and temporally—*then* (*da*). But this takes place also, always belatedly; it thus reveals the *itself* as subjected to, subject of the experience of *Nachträglichkeit*, that moment of coming to consciousness as an *après-coup*. That simultaneity of space and time undoes itself and remarks itself from within itself.

While Pierre Joris' translation of 'da' as 'then' is certainly reasonable, justifiable even given Celan's repeated use of 'als' earlier in the poem to indicate a prior temporal moment. However, I have chosen 'there' as indicative not only of the temporal but also the spatial dimension of being's reflection on itself. Thus there becomes readable as the merest possibility nostalgia for the notion of a previous unity to identity, which the subsequent spacing and reflection of the 'I' emerges from, and disrupts

irrevocably. *Then* is a time past. *There* on the other hand is both a sign of that moment lost as such; but it is also a sign of the place where that moment has taken place.

There are other troublesome resonances at work in the passage apropos the circularity of being. While 'ganz' obviously means whole, entire, or complete, can also mean 'quite' depending on context. 'Noch', meaning 'yet', 'still', 'just', or 'even', would seem to share a partial semantic resonance with the more occluded trace in 'ganz', and the temporal disturbance inflicted by reflective consciousness on the temporal recognition of being is perhaps signified, however slightly, in 'noch' and its function in particular words such as nochmals (once again), nochgeschäft (option to double) or nochmalig (renewed) indicative of iterability. Finally, the word order in German of the declined verb of being-war Ichevinces a sense of the temporal and spatial placement of an I (hence my emphasis), which arguably, I feel, gets lost in Joris' translation. Celan's German admits of a subject position discrete or quasidiscrete, and therefore discontinuous from, other than the I who recalls its other self to itself. The second of my two quotations is available to different readings, if one risks forcing the translation; which it has to be said is demanded by the line itself. Such an unavoidable forcing of the subject takes place for us to read. In a sense this is what one does within the line itself. Moving on from the reflection on being's becoming-conscious to itself through the example of Kant in the first part of the essay (and yet remaining with it), I wish to turn to the circulation of this becoming-being and being's becoming in its/their always dissymmetrical singular iterability as such disfigured figures are articulated and disarticulated in two poems. It should be stressed at this juncture, this turning point in the circle that we are de-scribing, that the present essay does not amount or aspire to a reading of either of those poems by Celan or Deguy. Rather, both Deguy and Celan are taken to offer felicitous examples of the circulation of being's consciousness to itself in the poems in question, and the significance—to reiterate and extend one of the citations—of the 'interval or the gap, of the trace [of being] as gap [écart], of the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space'.

But to return to Deguy's meditation on being's iterability, its revenant motion of becoming other in the return of becoming itself to itself: *Il faut redire en altérant le meme*. Key to this forcing is the phrase 'en altérant'. Both the work of the preposition and the various meanings of the verb must be taken into account. Take en. One must repeat when altering the same. One must repeat in altering the same. One must repeat with altering the same. This of course leaves out any acknowledgement of where a particular pressure arises, in that one, in must, in one must. As for altérer—to impair, to affect, to spoil, to mar, to alter, to change, to fade, to distort, to falsify, to adulterate. There is an alarming alterity to altérer. The condition of transformation or translation is intricately interwoven in a matrix of possibilities to do with the circulation and circularity of the one, of the ways in which it folds back on itself in coming to a consciousness of itself, but only in that structural condition of distorting and change, of alteration and falsification.

At the same time, as Deguy's phrase admits in the copula of the preposition, *One* not only repeats *in* altering (or falsifying, or distorting, and so on) the same; one also speaks again; *one* reiterates itself in itself and from itself, as both itself and not-itself, as the simultaneous trace of self and other within the repetition that one names, thereby giving the lie to unity, ontology, and a subjectivity undifferentiated either spatially or temporally. Taking this further, as the line already does, it is to be observed that one arrives and comes to speak once more (*re-dire*) when and where one alters, where the alterity of *one* arrives in the re-speaking that is repetition as reiteration. One thereby announces, as we have already indicated, the *itara*, the other, within the circling enunciation of consciousness to itself

as not-itself in naming it-self. And this despite the apparent in-difference that is assumed, silently evinced in that figure (all) the same.

However naïvely, or however one assumes the posture or performance of a strategic naïvety for the purposes of opening the circularity of being's articulation to itself, as this is dictated and marked by its own necessary difference in its articulation and repetition, it might be asked, even parenthetically—as if the very question would not bear the weight of the inquiry it demands—'comment l'un «traduiraib-il l'autre?" / 'how could the one "translate" the other?'. ¹⁴ Something is missing in the given translation, the appended reflexive subject, that 'it', possibly 'itself', so that allowing this silent graphic mark to return, one would be given to read: how would one translate it-/one-self the other? Clearly I am once again forcing the translation, to open the problem of recirculation and retour, to bring into plain sight the frustration of an impossible communication that takes place, and which, in taking place, gives place to being.

All of which is unravelled and wound, folded and unfolded, over and under, in this, the last citation from Michel Deguy, this time the poem *Catachréses*. <sup>15</sup>

Retournant l'endroit et l'envers, tournant à l'endroit l'envers: ce qu'il attend n'est pas là—visiblement: ce qui n'est pas, ni l'endroit ni l'envers.

First Wilson Baldridge's translation, then my own:

Turning outside to inside over and over, turning the inside out: what he is waiting for is not there—visibly; that which is not, neither the outside nor the inside.

Returning, turning again, the right side wrong side, turning (towards) the outside inside: that's what he's waiting for, what is not there—visibly: that which is not, neither right nor wrong, out nor inside.

I have, once again, forced open the translation here quite unreasonably. I have risked this however, in order to stress, to enflame and irritate the catachreses of circulation and iterability, being here being shown to be neither absolutely continuous nor discontinuous, and yet an uneasy and paradoxical interweaving of the continuity and discontinuity. At the same time, what also comes to light here is the sense of circulation as not merely a matter of a relatively straightforward or 'progressive' temporality, however much traces might remain in play, however 'overdetermined' by the ghosts of one's past selves one's present self reveals itself to be. What we see here at play in Deguy's Moebiusmatrix is a circulation of apparent surfaces. In this play is the appearance of that which is not—not nothing exactly, even though it is not something, not the absence of some thing; and which there for in not being either something or nothing is not nothing. This is what is not there—visibly: being, circling around and returning, appearing / disappearing in the very gesture of turning outside inside and turning inside outside.

## 4. CIRCULAR TOPOS

A circle is round, it is a round; but a round is not necessarily circular, at least not simply. As with the idea of a musical ground, for example the *ostinato*, the round, the idea of a round, announces series and sequence, and also cycle. The circular thus opens out from within its own structure, moving beyond its apparent closure or foreclosure. It does so via a succession, chain, or cycle of gestures that, while appearing to mimic that seemingly closed, 'first' figure, remain the same and yet move on, in the enactment of 'the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space' of being's being. So: the round as the insistence on the impossibility of the stability of any ground. Ground is placed under erasure in that gesture of mapping that takes place. What goes around comes around. As Rimbaud knew, and wrote repeatedly, 'I is an other'. <sup>16</sup>

There is both a luminous obscurity and an obscure luminosity to this phrase. For as much as it has been read or not read at all, misread. It announces with perfect economy the abyssal topography of a being, which always where it is, is nevertheless nowhere as such, other than in spatio-temporal différance that one can glimpse as having always already been shadowed in those motion-signs of becoming and between. Thus one always becomes other again and again, and this takes place, to reiterate the point, where one is. This is where one is in circularity, in the question of circularity. One is placed, one takes place, in the staging and framing that circularity de-scribes, in the (ana)logic of which all surface and depth, exteriority and interiority, originary ground and the myth of temporal fixity give way. Or, rather say, give place in the limiting-delimiting of the inherence of being's circular recursive revenance. I am never myself, as such, but neither am I the transcendent possibility of past moments of I that I might recall when I was, yet whole, quite complete. Supposedly. If every 'being-there is a being-in', 'I' where one is is always traced by, even as it enacts, both the poetics and 'logic of immanence'. I's I comes to be disclosed as an other, as every other and wholly other, as I is simultaneously placed and displaced in the taking place of this immanent othering, this radical ecstasis one names being.

This is what a poetics of being discloses, what it reveals as it suspends the intuitive and steps momentarily 'outside *one*'s ordinary mode of seeing' (emphasis added), <sup>19</sup> as is glimpsed in Rimbaud, in Celan, in Deguy, and doubtless in many other poetic locations. Poetic modes of staging being as the performance of a simultaneous 'disorientation and clarity'<sup>20</sup> admit the phenomenal contingency of that reflective apperception of being as *where one is*; but such staging is never merely a commentary upon the experience of being. It is the very trace of being returning, always in other words, as the attestation of the unbearable circulation of being that the literary makes possible. This is where one is in circularity in the circularity, the circulation that is named variously the literary or the poetic, before and beyond, circling around any merely philosophical logic, and exceeding that logic repeatedly. This is where one is. And this is where one begins in circularity. Again and again.

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1 Immanuel Kant, Opus Postumum, ed. and int. Eckart Förster, trans. Eckart Förster and Michael Rosen

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 200.

- 2 Kant, Opus Postumum, 213.
- 3 Immanuel Kant, 'What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?' in *Kant, Religion and Rational Theology*, trans and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-18.
- 4 Kant, 'What does it mean', 9; emphasis added.
- 5 Kant, 'What does it mean', 9.
- 6 Kant, 'What does it mean', 15.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, Rogues: Two Essays on Reason, (2003) trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 38.
- 8 Paul Celan, 'Als wenn das Weisse anfiel' / 'When whiteness assailed us', in *Breathturn*, (1967) trans. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), 111 /112. The first page number refers to the poem in German, the second to the facing English translation. Of the three 'versions' of the citation, the second is my translation, the third that of Pierre Joris.
- 9 Michel Deguy, 'Recumbants', in *Recumbants: Poems*, (1985) with 'How to Name' by Jacques Derrida, trans Wilson Baldridge (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 84/85. (The first page number refers to the poem in French, the second to the facing English translation. All further references will be given parenthetically in this way.)
- 10 Paul Celan, 'Reply to a Questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore, Paris, 1958', in *Collected Prose*, (1983, 1986) trans. and int. Rosemarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15-16; 16.
- 11 On the vulgar concept of time, see Derrida's explication of the notion of 'spirit' in Heidegger contra Hegel in *Of Spirit*, (1987) trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 23-30.
- 12 Derrida, Of Spirit, 27.
- 13 Derrida, Of Spirit, 28.
- 14 Deguy, Recumbants, 108/109.
- 15 Deguy, Recumbants, 102/103.
- 16 Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations and Other Prose Poems*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1957), xxvii, xxix. In Varèse' translation, 'Je est un autre' is given as 'I is someone else'.
- 17 Jean-Yves Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man, (1994) trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 9.
- 18 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 10.
- 19 Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language: Toward a New Poetics of Dasein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 238.
- 20 Gosetti-Ferencei, Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language, 241.