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## Reduction in Time

**Kinaesthetic and Traumatic Experiences of the Present in Literary Texts**

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**ABSTRACT:** The chapter explores the dimension of the living present as a form of temporal reduction, looking at its manifestation in literary texts. Bazzoni proposes here a focus on the living present as different from a still, eternal moment, and contrasts the experience of the living present with the reduction at play in trauma. Finally, the author discusses the affective, ethical, and political dimensions of the temporality of the living present as a site of subjectivation, which effects a counter-reduction of normative discourses.

**KEYWORDS:** Temporality; Living present; Trauma; Literature; Epochē; Becoming (Philosophy); Affect

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# Reduction in Time

## Kinaesthetic and Traumatic Experiences of the Present in Literary Texts

ALBERICA BAZZONI

### 1. TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF THE LIVING PRESENT

The living present is the home of temporality. It is a perceptive, cognitive, and affective disposition of the self, a kinaesthetic awareness of the flowing of life. In the living present, the self is the propulsive force on the edge of its own becoming. The living present is the constantly renewed discovery of the becoming of being.

In this chapter, I investigate the dimension of the living present as a form of temporal reduction, looking at its manifestation in literary texts. How is a temporal experience accessed and represented in language? What are the affordances of literary texts in relation to the living present? What does an aesthetic of the living present reveal about the culture and politics of a specific text and its context? First, I propose here a focus on the living present as different from an understanding of the present as a still moment that coincides with eternity, an instant outside of time, which is dominant in aesthetic reflections on temporality in literature. Second, I correlate the reduction at play in the experience of the living present to the reduction at play in trauma and begin to articulate the relationship between the two. In the final part,

I discuss the affective, ethical, and political dimensions of the temporality of the living present as a site of subjectivation, which effects a counter-reduction of normative discourses. Overall, I sketch here the coordinates of an aesthetic of the living present in literary texts, outlining the essential questions and variables regarding its configuration, its relationship with experience, and its philosophical and political implications. Such an aesthetic of the living present can serve to interrogate other texts, as a key lens to draw out the different relationships to the temporality, embodiment, and subjectivity they inhabit and exhibit.

In focusing on temporality, I frame reduction not as an idealistic method, a logical-epistemological device, a conceptual operation — such as when a theory is reduced to a more fundamental theory, or when inhomogeneous multiplicity is reduced to a coherent taxonomy/category/pattern/norm — but chiefly as an experiential practice: reduction as an experience of concentration in the present. From a phenomenological perspective, the constitution of temporality lies at the core of the constitution of experience — that is, the constitution of subjectivity in the co-constitutive encounter between self and world. Reduction — what Edmund Husserl defines as *epochē* or ‘bracketing’ — is that performative approach which seeks to grasp and express the embodied and emplaced experience of the world, which is essentially temporal.<sup>1</sup> As Francisco Varela explains in his essay ‘Present-Time Consciousness’, which brings together phenomenological, cognitive, and neurological studies, in ‘any true phenomenological study, the exploration of time involves the gesture of reduction.’<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the living present is an exercise in reduction to the irreducible, the material and libidinal core of the self, the founding encounter with the world through sensation, the primary vital impulses before and beyond their organization into a coherent narrative of memory and projection, and before and beyond the constitutive effect of power on subjects.

A focus on the living present is congruent with multiple yet inter-related traditions of philosophical thought that, distinguished from the metaphysical and phallogocentric perspective predominant in modern

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1 Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, trans. by Nancy M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

2 Francisco Varela, ‘Present-Time Consciousness’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6.2–3 (1999), pp. 111–40 (p. 112).

Western philosophy, have maintained a keen interest in the embodied, historical, and affective dimensions of existence, and that extend from Baruch Spinoza to Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl, continue into the theorizations of the body, experience, and subjectivity developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, and arrive at the feminist, neomaterialist, and posthuman perspectives of Rosi Braidotti and Donna J. Haraway — among many others.<sup>3</sup> In dialogue with, and in response to, the linguistic paradigm of deconstruction, these strands of thought place embodied experience at the centre of a redefinition of subjectivity, agency, and political struggle through the nourishment of desire and openness to change that pertain to the dimension of the living present.

The *hic et nunc* of the living present is defined primarily as a kinaesthetic experience — that is, a sensory awareness of embodiment and movement. Bergson, who plays a crucial role in the investigation of the lived experience of time, describes the experience of the present, the duration of time in its development, as a musical sequence of sounds, a continuous flow with no clearly demarcated beginnings and ends.<sup>4</sup> Similarly to Bergson's understanding of consciousness as duration through 'attention to life',<sup>5</sup> the practice of meditation follows the flow of inhale and exhale breathing to concentrate on the flowing present.<sup>6</sup> The experience of the present of a kinaesthetic body is what is found at the end of a phenomenological reduction, its precious discovery and its limit. Cognitive studies on the embodied mind by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Antonio Damasio, and Varela point in the same direction.<sup>7</sup> In Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytical perspec-

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3 In tracing the multiple developments of this philosophical perspective, I am following Rosi Braidotti's own formulation in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

4 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications, 2012).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

6 See Tullio Giraldi, *Psychotherapy, Mindfulness and Buddhist Meditation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

7 See Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994).

tive, the living body is the home of the 'true Self', the experience of a 'spontaneous impulse' and the expression of a 'spontaneous gesture'.<sup>8</sup>

What is reduced in the present, and how is this temporal reduction configured? In the living present, there is a reduction of temporal dimensions of memory and projection. In simple words, attention focuses on a reduced temporal dimension, which approximates the experience of the present in its constant flowing. Other temporal dimensions, consisting of retention of the past and protention towards the future, are always active within the present perception itself, as perception is already shaped by previous experiences (including how our senses have been trained and used before) and sustained by anticipation of what is to come. However, attention can be modulated to reduce the timespan on which it focuses and its direction, so that the longer arc of memory (past) and projection (future) recedes to the background and is only relevant insofar as it is contained within the present, which takes centre stage. Reduction to the present is a matter of attention: an intensified experience of the present comes to the foreground temporarily, and within a certain frame, revealing itself as the site of the embodied encounter with the world.

Varela analyses extensively the constitution of temporality in the present, bringing together a phenomenological frame and cognitive neurological studies. He writes:

There is always a centre, the now moment. [...] This centre is bounded by a horizon or fringe that is already past (I still hold the beginning of the sentence I just wrote) and it projects towards an intended next moment. [...] These horizons are *mobile*: this very moment which was present (and hence was not merely described, but lived as such) slips towards an immediately past present. Then it plunges further out of view. [...] This moment of consciousness is inseparable from a flow. [...] Consciousness does not contain time [...]. Instead, temporal consciousness itself constitutes an ultimate substrate of consciousness where no further reduction can be accomplished.<sup>9</sup>

Varela stresses the mobile horizon of constitution of the present and the centrality of temporal consciousness in the constitution of sub-

8 Donald W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965), p. 145.

9 Varela, 'Present-Time Consciousness', p. 113.

jectivity itself. The perceptive and affective unit of the body is able to last, that is, in Bergson's words, it is at the centre of an experience of duration. The flow of temporality has in the kinaesthetic present its point of encounter between the body and the world, and between past experiences and the yet unknown future.

When we reduce time to the living present, what does this type of reduction create space for? What energy and what affective disposition emerge from such a reduction? A related set of questions concerns how reduction to the present occurs, what 'the mode of access to the experience itself' is.<sup>10</sup> While the living present is experienced as a continuous flux, it only comes to the foreground intermittently. It is not part of the human experience to live continuously immersed in an unproblematic concentration in the present and sensorial enjoyment, for such a condition is not given in a continuum, nor is it given always in the same shape. Memory, projections, and overlapping temporal layers all interweave within the subject's experience of time, creating a discontinuous relationship with the present. An intensified experience of the living present can occur in different ways — through an intentional exercise, an individually or collectively ritualized practice, or as an emerging event, as the insurgence of sudden vitality. In fact, the practice of attention to the present itself opens up spaces for the emergence of the unknown to be heard and for vital energy to be mobilized. In the experience of the kinaesthetic present, there is a movement of expansion and intensification of the self.

When literary studies engage with the experience of the present, or philosophical studies draw on literary texts to reflect on the present, it is predominantly described in terms of a static experience, a fixed instant outside of time that coincides with eternity. I am interested instead in the experience of the moving of time in its happening, contingency, and embodiment. In other words, I am drawing a precise temporal distinction between concentration on the kinaesthetic present (embodied, flowing) and on the static present (disembodied, instant outside of time), the latter representing the atemporality of metaphysics. Here I foreground the notion of 'becoming', which em-

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10 Ibid., p. 115.

phasizes processes, that is ‘mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical modes.’<sup>11</sup>

In drawing this distinction, I am in conversation with a body of philosophical work that seeks to re-shape the concept of presence. While the notion of ‘presence’ critiqued by Jacques Derrida refers to ‘the fullness and permanence of the origin, the end or final purpose, speech, mind, and being’, and is intrinsically logocentric and metaphysical, outside of the linguistic paradigm within which Derrida operates there opens a space for a radically different — and radically anti-metaphysical — understanding of presence.<sup>12</sup> In Braidotti’s formulation, ‘[a]s models to account for the kind of subjects we have already become, representational thinking and the linguistic turn are outdated. I opt here instead for a neomaterialist, embodied, embedded approach.’<sup>13</sup> In this view, the living present is the temporality which discloses ‘our nonhermeneutic apprehension of the world in all its sensuous materiality.’<sup>14</sup> ‘The present of “presence” is a place of experience and unmediated contact with material things freed from the ambivalence and multiplicity of recollection, interpretation, and narration.’<sup>15</sup>

The distinction between living and static present works to undo the conflation of metaphysical instantaneity-eternity and anti-metaphysical embodied experience, which largely dominates studies on the present in literary works (and not only literary works). As temporal discontinuity has heightened with the advent of modernity, modernist writers such as Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Luigi Pirandello have brought a reflection on time and subjectivity to the fore. Epiphanies, revelatory instants beyond meaning, ‘archaic mimesis’ irrupt in narrative and poetic discourse.<sup>16</sup> Yet, such an in-

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11 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 2.

12 Vincent P. Pecora, ‘Be Here Now: Mimesis and the History of Representation’, in *Presence: Philosophy, History and Cultural Theory for the 21st Century*, ed. by Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 26–44 (p. 27).

13 Rosi Braidotti, ‘The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe’, in *Bits of Life: Feminisms at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*, ed. by Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), pp. 177–95 (p. 182).

14 Pecora, ‘Be Here Now’, p. 40.

15 Ethan Kleinberg, ‘Presence in *Absentia*’, in Ghosh and Kleinberg, *Presence*, pp. 8–25 (p. 10).

16 Pecora, ‘Be Here Now’, p. 31. Pecora refers here to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the poetic.

tensified awareness of temporality and the emergence of ‘present moments’ can take up entirely different meanings depending on whether they are configured as a metaphysical instantaneity outside of time, on the one hand, or as the awareness of the constant becoming of an embodied being, prior to conceptualization and signification, on the other. Postmodernism has inherited an awareness of temporal discontinuity, further widening the rupture between signification and material ontology and neglecting the present as the temporality of the flowing of life.

However, from the nineteenth century to today, writers have engaged with an exploration of the kinaesthetic experience of the present, both representing it in texts and performing it through texts.<sup>17</sup> In the Italian context, in the works of a precursor of modernism such as Giacomo Leopardi and in those of full modernists Pirandello and Giuseppe Ungaretti, vitalistic drives, bodily presence, primary interactions with others, and nature coexist and contend with representations of the discontinuity and unattainability of presence. In the course of the twentieth century, it is especially women writers, such as Elsa Morante, Anna Maria Ortese, Goliarda Sapienza, and Fabrizia Ramondino, who delve into the dimension of the living present, using the text to deconstruct normative discourses and foster agency by expressing sensorial experiences, vitalistic impulses — including the erotic — and empathetic relationships with others and the environment. The distinction between the static present and the kinaesthetic present serves to disclose different poetics at work in different texts, shedding light on their conception of temporality and, through temporality, on embodiment and becoming.

The kinaesthetic present as the becoming of life in its happening can be contrasted with the entrapped temporality of trauma. To focus on the living present and to be stuck in the present are, in fact, in a rela-

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17 Of course, temporality has always been an intrinsic element of literary expression as much as philosophical reflection. In ‘Declensions of “Now”’, for example, Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden analyse poems from the Middle Ages from a perspective that, although it does not resort to the vocabulary of the living present, is very much congruent with its conceptual ground. See Gragnolati and Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), chapter 4: ‘Declensions of “Now”’: Lyric Epiphanies in Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarca’, pp. 85–108 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-18\\_04](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-18_04)>.

tionship of mutual tension, as one state can morph into the other, the dynamic flux of perceptions always at risk of stumbling into overlaps, disjoints, and iterations. Phenomenological studies on the temporality of trauma point out the ways in which trauma impacts on the primary experience of time. In 'Telling Time: Literature, Temporality and Trauma,' Wendy O'Brien observes:

One of the most common qualities evidenced in trauma narratives is reference to the distortion of time. Time comes undone when experience makes clear [...] one's own death. [...] There is a collapse of all those psychological principles of organization that we rely on in order to structure experience.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of trauma on temporality affects our very cognitive structures, as it creates a breach to 'the cornerstones of lived experience: perception, the body, memory, birth and death, culture.' It fundamentally disrupts 'perception of such basic phenomena as space (distance), identity and time.'<sup>19</sup> In traumatized temporality, the continuous flow of time is interrupted, and so are space and identity. The subject is no longer working as a cognitive emplaced unit that brings together perceptions, as described by Varela; instead, multiple dimensions fragment the subject herself.

In her fundamental reflections on the temporality of trauma and narrative, developed in *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth identifies the specific nexus between trauma and time, characterized by inescapable iterations.<sup>20</sup> If the flow of temporality is what allows for a narrative to develop and thereby make change possible, its interruption traps subjects in an overwhelming paralysis. Caruth describes the stuck temporality of trauma as 'the encounter with death' and 'the ongoing experience of having survived it.'<sup>21</sup> As time stops flowing, the vital process of becoming turns into entrapped iteration, the present turns into the iterative re-enactment of the past, and the future is pre-empted

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18 Wendy O'Brien, 'Telling Time: Literature, Temporality and Trauma,' in *Temporality in Life as Seen through Literature*, ed. by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (= *Analecta Husserliana*, 86 (2007)), pp. 209–21 (p. 209).

19 Ibid., p. 210.

20 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

21 Ibid., p. 7.

of any futurity. The present is taken over by an *over-presence* of other temporal-spatial dimensions that paralyse the subject. In trauma, it is the present that is reduced.

As the living present is the core, unmediated experience of temporality in its unfolding, how can language convey such an experience? How can embodiment be performed in and through language? O'Brien asks a similar question in relation to trauma narratives: '[h]ow can trauma be written? In giving words to trauma and its after effects, aren't all those aspects of such overwhelming encounters with unmediated life lost? The very act of writing requires one to structure and temporalize events.'<sup>22</sup> If writing arguably requires structure and temporalization, the way in which literary texts do it provides a different answer to this question, one that has less to do with representing experience than with performing it.

Literary texts, with their sophisticated organization of spatio-temporal coordinates, offer revealing insights into the human experience of time. They represent a variety of 'modes of access' to the experience of the present, both in their content and in their function. When looking at a text, we can interrogate specifically what means it employs to express kinaesthetic and traumatized experiences of the present, including its imagery, its manipulation of tenses and deictics, its construction of narrative and rhythmic patterns, its configuration of the speaking or narrating voice. Literary texts enable us to approach language and the question of representation from a different perspective, which does not limit language to its semantic function as a relationship between signifier and signified.

Literary texts are particularly suited to bring the non-representational dimension of language to the fore, *performing* temporalization. Phenomenology, with its focus on embodiment, provides insightful tools to understand the ways in which literary texts bridge the allegedly insurmountable gap between signified and signifier, between world and language. As Jean-Claude Coquet — a French linguist of phenomenological orientation — remarks, the linguistic 'I' is always and primarily a body, as written language is not disassociated from the corporeal dimension of oral speech: 'The body takes part as much in

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22 O'Brien, 'Telling Time', p. 211.

reading as in writing. [...] Therefore, writing is inseparable from the voice.<sup>23</sup> In the performative aspect of enunciation, language maintains a close relationship with somatic experience, through projective modalities that highlight continuity over alterity: ‘there is no discontinuity between the event, the experience of the event [...] and the expression of the event. They complement each other.’<sup>24</sup> In this way, the textual performance of an experience of temporality expresses the very constitution of the self — and its disruption — as essentially temporal.

## 2. HERE AND NOW, EVERYWHERE AND ALL THE TIME, AGAIN AND AGAIN

Having outlined the theoretical and methodological coordinates of an aesthetic of the living present, let us look at some examples of temporal experiences in literary texts.

### ‘L’infinito’

Sempre caro mi fu quest’ermo colle,  
e questa siepe, che da tanta parte  
dell’ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.  
Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati  
spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani  
silenzi, e profondissima quiete  
io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco  
il cor non si spaura. E come il vento  
odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello  
infinito silenzio a questa voce  
vo comparando: e mi sovvien l’eterno,  
e le morte stagioni, e la presente  
e viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa  
immensità s’annega il pensier mio:  
e il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare.<sup>25</sup>

23 Jean-Claude Coquet, *Le istanze enuncianti. Fenomenologia e semiotica*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), p. 68. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian are mine.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

25 Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), p. 112

(‘Infinity’

This lonely hill was always dear to me,  
 and this hedgerow, which cuts off the view  
 of so much of the last horizon.  
 But sitting here and gazing, I can see  
 beyond, in my mind’s eye, unending spaces,  
 and superhuman silences, and depthless calm,  
 till what I feel  
 is almost fear. And when I hear  
 the wind stir in these branches, I begin  
 comparing that endless stillness with this noise:  
 and the eternal comes to mind,  
 and the dead seasons, and the present  
 living one, and how it sounds.  
 So my mind sinks in this immensity:  
 and foundering is sweet in such a sea.)<sup>26</sup>

Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), poet, philosopher, narrator, erudite, is attracting renewed interest (also outside of the Italian context) for the compelling way in which he speaks to contemporary questions, and specifically for his original understanding of the embodied mind, his radically materialist thought, and his post-anthropocentric view of a shared materiality among nature, humans, and nonhumans.<sup>27</sup> Leopardi’s ‘L’infinito’ (Infinity) is arguably one of the most known and studied poems in the Italian literary tradition. In this context, I look at it as an extremely rich and dynamic figuration of the living present.

The first element I want to draw attention to in this poem is the image of the hedgerow, which contains the poet’s experience as it limits the view: ‘da tanta parte | dell’ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude’ (cuts off the view | of so much of the last horizon). The hedgerow works effectively as an image of *reduction*: it performs an *epochē*, which ‘brackets’ the view outside and concentrates the poet’s attention on the experience taking place within the frame.

26 Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. by Jonathan Galassi (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 107.

27 See *Mapping Leopardi: Poetic and Philosophical Intersections*, ed. by Emanuela Cervato, Mark Epstein, Giulia Santi, and Simona Wright (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019). See also the recent English translation of *Zibaldone*, ed. by Michael Caesar and Franco D’Intino, trans. by Kathleen Baldwin and others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), which provides an invaluable tool for making Leopardi’s philosophical work accessible to the English-speaking world.

Having set this bounded frame of experience, the poem sets into motion a dynamic relationship between the emplaced and embodied temporality of the experience in the present, and the imagination of other spaces and time. 'L'infinito' is generally interpreted by focusing on the dimension of infinity and eternity evoked by the poetic voice beyond the boundary of the hedgerow, which moves the poet's imagination because of its sensorial absence, its unattainability. The development of the poem however also elicits a focus on the *here* and *now* of the poet's experience, which is rooted in the living present. Through the frame provided by the hedgerow and then the sound of the branches, the poet's experience is anchored to its present centre. Acting as a powerfully perceptive and embodied unit, the poet inhabits temporality as much as he is inhabited by it. The expansive and intensified dimension of the living present enabled by reduction contains within itself the other temporal dimensions, which 'sovengono' (come to mind) to the poet:<sup>28</sup> 'l'eterno' (the eternal), 'le morte stagioni' (the dead seasons), and 'la presente e viva' (the present | living one). The living present is here the embodied awareness of temporality. And it is in the very awareness of temporality — 'questa immensità' (this immensity), 'questo mare' (such a sea) — rather than in the absent and silent immensity beyond the reach of the senses that the poetic voice sweetly 'naufrega' (founders).<sup>29</sup>

In this temporal experience, the senses play a crucial role. In particular, the poem showcases the centrality of sound in the dimension of the living present: 'E come il vento | *odo stormir* tra queste piante, io quello | infinito silenzio a questa *voce* | vo comparando [...] e la presente | e viva, e il *suon* di lei' (And when I *hear* | the wind *stir* in these branches, I begin | comparing that endless stillness with this | *noise* [...] and the present | living one, and how it *sounds*). The poet's experience of the present is described through sound, an experience in listening to nature; significantly, the sound of the wind is

28 The verb 'sovengono', unlike the translation 'come to mind', does not imply a mental activity, and can be interpreted as describing a movement of emergence to awareness, a presentification to the self.

29 Here the translated version, 'such a sea', is more ambiguous; 'questo mare' literally means 'this sea' (and not 'that sea'), continuing the contrast between 'quello infinito silenzio' ('that endless stillness'; literally 'that infinite silence') and 'questa voce' ('this noise'; literally 'this voice') established earlier in the poem.

described as a voice, ‘voce’, thus reinforcing the shared dimension and interpenetration of human and non-human. In her philosophy of the voice, Adriana Cavarero mobilizes sound in an anti-metaphysical perspective, highlighting its embodied, contingent, and flowing feature: ‘Sounds are not perceived simultaneously but in succession. It is this characteristic that prevents hearing from becoming the foundation of an unlikely acoustic metaphysics.’<sup>30</sup> The sound of the voice manifests ‘the empirical contingency of the context’ and it ‘evokes a discontinuous becoming, characterized by the constantly renovated present of the “nows”’.<sup>31</sup> Similarly to Bergson, who resorts to the metaphor of a musical sequence in order to describe the constitution of temporality as duration, Leopardi expresses his intensified temporal awareness in the present in terms of sound, the auscultation of the voice of nature, pointing to a materialist and anti-metaphysical perspective.

Finally, a consideration on the structure of ‘L’infinito’. The poem features mostly a paratactic structure, with sentences and syntagms following one another in a continuous flow: ‘interminati | spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani | silenzi, e profondissima quiete’ (unending spaces, | *and* superhuman silences, *and* depthless | calm); and again, in the second part: ‘e mi sovvien l’eterno, | e le morte stagioni, e la presente | e viva, e il suon di lei’ (*and* the eternal comes to mind, | *and* the dead seasons, *and* the present | living one, *and* how it sounds). The paratactic flow is reinforced by the use of repetition and variation, including the use of the same terms — silenzio, questo, pensiero (silence, this, mind) — and of a web of semantically cohesive terms — infinito, immensità, interminati, sovrumani, profondissima (infinity, immensity, endless, superhuman, depthless), which alternate with specific elements from the natural world — colle, siepe, vento, piante, mare (hill, hedgerow, wind, branches, sea). Through repetition, variation, and parataxis the poem creates a dynamic rhythm that performs the flowing of the temporal experience it represents, ending on the image of the sea — unbounded and relentlessly becoming.

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30 Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Filosofia dell’espressione vocale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), p. 49.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

The image of the sea and the sensorial interconnection with the natural elements is also central in the following two passages, this time from narrative texts, respectively by Ippolito Nievo and Goliarda Sapienza, which describe moments of intensified awareness of embodied presence. Ippolito Nievo (1831–1861) is a Mazzinian revolutionary who died at thirty-one shortly after fighting in Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand. *Le confessioni d'un italiano* (*Confessions of an Italian*) is a long historical novel tracing the development of the Italian Unification, but it is also a coming-of-age novel characterized by contradictions and digressions, rich in moments of spontaneous vitality and strong sensations which delineate a radical and materialist ethics.

Oh la vita dell'universo nella solitudine è lo spettacolo più sublime, più indescrivibile che ferisca l'occhio dell'uomo! Perciò ammiriamo il mare nella sua eterna battaglia, il cielo né suoi tempestosi annuvolamenti, la notte né suoi fecondi silenzi, nelle sue estive fosforescenze. È una vita che si sente e sembra comunicare a noi il sentimento di un'esistenza più vasta più completa dell'umana. Allora non siamo più i critici e i legislatori, ma gli occhi, gli orecchi, i pensieri del mondo; l'intelligenza non è più un tutto, ma una parte; l'uomo non pretende più di comprendere e di dominar l'universo, ma sente, palpita, respira con esso.<sup>32</sup>

(Oh yes, the life of the universe experienced in solitude is a majestic spectacle beyond all words! That is why we admire the sea in its eternal battles; the sky with its tempestuous array of clouds; the night in its fecund silences and in its summer luminescence. All this life makes us feel the presence of some existence vaster and deeper than our own. It means we human beings are no longer the critics and the lawmakers, but the eyes, the ears and the thoughts of the world; intelligence is no longer all, but a part; man no longer thinks he can understand and dominate the universe, but feels, palpitates and breathes with it.)<sup>33</sup>

The young protagonist's discovery of the sea narrated in this passage exemplifies one of these moments, 'redemptive moments of release

32 Ippolito Nievo, *Le confessioni d'un italiano* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), p. 417.

33 Ippolito Nievo, *Confessions of an Italian*, trans. by Frederika Randall (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 346.

from the Cartesian worldview that dominates modernity', where the ideological orientation of narration is put aside, and the protagonist finds himself immersed in the experience of the living present.<sup>34</sup>

Goliarda Sapienza (1924–1996) is a Sicilian queer radical writer and actress, increasingly regarded as one of the most original voices in twentieth-century Italy. Her major novel, *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*), is also a combination of historical narrative and coming-of-age novel — Nievo actually being one of its literary models. Informed by an anarchist and Epicurean outlook, it tells the story of Modesta, born on the first day of 1900, and her pursuit of 'the art of joy' — the rejection of any normative imposition, the auscultation of the self, and the free enjoyment of the senses.

Ora solo una pace profonda invade il suo corpo maturo a ogni emozione della pelle, delle vene, delle giunture. Corpo padrone di se stesso, reso sapiente dall'intelligenza della carne. Intelligenza profonda della materia ... del tatto, dello sguardo, del palato. Riversa sullo scoglio, Modesta osserva come i suoi sensi maturati possano contenere senza fragili paure d'infanzia tutto l'azzurro, il vento, la distanza. Stupita, scopre il significato dell'arte che il suo corpo s'è conquistato in quel lungo, breve tragitto dei suoi cinquant'anni. È come una seconda giovinezza, ma con in più la coscienza precisa d'essere giovani, la coscienza del come godere, toccare, guardare.<sup>35</sup>

(Now, only a profound peace invades her mature body at each sensation of her skin, veins, joints. A body that is its own master, made wise by an understanding of the flesh. A profound awareness ... of touch, sight, taste. Lying on her back on the rocky ledge, Modesta observes how her developed senses can take in the entire blue expanse, the wind, the distance, without the fragile fears of childhood. Astonished, she discovers the meaning of the skill her body has acquired during the long, brief course of her fifty years. It's like a second childhood, but with a precise awareness of being young, an appreciation of how to touch, see, enjoy.)<sup>36</sup>

34 Pecora, 'Be Here Now', p. 41.

35 Goliarda Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), pp. 482–83.

36 Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, trans. by Anne Milano Appel (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 634.

In this passage, Modesta pauses to enjoy intensified sensations of aliveness — joy, characterized by the possibility to contain within herself the vastness of the sky, the wind, the horizon, entering into a resonant relationship with the environment without fear and without control, for the experience is both the result of a practice, the art of joy, and an always renovated surprise. Abandoning herself to the pleasure of the senses and the enjoyment of her body constitutes Modesta's achievement in the novel. This achieved freedom, however, does not coincide with a final and crystallized form of identity; rather, it is a profound awareness of temporality, where the living present functions as the heightened awareness of the temporal — embodied and mutable — constitution of the self: Maturity is a second childhood, an ongoing process of becoming. In both Nievo's and Sapienza's novels, passages such as these make explicit the materialist horizon that informs their works, as the experiences they represent encapsulate the protagonists' approach to existence, an approach that is performatively reflected in syncretic, dynamic, and non-teleological narrative structures.<sup>37</sup>

We can now contrast these figurations of the temporality of the living present with representations of traumatized time. The experience of trauma, an extreme awareness of vulnerability, causes an interruption in the flow of temporality. Trust that the next moment will come is suspended, the chain of memory and anticipation is disrupted, the dimension of the past irrupts and overlaps with the present, emptying it of its regenerative potential. While in the living present the subject is at the centre of perceptions, memory, and projections, interacting with the world as an embodied and emplaced unit with duration, trauma can impact on the cognitive ability to organize space and time. Experiences of traumatized temporality are pervasively present in writings by oppressed subjects, who are exposed both to intense forms of violence and to the cognitive dissonance deriving from the naturalization or mystification of the violence they undergo in dominant discourses.

Elena Ferrante's short novel *I giorni dell'abbandono* (*The Days of Abandonment*) centres on the loss of cognition, the disorienta-

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37 On the performative relationship between narrative structure and materialist ethical worldview in *Le confessioni d'un italiano* and *L'arte della gioia*, see Alberica Bazzoni, 'Nievo's Pisana and Sapienza's Modesta: Female Heroism as a Challenge to Gendered Configurations of the Nation', *The Italianist*, 39.3 (2019), pp. 332–46.

tion, the spatial and temporal entrapment experienced by a woman, Olga, whose husband's sudden abandonment triggers in her previous wounds.<sup>38</sup> While in the living present the frame — the performance of a reduction — concentrates attention by holding the experience, in *I giorni dell'abbandono* the protagonist is trapped in her apartment: an inexplicably locked door stops time from flowing, ghosts from the past invade the rooms, the body is an unruly and destructive force. In her collection of essays *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante describes the experience of traumatized time: "The eruption of suffering cancels out linear time, breaks it, makes it into whirling squiggles."<sup>39</sup> The collapse of temporality represented in the novel is the direct overturning of the kinaesthetic present:

Non volevo correre, se correvo mi rompevo, già ogni gradino lasciato alle spalle si disfaceva subito dopo persino nella memoria, e la ringhiera, la parete giallina mi correvano di lato fluide, a cascata. [...] alle spalle mi sentivo una scia gassosa, ero una cometa. [...] Forse ero troppo stanca per trattenere il mondo dentro l'ordine consueto.<sup>40</sup>

(I didn't want to run, if I ran I would break, every step left behind disintegrated immediately afterward, even in memory, and the banister, the yellow wall rushed by me fluidly, cascading. I saw only the flights of stairs, with their clear segments, behind me was a gassy wake, I was a comet. [...] Maybe I was too tired to maintain the usual order of the world.)<sup>41</sup>

The subject cannot retain perceptions and compose them into duration, spatial distinctions melt and vital movement is impeded. When trauma impacts on temporality, the present is overcrowded with other

38 On trauma in *I giorni dell'abbandono*, see Victor H. Zarour Zarzar, 'The Grammar of Abandonment in *I giorni dell'abbandono*', *MLN*, 135.1 (2020), pp. 327–44, and Alberica Bazzoni, 'Trauma, Sadomasochism, and the Female Body in Elena Ferrante's *I giorni dell'abbandono*', in *Italian Studies Across Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity, New Approaches and Future Directions*, ed. by Marco Ceravolo and Anna Finozzi (Rome: Aracne, 2022), pp. 165–201.

39 Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), pp. 107–08.

40 Elena Ferrante, *I giorni dell'abbandono* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2002), pp. 105–06.

41 Elena Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2005), p. 118.

dimensions, in which the subject loses orientation and risks disintegration:

se mi fossi abbandonata, sentivo che quel giorno e lo spazio stesso dell'appartamento si sarebbero aperti a tanti tempi diversi, a una folla di ambienti e persone e cose e me stesse che avrebbero esibito tutte, simultaneamente presenti, eventi reali, sogni, incubi, fino a creare un labirinto così fitto da cui non sarei più uscita.<sup>42</sup>

(if I were to abandon myself, I felt, then, that day and the very space of the apartment would be open to many different times, to a crowd of environments and persons and things and selves who, simultaneously present, would offer real events, dreams, nightmares, to the point of creating a labyrinth so dense that I would never get out of it.)<sup>43</sup>

Another fundamental element of traumatized time is that of iteration, which blurs all distinctions between temporal dimensions. The narrative fragments that compose Sapienza's *Destino coatto* (Compulsory Destiny), for example, articulate an experience of disrupted time and self through the use of syncopated language, claustrophobic spaces, hallucinations, and obsessions. In this brief prose, the speaking voice 'cries out' (to use Caruth's apt definition of narratives of trauma) a temporal block, a state of suspension which exhausts any sense of openness and change:

Vorrei tanto scordarmi di ieri ma non posso. Lavoro per casa, cucino, tengo in braccio Carluccio, ma non posso scordarmi di ieri. È lì, davanti a me. Ieri con quel sole che spaccava le pietre lì davanti dietro i vetri sporchi di pioggia. Domani li debbo lavare un'altra volta.<sup>44</sup>

(I would really want to forget about yesterday but I can't. I work at home, I cook, I hold little Carluccio, but I can't forget about yesterday. It's there, in front of me. Yesterday, with that crushing sun right there behind the windowpanes, dirty with rain. Tomorrow I shall clean them again.)

42 Ferrante, *I giorni dell'abbandono*, p. 126.

43 Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment*, p. 141.

44 Goliarda Sapienza, *Destino coatto* (Rome: Empiria, 2002), p. 110.

These texts provide contrary instances of figurations of the living present, representing the traumatized time of loss, depression, and anxiety. Sapienza's experimental collection, which consists of narrative fragments that do not recombine any narrative development, effectively represents the disrupted temporality of trauma. Past and present, perceptions and hallucinations, disconnected experiences and dreams all overlap, eroding the embodied relationship between self and world grounded in the sense of temporality:

Mi sembra che stavo vomitando. Qualcuno mi teneva la testa e la tazza era grigia, sbeccata. Qualcuno mi teneva la fronte e mi frugava nella gola, in fondo. Mi faceva il solletico. Volevo ridere ma avevo freddo. Sempre ho sofferto il freddo ed il solletico. Carlo lo sapeva e sempre mi afferrava alla vita e mi faceva il solletico ma non vomitavo. Ridevo. Mentre adesso non posso ridere e vomito. Vomito delle palline bianche nel cesso dove ieri ho cercato di fare *la pupù*, come dicevamo a Catania, *ti ricordi, Carlo?* E non ci sono riuscita.<sup>45</sup>

(I think I was vomiting. Somebody was holding my head and the toilet was grey and chipped. Somebody was holding my forehead and rummaging deep in my throat. It tickled me. I wanted to laugh but I was cold. I've always suffered from cold and tickle. Carlo knew it and he grabbed my waist all the time and tickled me but I didn't vomit. I laughed. But now I can't laugh and I vomit. I vomit white little balls in the toilet where yesterday I tried to *poo*, like we used to say back then in Catania, do you remember, Carlo? And I couldn't.)

In Ferrante's and Sapienza's texts, the process of becoming through the continuous flow of temporality is interrupted. While in experiences of the living present the subject feels a deep interconnection with the world, as scenes involve a relationship with the natural elements and especially the sea, these passages take place in the entrapped space of the house, with walls, doors, and dirty windows impeding connection — which is primarily a connection with the subject's own embodied self. As the present is reduced to other temporal dimensions, the unity and duration of the self disperses.

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45 Ibid., p. 95.

## 3. AFFECT, DESIRE, POLITICS

What is at stake in a reduction to the living present? And what relationship exists between trauma and the living present? The focus on the living present, and its interruption in traumatized time, sheds light on the affect of temporality and interrogates specifically the question of vulnerability. As O'Brien observes, '[t]he term *trauma* has been used to describe a wide variety of experiences all of which share in common the individual's recognition of her/his own vulnerability.'<sup>46</sup> The affect that sustains the living present consists in a core sense of trust. In conditions of safety, time is experienced as continuous, the chain of temporality is sustained by trust that the next moment will come. Trauma — the experience of one's extreme vulnerability through violence and loss — renders the continuity of time unsafe. Trauma disrupts the subjects' belief that they will continue to exist through time, taking away the affective ground of trust and the flow of life that it sustains.

If the living present is rooted in an affect of trust, the importance of a reduction to the living present is related to an ethics and politics of becoming. The act of reduction consists in the creation of a holding frame, a safe context within which to practice trust and negotiate unsafety. Literature, and the arts in general, is one of these spaces. Writing and reading can be understood as acts of creating continuity through time, sustaining attention, performing the very encounter between self and world in its temporal happening. Through reduction, creating a holding frame, we learn to negotiate unsafety within a safe boundary. The frame, the 'hedgerow', also holds experience in theatrical and musical performances, in rituals, in the therapeutic session, in meditation. Practicing transitions between different states of attention, moving inside and outside of the frame of reduction, nourishes awareness of the temporal and embodied constitution of the self and sustains the ability to thread unsafety. Reduction to the living present is related to what Michel Foucault, reflecting on ancient philosophy as a practice, defines as 'techniques of the self' or 'arts of existence', and to the practices of the self that are central in Eastern traditions of thought, especially Buddhism and Taoism.<sup>47</sup>

46 O'Brien, 'Telling Time', p. 209.

47 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 4 vols (London: Penguin, 1978–2021), II: *The Use of Pleasure* [1984] (1992), pp. 10–11.

Finally, the experience of the kinaesthetic present is linked to processes of subjectivation and nourishment of desire which have a precise ethical and political connotation. The reconfiguration of the sovereign subject as a desiring, embodied, and relational subject is a core project of feminism, and of subaltern struggles more broadly. As the temporality of embodied becoming, the living present is a site of possibility of such a reconfiguration of the subject:

This subject is psychologically embedded in the corporeal materiality of the self. The enfolded intensive or nomadic subject is an in-between: a folding in of external influences, and a simultaneous folding out of affects. As a mobile entity — mobile in space and time — this subject is continually in process but is also capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations while remaining extraordinarily faithful to itself.<sup>48</sup>

As a temporal dimension that humans share with other animals and the natural environment, the living present is also the domain of relationality and environmental embeddedness, for it is the flow in which the encounter with the world is constantly produced, thus pointing to a posthuman, ecocritical ethics.<sup>49</sup> The living present nourishes openness to the unknown and the actualization of ‘the endless vitality of life as a process of continuous becoming.’<sup>50</sup> It enables processes of dis-identification from normative identities and the re-appropriation of one’s embodied subjectivity. As Braidotti claims,

Positive metamorphosis can be seen as political passion. It endorses the kinds of becomings that destabilize dominant power relations and deterritorialize fixed identities and mainstream values. Such a metamorphosis infuses a joyful sense of empowerment into a subject that is always in the process of becoming.<sup>51</sup>

In this sense, subalterns’ redeployments of reduction serve to counter normative and violent reductions of ‘others’ — women, Black people,

48 Braidotti, ‘The Politics of Life’, p. 187.

49 See for example Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) <<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415>>.

50 Braidotti, ‘The Politics of Life’, p. 182.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

queer people, disabled people — to their bodies. Reduction is inherited as a practice of questioning dominant discourses, to which the productive domain of experience is opposed.<sup>52</sup> Deeply inspired by Audre Lorde's poetics and politics of the erotic, Black Buddhist queer thinker and activist Lama Rod Owens summarizes with great clarity the political stake of embodiment for subaltern struggles: 'I noticed in my practice that internalized oppression continued as long as I remained disembodied. The work of embodiment was the work of reclaiming my body, healing and managing my trauma, and embracing agency over my own body.'<sup>53</sup>

A focus on the living present activates processes of dis-identification and makes space for new beginnings and changes. Reduction enables us to open to the unshaped, to put aside what we already know and how we are constructed, enacting a movement of subtraction from other temporalities which are connected to heteronomous, overdetermining structures. In the living present, we practice how to unlock traumatized structures of time, so that life can flow again.

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52 See Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

53 Lama Rod Owens, *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2020), pp. 80–81.

Alberica Bazzoni, 'Reduction in Time: Kinaesthetic and Traumatic Experiences of the Present in Literary Texts', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, *Cultural Inquiry*, 25 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 191–212 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25\\_10](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_10)>

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