Language, History and Religion in the Poetry of Paul Celan

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I.

Critical discussion of the poetry of Paul Celan (1920-1970) has had to confront two seemingly contradictory elements. The often complex and highly dense language of Celan's poems is seen as calling into question the very possibility of their having a "meaning" that can escape the poems' very self-referentiality and apparent tendency toward "pure poetry." On the other hand, Celan is also widely acknowledged to be the leading poet of the Holocaust and the (self) destruction inflicted on Europe and its culture from 1933 to 1945, thus putting his writing very much into contact with the "real world."

Paul Celan was born Paul Antschel in 1920 in the town of Czernowitz, capital of Bukowina, which had been in the Austro-Hungarian empire but which became part of Romania just shortly before the poet's birth. His family were German-speaking Jews and his parents were deported and murdered by the Nazis during World War II. Paul survived over two years of forced labor during the war, after which he moved to Bucharest, then Vienna and finally, in 1948, to Paris. In France, he adopted the name Celan by modifiying the Romanian spelling of his name (Ancel). He lived for the rest of his life in Paris, writing and teaching at the Ecole Normale Supérieur, and married the French artist Gisèle de Lestrange with whom he had two children, one dying in infancy. Subject to increasing attacks of depression in middle age, and despite hospitalizing himself on two occasions for treatment, he died on about April 20, 1970 after jumping into the Seine.

II.

For all its highly erudite cultural and linguistic demands, Celan's poetry is highly "dialogical," recalling Bakhtin's notion of the "microdialogue." In a speech acknowledging a poetry medal awarded him by the city of Bremen, Celan referred to poetry as a kind of precarious conversation or message.

> The poem can, as a manifestation of language and consequently in its essence dialogic, the poem can be a message in a bottle, sent in the — certainly not always hopeful — belief that somewhere and sometime it could be washed on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems are on the way also in this manner, they move towards something. Towards what? Towards something that stands open, something that can be occupied, towards a responsive "you" perhaps, towards a responsive reality.[1]

Celan felt that both humanity and language had suffered such damage in the Nazi era that poetry needed to be a reaching out. He used the word "thou" some 1300 times in the 800 poems he wrote from 1938 to 1970. There is a great urgency to this effort, given the historical background of the Jews' having for thirteen years been denied a voice, even an existence, in the German-speaking community, the place where communication should have taken place. His poetry shows the effort of having to create and keep free a space for possible dialogue. This puts a wider perspective on the obscurity and tendency toward "silence" often noted in Celan's poetry. It was something he himself saw as necessary.

> The poem today shows, in a way that has only indirectly to do with the not to be undervalued difficulty of the choice of words, of the more rapid slant of syntax, or of the more awake sense for the ellipse; the poem shows, this is unmistakable, a strong inclination towards silence.[2]

It is perhaps preferable to consider Celan's poetry as a discourse fighting off interruptions, and not as meaningful representation unsuccessfully attempted. Woven into even those poems which seemingly deny language the right to express a consistent reality is an attempt to address the poem to someone who will accept it, together with an awareness that this attempt may fail.

Address is disrupted and utterances are broken apart. But address is the only way to reconstruct dialogue. Celan's poem "Night" shows a nearly lifeless scene, with just a hint of address and response.

Pebbles and rubble. And a shard-zone, thin,
as the hour's encouragement.

Eye exchanges, final, untimely:

image-steady,

made wooden

the retina —:

the sign of eternity.

Thinkable:

up there, in the world-grid,

starlike,

the red of two mouths.

Audible (before tomorrow?): a stone

that takes the other as goal.[3]

Pebbles and rubble, alien and resistant to meaning. But among them we hear a tone, a fragmentary first, encouraging indication. Eyes attempt to exchange looks, and mouths make possible the beginning of dialogue, working toward a discourse of the thinkable, in a world with the chance of emerging connections. The poem listens for an other, toward whom it directs itself.

Celan's poems are also situated in a pattern of speech that is directed at a possible listener, and yet they remain aware of the elimination and silencing of the discourse community: not failed language, but frustrated communication.

Your eyes in the arm,

the

burnt-apart

they cradle you

further, in the flying

heartshadow, you.

Where?

Assign the place, assign the word.

Extinguish. Miss.

Ash-brightness, ash-yardstick,
swallowed.

Measured, unmeasured, displaced, deworded —

dewo

Ash-swallowed, your eyes
in the arm
ever.[4]

This poem, which could at first glance be taken for a language game, is much more grounded in history and in the difficulty of dialogue than it might seem. The "eyes in the arm" imagery could evoke a scene of a parent cradling an infant. Celan frequently uses eye-related imagery, often to evoke "time frozen into space, through which the self is distributed, without integration, as is the self's language." [5] The images of burning and of ashes recall the war-cremated. The "flying heartshadow" may be seen as the burden of recent history, interfering with the possibility of communication in the present moment. The poem is full of references to dislocations, to a lack of integration. The self lacks direction, exists among fragments of language, time and space. Yet, all the same, the inadequacy of the self does not lead to despair and silence. The poem uses a scene of displacement and mismeasure to point to the need for dialogue and communication, even amid the remembered wreckage of a recent history in which it was impossible to find, or to be a "you" serving as an escape from self-fragmentation.

III.

Celan had a gift for metaphor and a sense of the richness of language that leads some to say his poetry is based on German rather than "written in German." Yet he proved amazingly willing to sacrifice this quite powerful mastery of expressive language to avoid having the serious nature of most of his topics lose any of its emphasis through distracting ornamentation. This tendency came to pervade his later poems, making them shorter and terser, but was inagurated in one of his longest, poems, "the Straitening," which I will discuss only in excerpts because of its 71-line length.
Celan, in his Bremen speech, mentioned the need to write poetry in which "what's real happens," and in a form that would be resistant to easy appropriation as a mere text. The poem begins:

*

Driven into the
terrain
with the unmistakable track:

Grass, written asunder. The stones, white,
with the shadows of grassblades:
Do not read anymore — look!
Do not look anymore — go!

Go, your hour
has no sisters, you are -
are at home. A wheel, slow,
rolls out of itself, the spokes
climb,
climb on a blackish field, the night
needs no stars, nowhere
does anyone ask after you.

*

Nowhere
does anyone ask after you -[6]

The opening lines of the poem seem linked with work Celan had done on the German translation of Renais' film Night and Fog, with its scene of the train tracks leading to the gates of Auschwitz concentration camp, and a strange grass that covered the earth worn down by the footsteps of the prisoners, yet grown back again in the contemporary last scene of the film. But they also resonate with Old Testament references: "My days are like a shadow that declineth, and I am withered like grass," (Psalms, 102: 11). "The Straitening" converts reality into a text, making the poem into an actual event in time and space. The wheels of the trains are taking the people transported directly to their deaths, and a "trace" of them remains, only thanks to this poem.

The poem reaches its nadir near its midpoint:

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
came through the night,
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night. — Go
to the eye, the moist one.

*

Go
to the eye,
the moist one -

At this point, the poem has no words referring to people, only "Ash" and "Night," and an eye moist with grief.

The poem traces a journey in time out of the hellish past of wartime death and suffering, making all these traces present, with the temple and the star (a reminder of the star of David the Jews were forced to wear as part of the attempt to exterminate them, yet whose light still may reach us) persevering against all odds. "Nothing" is lost, in the sense that we have everything even if we have a trace of it. The journey ends when we find groundwater traces. The poem ends with lines similar to its beginnings, but with a difference. The poem's [5] opening words recur in split time, a space occupying double the number of lines and thus strange, needing to be newly seen. The grass has been written asunder.

So
there are temples yet. A
star
probably still has light.
Nothing,
nothing is lost

Ho-
sannna.
At owl's flight, here,
the conversations, day-grey,
of the water-level traces.

*

(— day-grey,
of
the water-level traces -

Driven into the
terrain
with
the unmistakable
track:

Grass.
Grass,
written asunder.)

"The Straitening" explores memory itself as a dimension of the trauma of war. The poem's ending merges with its beginning, the way memory almost recovers reality. The title of the poem refers to a musical counterpoint technique used in the fuge, calling for repetitions of beginning and end, so "nothing is lost."

IV.

Although Paul Celan was not an actively religious Jew, his poetry retains and develops profound links to his Jewish background, making many of his poems highly religious in tone and significance. At those times when Celan worked most directly with the language and symbolism of the Jewish tradition, its closeness to and "reinterpretation" by the European (Judeo-) Christian tradition could lead to interpretations different from what Celan might have intended, but which also shed light on the "situation" of the poetry. Additionally, the fact that for Celan language is sited in time and history means that the religious aspects of his poetry avoid being situated in a zone outside language and history, as is often the case in the Chrisitan mystical tradition. Equally, the divine is no longer isolated from the acccusations that might be raised by those experiencing injustice and suffering.

A good example of the crossweaving of these themes is the understated, bitter and yet prayerlike "Tenebrae," inspired in part by François Couperin's Easter Passion cantata Leçons des Ténèbres itself based on the Old Testament Lamentations of Jeremiah, Judaism's principal text of the first fall of Jerusalem, and of subsequent misfortunes. In the Catholic ritual for Holy Week, the services for Matins and Lauds on Good Friday include an extinguishing of candles, to symbolize the darkness ("tenebrae" in Latin) that the New Testament mentions covered the earth at the time of Jesus's Crucifixion. There are similar images in the Old Testament, in the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy and Job.

Near we are, Lord,
near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,
clawed into each other, as if
each of our bodies were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,
went there, to bend

over pit and crater.

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It shined.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.[7]

The opening lines echo the opening paradox of "Patmos," a famous poem on the Apostle John's banishment to the Agean island of Patmos, by the German Romantic poet Hölderlin, written in 1802: Near by/ And hard to grasp is the God./ Yet where danger is, grows/ What rescues as well. But Celan inverts the inspiration of the Romantic poet, subverting the hymnlike opening tone by saying it is "we" who are near. The implication is that God is now far away and there will be no saving grace for those who can only "grasp" each other as they are killed in the gas chambers. Shortly before writing "Tenebrae," Celan had translated the narration for Night and Fog,, the Resnais film on Auschwitz-Birkenau, into German, and he was aware of the shots of the fingernail marks gouged into the ceilings of the "shower rooms." The "we" who are near God are the dead Jews of the concentration camps. Critics have seen the "pray to us" in the third stanza as blasphemous, but Celan is working in a Jewish tradition that includes verbal "attacks" on God for human suffering, and in which what would be "sacreligious" in the more transcendental Chrisitan tradition is an attempt to signal the presence of a religious, historical and language crisis severe enough that it is no longer man, but God, that must renew the possibility of contact between heaven and earth. The destruction of Jewish culture brought with it the death of "normal dialogue" and Celan has chosen deliberately provocative language in order to jar the awareness of his readership as to the existence of a crisis. "Tenebrae" is also a refutation of the themes anti-Semitics developed to justify persecuting the Jews by "blaming" them for the death of Christ, and by inventing subsequent libels involving accusations

of drinking Christian blood, or of ritual murder of Christian children. And by the last lines, with the dropping of the words "pray to us," even the blasphemy has disappeared, thanks to a rhetorical inversion, and only the prayerlike element is predominant, to such an extent that despite the earlier reversal of Christian Easter Passion motifs, this poem is even frequently interpreted as human sharing in the sacrificial death of Jesus.[8]

V.

Perhaps Celan's most well-known poem combining a hope of redemption with the fear of despair is "Psalm."

No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,
no one incants our dust.
No one.

Blessèd art thou. No One.
In thy sight would
we bloom.
In thy
spite.

A Nothing
we were, are now, and ever
shall be, blooming
the Nothing-, the
No One's Rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
our stamen heaven-waste,
our corolla red
from the purpleword we sang
over, O over
the thorn.[9]

The prayer which this poem sounds like is undercut by its simple turning of traditional phrases of religious ritual against themselves. We think we know what this poem is supposed to mean from its title. But as with "Tenebrae," Celan refuses to rely on traditional hymns of sorrow or joy. "No one" will revive Creation, and at the same time an entity called "no one" does remake us, in an ironic and again sacreligious juxtaposition of the absent "no one" of the Holocaust with the God of Jewish mysticism, "the one not to be named."

The third stanza contains both a somewhat bitter adaptation of the triple conjugation of time in the Christian Doxology, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be," and an echo of the ancient Hebrew him "The Lord of the World:" "For He has been, for He is now, for He shall be, in radiance, For He is One, no Other is. Perhaps the best explanation of the final stanza comes from the translator:

> When "Psalm" joins "Nothing" and "No One" to the vitality of arose, ambiguities boost the odds against translation. In the rose's soul-bright "pistil," besides a flower's seed-bearing organ, Griffel also means a stylus: the rose blossoms with writerly energy. In "our stamen heaven-waste," Staubfaden for "stamen" compounds "dust" and "thread," while "heaven-waste" replaces the earth of Genesis — "waste and void" — with a wasted heaven. In "our corolla," Krone's botanical sense matches the regal "crown," a potent Judaic symbol, which then yields Jesus' crown of thorns. And "our corolla red / from the purpleword" calls up a bleeding King of the Jews in his purple robe, tying Christ's agony back into Jewish suffering. As in "Tenebrae," Celan will not let the New Testament supersede the Old. He himself warned against fixing on Christian resonance in "Psalm."
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> Singing "over, O over / the thorn" ends up eloquent and broken, like "the / choirs, back then, the / Psalms" in "Stretto." Celan turns most Jewish in struggling with Jewish faith and most lyric in singing "over / the thorn."[10]

Toward the end of his life, after a long-deferred visit to Israel, where he discoverde a long-lost childhood friend who had survived the war and left Europe, Celan wrote a poem in which he used the image of almonds, something that had symbolized his Jewishness and also the memory of his lost mother, into a song of return from homelessness.

Almonding one, you half-spoke only,
though all trembled from the core,
you
I let wait,
you.

And was
not yet
eye-reft,
not yet enthorned in the realm
of the song that begins:
Hachnisssini.[11]

These lines, to someone Celan knew as a child, embody a delayed possibility of return "home." The poet's mother is also present, as is the Shechinah, the Hebrew term for the female presence of God. "Eye-reft" refers to the Shechinah in exile weeping her eyes out, while "enthorned" ties the poet's Jewish destiny to Christ's crown of thorns, by association with the site of the Crucifixion in Jerusalem, thus linking the pain of what he has not yet become to what he hopes for. The final word is Hebrew for "bring me in." It draws on the Psalms, "Hide me in the shadow of thy wings" (17: 8) and urges a return from homelessness.

1 Celan, Paul. *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden.* Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983, v.3:186
2 Celan, *GW*, v.3:197
3 Celan, *GW* 1:99 (trans. S. Wolosky)
4 Celan, *GW* 2:123
5 Wolosky, Shira. *Language Mysticism*, Stanford University Press, 1995, 180
6 Celan, *GW* 1:197 (trans. Hamburger)
7 Celan, *GW* 1:163 (trans. Felstiner)
8 Gadamer, Hans Georg "Sinn und Sinnverhüllung," *Zeitwende* 46 (1975)321-49
9 Celan, *GW* 1:225 (trans. Felsteiner)
10 Felsteiner, John, *Pail Celan.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 169
11 Celan, *GW* 3:95 (trans. Felsteiner)