



Translating Trauma, Voicing Silence: Paul Celan, the Politics of Language, and the Poetics of Witnessing

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Abstract

Paul Celan never shunned away from writing in German, even though his native language was Romanian. He translated to and from French, English, and Russian amongst others, predicating an adulterated identity which was simultaneously pan-European and indefinite. A poet without a country, positioned against a monolingual identity, Celan tamed the German language with irreverent yet cerebral playfulness, and defied every single parameter of the fascist world-view. It is easy to forget the (denazifying) deazifying aspect of his poetics, but the aesthetic of his poems are means for a cause. Taking cues from historiography, trauma theory, and that great admirer of Celan, Jacques Derrida, in this essay I shall try to focus on the later poems of Celan to show how his engagement with language and poetry, both original and translations, continue the themes of survival, trauma, identity, paranoia, and witnessing – themes that his most celebrated poem, ‘Todesfuge’ portrays most emphatically. In this article, I shall try to show how Celan, like Viktor Klemperer, was deconstructing and exposing fascist language-worlds and at the same time, with his neologisms and puns, was critically engaging with what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘retrotopia’. Following Benjamin and Derrida, this essay will discuss Joris, Felstiner, and Celan as translators who are heroic figures and where linguistic transformations are shibboleths of trauma and testimony. Following Benjamin and Derrida, this essay will discuss Joris, Felstiner, and Celan as translators who are heroic figures and where linguistic transformations are shibboleths of trauma and testimony.

In Celan’s body of work, we find a traumatised poet concerned with the dissemination of his memories and paranoia who also wants to create and recreate, not only to work through his trauma, but also to find different channels to engage with his identities and witnessing. As readers/co-authors we also witness the witnessing, become tertiary subjects who must continue the tale of a harrowing past so that it can never be forgotten. Celan, thus, becomes a prophet of an avoidable but possible future and a reckoning against the rise of fascism.

Keywords: Paul Celan, Fascism, Language, Trauma, Translation, Witnessing



Victor Klemperer begins his influential study of Nazi parlance, *The Language of the Third Reich*¹ with a reflection on the German prefix *ent-* or *de-* (in English) and how this novel fascination is intimately linked to the Third Reich led by Adolf Hitler. Klemperer, a philologist in training and an assimilated Jew, saved only by his marriage to a German, vigorously recorded his life as a pariah and a disenfranchised half citizen in Germany during the Nazi regime in his voluminous diaries. Once the regime ended, he turned his focus to an astute analysis of the politics of language and its manipulative power as practised by the Nazis. In the wake of de-Nazification, his analysis cannot but start with a discussion of the disruptive power of that key prefix, and how the destruction of Germany, marked by the fall of the Third Reich and *Entnazifizierung* are indeed matters of trepidation and hope. In this context, Klemperer also engages with the Nazi concept of a hero, a man of super speed and physical prowess – an *Übermensch*, exemplified, for instance, by a fascination with uniforms.² Thus, ‘brown Storm Troopers’, or a uniformed racing driver, or, a tank driver from the Second World War became public heroes, subjects of much adulation – their images became all pervasive.³ This *Heldentum* or hero-worship⁴, pumped up by huge propaganda machine gave rise to a culture of *heldenhaft* (valiant) and a *kämpferisch* (aggressive and belligerent) attitude in the general psyche at the cost of civilian heroism that was “infatuated with the most dubious notion of heroism.”⁵ Klemperer adds that Hitler’s thinking did not have any space for intellectual engagements; ‘The fear of the thinking man and the hatred of the intellect are revealed in a constant stream of new expressions’.⁶ Klemperer engages with these new expressions, often satirically, as he considers writing in the face of overwhelming odds an act of heroism.⁷ This engagement with the language of the Nazis distinguishes another author’s fight with the Nazis, although his path diverges towards gradual silence later as a conscious demolition of the aggressive and belligerent noise-making. Paul Celan in his breaking and remaking of words of his own choice, by deconstructing the language of his own oppressor in his poems and translations, has re-enlivened the debate of a singular language-based national identity and turned the tables on any attempt to the claim of a language as an authentic symbol of identitarian nationalism.

Klemperer’s project of exposing the Nazi turn of language, a turn which marks a re-marking, a re-turning to the past, a more serious sounding German to elevate the Nazi ideology with a veneer of seriousness and pseudo-spiritual implications to confer an assured speciality through repetition and appropriation,⁸ resembles what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘retrotopia’. Bauman,⁹ defines it as an obsession with the past, a celebration of nostalgia. Following Walter



Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's Angelus Novus or the 'Angel of History', Bauman talks of how the Angel is "caught in the midst of a U-turn" to find comfort in "the Paradise of the past" in order to avoid a potentially dangerous future.¹⁰ Instead of Utopias, we now have retrotopias, with "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past", and the linguistic turn of Nazism, or the fascistic turn of language is a similar U-turn to the past for a paradisaical time.¹¹ Thus, the chronotope of language is intimately related to the notion of belongingness. However, Svetlana Boym, whose book *The Future of Nostalgia*¹² is a great influence on Bauman's theory of retrotopia, argues that this nostalgia is dangerous because, in prioritising emotional bond over critical thinking, it "tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one."¹³ The 'restorative' idea of nostalgia is the hallmark of nationalist revivals across the world "which engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories."¹⁴ Nowhere is this attachment with the past clearer for the Nazis than in the name 'The Third Reich' which promises to be a continuation of the previous two empires. Therefore, the specific words they chose to focus on, especially proper names, are often specialised and romantic in nature.¹⁵ The original title of *The Language of the Third Reich* is a parody of the Nazi obsession with acronyms such as SS or SA; *LTI Notizbuch eines Philologen* plays with the acronym for *Lingua Tertii Imperii*. This imperial language, the empire of language, is challenged by Paul Celan, a polymath, through his experiment with the German language in which he did not hesitate to inject foreign elements, thereby diluting the false claim of authenticity of an identity-based genocidal psyche and simultaneously essaying a redemption of the language through an acceptance of verbal diversity.

Paul Celan was born in Romania as Paul Antschel in 1920 to a Jewish family. Even though Romanian was his native tongue, he always considered German as his language of creativity. Apart from these two languages, he knew French, Russian, English, and Hebrew. Celan used his polymath skill to translate to and from German, always in an attempt to disturb expectations that come from a monolithic understanding of language. Language as a tool of propaganda for nationalistic vision, of changing meanings to accommodate the ruling ideology¹⁶ can indeed infect susceptible minds. Any attempt to formalise a language or to give precedence to one specific language is just another attempt to incorporate and thus totalise public imagination. Whereas, a fragmented linguistic body made up of differences and 'differend', as Lyotard says,¹⁷ is an acceptance of the other in the body we have come to define as the nation. Even



though we celebrate, for just reasons, Celan's "Todesfuge" as a quintessential Holocaust poem, it is not the only poem he wrote to deal with the trauma of his Holocaust experience.¹⁸ In this paper, I shall focus on Celan's late poems to show his regular heroism in the face of trauma and tragedy, where a simultaneous engagement and re-examination of his earlier motifs define his musing and muting.

Celan was interned in the Wallachia labour camp and his parents perished in the Transnistria concentration camp. Throughout his life Celan suffered from a sense of guilt, the ghost of betraying his parents, as John Felstiner has pointed out.¹⁹; his mellow and silent personality, where he was reluctant to talk about his camp experience, assumes a loaded significance in this light. The silence is not only a way to cope with the trauma and guilt, but it is also an attempt to critically engage with that memory, to work through it, using non-verbality as a defence mechanism, where the loss of words is an eloquent expression of shock. In lieu of words, we have his poems; for him, as Felstiner adds, the "composing and composure of poems" provided "a reason to go on living."²⁰ It was either poetry or silence. Felstiner adds that Celan like "many people who lived through those years . . . gave almost no factual testimony about them – which gives his poetry a testimonial charge."²¹

Celan wanted to estrange the language of Nazism which was a common criticism of his poetic scheme. He was a Romanian, a Jew by birth, residing mostly in a French speaking city, while translating from a number of languages. And he chose German as his preferred language of writing. Celan believed that one should write in one's own language, in a foreign language the writer lies..²² He had a solid ground for that, since his mother's native language was German, though his own mother tongue was not. However, when the German-speaking people became the reason for his mother's death, the issue became a matter of acute trauma and struggle. Celan's life-long project of translating from other languages into German, and his experiments with the limits of the language by forming complex words, new words, multi-lingual references, often using three different languages, in effect breaking down the standard German – all these were part of his poetic struggle to fight the language of Nazism. He, in a sense, wanted to chasten German from 'Germanistik', attenuating the language with other tongues to create a heterophonic democratic space. The language which was an emissary of "the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech"²³, was strange to him, as he, being Jewish, was a stranger to the people using that language. Language is intricately related to citizenship, but it may not



be as hospitable and inhabitable as this relationship might promise, as Derrida proposes in *Monolingualism of the Other*.²⁴ In this monograph, Derrida calls for a linguistic revolt against any narrow idea of patriotism or the “nationalist politics of language” through inventions and interventions, especially by ‘translator-poets’.²⁵ The inventive translator-poets (and Celan is one, according to Derrida)²⁶ through ‘unsettling’ this homeland known as language, now rendered uninhabitable, by the “*nonlocatable* experience of *language*”;²⁷ will counter and challenge “nationalist aggressions . . . or mono-culturalist homo-hegemony.”²⁸ Celan, through estrangement of the standard German, tried to unsettle the only language he chose to write in, and, this familiar but strange language, an uncanny rewriting and iteration, is the language of the other, the stranger and yet still a *nebenmensch*, as Derrida argues.²⁹ This ambivalent status of the stranger, this destabilising capacity of the Jewish figure simply by existing and practicing, is also the major theme of Bauman’s *Modernity and Ambivalence*³⁰ The ambivalent status of strangers makes their life more precarious.³¹ Since they are “the other side of order”³² and “the waste of nation-building”, they must be eliminated.³³ Yet, it is in an embracing of that ambivalence that the stranger figure could,³⁴ Bauman argues, challenge this project of imaginary homogeneity based on exclusion and hatred.

After learning from hearsay about his parents’ death in the concentration camps Celan’s dependence on poetry grew to deal with the trauma. Yet, the immediate Russian occupation of his native city was equally traumatic to him. He would relinquish the motherland, in order to write about his mother – both the mother figures ended up being absent, only to be invoked by his mother’s mother tongue. Celan went to Vienna, and then to Paris, eventually settling there— the poet, the translator, the manual worker. He also decided to rename himself, to remember the poet in him so that he can eschew the naming of his horrific experience, namely, the Holocaust. But re-membering does not mean dis-membering– the memory that is mother, that is the trauma of the Holocaust, remains under the erasure of an anagram. Paul Antschel, pronounced as Ancel, became Paul Celan – something of an echo of the previous identity, of the previous body carrying the trauma. Even this renaming appeared inadequate for his quest for a de-traumatised identity. So, sometimes, he also became Pawel Tsvelan, the Russian. All these wordplays, so peculiar to him, apart from revealing a bitter sense of humour, also foregrounds a struggle to find a more verbal way out of the trauma. Thus, during his sojourn in Bucharest from 1945 to 1947, when the trauma of his parents’ death was still fresh, he engaged in a sustained display of pun and other verbal witticisms, something he kept doing throughout



his poetic career. In his introductory essay to *Paul Celan: Selections*, Joris goes on to characterise the reticence of Paul Celan in his personal life as a strategy to exorcise the traumatic memory of the Holocaust even though the memory itself was present throughout his poetic body.³⁵ Unlike Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel, Celan did not want to master the experience. His poems not only bear witness to the Holocaust, they also look forward to a more cohabitable world remorphed by the experience of Auschwitz. Thus, his writings are an enactment of de-Nazification on a poetic level. His poetry, as Joris says:

... cannot simply bear witness to the past but must at the same time be resolutely turned to the future: it has to be open, it has to be imaginatively engaged in the construction of a new world, it has to look forward, to be visionary.³⁶

Celan challenged the very foundation of retrotopia, in favour of an ethical future with a promise of an “addressable thou:” as he proposes in his Bremen speech. Poetry is a conversation with the other, it is a handshake.³⁷

Celan, who worked in a labour camp, was a witness to the Holocaust, much like the narrator of ‘Todesfuge’. As a witness, Celan was different from other Holocaust witnesses/writers. It was in his role as a visionary poet that he relentlessly bore witness to the event which, he believed, cannot be named. Throughout his career, Celan tried to rephrase ‘Todesfuge’ as if he wanted to grasp a truth within different restructurings of language. ‘Tenebrae,’ ‘There was earth inside them’, ‘Stretto’ are the most famous examples of redoing a text which, to the chagrin of Celan, became paradigmatic of his poetic identity and of the Holocaust. What is remarkable is that as he would keep on writing and rewriting, the invasion of metaphors would seem to lessen, giving way to a silence that seems to be in sync with his personal stance of never speaking of that ‘which happened’.³⁸ His deliberate avoidance of words like ‘the Holocaust’, ‘race’, or ‘Deutschland’ in his poems (‘Todesfuge’ being the sole exception) points to a desire to invalidate the words which helped institute a genocide. Gradually, words like ‘void’, ‘snow’, ‘rock’, ‘digging’, ‘stillness’ – all symbols of death and silence, started to appear in his later poetry. Celan, the witness- narrator, writes in “There was earth inside them”:

There came a stillness then, came also storm,

all of the oceans came.



I dig, you dig, and it digs too, the worm,

and the singing there says: They dig.

O one, o none, o no one, o you:

Where did it go then, making for nowhere?

O you dig and I dig, and I dig through to you,

And the ring on our fingers awakens. (trans. Felstiner)³⁹

This reaching out to the reader, the translator, the other, the witness of the witness, becomes a motif in Celan's poetry. This I-Thou interaction is important as a means of disseminating the truth and regenerating a new, cohabitable world, to nullify the trauma of destruction, so that after winter, spring can soon arrive.

As Celan moved on from the Holocaust, maintaining, to use Spivak's term, "critical intimacy"⁴⁰ with the tragic event, the verbal profusion and lyricism of "Todesfuge" are sacrificed for an approaching reticence in an attempt to deconstruct the associated pain and trauma. This does not mean that Celan did not write about what happened further. Rather, his obsession with the mother, with murdering rituals, with thousand years (of the Third Reich) alluded constantly to Shoah and his loss. However, from *Breathturn* (1967) Celan would embark on a journey from expressions such as "it wanders everywhere, like language",⁴¹ to a futural of "co-wandered language".⁴² This sense of secret sharing, of togetherness, of a liaison, of a three-way affair of the writer, translator, and the readers – all bound by their roles as witnesses, simultaneously introduces an obsession with 'witnessing'. This bond between the author and the reader, the familiar and the stranger, is not always happy or productive, but they must share the secret even when the secret is questionable or suffocating. In "No more sand art" Celan talks about "Your question – your answer./Your song, what does it know?"⁴³



The song in question, another ‘Todesfuge’ perhaps, might not have grappled with the wider significance of the Holocaust or the trauma of it. The doubt lingers. The witness, though ‘unannullable’,⁴⁴ Celan well knew, “No one/ bears witness for the/ witness” (‘Ash-aureole’).⁴⁵ The poet/witness’ doubt about the future dissemination of his knowledge is expressed through these lines. Unlike Shakespeare, whose sonnets he translated, Celan was unsure about the permanence of his lines, even though he seemed to be influenced by the ‘begetting’ metaphor of the bard, writing a number of poems obsessed with procreation in the face of a genocide, as if to creatively giving birth to witnesses in the stead of literal ones. The dissemination of the horror of his trauma was, after all, an integral part of his role as a poet-witness. If “Corona’ is one of his more tender poems which is concerned with an act of love, “Radix, Matrix” is a more serious attempt to deal with these overwhelming issues where the poetic mood is nothing less than prophetic.⁴⁶ The word ‘bearing’, a choice both Joris and Felstiner make while translating “Aschenglorie” to underscore the sexual connotation of the German word ‘zeugen’ (‘witness’),⁴⁷ which is related to ‘zeugt’, meaning ‘to produce’ or ‘beget’ and Celan uses the very word in the previous line, reminds us of the Shakespearean use of the word,⁴⁸ frequently in the sense of ‘procreating’ and ‘carrying forward’ – a tantalising notion that both Joris and Felstiner fail to highlight.

The 1960s proved to be a trying time for Celan with an onset of depression and allegations of plagiarism hitting too close to home and a new series of motifs kept him troubled as a poet. This was also when he translated twenty-one of Shakespeare’s sonnets. In all probability, the borrowed poetry from a foreign tongue helped him manage his creative urge. The strange rendering of Shakespeare in German is ‘rich’ and Felstiner sees “no contradiction between esteeming and estranging.”⁴⁹ Peter Szondi, one of the earliest scholars to have analysed Celan’s translation of Shakespeare, notes how this creative liberty is part of Celan’s poetics of ‘constancy’,⁵⁰ defining Celan’s politics of translation as a close follower of Walter Benjamin who, Szondi adds, “saw the legitimacy, indeed the necessity, of translating as lying in the different intentions toward language and modes of signification displayed by an original text and its translation.”⁵¹ Celan’s use of similar or repetitive words and imageries in his translations, to the detriment and alienation of the original, is a repetition of his poetical project, thereby establishing in Celan a note of authenticity, of constancy, between the poet and the translator. Szondi claims that “Celan’s translations are Celan poems.”⁵² Felstiner seems to agree when he says, ‘A Celan translation, no less than his own poetry, is “making toward



something,” as in the Brethren speech – “something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou”.⁵³ He further adds,

Working on Shakespeare in the fall of 1963, he himself had not written a sonnet for twenty years and was at a watershed after his fourth book, *Die Niemandrose* (“The NO One’s-Rose”). At that time Celan’s own verse, often cut to a word or a syllable per line, had begun to seem chipped off silence, blankness . . . On the other hand, in translating, his voice resonates against another voice. Celan’s version of Shakespeare reverberate, because the sonnets’ main themes – beauty, time, death, memory, regeneration, poetry itself – run disturbedly throughout his own lyrics.⁵⁴

Auschwitz, the very signpost of the Holocaust, might suffer the same fate of displacement and incomprehensible silence, not to mention, even in its present existence with a display of the artifacts of the horrors of the concentration camps, it fails to capture the trauma of the Holocaust. It generates an uncanny feeling, i.e., it haunts us, but only on a voyeuristic level. The things we witness are twice removed and estranged by a prior cognisance of the objects in display, almost with a purpose. Mark Day in his book *The Philosophy of History* quotes from Eelco Runia’s essay “Presence” to convey the metonymical functions of monuments in our time:

It should be remarked that while a modern monument *presents* a past event in the here and now, it can hardly be said to *represent* it. A monument like the Berlin Holocaust Memorial is a repository of what haunts the place of the present, a refuge for what has always (or at least since the event in question took place) been there. It is closer to a relic than to a painted, written, or sculpted pictorial account of what happened – though, of course, it differs from a relic in the sense that presence is transferred to a new, willfully made, object. So, whereas pre-modern, metaphorical monuments are primarily engaged in a transfer of *meaning*, modern metonymical monuments concentrate on a transfer of *presence*.⁵⁵

Hitler spearheaded the Holocaust of the Jewish people on the basis of their religious faith – something that makes those killed Jewish people ‘martyrs’ in the earliest sense of the word.



The word ‘martyr’ is derived from the Greek word *martur* which means ‘witness’. The paradox is, however, if someone is martyred s/he cannot be a witness. The ‘death factor’ which Derrida discusses⁵⁶ and which the Holocaust deniers have repeatedly banked upon, becomes an uncomfortable issue. Only a survivor can be a witness, but they cannot be a martyr – this is a dilemma which has been, in a sense, resolved by figures such as Emanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish historian who formed a group at Warsaw Ghetto called *Oyneg Shabes* and asked the members to write down their experiences and keep those records hidden. Most of the members died afterwards in the hand of the Nazis. One of the survivors revealed that huge reserve of witness testimony compiled by people long dead. And it is only a book like *Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* which, in a remarkable display of historiography as an act of memorialisation, could highlight those traumatic testimonials to build a narrative of those long lost and forgotten lives.⁵⁷ This book charts the way a distinct discipline of Jewish historiography, mainly based on local experiences was being developed since the beginning of the 20th century which came to be used during the Nazi ghettoization of the Jews and the subsequent genocide to record the daily lives and heroics of the persecuted people in the face of imminent death. Walter Benjamin, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, penned on January 11, 1940, wrote, “Every line we succeed in publishing today – no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it – is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness.”⁵⁸

Benjamin did not live to witness the fall of the Third Reich, but his statement holds true to the act of writing itself. Celan, the German poet of Jewish-Romanian origin, faced all the difficulties and baggage that come with such a complex identity, which often led to a crisis of identity. German critics were not overall appreciative of his poetry, finding the poems too obscure, metaphor-ridden or sonorous. One even went on to compare Celan’s way of reciting his poetry with Goebbels.⁵⁹ All these preposterous claims found a particularly vicious outlet in the different charges of plagiarism brought against him throughout his life. Celan chose a gradual silence as his answer instead of vociferously engaging with these platitudinal and often racially-stereotyped accusations.

A re-turn, ‘*Breathturn*’ marks the beginning of immense silence that distinguishes Celan’s later poetry, embracing doubts and talking about poetic language in terms of factuality, as Pierre Joris points out.⁶⁰ Celan’s project of *Gegenwort*, “a counter-word and thus the word of poetry”



is a “terrifying silence.”⁶¹ This is a non-verbal project that is uncannily similar to the verbal de-Nazification Klemperer talks about. The untranslatable mother,⁶² the impossible task of translation⁶³ of the mother’s mother tongue came back to haunt him in the form of plagiarism charges and the accusation of incomprehensibility. Not many people understood Celan’s poetics of “untranslatable translation” as a “new idiom”,⁶⁴ the bare and sparse “poetic economy of the idiom.”⁶⁵ Silent witnesses are as important as verbally proficient witnesses. Often silence is more eloquent. That is why, perhaps, the later poetry of Celan is cryptic, allusive, muter than his earlier poems, which also makes us understand his unease at the loud celebration around ‘Todesfuge’. Mark Day observes how historians have not only inferred information from ‘true’ and ‘false’ testimony, but also from testimonial silence. Day writes:

Luisa Passerini has stressed the importance of listening for silences in oral testimony, asking why the topic is being passed over (potentially being ‘evidence of a scar’). With regard to written evidence, one example stems from our possession of plentiful written material relating to the bureaucracy of the Holocaust, though with an absence of mention of the final purpose to which those objects and actions were directed. We should, contrary to Holocaust deniers, infer from this silence a desire to hide the final purpose; it is a further and interesting question why that desire was felt.⁶⁶

That final purpose, to echo Derrida, is ever elusive, which would repeatedly lead us back to to the texts Celan created as his testimonial. He was there at the time the event was taking place, he was both a victim and a survivor, a metaphorical martyr, and therefore, a witness.⁶⁷ One particular poem in this context provides an interesting example. ‘No more sand art’ is a poem which is an understated testament to Celan’s trauma which was gradually approaching muteness, due to the falseness that surrounded him:

No more sand art, no sand book, no masters.

Nothing on the dice. How many

mutes?

Seventeen.



Your question – your answer.

Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow.

Eepinnow.

E – i – o (trans. Felstiner)⁶⁸

The poet is deeply doubtful (“what does it know?”) about the mute ‘you’; whatever the witness, knows; it is buried deep – only a fragment, an echo is evident. This is perhaps the statement of the poet/witness Celan, who, though deeply troubled, was present at the event and he expresses his trauma only cryptically, in a futile attempt to approximate it. Pierre Joris, while translating the poem, translates the line as ‘I-i-o’ which does not visually follow or echo his translation of the previous line which he translates as ‘Eepinno’.⁶⁹ Joris manages to retain the auditory echo, sacrificing the visual one which demands from the readers to read the last line as ‘e-e-o’. In Celan’s original, the previous lines read :Tiefimschnee,/Iefimnee,/ I-i-e”⁷⁰. Felstiner, true to his rendering through ‘E-i-o,’ echoes the vowel sounds of his translation of the previous line, which seems closer to Celan’s intention. Felstiner, in his translation of ‘constancy’ where he is in a critical relationship with the original, keeps things familiar yet unfamiliar, and also traces different echoes of Jewish texts throughout the poem.⁷¹ He then goes on to explicate the significance of the last line:

No more sand art, a snow art now, contracted to its selfmost straits. Nothing but vowels remain, the heart of a word, the sine qua non. But translated into Hebrew, which has no vowel letters, this poem would verge on silence – a testimony to the literal truth that Celan sought.⁷²

Thus, translation becomes a matter of conscious choice, where same sources can lead to different interplay of interpretations. Yet, the loss of the last line is the silence that stuns, as the people who speak Hebrew must have felt because of the shocking trauma of the Holocaust. Even if we consider the last line with hyphenated vowel sounds, it fails to suppress the trauma of Celan’s memory. Hyphens are never enough, as Derrida points out in *Monolingualism*, ‘to conceal protests, cries of anger, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs.’⁷³



Much has been said about the controversial statement of Adorno, who proposed that after Auschwitz poetry is impossible. One of the earliest rejoinders to this came from Celan in his 'Meridian' speech where poetry is defined as an interaction and communication with the other and this communication is aware of its context and time⁷⁴. Art aims to step out "of what is human, betaking oneself to a realm that is uncanny yet turned toward what's human."⁷⁵ The obscurity of the poem is "for the sake of an encounter, by a perhaps self-devised distance or strangeness."⁷⁶ Adorno has been criticised by a number of writers, including Günter Grass, who himself was a member of a Nazi body as a young boy, and Peter Szondi, for his claim; but it must be said that the cultural underpinnings of Adorno's statement has largely been misunderstood. Charlotte Ryland rightly claims that for Adorno, Auschwitz is a symbol of a totalised society which thrives on dehumanisation of society⁷⁷ and barbarisation of culture.⁷⁸ Thus, art becomes complicit with this barbaric reality in a totalised structure, in which artists "continue to believe in their autonomy and thus do not act to prevent their reification in society."⁷⁹ Adorno, according to Ryland, warns us about an all-consuming total society "which integrates all elements, including culture, according to the dominant identificatory discourse that suppresses difference."⁸⁰ John Zilcosky and Ryland both have identified the use of 'Auschwitz' in that controversial claim as synecdochical and Zilcosky goes even further to identify such an use as 'poetical' in itself.⁸¹ Adorno was actually writing against the major literature where Auschwitz became a symbol of pity and melodrama in order to 'repress and/or retouch the Holocaust'.⁸² An avid admirer of experimental literature, especially that of Beckett, Adorno considered hegemonic style, as Zilcosky quotes him, 'the aesthetic equivalent of domination'.⁸³ In fact Adorno was fond of Celan, whose cryptic, elliptical, and inventive poetry 'reveals the "shame of art" in the face of "suffering"'.⁸⁴ Perhaps, Celan's rejoinder can best be understood as a minor literature⁸⁵, a politically conscious deterritorialised use of the language of the dominant signifier to reterritorialise it to his poetic service, at once destabilising the flow of major literature and defamiliarising the same. Even in his gradual silence, we must find a celebration of that radical art.

When Adorno, in one of his many rephrasings of his Auschwitz dictum, raises the 'cultural question' of how a Holocaust survivor can "go on living" undergoing what Adorno calls "the drastic guilt of him who was spared",⁸⁶ he was pointing out something that is inextricably related to Celan's gradual regression into silence. For Adorno, "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death."⁸⁷ Celan committed suicide, as did his friend Peter



Szondi, and the writer he influenced, Primo Levi. The stunned silence was perpetuated, but not before it had its say, and turns itself into an un-annullable poetic witness. It is upto the numerous Celan scholar-translators and through them, his readers worldwide to know, learn, and rectify that which happened so that it might never take place again. The present remarkably resembles the the period of the rise of Hitler. We are currently living in the post-truth age where lies are given the name of alternative facts and trolls are the creators of news which they spread through rumour-mongering. White supremacists and Neo Nazis are becoming powerful again, many of the Western countries are ruled by people who publicly acknowledge their allegiance to fascism and far-right politics.⁸⁸ In the wake of citizenship question closer home where marginal people are mercilessly being stripped of fundamental rights to promote an idea of an imaginary homogenous nationhood, Celan's poetics and subsequent fate should work, as Derrida noted, as a warning and a shibboleth.. In such times, Celan is becoming more relevant than he ever was.



Notes

¹ Klemperer, significantly, titles the opening chapter “Heroism (Instead of an Introduction)”, *The Language of the Third Reich*, Translated by Martin Brady, London: Continuum 2007, pp. 1–7.

² Klemperer, *Language*, 2–3.

³ Klemperer, *Language*, pp. 3–4.

⁴ Klemperer, *Language*, p. 7

⁵ Klemperer, *Language*, p. 2.

⁶ Klemperer, *Language*, p. 3.

⁷ Klemperer compares the act of writing and bearing witness to heroism in his diary. See, *To the Bitter End*, trans. Martin Chalmers, London: Phoenix, 1999, p.74.

⁸ Klemperer, *Language*, p. 14.

⁹ Bauman, *Retrotopia*, Cambridge: Polity Press (2017).

¹⁰ Bauman, “Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia”, *Retrotopia*, p. 2.

¹¹ Bauman, *Retrotopia*, p. 5.

¹² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books (2001). Boym’s book is specifically about Russia’s state of affairs.

¹³ Quoted in Bauman, *Retrotopia*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Bauman, *Retrotopia*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Klemperer discusses the politics of nomination in the chapter “Names” in *The Language of the Reich*, pp. 69–77.

¹⁶ Klemperer, *Language*, p. 14.

¹⁷ For an elaboration on Lyotard’s idea of ‘differend’, see his work *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

¹⁸ I have discussed the link between “Todesfuge” and the Nazi language’s association with torture and trauma in “‘Todesfuge’ and the Language of Death: A Study” in *Uttaran: Academic Journal of Maharaja Manindra Chandra College*, 2013-2014 & 2014-2015 2016, pp. 181–186. Volume and Issue numbers available?

¹⁹ Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* New Haven: Yale University Press 2001, pp. 14–15.



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- ²⁰ Felstiner, p. 16.
- ²¹ Felstiner, p. 22.
- ²² Joris, Introduction, *Paul Celan: Selections*, Berkeley: University of California Press, (2005) p. 16.
- ²³ Felstiner, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, New York: W.W. Norton (2001), p. 395.
- ²⁴ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other* Translated by Patrick Mensah, Stanford: Stanford University Press, (1998) , p. 58.
- ²⁵ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 57
- ²⁶ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 69.
- ²⁷ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 29.
- ²⁸ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 64.
- ²⁹ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 37.
- ³⁰ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* , Cambridge: Polity Press (2007)
- ³¹ Bauman, *Modernity*, p. 16.
- ³² Bauman, *Modernity*, p. 7.
- ³³ Bauman, *Modernity*, p. 15.
- ³⁴ Bauman, *Modernity*, p. 16
- ³⁵ Joris, *Paul Celan: Selections* , p. 7.
- ³⁶ Joris, *Selections*, p. 6.
- ³⁷ Celan, writes of this in a letter to Hans Bender. It has been translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, cited in “Addressable Thou” by Chase Berggrun, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/04/criticspage/Addressable-Thou>.
- ³⁸ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 395
- ³⁹ Felstiner, *Selected Poems* p. 135.
- ⁴⁰ Gayatri Spivak uses the term in the context of a Derridean insider praxis in “Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Spivak” by Steve Paulson, 2016 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/critical-intimacy-interview-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak>.
- ⁴¹ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 207.
- ⁴² Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 273.
- ⁴³ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 251.
- ⁴⁴ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 247.
- ⁴⁵ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 261.



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- ⁴⁶ For a discussion of “Radix, Matrix” and the possible meanings of the word “Zeugen” see Derrida *Sovereignties in Question*, New York: Fordham University Press (2005), where he also traces different procreative imageries used by Celan in many of his poems.
- ⁴⁷ The last three lines of ‘Aschenglorie’ run like this: “Niemand/ zeugt für den/ Zeugen”, Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 260.
- ⁴⁸ Shakespeare’s sonnet 1 has this line: ‘His tender heir might bear his memory’. This clearly shows how bearing is not only associated with heiring or giving birth, it is also used in the sense of carrying forward the memory, precisely what a witness does. For a discussion see Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* London; Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare (2010), p.112
- ⁴⁹ Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p. 205.
- ⁵⁰ Szondi, *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays* Translated by Harvey Mendelsohn. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 168.
- ⁵¹ Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, 165.
- ⁵² Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, 168.
- ⁵³ Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 206.
- ⁵⁴ Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 206.
- ⁵⁵ Runia, “Presence”, *History and Theory* 45, (2006), p. 17, as quoted in Day, *The Philosophy of History*, London: Viva-Continuum, (2008), p.13.
- ⁵⁶ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question* p. 90.
- ⁵⁷ Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Rediscovering a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto*. 2007. London: Penguin Books, (2009).
- ⁵⁸ Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 623.
- ⁵⁹ Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p. 65.
- ⁶⁰ Pierre Joris elaborates on the ‘turn’ in Celan’s language in the “Introduction” to *Paul Celan: Breathturn*, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Classics Press, (1995). pp. 13–51.
- ⁶¹ Joris, *Breathturn*, p. 17.
- ⁶² Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 89.
- ⁶³ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 57.
- ⁶⁴ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 66.
- ⁶⁵ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 56.
- ⁶⁶ Day, *The Philosophy of History*, pp. 19–20.



⁶⁷ Derrida, *Sovereignties*, 75. Derrida explores the themes of martyrdom witnessing and regeneration in his reading of Celan's poetic body in this word. His reading is very important in understanding some of the mysteries of Celan as a witness-writer. However, a more elaborate discussion of this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁶⁸ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 251.

⁶⁹ Joris, *Breathturn*, p. 107.

⁷⁰ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p.250

⁷¹ Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p. 220.

⁷² Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p. 220.

⁷³ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 408.

⁷⁵ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 404.

⁷⁶ Felstiner, *Selected Poems*, p. 407.

⁷⁷ Ryland, Ryland, "'Wenn wir weiterleben wollen, muß dieser Satz widerlegt werden': Rewriting Adorno in the debate on post-Holocaust poetry', *Focus on German Studies* 13 (2006), pp. 63–64.

⁷⁸ Ryland, p. 51.

⁷⁹ Ryland, pp. 52–53.

⁸⁰ Ryland, p. 53.

⁸¹ Zilcosky, "Poetry after Auschwitz? Celan and Adorno Revisited," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*

für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 79 (2005), p.671. Ryland shows how earlier scholars like Michael Rothberg and Rolf Tiedemann proposed similar ideas (66).

⁸² Zilcosky, p. 672.

⁸³ Zilcosky, p. 672.

⁸⁴ Zilcosky, pp. 672–673.

⁸⁵ I am borrowing the idea of minor literature from Deleuze and Guattari's book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁸⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* Translated by E.B. Ashton. London: Routledge, (2004), p.363. Incidentally one of the finest biographies of Kafka, written by the Holocaust scholar Saul Friedländer, is titled *Franz Kafka: The Poet of Shame and Guilt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) where soul searching and anxiety are associated with these peculiar existential sensibilities (pp. 5–6). In this, Friedlander and Deleuze and Guattari seem to agree that Kafka's complicated identities as a Jew and a minority contributed to his literary projects far more practically and politically, instead of mystically, than have been previously thought.

⁸⁷ Adorno, p. 362.



⁸⁸ Whereas Donald Trump raised the bogey of White Supremacy in America, Germany and France are experiencing a surge of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments. Italy is no exception. Brazil was being governed by a far right president, Jair Bolsonaro, even a year back, bringing in an ecological disaster in the form of a destruction of the Amazon rainforest, and the more recent Russia-Ukrainian war is being fought over the alleged rise of the Neo-Nazis, among other reasons.

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