

# In dialogue with Thomas Merton:

## Paul Celan's Poetry after Auschwitz

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### Introduction

Paul Celan was a German-speaking Jewish poet who survived the Holocaust. He was born on 23 November 1920 in Czernowitz, which belonged until the end of the First World War to the Austrian-Hungarian empire; then to the kingdom of Romania. Before the Second World War the region around Czernowitz had a large German ethnic group, mainly Jews, who cultivated German culture there. During the Second World War this region of Bukowina was alternately occupied by the Soviet Red Army and Hitler's German forces. After the war, Bukowina became part of the Ukraine.

Celan's parents were deported, then murdered in Transnistria Nazi concentration death camps in June 1943. Paul, who narrowly escaped by being absent from home at the time of his parents' deportation, was later brought to a local work camp, which he survived. After the war he lived for a short time in Bucharest and Vienna, and finally settled in Paris. He was a translator of poetry and a lecturer at the *École Normale Supérieure*. His work comprises ten volumes of poetry, as well as prose and recorded lectures. In April 1970 he committed suicide by drowning in the river Seine in Paris.

All of Celan's work was influenced by his own experience of the Holocaust. He strongly suffered from the so-called survivor syndrome. One of his former childhood friends recalls that Celan 'suffered a severe psychic shock he never overcame and felt a heavy burden of conscience – the thought that maybe he could have prevented his parents' murder in the camp, if he had gone with them.'<sup>1</sup>

Celan wrote most of his poetry between 1945 and 1970, during

which time two philosophers played an important role in post-war Germany. One was Martin Heidegger; the other Theodor W. Adorno. Celan studied their work intensively, corresponded with them, and met them in person.

Heidegger was best known for his philosophy of existence, though he did not want to be addressed as an existentialist. Whilst Celan was fascinated by Heidegger's work, he was ambivalent about Heidegger as a person, because of his early liaison with the Nazi-party. Adorno, on the other hand, was of Jewish origin like Celan, and had returned to Germany after the war from exile in the United States. Adorno was a philosopher and sociologist, for whom the work of Freud, Marx and Hegel were essential to his critical theory of society.

Thomas Merton mentions Celan only once, writing in his journal on February 13, 1966 that Celan is someone he wanted to read. We do not know whether Merton actually managed to read him or, if he did, what the impact was. By gaining an impression of Celan's work with Merton in mind, we can however let these two poet-writers meet in our imagination, perhaps to detect some common thread running through both men's work.

Before diving into some of Celan's poetry let me make two more points which, I believe, are necessary to our consideration of his poetry. First, we need to be aware that after the Holocaust poetry could not seamlessly continue from where it has left off before. There is the famous quote from Adorno, 'that writing poetry after the Shoah would be barbaric'. Later, after meeting Celan in person and reading his poetry, Adorno revised this verdict, saying that: 'Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.'<sup>2</sup> Secondly, Celan chose Paris as a place of permanent residence, but continued to write poetry in German. It may have been the language of the murderers of his people, his parents and relatives, but it was also his mother tongue. Celan once said that 'only in your mother tongue can one speak the truth'. As such his poetry moves amidst the ambiguity and antagonism of murder and mother language.

I want to explore three poems from Celan from different periods of his life, 'Todesfuge', 'Psalm' and 'WEGGEBEIZT'

### Todesfuge

This poem, Celan's most famous, is from 1944-45. In English the title means Deathfuge.<sup>3</sup> The poem, of 36 lines arranged into 8 stanzas, opens

as follows:

Black Milk of daybreak we drink it at evening  
 we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night  
 we drink and we drink  
 we shovel a grave in the air where you won't lie too cramped  
 A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes  
 he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland  
     your golden hair Margareta  
 he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling  
     he whistles his hound to come close

In 'Deathfugue' there is a polyphony of voices: the 'he' (the concentration camp guardian) might be the counterpoint ('contrapunctus' in music language) to the 'we' (the dying Jews). For Ruth Klüger the poem also reveals a fugue-like compositional pattern of a world which comes apart at the seams (German: *aus den Fugen geraten*), yet connects through the musical consolation of a fugue.<sup>4</sup> Because of this melodiousness and apparent harmony, Celan later distanced himself from the poem.

According to John Felstiner, Celan's American biographer, the poem 'has startled its listeners, shocking some and convincing others by its metaphors: milk that is black, graves dug in air, hair of ash, dances fiddled for gravediggers. These embellish the raw matter of Auschwitz, reviewers complained. But they aren't metaphors at all, they're plain fact, survivors claim.'<sup>5</sup>

Black Milk of daybreak we drink it at evening

Milk is first of all the most nourishing food, and in many cultures the symbol for fecundity. We are reminded of Exodus 33.3 where God tells Moses and the people of Israel to, 'Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey'. For Felstiner, black milk is a flagrant metaphor, asserting something contrary to fact in order to convey fact. The metaphor is extreme, bittersweet, nullifying the nourishment vital to humankind. But maybe this is no metaphor; maybe camp inmates were given a liquid simply described as 'black milk'. If so, Black Milk insists that, in Nazi-ridden Europe, reality overwhelmed the surreal. In German-occupied Paris, a Gestapo officer asked Picasso about his famous painting, 'Guernica', depicting civilians suffering from German air raids on the

town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The Gestapo officer asks Picasso, 'Did you do this?', gesturing at the painting. Picasso replied, 'No, you did.'<sup>6</sup>

A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes  
 he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland  
     your golden hair Margareta

The serpent is a symbol of evil in many cultures. For the Jews and Christians it is the serpent from Genesis 3, who seduces Eve to taste the forbidden fruit. The serpent has the form of the letter 'S' – it might stand for Hitler's SS, those in charge of the death camps. Deutschland/Germany (the only time Celan uses the word 'Deutschland' in all of his poems) is connected with darkness, but the camp commander has his romantic feelings of love and writes to his beloved Margareta with the golden hair. Krystina Zywulska, an inmate and survivor, who had to work in an office at Auschwitz, recalls that she noted that the commander was writing love letters to someone called Eve. She says that he could love, he was longing for this Eve while she was writing and recording death files.<sup>7</sup>

Merton writes in 'Auschwitz: A Family Camp' about the euphemistic or cynical language of Nazi propaganda: 'We have learned to associate the incredible brutality and inhumanity of Auschwitz with ordinary respectable people.'<sup>8</sup> One might also add that such people are not incapable of developing loving, romantic feelings.

The third stanza ends:

he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland  
     your golden hair Margareta  
 Your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air  
     where you won't lie too cramped

Crystina Zywulska recounts that 500 young women, after they had been shaven and deloused, were cramped in a shack, then dead bodies clinging to each other were brought out of the gas chambers and brought to the crematorium. For Felstiner, Celan's laconic phrase gives a proverbial ring to the notion that these prisoners would no longer be jammed into rough narrow bunks, once they have gone up in smoke. Then Shulamith with the ashen hair contrasts with Margareta with the golden hair, representing the German Arian woman, perhaps like Gretchen, the heroine of *Faust* by Goethe, revered as the quintessence of the Age of Enlightenment. Shulamith, by contrast, brings to mind the Jewish heroine

in the Song of Solomon.

The next stanza starts:

He shouts dig this earth deeper you lot there  
you others sing up and play

It was common practice in the death camps to force the captives to sing on all occasions. There were also complete orchestras which had to play for the amusement of the camp commanders. According to documents displayed in Yad Vashem (The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem) a Jewish survivor remembers that they had to lie down on the earth and sing, even if there were snow or ice, mud or sludge. The camp commanders were going through the rows with riding crops, abusing everyone who was not singing loud enough. Rudolf Reder, one of only two survivors of the Belzec extermination camp, testified that he and other inmates had to drag the bodies of people who had only just died. As they dragged them to the huge mass graves, the orchestra played all the time.

At the end of the poem Celan appeals again to Margareta and Shulamith. In Felstiner's words: 'Darkened by ash, "Shulamith" ends the poem holding onto what Nazism tried to erase: a rooted identity. Archaic, inalienable, she has the last word, not to mention the silence after.'<sup>9</sup>

Even though the indescribable horrors of the Shoah committed by Nazi Germany were a clear, one-of-a-kind break with the history of civilization, this conflict has its older roots in the Christianity of the Middle Ages, which prepared the ground for later pogroms. In Jewish-Christian terms it is the conflict between *ecclesia* (the Christian Church) and the *bet kneset* or Jewish Synagogue. Statues of Ecclesia and Synagoga facing each other are still to be seen in many Gothic Cathedrals like those in Strasbourg (France) or Bamberg (Germany). Here in England there are remains of these pairs, after damage or destruction in the English Reformation, in the cathedrals of Rochester, Lincoln, Salisbury, and Winchester. The two figures are shown as women, both usually young and attractive. Ecclesia is generally adorned with a crown, chalice and cross-topped staff, looking confidently forward, whilst Synagoga is blindfolded and drooping, carrying a broken lance (possibly an allusion to the Holy Lance that stabbed Christ) and the Tablets of the Law of Torah scrolls that may even be slipping from her hand.

### Psalm

The second poem, written almost twenty years later, in 1963, is shorter,

consisting of 20 lines arranged into 4 stanzas.<sup>10</sup> The whole poem speaks on behalf of the dead victims of the Shoah, who are no longer able to speak for themselves. It opens:

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

The book of Psalms is the most important Jewish and Christian prayer book, used for private and liturgical prayer. Praying the psalms involves a direct communication with God in praise, gratitude, lament or complaint. Since Celan's 'Psalm' apparently does not communicate with God but with 'no one', we might argue that it is not really a psalm but an Anti-Psalm. But is it?

The poem is full of biblical allusions: In the first stanza it is to Genesis 2.7.: '... then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.' But it might also be an allusion to the famous Golem narrative from Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the late 16th century rabbi of Prague, also known as the Maharal, who reportedly created a golem entirely from inanimate matter to defend the Prague ghetto from anti-Semitic attacks and pogroms.

Then there is the lamentation of such psalms as 103 [Vulg. 104]: 'He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust', and: 'Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.... Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly clings to the ground. Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!' In the Jewish tradition 'to incant' can have the meaning of 'to bring to life'. Does Celan want to prosecute a claim for a re-creation of the victims of the Shoah?

At the end of the first stanza the term 'no one' is repeated, to give it greater emphasis. Then in the second stanza which starts, 'Blessed art thou, No One', the No One (now with capital letters) becomes a name for someone who is directly addressed. The lamentation of the first stanza changes into a benediction, which is derived from the famous 'Baruch ata Adonai elohenu' (Blessed or praised are you, Lord God). Since the name of the addressee is 'No One', does this mean that his existence is doubted? Is the omission of the name of God in line with the Jewish and also the apophatic mystic tradition? Or is the refusal to pronounce God's name an avoidance of exploiting or desecrating the Holy Name?<sup>11</sup> In a comment on

this poem, Jacques Derrida says: 'To address no one is not exactly to address any one. To speak to no one, risking each time, singularly, that there might be no one to bless, no one who can bless – is this not the only chance for blessing? For an act of faith? What would a blessing be that was sure of itself? A judgement, a certitude, a dogma.'<sup>12</sup>

In the next stanza, the 'we' is also identified as 'A Nothing':

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

Surprisingly, however, the 'we' of the poem, even though it is A Nothing, is 'blooming'. The 'No-One's-Rose' are the people of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The last stanza is full of symbolic meaning:

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

Although one might be reminded on the symbols stemming from Christ's passion, that is not what Celan intended, as he once said himself. Rather, Celan seems to be drawing from the Jewish mystical tradition (The Kabbala) with which he was very familiar. Rose and corona represent the 'Schechin', originally understood as the female indwelling and presence of God in the world. The Kabbala distinguishes between the upper and the lower Schechina, where the upper is the eternal sphere of salvation, to where everything returns, and the lower is identified with the people of Israel. The line 'our stamen heavenwaste' speaks of the unifying of the upper Schechina with the lower. However it is emphasized that every grace that comes from above needs the impetus and initiative from below, the human acts.<sup>14</sup>

With the poem's closing lines one can imagine the still faithful Jews who under extreme conditions in the death camps did not stop singing the Psalms, and with the 'Sch'ma Jisrae' (Hear, O Israel) on their

lips, went into their deaths. Their prayers which were addressed to the most hidden God included praise, gratefulness, lament and petition in the face of the 'thorn' and, beyond that 'thorn', beyond the barbed wire and annihilation in the crematorium fire, they trusted themselves to a longed-for union with their God.

### WEGGEBEIZT

In English, the title of this short poem of 21 lines arranged in 3 stanzas, is BITTEN AWAY.<sup>15</sup> This poem is the closing poem of a volume titled *Atemwende* (Breath-turn) from 1965.<sup>16</sup> The subject of the poem is to tell the story of language in its different facets.

BITTEN AWAY by the  
radiance-wind of your language,  
the motley gossip of pseudo-  
experience – the hundred-  
tongued My-  
poem, the Lie-noem.

In this first stanza, false language appears in different forms, as the motley gossip of pseudo-experience, the hundred-tongued My-poem, the Lie-noem. The German word for pseudo-experience is 'das Anerlebte', a neologism by Celan, where the 'An' before the 'erlebt' refers to something which has only scratched the surface. It means that there was no real, underlying, genuine experience but only chatter about something which is known from hearsay, then becoming pretended experience.

At this point I want to add two personal comments. Firstly, with respect to 'Das Anerlebte' (the pseudo-experience), I am reminded of the propaganda of the right-wing populist movements in most of our European countries. They stir abstracted fear of refugees and foreigners and are, paradoxically, most successful in regions where the percentage of foreigners is actually the lowest. In regions where, on the other hand, the population has long lasting experience with a multi-cultural environment, people are much less prone for racist propaganda and the populist promise of easy solutions. Secondly, what can be also seen in current public discussion of the refugee crisis is a tendency to depersonalize human suffering, by creating neologisms. Examples of such cynic language are 'Flüchtlingsschwemme' (refugee-flood), 'Überfremdung' (foreign infiltration) or 'Sozialtourismus' (social tourism). With large numbers of refugees coming into Europe, the

individual fate and personal suffering of the refugee is often forgotten or neglected, as only depersonalized, anonymous numbers seem to have any relevance. Let me turn to Merton, who writes in *Conjectures* that:

This is one of the few real pleasures left to modern man: the illusion that he is thinking for himself when, in fact, someone else is doing his thinking for him. And this someone else is not a personal authority, the great mind of a genial thinker, it is the mass mind, the general 'they', the anonymous whole. One is left, therefore, not only with the sense that one has thought things out for himself, but that he has also reached the correct answer without difficulty – the answer which is shown to be correct because it is the answer of everybody. Since it is at once my answer and the answer of everybody, how should I resist it?<sup>17</sup>

From these pseudo-experiences follow all the motley gossip, the double-talk and lies that may be either intentional or subconscious. In order to destroy this falsity ('to bite it away' as the poem says) a strong opposing language like a turbulent wind is needed. When the whirlwind has done its duty, the 'you' of the poem is released to go on its pilgrimage into rough mountain landscapes. At the end the pilgrim arrives, as a reward for his efforts, at the glacier's welcoming chambers and tables. The last stanza finally comes to an apparently conciliatory end, when deep in the time crevasse, by the honeycomb-ice, there waits a breath-crystal, an unequivocal witness:

Deep  
In the time crevasse  
by the  
honeycomb-ice  
there waits, a breathcrystal,  
your unannullable  
witness.

Celan recommended that we dive into these breath-taking images, allowing them to penetrate our imagination, reading them repeatedly. For the reader of Merton, there are resonances with the notion of the 'true self', the indestructible 'point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion'.<sup>18</sup>

I found it most helpful to look for more guidance in Celan's two speeches made on the occasions when he received literature awards, first from the city of Bremen and then the Georg Büchner prize from the city of Darmstadt. In the Büchner prize speech he explains that for him there is no absolute poem (with reference only to itself, an idea pursued by the poet Stéphane Mallarmé), since every poem is written from the specific date inscribed into the poem. For Celan this date is (and here he follows Büchner's Lenz, the protagonist of the 1836 novella with the same title) the 20th January. Most likely he is referring to 20th January 1942, when the Wannsee Conference took place. The objective of this conference was to ensure the cooperation of administrative Nazi leaders of various government departments in the implementation of the so-called 'final solution to the Jewish question', whereby most of the Jews of German-occupied Europe would be deported to camps in Poland and murdered.

### Conclusion

For Celan, 'a poem as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps.'<sup>19</sup>

In a time of smartphones, Google, Facebook and Twitter, communication has apparently lost all its barriers of space and time. Information becomes globally and indefinitely available. However this kind of communication is often superficial and has an insipid taste; it is often only communication for communication's sake. And paradoxically people seem not to be better informed but more and more influenced and manipulated by mass media and populist political leaders, who use the social networks to distort reality and to convey their populist, racist and nationalist messages, and accordingly misuse language for their own inhumane purposes.

For Merton, 'all [word] magic is a ruthless venture in manipulation.'<sup>20</sup> True poetry, however, is and must be a different kind of communication. For Celan, having lost everything and everyone of his relatives in the Shoah, 'there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language.'<sup>21</sup> Celan's poetry goes below the surface of our ordinary speech and often beyond any rational argument. From there it unfolds its own magic and power if the reader is prepared to devote himself to it in repeated readings. Then the reader might be transformed by the power of the words and the message in the bottle will have reached its heartland.

## Notes

1. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 26.
2. Theodor W. Adorno: *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 355, translation by John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 232.
3. Paul Celan: *Die Gedichte, Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 40-41, translation by John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, pp. 31-32.
4. See <http://literaturkritik.de/id/20279>
5. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 27.
6. See also John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, pp. 33-34.
7. Krystina Zywułska, *Tanz, Mädchen. Vom Warschauer Getto nach Auschwitz. Ein Überlebensbericht.* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag 1988), pp. 321-322.
8. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace, The Social Essays, Edited and with an Introduction by Willam H. Shannon* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), p. 285.
9. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 41.
10. Paul Celan: *Die Gedichte, Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 132, translation by John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 167.
11. See Jan-Heiner Tück, *Gelobet seist Du Niemand, Paul Celans Dichtung – eine theologische Provokation* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 2000), pp 76-77.
12. Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question – The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 42.
13. Hosea 14.5. reads: 'I will be as the dew to Israel; he will put out flowers like a rose, and send out his roots like Lebanon.'
14. See Jan-Heiner Tück, *Gelobet seist Du Niemand*, pp. 82-85.
15. Paul Celan: *Die Gedichte*, p. 180, translation by John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, pp. 218-219.
16. Paul Celan: *Atemwende*, here quoted from Paul Celan: *Die Gedichte*
17. Thomas Merton: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p.238.
18. Thomas Merton: *Conjectures*, p. 158.
19. Paul Celan: *Der Meridian und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988) p. 39, translation by John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 115.
20. Thomas Merton: *Message to Poets in Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 159.
21. Paul Celan: *Der Meridian und andere Prosa*, p. 38, translation by John Felstiner: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 114.

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