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How to speak? Non-semantic representation of the Shoah in the writings of Paul Celan

The question of representation has always accompanied writings about the Shoah. The Shoah immediately calls to mind discussions about the impossibility of representing a traumatic experience and the problem of aesthetic forms, which tend to be too beautiful, too meaningful, too structured, and too close to chronological narration. Moreover, the term representation not only includes a dimension of presenting and describing, but also the problem of substitution and standing in place for someone or something.

When we consider the relationship between individual and collective trauma, the second meaning of the word representation warrants special attention. For what is at stake in Paul Celan's poetry is precisely this aspect of the expression and representation of trauma, not only as a problem of finding a poetic form for something unrepresentable but also as the question of substitution and speaking for those who are absent. What do we mean by saying that Celan's poetry deals with memory? What or whom does the poem try to remember and how?

On the one hand, there is Celan's individual trauma, the death of his mother in a concentration camp, his exile from his home and his language. On the other hand, there is a constant attempt in his poems to speak in memory of all the victims whose stories can never be told. But is it possible to speak "for the other", to express the suffering of the other, without claiming to take his or her position, understand and thus replace the other by ignoring the gap between his or her absence and the gesture of creating a presence in language? In other words – how can poetry find a way to mourn and remember that respects the singularity of the victims and recognizes the impossibility of sharing the abysmal experience of trauma without ending in silence? Dealing with the representation of trauma raises a more general, and for poetry quite decisive, problem of memory: is there a form of mourning and remembering that does not try to re-present what has been lost, thereby convert it into an object of the remembering subject? Is it possible to remember what is absent in and through language without having the person who is speaking appropriate such memories?

For Celan, the problem of representing a collective trauma in poetic language is thus the problem of how to do justice to the victims without monopolizing their experience and without appropriating and annexing the Other. The poet must deal with the paradox of the absolute singularity of experience and represent experience in a language which must always be a common language, repeatable and shareable, in order to be comprehensible and communicable.

In the following I would like to show how Celan's poetics deals with this link between ethics and aesthetics inherent in the problem of representation. I will argue that Celan's poetry undergoes a significant change, in the course of this development, which Celan turns from expressing his personal destiny and its connection to collective trauma to a form of writing which no longer seeks to re-present the absent but instead aims to refer to the wound in language itself. Although the crucial theme in all of Celan's poems remains the question of whether and how we can remember the Jews murdered in the Holocaust, the forms of representing this memory change fundamentally in different phases of his work. *These shifts in representation can be described as a gradual disconnection of representation of the*

experience of the victims from personal biographical reminiscence; as part of this development, Celan's poems increasingly avoid any mention of the Shoah at all. This refusal to refer directly to the Shoah is expressed on the level of language as something which I would term "gradual dis-semination", not in the sense of Derrida's "disseminacion", but rather in the sense of a non-semantic, non-thematic representation of the Holocaust.

How the connection is established in Celan's early poems between personal experiences, such as the death of Celan's mother, and the Shoah in general can be seen in a poem like "Eспенbaum" ("Aspen tree")¹:

ESPENBAUM, dein Laub blickt weiß ins Dunkel.
Meiner Mutter Haar ward nimmer weiß.

Löwenzahn, so grün ist die Ukraine.
Meine blonde Mutter kam nicht heim.

Regenwolken, säumst du an den Brunnen?
Meine leise Mutter weint' für alle.

Runder Stern, du schlingst die goldne Schleife.
Meiner Mutter Herz ward wund vor Blei.

Eichne Tür, wer hob dich aus den Angeln?
Meine sanfte Mutter kann nicht kommen.

[Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.
My mother's hair was never white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My yellow-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, above the well, do you hover?
My quite mother weeps for everyone.

Round star, you wind the golden loop.
My mother's heart was ripped by lead.

Oaken door, who lifted you off your hinges?
My gentle mother cannot return.]

Since space is too limited to allow a closer look at the entire poem, I just want to point to the third stanza: "My mother weeps for everyone". Unfortunately, the translation misses the most important characteristic of the whole poem, that is, the elision of the vowel in the word "weint'/ weep". Whereas all the other stanzas that talk about the mother, with the exception of the final stanza, are written in the past tense, thus creating a clear opposition to references to nature, which are written in the present tense, this line is quite ambiguous. Phonetically, it can also be interpreted as the present tense, because of the omission of the 'e', indicating the

Imperfekt. The victims' pain and the survivors' grief cannot be limited temporally. Although the poem is apparently dedicated to the individual memory of Celan's mother, her grief also stands for the other victims, thus opening the poem for other victims.

In the course of Celan's writing, such direct allusions to his own history slowly disappear, and we can generally say that, after publication of the third volume, *Sprachgitter*, in 1959, the Shoah is no longer mentioned at all in Celan's poems. Celan's texts reveal an increasing tendency to refuse to deal with memories and the poet becomes more and more aware of a crucial problem: that a language which is itself so deeply marked by the catastrophe of the Shoah can no longer function as a sign. The body of the significant itself has been wounded by the event it is to denote. Or, as Celan stated in a speech delivered in Bremen in 1958, when he was awarded the city's Literature Prize:

"In the midst of the losses there was one thing that remained attainable, near and not lost: language. It, language, was preserved, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to go through its own answerlessness, go through its dreadful silence, go through the thousand darknesses of deadly speech. It went through it and gave no words for what had happened; but it went through these events. Went through and was allowed to come to light again, "enriched" by all that."²

How the poems try to open up a space for mourning in language itself without claiming to speak for the victims can be seen in a poem like "Die Schleuse" ("The sluice").³ This poem connects memory and poetry by searching for a "word following the image of silence, a word capable of opening up a dimension of memory in the poem and one that has – this becomes clear from the very beginning of the poem – no transcendental consolation to offer.

DIE SCHLEUSE

Über all dieser deiner
Trauer: kein
zweiter Himmel

.....

An einen Mund,
dem es ein Tausendwort war,
verlor –
verlor ich ein Wort,
das mir verblieben war:
Schwester.

An
die Vielgötterei
verlor ich ein Wort, das mich suchte:
Kaddisch.

Durch
die Schleuse mußte ich,
das Wort in die Salzflut zurück-
und hinaus- und hinüberzuretten.
Jiskor.

THE SLUICE

Over all this grief of
yours: no
second heaven.

.....

To a mouth,
for which it was a myriad-word,
I lost –
lost a word
left over for me:
Sister.

To
many-godded-ness
I lost a word that sought me:
Kaddish.

Through
the sluice I had to go,
to save the word back into,
and across, and beyond the brine:
Yiskor.

"Over all this grief of yours, no second heaven." As in "The Meridian", to which I will refer later on, heaven itself has become abysmal, and the you is "exposed to the open in the most uncanny manner". Instead of opening up a second heaven, in the sense of a transcendental space of protection and comfort, the poem opens up a perforated line, indicating frontier and passage at the same time. This line is the graphic representation of the motif of passage and going-through to which the title alludes. The void between the verses is thus made visible without being filled. Whereas normally a poem comes out of silence and ends in silence, here the perforated line transfers silence into the interior of the poem, as a kind of speechless gap in its body. The line separates the mourners from each other and from the absent object of their mourning. The isolation produced in the first stanza by the irretrievable loss of the transcendent is underlined by this perforated line, which separates the grief of You from the speech of I.

What is shown in the following verses is that the loss must be understood above all as a loss of language's ability to denote a singular referent. The uniqueness of language has been destroyed; the word 'Sister' has become a myriad-word. Words are no longer appropriate for establishing a relationship to the absent other, neither to humans nor to God. The word Kaddish is lost as well.

As the Kaddish is a traditional dirge, prayed in common during the funeral and during mourning, the poem shows that such a common gesture of mourning and commemoration is no longer possible. What can be rescued is the word Yiskor. Yiskor refers to a silent prayer of each mourner, a prayer that does not establish community but instead formulates the silent wish that "He may remember". By remaining unspoken, the prayer protects memory from becoming a part of repetitive, ordinary language.

The loss of the Kaddish, on the one hand, underlines the painful impossibility of a community of mourners, but the rescuing of the Yiskor indicates how poetic language is still capable of opening up the possibility of memory. The Yiskor neither establishes a community nor does it constitute a second heaven. But it can formulate a silent, individual grief that no longer can be communicated, understood, and shared. What remains inside the poem is a void that cannot be filled semantically and must be filled by the silent prayer of each individual.

Celan's Darmstadt address, "The Meridian", extends this dis-semination of memory to a discussion of the paradox of singularization and encounter beyond representation. This is expressed most explicitly in a passage in which Celan speaks of the poem as a dialogue in the present:

"Yet whatever is addressed and through being named has become a Thou, as it were, brings its being-other also into such a present. Even in the here and now of the poem [...] even in this immediacy and proximity, the poem allows the other to participate by speaking its ownmost: its time."⁴

What is at stake in the poem is the encounter with the ownmost of the other, that is, the singular, inalienable time of the Other, his or her finitude. What one encounters in the way the poem speaks to us and what one can never gain possession of is the being of the Other, his or her mortality; it resonates in the present of the poem without being named. How this speaking-with of the time of the Other is carried out in the encounter becomes clear when we take a look at Lucile, Camille's lover in Büchner's *Danton's Death*, the person of whom Celan says "she may be poetry."⁵

"The Meridian" refers to the capture and execution of Danton, Camille and their friends. The scene on Revolution Square is described as follows:

"The carts pull up and stop. The companions are there, all of them, Danton, Camille, the others. They all make speeches, well-wrought speeches, even here; they deliver them to the man, speeches about [...] their collective willingness to go to death. Fabre, indeed, wants to die twice; they are all at their very best [...].

And here, where everything is coming to an end, in the long minutes, when Camille – no, not he himself, but a companion –, when this Camille theatrically [...] dies a death we come to sense as his own only two scenes later from a word that is quite foreign to him – yet so close to him, [...] there is Lucile once again with her sudden exclamation: 'Long live the King!'"⁶

We should have a closer look at this passage, because it is here, where the two possibilities of encounter that Celan is dealing with came together. First we have the "shared going to death" of Danton and Camille. By trying to close the gap inscribed in death and establishing an encounter based on their fusion in the moment of death, they are unable to leave behind the artificial realm of techné and rhetoric. Camille is thus not "himself, but a companion". We can't read this death as his own. Experiencing this death as his own becomes possible "from a word that is quite foreign to him – yet so close to him". This word is Lucile's "Long live the king!", which Celan calls "the counter-word", an "act of freedom", "a step."⁷ It is a mortal word, a word by which Lucile is taking over her own death; the step is a step towards the abyss. This word is not spoken to anyone, it has no intent and does not try to convey a message. It is a word of isolation and singularity, and yet it is this word that enables us to experience Camille's death as his own. This word is foreign but near and in this foreign proximity lies the enigma of encounter: an encounter which takes place on the border of one's own finitude and which can never fulfill the desire for unity.

By taking her own death upon herself with the cry "Long live the king!", Lucille reveals that, in this experience of total isolation, there is also a moment – a gift, as it were – of encounter. Lucille's foreign nearness does not lead to the theatrical unification proclaimed in the "collective willingness to go to their death." What occurs instead of unification is an encounter with the Other that makes it possible for his or her time to resonate, as it were: a co-speaking (*Mitsprechen*) of his or her mortality.

Thus, speaking-with (*mitsprechen*) can only mean "pointing into the Open" in such a way that the temporality of the Other in his or her otherness can break in, without the speaker being able to identify with otherness. The poem cannot speak "for the other," but it can open itself to his or her temporality by speaking "at the edge of itself. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-here'".⁸

For Celan the question of encounter with the victims has to be asked in a language which is itself deeply marked by the caesura of history. For him every form of "We" has always already been undermined and brought to its limits. The fundamental experience that Celan wants the reader to undergo when reading his poems is the experience of a memory which cannot represent the person who is remembered. What must be remembered is death in a time of "terrible silence", a time for which language cannot find any words and which cannot be narrated.

As Hannah Arendt has pointed out, "Each era to which its own past has become such a problem, as it has to ours, must finally discover the phenomenon of language: because it is language where the past ineradicably is dwelling, and it is in language, were all attempts to get ultimately rid of it, are doomed to failure."⁹ Celan's poetry can be read as such a discovery of the phenomenon of language. His poems must be understood as a permanent reflection on

the conditions which make one's own speech possible – not in the sense of a hermetic closure but in the sense of a constant search for the historic dimension of language. For it is in language that we can find the traces of history with which we will never come to terms. I think by identifying language itself as the place where we are forced to confront ourselves with the traces and wounds of history, Celan finds a way to speak about the collectivity of trauma without destroying the singular dimension of each experience and without letting the reader appropriate this singular experience in the course of reading.

References

¹ Paul Celan, 'Espanbaum', in: Mohn und Gedächtnis, Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, ed. by Beda Allemann und Stefan Reichert, Bd. 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1983, p. 40. English translation by Michael Hamburger, Paul Celan: Poems, A Bilingual Edition, New York: Persea Books 1980, p. 32.

² "Erreichbar, nah und unverloren blieb inmitten der Verluste dies eine: die Sprache. Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem. Aber sie mußte nun hindurchgehen durch ihre eigenen Antwortlosigkeiten, hindurchgehen durch furchtbares Verstummen, hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede. Sie ging hindurch und gab keine Worte her für das, was geschah; aber sie ging durch dieses Geschehen. Ging hindurch und durfte wieder zutage treten, 'angereichert' von all dem.", Paul Celan, Ansprache anlässlich der Entgegennahme des Literaturpreises der Freien Hansestadt Bremen, in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Bd.3, pp. 185-86. English translation by Walter Billeter, Paul Celan. Prose Writings & Selected Poems, Victoria: paper castle 1977, p. 21.

³ Paul Celan, 'Die Schleuse', in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Bd. 1, Frankfurt/M., S. 222, English translation by Joachim Neugroschel, Paul Celan, Speech-Grille and Selected Poems, New York, Dutton 1971, p. 181.

⁴ "Aber in diese Gegenwart bringt das Angesprochene und durch Nennung gleichsam zum Du gewordene auch sein Anderssein mit. Noch im Hier und Jetzt des Gedichts [...] noch in der Unmittelbarkeit und Nähe läßt es das ihm, dem Anderen, Eigenste mitsprechen: dessen Zeit.", Paul Celan, Der Meridian, in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Band 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986, pp. 198f. English translation by David F. Krell for this paper.

⁵ "Das, meine Damen und Herren, hat keinen ein für allemal feststehenden Namen, aber ich glaube, es ist ... die Dichtung.", Paul Celan, Der Meridian, in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Band 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986, p. 190.

⁶ "Die Wagen kommen angefahren und halten. Die Mitgefahrenen sind da, vollzählig. Danton, Camille, die anderen. Sie alle haben, auch hier, Worte, kunstreiche Worte, sie bringen sie an den Mann, es ist [...] vom gemeinsamen In-den-Tod-gehen die Rede, Fabre will sogar doppelt sterben, jeder ist auf der Höhe [...]. Und hier, wo alles zu Ende geht, in den langen Augenblicken, da Camille – nein nicht er, nicht er selbst, sondern ein Mitgefahrener – , da dieser Camille theatralisch [...] einen Tod stirbt, den wir erst zwei Szenen später, von einem ihm fremden – einen ihm so nahen Wort her, als den seinen empfinden können, [...] da ist Lucile [...] noch einmal da, mit ihrem plötzlichen 'Es lebe der König!'", Paul Celan, Der Meridian, in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Band 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986, p. 189. English translation by David F. Krell for this paper.

⁷ "Es ist ein Gegenwort, es ist das Wort, das den 'Draht' zerreißt, das Wort, das sich nicht mehr vor den 'Eckstehern und Paradehäulen der Geschichte' bückt, es ist ein Akt der Freiheit. Es ist ein Schritt.", Paul Celan, Der Meridian, in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Band 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986, p. 189.

⁸ "[...] das Gedicht behauptet sich am Rande seiner selbst; es ruft und holt sich, um bestehen zu können, unausgesetzt aus seinem Schon-nicht-mehr in sein Immer-noch zurück.", Paul Celan, Der Meridian, in: Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Band 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986, p. 197. English translation by David F. Krell for this paper.

⁹ "Jede Epoche, der ihre eigene Vergangenheit in einem solchen Maße zum Problem geworden ist wie der unseren, muß schließlich auf das Phänomen der Sprache stoßen: denn in der Sprache sitzt das Vergangene unausrottbar, an ihr scheitern alle Versuche, es endgültig loszuwerden.", Hannah Arendt, 'Walter Benjamin', in: Menschen in finsternen Zeiten, ed. by Ursula Ludz, München, Zürich: Piper 1989, p. 241 (my translation).

Short biographical note

Dr. phil. Anja Lemke was born in 1969 and studied German and Spanish literature, philosophy, and political science in Freiburg, Madrid and Hamburg. Her dissertation in 2001 was about Heidegger and Celan. After her time on the research staff of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and of the Institute for Cultural Studies in Essen, she was the scientific co-ordinator of the Graduiertenkolleg "Zeiterfahrung und ästhetische Wahrnehmung" at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, where she is currently working as lecturer (wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin) in the Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft.

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Citation Anja Lemke, Frankfurt am Main, How to speak? Non-semantic representation of the Shoah in the writings of Paul Celan. In: TRN-Newsletter 2, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, June 2004.

URL www.traumaresearch.net/focus2/lemke.htm

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