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Paul Celan's Other Reconsidered

There are still songs

On the dreary autumn day of October 16, 1963, in Paris, the forty-three-year-old poet Paul Celan wrote the first draft of one of the most memorable German poems of the twentieth century: “In den Flüssen” [In the Rivers].

In den Flüssen nördlich der Zukunft
werf ich das Netz aus, das du
zögernd beschwerst
mit von Steinen geschriebenen
Schatten. (Celan 1990, 14)

In the rivers north of the future
I cast the net, that you
hesitantly burden
with stone-written
shadows. (Celan 2001, 227)¹

The striking metaphor at the center of this poem is that of the rivers “north of the future.” While “rivers” and “north” are spatial nouns, “future” is temporal. How can anything be north of the future? Furthermore, if the future marks the time ahead of us in its entirety, how can we conceive of anything that would follow it – a time beyond time? Before trying to answer these questions, let us turn to another of Celan's unforgettable poems, “Fadensonnen” [Thread Suns], a poem he wrote only a month after drafting “In den Flüssen.”

FADENSONNEN
über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.
Ein baum-
hoher Gedanke
greift sich den Lichtton: es sind
noch Lieder zu singen jenseits
der Menschen. (Celan 1990, 26)

THREAD SUNS
above the gray-black wasteland.
A tree-

¹ The translation has been modified.

high thought
 grabs the optical soundtrack: there are
 still songs to be sung on the other side
 of mankind. (Celan 1980, 183)²

Like the poem “In the Rivers” with its shadows and stones, “Thread Suns” depicts a dark desolation. Yet the gloom of the first lines stands in stark contrast to images of what is open, of what may still come. Indeed, the image of “the other side of mankind” suggests a place and a time that are utterly outside our previous experiences of these categories of perception, an era of “songs” that will be different than what human history to date – the time of “gray-black wilderness” – has brought about.

Imagining a place and a time that are outside our given notions of space and time, the two poems offer us a unique perspective on Paul Celan's writing and thought. They express what I will call throughout this essay “futurity.” Futurity marks the ability of poetry to generate new metaphors and images, to create novel ways to view our past and present circumstances, as well as poetry's capacity to allow us to imagine a different human future by recognizing and learning to respect others. In other words, futurity is the capacity of poetic language not only to represent our past and present conditions, but also and significantly to produce new vocabularies and with them new, fuller modes of human being-in-the-world.³ In fact, I want to suggest, poetic language – even when it seems utterly focused on representing our given natural, social, or cultural conditions – creates the very language with which we may reshape them. This essay thus traces how some of Paul Celan's most memorable poems both reflect the gray-black realities of the twentieth century, especially the Shoah, but also at the same time project a distinctively prospective dimension. The poems I wish to discuss offer a new perspective on our postcatastrophic conditions, yet they also suggest a way to address them through language and even action. As we will see, the poems I present explore our capacity to have a future in spite of historical events of such magnitude that they seem to exclude the viability of a tomorrow altogether. To put it in broader terms: Celan addressed in his poetry and poetological writing some of the most significant questions that followed the man-made catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century, questions raised also in such divergent works as Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Sartre's *Existentialism is Humanism*, and (as

2 Alterations (verses 2 and 5) by Timothy Boyd.

3 Obviously, I am using the term “being-in-the-world” in its Heideggerian meaning (Heidegger 1979, 44).

we will later see) Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*: How can we envision a future humanity after the Shoah? What might that future consist of? What is the relationship between envisioning such a future and the human ability to engage in ethical and political action? As we will see, the answers Celan offers involve a turn to the other – an embrace of otherness.

Poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world

Before turning to Celan's poetry, I would like first to expand on the origin of the notion I call futurity. Celan's futurity, I believe, continues a distinctive tradition in modern literature and thought. In fact, metaphors such as "north of the future" call to mind a philosophical-aesthetic tradition that goes back to European Romanticism, but also found its way – via Nietzsche and Heidegger – to American (philosophical) Pragmatism and to Neopragmatism.⁴ Celebrating the power of the literary imagination to affect human circumstances, the British Romantic poet Percy Shelley famously underlined in his essay *Defence of Poetry* (1821, published 1840) "the electric life" that burns within the words of poets (Shelley 2002, 535). Shelley characterizes poets by their ability to move beyond the representation of nature and beyond individual and social circumstances to the making of utterly new ways to see the world and indeed to create it anew. "Poets," Shelley declares, "are [...] the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not [...] the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." (Shelley 2002, 535)

Shelley's notion of the poet as mirroring the shadow that futurity casts upon the present, as spelling out with innovative metaphors the promise and the challenge that the future holds, is echoed in the aesthetic thought of philosophers such as John Dewey, Charles Sanders Pierce, and William James, specifically in their conviction that the literary artwork creates novel modes of experience and "manners of living." (Gaskill 2008, 167) According to these central figures of American philosophical Pragmatism, art does not simply mirror our natural circumstances, our social and cultural realities – in short, how we live –, nor do poems express only the genius of the poet. Rather, poetry creates images that

⁴ I discuss this link, as well as the concept of futurity, as I understand it, in my book, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Eshel 2013).

expand our experience of the world. It broadens the pool of images that we draw on as we negotiate our identities. It contributes new elements to the mental and linguistic vocabulary that we use in thought, conversation, and action (Gaskill 2008, 169). By offering new ways to view and describe how we live and interact with each other, poetic language is capable of assisting us in reconfiguring our realities (Gaskill 2008, 171–172).

In this view, distinctive metaphors such as “rivers north of the future,” “songs beyond mankind,” and others to which we will soon turn do not only give us insight into a given historical condition, say, life following the trauma of the Shoah, but, crucially, they also enable us to reshape habits, feelings, social relations, and patterns of behavior. By pushing the boundaries of our given language through such thought-provoking metaphors as “rivers north of the future,” poetry may, in fact, prompt individual readers and their communities to think and even, possibly, to act (Gaskill 2008, 171–172). “For Shelley,” Richard Rorty notes, “the poet does not fit past events together in order to provide lessons for the future, but rather shocks us into turning our back on the past and incites hope that our future will be wonderfully different.” (Rorty 2007, 84)⁵

The striking metaphors of Paul Celan with which we began do precisely that: by combining space and time (“north” and “future”), they give us a sense of a time and of being-in-the-world that could be decidedly different from recent history.

By concentrating on this capacity of poetic language, on futurity, we gain a fruitful approach to Paul Celan's poetry and thought. In recent decades, many critics have studied Celan's oeuvre in its relation to European modernism (see for instance Baer 2000). Others have read his work as a poetic reflection of modern European history, especially the Shoah, or have traced the poet's dialogue with Jewish cultural memory and with Heidegger's philosophy. All of these approaches have yielded lasting insights into Celan's work. Focusing on futurity, however, we can trace a significant aspect of Celan's immensely rich work: we can outline how Celan's poems created a new vocabulary that may allow his readers to view themselves and their conditions in ways that they have not anticipated.

Futurity appears in Celan's poetry in multiple expressions. As we will see in the following section of this essay, Celan's struggles in the postwar German literary scene resulted not least from the radically unprecedented images he introduced into the realm of German poetry. Celan's work was often rejected precisely because it broadened the scope of what was considered an acceptable

⁵ Rorty referred on many occasions to his debt to the Romantic tradition. See, for example, his essay “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” (Rorty 1998).

modern German poem. On telling occasions, it was questioned precisely because it was perceived as introducing words, images and symbolic constellations into German poetry that had thus far been considered outside the scope of the ‘acceptable’, national language.⁶

Our discussion will then consider how Celan’s poetry expresses futurity by thematically pointing to what remains, to what is still possible in the face of the catastrophe. Concentrating on Paul Celan’s most significant poetological text, his so-called “Meridian” address, I will subsequently consider futurity as the potential of poetry to serve as what Celan calls “eine Schule wirklicher Menschlichkeit” [a school of genuine humanity] (Celan 1999, 130).⁷ Singing songs on “the other side of mankind,” I suggest, means forming a language that is different from ordinary speech. Poems that teach us to respect the uniqueness of poetic discourse, Celan insightfully claims, also instruct us to respect difference as such, to embrace alterity. I will conclude by relating futurity in Celan’s poetry and thought to what Hanna Arendt – another towering figure of German-Jewish thought – has called “natality:” the capacity of humans to begin anew, to set off, to alter their given circumstances regardless of how irreversible they may seem.

Digging as historical reference and as a poetic procedure

Let us first turn to history. Born by the name of Paul Pessach Antschel on November 23, 1920, Paul Celan grew up in Czernowitz, in the Bukowina. His peaceful childhood and youth ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Second World War. While Celan was interned in the forced labor camp of Tabaresti in July of 1942, his parents were deported to the area between the rivers Dnjester and Bug. For them, there was no future beyond these rivers: in August, 1942, Celan’s parents arrived at the concentration camp Michailowka. In the fall of the same year, Celan’s father died of typhoid. Soon after that, his mother was shot in the neck.⁸

Less than six years after the traumatic winter of 1942, Paul Celan arrived in Paris. By then he was already an accomplished poet, the writer of the soon to

⁶ See, for example, Hans Egon Holthusen’s criticism of Celan as described by John Felstiner (2001, 78–79).

⁷ Translation: Amir Eshel. If not otherwise indicated, the English version of Celan’s delivered “Meridian” speech is quoted from Celan 1986.

⁸ For more information on these biographical circumstances, see, for example Barbara Wiedemann’s glossary in Celan/Celan Lestrangle 2001, 396–397.

become canonical “Todesfuge” [Death Fugue]. In the following years, Celan read in the gathering company of Germany’s up-and-coming writers, the legendary Gruppe ’47, and he published four volumes of poetry. His quick ascent culminated in 1960, when he was awarded Germany’s highest literary honor, the Georg Büchner Prize.

The decision to award Celan with the Büchner Prize, however, was hardly a sign of broad recognition. On the contrary. Celan’s poetry was often criticized in harshest terms. He was also wrongfully accused of plagiarism.⁹ Delivering his acceptance speech upon receiving the prize, Celan had no illusions about his audience nor, indeed, about his German readership. He knew that many of the dignitaries attending the ceremony had participated knowingly or, at best, reluctantly in the Nazi endeavor and that many of them belonged to the conservative literary and scholarly elite of the willfully oblivious in Adenauer’s Germany. Celan was aware that many of them rejected everything his poetry stood for: surrealism, hermeticism, and, above all, the metaphors that evoke the Shoah. In fact, only a few months before the ceremony, the distinguished critic Günter Blöcker reviewed Celan’s most recent volume, his 1959 *Sprachgitter* [Language Mesh, or Speech-Grille], claiming that the “freedom” of Celan’s poetry vis-à-vis the German language “may lie in his ancestry” – another way of referring to his Jewish origins.¹⁰

The distinctiveness, the otherness of Celan’s poetry of this era results from his remarkable ability to draw on the best of French, Russian, Italian, English, and Rumanian modernism. Yet his innovations also signaled what I described earlier as futurity: Celan’s poems offered a decisive expansion of the German poetic vocabulary, the broadening of its thematic and formal scope – beyond what critics such as Blöcker and others considered admissible. In the volume *Sprachgitter* – the same book Blöcker read as the product of Celan’s “ancestry” – this enlarging of the range of German poetry happens to take the form of historical remembrance. Unquestionably, the long, programmatic poem “Engführung” [The Straightening, Stretto] invokes the Shoah (Celan 1980, 116–27). As the poem reaches its bleak climax, it names the walls against which Jews and many others were executed by shooting: “in /der jüngsten Verwerfung, / überm / Kugelfang an / der verschütteten Mauer” [in the latest rejection, / above / the shooting-range near / the buried wall] (Celan 1980, 125).

⁹ For more on the plagiarism charges, see Wiedemann 2000.

¹⁰ Günter Blöcker’s review appeared as “Gedichte als graphische Gebilde,” in the Berlin daily *Der Tagesspiegel* on October 11, 1959. On the Blöcker affair, see Eshel 1999, 133–39. More information on the matter became available with the publication of Celan “*Mikrolithen sinds, Steinchen*”: *Die Prosa aus dem Nachlaß* (Celan 2005, 110–111).

With the telling exception of Nelly Sachs, no other German poet of this time wrote about the “shooting-range” and the walls that served as background to brutal executions during the Shoah. The poem thus introduces into the vocabulary of German poetry explicit references to the mass killings, the bulldozed remains of the concentration camps, thereby recalling and resisting the attempt to bury not only Jewish civilization in Europe, but the memory of the crimes as well.

Besides expanding the vocabulary of German poetry to address “the latest rejection,” Celan’s “Engführung” is also futural in pointing to what comes now, after the terrible fact. Indeed, shortly after the lines we just read, “in the latest rejection, / above / the shooting-range,” the poem states: “Also / stehen noch Tempel. Ein / Stern hat wohl noch Licht. / Nichts, / nichts ist verloren.” [So / there are temples that still stand. A / star / possibly still has light. / Nothing, / nothing is lost.] (Celan 1980, 127; translation modified) Stating that the temples are still standing, that “nothing is lost,” the poem prompts its readers to consider both what has vanished during the Shoah and also what remains, what is still possible, including what we might do when staring into the abyss of shooting ranges and execution walls.

Marked by the thematic of the Shoah, Paul Celan’s poetry thus negotiates this historical watershed and the future. Let us turn to another telling example. In Celan’s poem “Es war Erde in ihnen” [There Was Earth Inside Them], we are reminded of Jews digging their own graves during the Shoah. Yet the act of digging in this poem is multivalent:

ES WAR ERDE IN IHNEN, und
sie gruben

Sie gruben und gruben, so ging
ihr Tag dahin, ihre Nacht. Und sie lobten nicht Gott,
der, so hörten sie, alles dies wollte,
der, so hörten sie, alles dies wußte.

[...]
Es kam eine Stille, es kam auch ein Sturm,
Es kamen die Meere alle.
Ich grabe, du gräbst, und es gräbt auch der Wurm,
Und das Singende dort sagt: Sie graben

O einer, o keiner, o niemand, o du:
Wohin gings, da’s nirgendhin ging?
O du gräbst und ich grab, und ich grab mich dir zu,
Und am Finger erwacht uns der Ring. (Celan 1996,9)

THERE WAS EARTH INSIDE THEM, and
they dug.

They dug and dug, and so
their day went past, their night. And they did not praise God,
who, so they heard, wanted all this,
who, so they heard, witnessed all this.

[...]
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 finger awakens. (Celan 2001, 135)

The act of digging takes place in the past, but also in the present: in the oscillation between “dug” and “dig.” Furthermore, the act of digging is not confined to the one obvious referent of the poem, its third-person plural, the Jewish victims of the Holocaust who were forced to dig their own graves before they were murdered. It is “they” who dug, but also, and crucially, the lyrical “I.” Celan’s poetry here expands the realm of the then existent German poetic vocabulary in several decisive ways: it invokes in a poem a horrendous historical moment that many Germans would rather forget: the murder of European Jews in the name of the German Nazi state. Furthermore, the poem defies the famous and much-debated claim by Theodor Adorno that writing poems after Auschwitz is a barbaric act.¹¹

Yet the poem’s ability to broaden the given vocabulary of German poetry is also reflected in its unique temporal perspective. The poem’s “occurrence,” the act of digging, is not set in the past, solely in the Holocaust as a historical event that one should commemorate. Rather, the poem relates to the historical event of the Jewish genocide as a crucial point of reference for all living in the shadow of the Holocaust – Jews and non-Jews alike. The lyrical “I,” after all, is not determined in any way by nationality, by time, or by place. The digging “I” encompasses, in fact, both the victims and all who struggle to come to terms with what was done to the victims – all of those who struggle to conceive what the future of

¹¹ Adorno raises the question regarding the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz in an essay titled “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” that was written in 1949 and published in 1951.

humanity means now that European history has displayed what modern humans are capable of doing to each other: to “I” and to “you.” This universal dimension is reflected in the poem’s temporal structure, its use of the present tense. The present tense underlines that the digging, a searching for comprehension of the watershed events of the Holocaust, is an ongoing, wide-ranging procedure. It is an action of the present and a task that lies ahead of the “I” and ahead of anyone reading the poem, uttering the words “I dig.”

This process of digging, of coming to terms with what the past means for the present and for the future, leads through an encounter with a “you:” it involves an interpersonal procedure. Coping with a past that will not go away, a past that challenges anyone born after the historical events of the mid-twentieth century, is a task that involves an interplay between “I” and “you,” a movement from “I” to “you.” The “I” struggles with the memory of what was done to humans during the Shoah, but also with the question of how it should behave toward any “you” – how it should act in a world in which others are facing similar realities.

The poem as the search for another

After considering the futurity of Celan’s work as the expansion of the German poetic vocabulary and as the linking of the past to the future, I turn now to reflect on the movement toward “you”: to consider in what ways the “I” may “dig” toward the “you.” Celan’s most significant work on poetics, the speech he delivered upon receiving the Georg Büchner Prize, also known as the “Meridian,” defines poetry as an advance toward the other. It is in the “Meridian” speech that Celan emphatically states: “The poem intends another, needs this other, needs one across from it. It goes toward it... . For the poem heading toward the other, everything and everyone is a figure of this other.” (Celan 1986, 49) As I have shown in my previous work on Paul Celan, when he declared to this audience that every poem needs “another” across from it, he was responding to the self-fixated poetics of his highly influential contemporary, Gottfried Benn, specifically to Benn’s idea that “the poem is always the question of the I.”¹²

Situating himself within a tradition of aesthetic thought that reaches back to Plato’s *Republic* (book 2, 10), Celan views poetry as fully capable of propelling reflection on ethical concerns and, possibly, action. Poems such as “In the Rivers” are in effect invested with interpersonal agency: “In the rivers north of the future /

¹² See Eshel 2004. On Benn’s notion of the poem as the question of the “I,” see Benn 1960–1968, vol. 4, 1065–66.

I cast the net," that a you, someone across from the I, can "[b]urden, hesitantly / with stone-written / shadows." The lyrical "I" sets a process in motion, reaches out. Yet this act depends on a "you," on a counteraction by someone else who brings into the net her or his shadows – her or his experiences, emotions, thoughts, words.

Poetry's distinction lies for Celan in the interplay between "I" and "you." The poem is an encounter. It assumes speaking to others. It reaches from one individual to another: from the poet to the reader and from the reader to the larger community. It sets in motion conversation, dispute, and even action. By writing and reading, Celan notes, one enters through the poem into "an event [ein Geschehen]." (Celan 1999, 125) As an event, the poem can give voice, can speak in the name of "the foreign ... on behalf of the other ... of an altogether other." (Celan 1986, 48; translation modified)

Although Celan does not say so explicitly in his "Meridian" speech, we know that he came to the idea of the other through the notion of the "eternal Jew." Indeed, Celan considers poetry as an expression of "Jewishness." He did not mean "Jewishness" as a religious affiliation, however. Rather, Jewishness is for Celan the essence of the experience of otherness. In its strangeness, in its distinctiveness, poetry appears like the utmost other of modern history, the "jabbering Jew" (Celan 1999, 127–31) of anti-Semitic discourse. According to Celan, like the Jew, who with his distinctive language is a constant challenge to those who hold on to standardized language, modern poetry defies all norms and expectations. In other words, one can learn how to perceive modern poetry from the experiences Jews have had with those who claim that their manner of speaking German is "related to their ancestry." Celan writes: "[r]everence for the secret of the crooked-nose creature – that is a way to the poem." (Celan 1999, 130) Like the crooked-nosed, cast-out Jew, modern poetry does not and should not obey the expectations of those who would like to encounter only poems that are written in predictable forms or that use lexically correct language.

The hermeticism of Celan's poetry – images such as that of shadows written by stones – is surely an expression of the hermetic aesthetic tradition from Novalis and Schlegel to Mallarmé and beyond. It is, however, also what Celan calls a "Gegenwort," an "opposing word" (Celan 1999, 49), a poetic breaking away from worn-out metaphors, from any given trite vocabulary. Hence, we find in Celan's poetry many "jabbering" Jewish words and expressions, such as "s mus asoj sajn." (Celan 1983, vol. 1, 249), "Hawdala" (Celan 1983, vol. 2, 12–13), "Kaddisch" (Celan 1983, vol. 1, 284), "Tekiah!" (Celan 1983, vol. 1, 284), and "Kumi, ori" (Celan 1983, vol. 2, 327). These words are by no means merely Hebraic expressions of a fixed Jewish "identity," nor can they be viewed as "Jewish" ornaments of a fundamentally German poem. Rather, they are what Celan calls

“Jewification” [Verjudung], the poetic expansion of what is regarded as lexically “correct.” Celan writes: It is “[n]ot because the poem speaks of agitation, but because it ... unshakably remains itself that ... it is [the poem becomes] the Jew of literature..... One can Jewify [verjuden] ... I consider Jewification [Verjudung] recommendable.” (Celan 1999, 131)

On August 19, 1960, two months before delivering the “Meridian” speech, Celan summarized this notion by pointing out the poem’s ability to re-create, to “educate” its readers to become different from mankind as we have come to know it. He notes: “The poem has only its language ... and thus its level of meaning... . For this reason, by way of its nature and not by way of its thematic, the poem is a school of real humanity [eine Schule wirklicher Menschlichkeit]: It teaches the understanding of the other as the other, in its being other. It demands ... reverence for this other.” (Celan 1999, 130)

Poetry as a mode of natality

In their capacity to change our vocabulary, to point to the other and to set us off in a new direction “north of the future” and beyond “mankind” as we know it, Celan’s poetics bear a striking resemblance to the thinking of Hanna Arendt. While Paul Celan was writing poems such as “Todesfuge,” Arendt was reflecting on Nazism and Stalinism. Concluding her magisterial *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt famously turned to the man-made catastrophes of our time and noted: “*But* there remains also the truth that every *end* in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only ‘message’ which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom... . This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.” (Arendt 1979, 478–479)¹³ While their point of departure is the end points of history – those epochs when events seemingly circumscribe the promises and possibilities of life – the center of gravity in these sentences, as in Arendt’s work as a whole, lies in the gesture “[b]ut there remains”: even in the face of such a recent end point as the unprecedented terror brought about by Nazism – a devastation that, given its scope, seems to undo the very notion of a new beginning – Arendt emphasizes futurity. She speaks of what is still there as a promise and as a challenge; she stresses the capacity of humans for a “new beginning.”

¹³ Arendt refers to the “crisis of our time” on page 478.

As Paul Celan was working on “Engführung” in the late fifties of the twentieth century and considering the tension between the realities of the “shooting range” and the star that still has light, Arendt was concluding her books, *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Between Past and Future* (1961). It is these two works that spell out what she meant by “new beginning” as “the supreme capacity of man.” Considering the link connecting the realms of yesterday and tomorrow in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt notes that the past “is not, as in nearly all our metaphors *a burden man has to shoulder* and of whose dead weight the living ... must get rid in their march into the future.” (Arendt 1961, 10) Time is not a teleological entity composed of the past, the future, and a present that is pressed between them in which humans move “from” the past “to” the future. Rather, what appears to be the continuum of time is constantly disrupted by the emergence of something new: the birth of human beings.¹⁴ Birth, the “insertion of man,” Arendt argues, breaks the “continuum” (Arendt 1961, 10) of time. With each and every new birth, a new trajectory, however insignificant, begins: a movement that, like the thrust of the past and the open-endedness of the future, is infinite, its conclusion never known (Arendt 1961, 11–12).

Arendt elaborates the notion of the past as not merely a burden, not just a gray-black landscape, but also a force, in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958). Here, she expands on the idea of “the insertion of men” through the concepts of natality and action. Natality is the fundamental human capacity, inscribed in human birth, to “insert” oneself, “[w]ith word and deed ... into the human world.” (Arendt 1958, 176) Born into the world, every newborn becomes instantaneously a part of a network made of other speaking and acting human beings. With words and deeds, every person is capable of changing surrounding circumstances, albeit to varying extents.

While Arendt is focused on the distinctiveness of political action and on the spoken (not written) word, she herself alludes to literature as a form of insertion. Referring to Rilke’s poem “Magic,” Arendt argues, for example, that art presents “a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames.” (Arendt 1958, 168)

“Inserted” into our given language, poetry is, in fact, capable of changing our notions, our modes of behavior, and, potentially, our circumstances. Literature is thus a mode of natality. Inserted into our current ways of speaking, perceiving, and relating to the world, literature alters what appears to be time’s trajectory:

¹⁴ See Peg Birmingham’s insightful discussion of Arendt’s interpretation of Kafka’s parable in Birmingham 2006, 17–23.

like the constant “insertion” of humans by birth that causes the forces of the past and the future to “deflect ... from their original direction,” literature generates a new trajectory that is just as significant as the thrust of the past and the uncertainties of the future.

Arendt’s attempt to reconceive the relation between past and future in light of the end points of the mid-twentieth century is clearly echoed in Paul Celan’s poetry. Casting a net in the rivers north of the future, singing songs beyond mankind as we know it, Celan’s poetry inserts a new way to consider our conditions into the realm of our given language, into the sphere of our given ideas about human history. By expanding our vocabularies, by viewing poems as a school of genuine humanity, it allows us to consider that such a time and place beyond what we know is, in fact, possible.

Celan seems well aware of this capacity of the poetic word. In 1963, he wrote in a quick note that reminds us of Hannah Arendt’s “even dust can burst into flames:” “Mit jeder Asche, jedem wirklichen Gedicht ist uns immer der Phoenix zurückgegeben” [With every ash, with every real poem, the phoenix returns to us] (Celan 2005, 48). In the same period, while working on his poetry volume *Atemwende*, Celan also noted “I am not writing for the dead, but rather for the living – for those who know of the dead.” (Celan 2005, 122) Poems, he reflects elsewhere, “do not change the world, but they do change how we live in the world [In-der-Welt-Sein].” (Celan 2005, 126) Hence, Celan’s poems testify to the power of the lyrical word to prompt us to a new beginning, and he imbued them with a real power to generate movement in a new, different direction. They tirelessly invoke the past and the Shoah as a hardly tolerable burden. Yet as his poem “Ich habe Bambus geschnitten” (I have cut bamboo) signals, they also revisit this historical caesura as an imperative commanding us to engage what is, what is to come:

ICH HABE BAMBUS GESCHNITTEN:
für dich, mein Sohn.
Ich habe gelebt.

Diese morgen fort-
getragene Hütte, sie
steht.

[...] du
weisst nicht, in was für
Gefässe ich den
Sand um mich her tat, vor Jahren, auf
Geheiss und Gebot. Der deine
kommt aus dem Freien – er bleibt
frei. (Celan 1996, 98)

I have cut bamboo:
for you, my son.
I have lived.

This hut, carried off
tomorrow, now
stands.

[...] you've
no idea what sort of
vessels I packed
with the sand around me, years back, at
beck and command. Yours
comes from free ground – it stays
free. (Celan 2001, 184)

Turning to his son, the incarnation of natality, the lyrical “I” testifies to the “vessels,” the burden he, the father, had to carry “at beck and command.” Yet the thrust of the poem is to emphasize how open the future remains for the son.

It is impossible to read Celan's poetry as being naively optimistic, as simply celebrating the future. Yet when facing the Shoah, the loss of his parents and the entire world of his childhood, and even in the face of his harrowing mental collapse in the 1960s, Celan never got tired of exploring futurity, never stopped seeking what tomorrow may still bring through the power of the written word, through the encounter between humans who speak to each other.

We began with two poems from the poetry volume *Atemwende*. I would like to conclude with a third poem, titled “Einmal” [Once] – the poem that closes the volume. It is here, in nine short lines, that Celan captures the essence of the flood that swept over humanity in the mid-twentieth century, but also the sense of what lies “north of the future” – the possibility of a renewal that comes when humans are willing to expose themselves to the other.

EINMAL,
da hörte ich ihn,
da wusch er die Welt,
ungesehn, nachklang,
wirklich.

Eins und Unendlich,
vernichtet,
ichten

Licht war. Rettung. (Celan 1990, 107)

ONCE
 I heard him,
 he was washing the world
 unseen, nightlong,
 real.

One and Infinite,
 Annihilated,
 nihilated.
 There was light. Salvation. (Celan 1980, 207)

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