

ABSTRACT: I examine these final Celanian motifs in Derrida's *oeuvre*. Where most treatments of Celan and Derrida have tended to focus on the motif of witnessing, I focus on the constitution of a fictional form of presence as a response to the absence of a unitary phenomenon of world. I examine how Celan wrote poems which "dialogue" with other thinkers by responding to this absence in order to develop a theory of linguistic and literary performance (or "ideal enactment") as a response to the blind, catastrophic structure of history.

In his final seminar series on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida takes up for the last time both the poetics and the poetry of Paul Celan, devoting considerable space in the first seminar series to Celan's *Meridian* address, the main source for his "poetics" and using the closing lines of the poem "**Große, glühende Wölbung:**" (*die Welt ist fort / ich muss dich tragen*)<sup>1</sup> as a constant refrain in the second seminar. And, as is always the case when Derrida takes up Celan, lurking in the background is a shared concern with Martin Heidegger's onto-poetics, with their shared ambivalent quasi-obsession with the Heideggerian *Gespräch zwischen Dichtern und Denkern*.<sup>2</sup> Here, I examine these final Celanian motifs in Derrida's *oeuvre*. Where most treatments of Celan and Derrida have tended to focus on the motif of witnessing, I focus on the constitution of a fictional form of presence as a response to the absence of a unitary phenomenon of world. I examine how Celan wrote poems which "dialogue" with other thinkers by responding to this absence. My reason for focusing there is to shed light on a motif running throughout the whole of Derrida's work from his early phenomenological investigations to his final seminars and books, namely the development of a theory of linguistic and literary performance (or "ideal enactment") as a response to the blind, catastrophic structure of history, a

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<sup>1</sup> All Celan references are to Celan, Paul. *Gesammelte Werke*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> (roughly, dialogue between thinker and poet)

response that Derrida identifies as distinctively “literary” while also avowing its closeness to Celan’s own poetics.

In the first series of *Beast and the Sovereign*<sup>3</sup> seminars, Derrida interrogates the image of the mannequin in Celan’s *Meridian* speech. Examining how both the beast and the sovereign fall outside of the scope of subjectivity and, therefore, humanity, Derrida examines how Celan uses the mannequin to describe poetry’s unusual discursive mode whereby what is brought to presentation leaves subjectivity in abeyance and in fact, gives space for the presentation of alterity.<sup>4</sup> Derrida is particularly concerned in showing how this sets up the possibility of a totally hypothetical form of presence<sup>5</sup> in order to highlight the unworking of the political subject via a “discreet, even unobvious, even miniscule, even microscopic dethroning of majesty [that] exceeds knowledge. Not to pay homage to some obscurantism of knowledge, but to prepare perhaps some poetical revolution in the revolution, and perhaps too some revolution in the knowledge of knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> As I’ll discuss below, this move parallels moves that Derrida makes elsewhere where he uses Kant to situate and conceptualize the place of philosophy in the university. For now, however, let me simply note that Derrida emphasizes the explicitly

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol 1. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Celan figures prominently throughout the second half of sessions, but see particularly Session Ten, e.g. “Celan signals towards an alterity that --- within the ‘I’ as punctual living present, as point of the living self-present present, an alterity in the wholly other --- comes not to include and modalize another living present . . . but here, which is quite different, letting the present *of the other* appear, that ‘leaving the most proper time of the other’ we were talking about last time” (270). I would call this form of presence the transcendental condition for the paradoxical work of witnessing that Celan and Derrida are both concerned with and that has been the primary thing that the secondary literature on their relationship has concerned itself with. It’s because the presence that poetic discourse draws up is so odd that the paradoxicality of witnessing can come to light.

<sup>5</sup> Here, Derrida will insist on Celan’s repetition of the word “*vielleicht*” (perhaps), elsewhere he’ll be interested in the deployment of presence considered *als-ob* (as if)

<sup>6</sup> *Beast and Sovereign* I, 273.

“fictional” quality of this poetical unworking, contrasting it equally with the fiction involved in the representation of the sovereign subject,<sup>7</sup>

Now, the discourse in this first seminar series (as in Celan’s Meridian address) is primarily a discourse of poetics: that is, it belongs to that genre which discusses (often in a highly *literary*, maybe even *poetic* way) what poetry is without necessarily being a poem itself. Let’s note that this distinction overlaps with, but is not identical to, the distinction between constative and performative discourse, with which Derrida is so often concerned, particularly when it’s a matter of understanding philosophy’s place in the university. The discussion in this first lecture series rarely if ever strays from poetics into a discussion of Celanian poetry.

In that first series, the *Meridian* address had formed one of the core texts around which the whole seminar was constructed. In the second series of *Beast and the Sovereign* lectures, Celan’s poetics is treated far less thematically.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless the line, “*Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen.*” (The world is gone, I must carry you) is an often invoked refrain. The sense of this in the context of the previous series is clear: the poet carries into presence what is threatened with obliteration (may in fact already be obliterated) in the experience of the other. The emphasis, however, on the phenomenon of “world” here is decisive, as is the insistence of the lostness of the very structure of worldhood. This continues to intensify the peculiar conjunction of alterity and presence in the *contretemps* of poetic discourse. Derrida is drawing attention to the impossible task that Celan has set himself *qua* poet: to carry a world that is gone, to carry a world whose loss is traumatic is, in fact, the original trauma of experience, to bring unity to a

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<sup>7</sup> see especially 288-289,

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol 2. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 2011).

disparate set of experiences that are in fact fundamentally incoherent.<sup>9</sup> And Derrida is explicitly adopting this task as his own.

Consider, in this regard, the final passage in which Derrida invokes Celan, a passage which is to my mind one of the most stunning he writes anywhere.<sup>10</sup> Speaking on March 26, 2003, less than a week after the United States had invaded Iraq, Derrida imagines, one last time, how the poetic word might stand up to the loss of world signified by “death and barbarity,” Derrida insists that “the poets, more than ever, more rare than ever, are more touched by the truth than the politicians, priests and soldiers.”<sup>11</sup> He then goes on to recount a feverish nightmare in which he (Derrida, not he, Celan) is compelled to defend the rights of “Saddam Hussein, Bush, Aznar, Blair, Chirac, Sharon, Arafat, Putin and [Pope John] Paul [II] and some others”<sup>12</sup> to lay claim to *logos* (that is to a capacity for justification beyond brute force.) Recognizing that these leaders will not recognize the need for this defense, Derrida nonetheless asserts that they do have access *logos*, “the power and the right” and that, if they recognized this, this would condemn them to their responsibility. Even after he awakens, he wonders, whether if they were isolated, they could even be educated to see this<sup>13</sup>. But, once his fever subsides he recognizes, whatever the necessity of this recognition would be, it is also an impossibility.

I underscore the “political” nature of this aside, as well as the countless singularities that Derrida manages to compress into a litany of proper names. But it’s also important to notice that

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Derrida’s discussions of *cosmos* and *ordo* as ordered wholes, particularly in opposition to the disunity or non-world of “barbarism,” represented geo-politically by the warlike force of sovereigns engaging in world war. See especially 259-260.

<sup>10</sup> See 260-261, here included as Appendix I, which I will bring as a handout,

<sup>11</sup> 260

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> The closeness of this “nightmare” scene to the Nocturnal council at the end of Plato’s *Laws* (what we take, then, to be Plato’s own closing lines.), even down to the dialogue between thinkers and political actors in order to “secure” the force of the law by binding it to the golden thread of necessity of “logos” is so striking that I suspect that Derrida is intentionally eluding to it.

this political invocation takes place adjacent to a discussion of education, and even explicitly to the university. This is almost always the case in Derrida, as he had already called attention to when describing his own political work outside of the academy in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, my own reasons for being interested in this thread of Derrida's and Celan's work are oriented towards an interest in developing a critical understanding of the material conditions under which intellectual and creative labor operate in the service of subject formation or subjectivation. Can "thinkers" and "poets," say, who make their livings working in institutions that do capitalism's dirty justificatory work, also find pathways to undo that subjectivating work? My own suspicions are that, if such resources are to be developed in contemporary intellectual and cultural institutions it will be through the sort of ironic undoings via performative contradiction of ideological constructs that force an experience of the fictional status of all ideal entities, the sort of undoings to which the names *deconstruction* and *widerspruch* have been attached, the practice of which both Derrida and Celan have been masters of developing.

And yet ironically, in both cases these critical, materialist and highly situated practices have been formed out of an intense, deeply struggle with one of the most masterful deployments of very similar parallel gestures, one however, where rather than being critical and materialist the practice is intentionally mythologizing. Heidegger, like Celan and Derrida, understood that the political significance of ontology lay in its foundational pedagogical character (If I were a Heideggerian, I'd insist on asserting at this point that every one of those key terms: politics, ontology and pedagogy be understood in an *ursprunglich* way. As a Derridean, I'll call attention to that insistence, but then immediately cross it out.) But where Celan and Derrida develop what

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<sup>14</sup> See particularly the material at the end of *The Right to Philosophy*. (1990).

I'd call critical mythologies or metaphors (elsewhere, I've called them lyrical), Heidegger's mythology remains primarily epic in cast. Consider the very term which he uses in his most explicit attempt to name the university as the site which gathers the dialogue between thinker and poet, the rectoral address, where he calls for the "self-assertion of the German university."<sup>15</sup> And yet, it isn't just by wrestling with Heidegger's thought generally, but with this exact, most explicitly fascist motif of his work, that both Derrida and Celan wrest an anti-humanist understanding of the material possibilities afforded the critical thinker, or the critical poet.

I take it that's what stake in Derrida's invocation of that nightmare scene at the end of the final seminar that he will give. I hope to show that in more detail elsewhere, but I want to end today by further clarifying what I take to be going on in Derrida's appropriation of Celan through a more direct consideration of a few of Celan's poems where I think he's being particularly explicit about the fictionality or hypotheticality of the performative force that his poetry brings to bear in dialogue with various thinkers.

Let's start by continuing our consideration of Heidegger. In the poem, "*Todnauberg*," Celan describes his visit to Heidegger's mountain retreat.<sup>16</sup> The longest stanza centers around the guest book,

What in the book  
--- whose names did it take up  
before my name? ---  
what is written in this book, the line about  
a hope today,  
for the coming of a thinker's  
word in the heart.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "Die Selbstbehauptung der Deutschen Universität" (1934).

<sup>16</sup>For the most comprehensive reconstruction of this encounter, and how Celan worked it into his poem, see Lyon 159-191. Lyon, James. *Martin Heidegger and Paul Celan: An Unresolved Conversation* (2006).

<sup>17</sup> *Die in das Buch*

--- wessen Namen nahm auf

This stanza describes an event that happens seven years after “The Meridian” address, near the end of both Celan’s and Heidegger’s lives, well after all of the texts by Heidegger that we have discussed, and after most of the Celan poems that we have discussed or will discuss. It juxtaposes Celan’s continued hope for Heidegger to thoughtfully address the situation of modernity with his accusation of Heidegger’s complicity with Nazism, his willingness to take suspect names into his text. This accusation takes the form of a question that interrupts the entry in the guest book that Celan himself presumably writes. But it is important to note that one of the “lines” of Heidegger’s thinking involved attending to the signs of a coming poet who would open up the heavenly dimension from which the last god(s) could come.<sup>18</sup> Celan’s interruption seems to suggest that the heart-felt word of the thinker must go back to the site of this interruption if it is to truly think about the present. Celan’s lines force a different scansion of the Holderlinian caesura, a different “collocation” (to use Derrida’s preferred translation of *Gesprach*) than the one that Heidegger called for. But there is no simple rejection of the notion of collocation. On the one hand, Celan produces a reversal. The “poet” sets up the task of the “thinker.” But, more to the point, Celan deconstructs this collocation. He renders the relationship between thinker and poet ambiguous by destabilizing the identities that Heidegger

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*vor dem meinen? ---  
 die in dies Buch geschriebene Zeile von  
 einer Hoffnung, heute,  
 auf eines Denkenden  
 kommenden  
 Wort im Herzen. (GW, 2:255).*

<sup>18</sup> Celan shows the difficulties such a poet would face in one of his poems about Hölderlin, “Tübingen, Jänner.” This poem is found in the same cycle of *Die Niemandrose* as “*Dein Hinübersein*,” “*Mit Allen Gedanken*” and “*Psalm*” (and also “*Zurich, Zum Störchen*,” which I shall address shortly). In it, Celan visits Hölderlin’s tower with the words, “*käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute, mit / dem Lichtbart der / Patriarchen: er dürfte, / spräch er von dieser Zeit, er / dürfte / nur lallen und lallen, immer-,immer-/zuzu*” (*GW*, 1:226) “should a man come into the world, today, with / the shining beard of the / patriarchs: he could, / if he spoke of this / time, he / could / only babble and babble / over, over / againagain” (*PPC*, 155)..

ascribes to them. He sets them to work at the site of an interruption. This site resembles what Celan called utopia in “The Meridian.” But we find it situated in discourses that have to deal with the most bitter and difficult political and historical realities of today. In this sense, Lacoue-Labarthe’s use of the word “catastrophe” to describe Celan’s treatment of history is apt.<sup>19</sup> Celan certainly treats history as a catastrophe, as we see elsewhere in his invocation of a God who grows whole from the bodies of those who have died like a tree grows from the compost of grass clippings, or in his identification of the poet Lenz’s topsy-turvy situation (going for a walk on his hands) as the emblem for our own, or in his recollection of Heidegger’s disastrous past. But more to the point, his poetical treatment of history is cata-strophic: it turns downward and inward in order to respond to the impact that history has on the very way we speak.

Celan’s point is not that all our speech should itself be attuned to the most awful, troubling and difficult moments of history, as he makes clear in his response to Berthold Brecht. Brecht voiced the position of many intellectuals and artists that the traditional subjects of art such as nature and beauty could not be represented any more and had indeed become impossibly vulgar when he asks, “What kind of times are these when / a conversation about trees is almost a crime / because it omits so many horrors?”<sup>20</sup> Celan responds with a conversation that he identifies as a treeless leaf.<sup>21</sup>

A leaf, treeless  
for Berthold Brecht,

What sort of times are these  
where a conversation  
is nearly a crime because

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<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Poetry as Experience*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Felstiner, John. *Selected Poems of Paul Celan*, 419.

<sup>21</sup> There is probably also an inverted reference to Hölderlin’s description of the mariners who are willing to endure years beneath the leafless, shadeless tree of the mast in their search for both the foreign and the homeland. See *Poems and Fragments*, 490.

it contains so much of  
what's been said?<sup>22</sup>

To begin with, there is a playful element of verbal pastiche going on here, a sort of *argumentum ab absurdum* against the whole-sale rejection of the traditional values of art, beauty, and nature implied by Brecht's comment (even if not actually practiced by Brecht himself). We can extend this point beyond the "ordinary language" of a conversation to the poetic. Celan himself certainly did not give up on the idea of beauty, nor does he shy away from writing poems that are primarily about love, sex, nature, or birth.

In addition to this playful element, there is also a rejection of an overly-loud form of thought or poetry in favor of a turn to silence. When too much is simply said, our conversations threaten to break off, and not really to be conversations at all. In contrast, many years earlier Celan had described his own conversation with the poet Nelly Sachs as navigating between saying too much and saying too little. "*Vom Zuviel war die Rede / Vom Zuwenig*" (GW, 1:214). "Our talk was about Too-much, about Too-little." By navigating between these two extreme possibilities, Celan and Sachs manage to sustain an intermittent dialogue that lasts over their whole lifetime and touches to the core of their understanding of both poetry and Judaism.<sup>23</sup>

But we should note that what Celan says in general terms would certainly apply to what he says about his conversation with Heidegger. They talk about flowers "Arnica, Eyebright . . .

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<sup>22</sup> *Ein Blatt, baumlos*  
für Berthold Brecht:

*Was sind das für Zeiten*  
*wo ein Gespräch*  
*beinah ein Verbrechen ist*  
*weil es so viel Gesagtes*  
*mit Einschliesst?* (GW 2,385)

<sup>23</sup> See Wiedemann, Barbara, ed. *Paul Celan / Nelly Sachs: Correspondence*. See in particular John Felstiner's introduction to that volume and his discussion of their meeting at Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet Survivor Jew*, 155-163.

Orchid and Orchid,”<sup>24</sup> they drink from a well with a star die on top of it, they walk through the “forest meadows” along “the half trodden log - / paths on the high moor”<sup>25</sup> amid much wetness, but they do not really talk about what Celan wants to ask, or about what he has been asking about, perhaps in a roundabout way in the visit he describes, but unmistakably in “The Meridian,” in a number of his earlier poems, and through their mutual friend Otto Pöggeler. Celan certainly felt that Heidegger did not hear him ask the question, even when Celan actually asked him the question. The earliest published bibliophile edition of “*Todnauberg*” says that Celan hoped for “a thinking / (undelayed coming) / word in the heart.”<sup>26</sup> But Celan deleted *ungesäumt* (undelayed) from the version of “*Todnauberg*” published in the more widely released collection *Lichtzwang*.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the initial encounter, it seems that right at the end of his life, Celan came to believe that despite his severe critique of Heidegger, he had still overestimated him. The dialogue that Heidegger had failed to take up despite numerous solicitations, but that Celan hoped would nonetheless be spurred by the lines of a poem he had addressed directly to Heidegger, still did not reach its destination. The anticipated dialogue of thinker and poet at the site of a catastrophe would have to wait, or more likely never would happen at all. It would break off before it began. This really is a crime. But it’s ontologically a different sort of crime than the war crimes that Derrida invoked in his feverish dream.

Note the closeness of the scene that we’re seeing Celan describe here to the one that Derrida describes at the end of his own life. In both cases, there is an invocation of imagined or

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<sup>24</sup> “*Arnika, Augentrost . . . Orchis und Orchis*” (*GW*, 2: 256).

<sup>25</sup> “*die halb-/ beschrifteten Knüppel- / pfade im Hochmoor,*” (*GW*, 2:256 )

<sup>26</sup> “*eines Denkenden / (ungesäumt kommendes) / Wort im Herzen*”

<sup>27</sup> John Felstiner suggests that this was because Heidegger responded to the poem with polite, effusive thanks rather than by addressing it thoughtfully, although James Lyon has argued more recently that in fact there may have been a more honest and substantial conversation than was previously thought. See Felstiner, 247 and Lyon 164-167

hoped for conversations that are for various reasons impossible. This fact blurs the distinction that I'd earlier followed Derrida in making between constative and illocutionary discourse. The poet wants to do something, but can only talk about doing it. The philosopher would like to address the political leaders of his time, but can only do so ironically, feverishly, from the stance of a university seminar whose absolute freedom has been determined at least from Kant on, to be conditioned by its total powerlessness.

If I had more space for my discourse today, I would go on to argue that in fact the double bind of this condition forms the most basic understanding of both Derrida's self-interpretations over many years, as well as Celan's statement of the task of the poet from his earliest works right up to the end of his life, including in his oft-neglected work as a translator. I'd also go on to bounce it back to Heidegger and argue that, after the publication of the *Schwarze Hefte* more than ever, this is the thread of thought that anyone who takes Heidegger seriously must reckon with. I'd argue that if we can hope to find anything of value after reckoning with this, it'll be a better understanding of the sheer difficulty of talking about the peculiar violence without descending into it ourselves. It would be a better sense of how to develop metaphors and mythologies which don't demand their enactment through institutions. It would be a better sense of how, rather than a fixed conversation between thinkers and poets, modernity has occasionally managed to enable these odd kinds of linguistic acts that we might call literature, linguistic acts that somehow manage to briefly neutralize the inherently normalizing tendencies of ordinary language. But our discourse here won't be interminable, nor will I force you to stay here to listen. I'll simply ask you to consider what would have to be true for Derrida's claim that "only

poets” and thank you for the real time that it takes to work out that conceptual puzzle on countertime.