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The Speculative Lyric:

Poetic Testimonials of Modern Holocausts

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for

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by

Kyle Bijan Rosen

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The Speculative Lyric: Poetic Testimonials of Modern Holocausts explores the moral, political, and aesthetic significance of poetry's response to man-made disaster through the optic of Paul Celan and NourbeSe Philip's oeuvres. This thesis, a work of historical and literary theory, takes measure of the artistic means applied by Celan and Philip to bear witness to the Holocaust and New World Slavery: extreme events that test the limits of historical and literary representation.

My aim is to determine the kind of access their poetry provides us to the lived past. What sort of account does their testimonial art furnish of mass death and moral collapse? What sets their work apart from academic historical accounts that are already on offer? And why should we consult their poetic works today, namely in light of our present? An adequate response to these questions should do more than remain mindful of contemporary discussions on disaster, testimony, historical memory, and political violence. It must underscore the relevance of Celan and Philip's voices by placing them at the heart of such considerations.

In this sense, my project is as concerned with their poetry as it is with bringing knowledge of the past to bear on an analysis of the present in which we live and breathe, making use of history to promote human flourishing and solidarity in the here and now, as well as for the future.

The dissertation of Kyle Bijan Rosen is approved.

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Post tenebras spero lucem

– Job 17:12

Anselm Kiefer's *Wölundlied* (1982). Oil, acrylic, pain, emulsion, resin, lead, and straw on linen. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

In Memoriam: Robert Rosen, בערל בין יצחק, *and Renate Keymaram*, رناته كي مرام

For Marta, as ever

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Unlistened-to Testimony

> There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank.
>
> – J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

Readers of *Se questo è un uomo*, Primo Levi's memoir on his time in Auschwitz in the late months of World War II, will recall the dizzying and phantasmagoric scene in chapter five, when the author, stripped of his valuables and insufficiently cured of a foot injury, his trousers falling off his thin body and his shirt missing buttons, is expelled from the infirmary after a period of convalescence and ends up, following extensive administrative rites, in the crammed confines of Block 45, where he will be pursued over the course of winter by a recurring nightmare. Lying on the wooden edge of his bunk, with his neighbor's feet next to his face, tired and shocked by the day's events, Levi drifts into a half-sleep and begins to dream—albeit sporadically. He dreams he is asleep on the tracks of a railroad. He hears a train panting and puffing as its presence draws closer and closer. He fears the heavy object will surely run over him if it does not slow down. Yet he is not yet so asleep as to believe that what is happening to him is real. Still conscious, he finds he has mistaken the train's panting for the snoring of the man with whom he shares a bed.

All this is rather clearly narrativized and patiently illuminated by Levi himself, who of course survived Auschwitz and proceeded to bear witness to it. Even in the moments before going to bed, amid conscious and unconscious states, he does not omit to mention how he managed to tear his mind out of sleep to

register the world where he was living: his visual impressions of the Lager, as well as the disturbing noises that impressed themselves on his ears there. Thus the senseless, deadening reality of the concentrationary world with which his existence was entwined is collapsed into images and sounds. No sooner are these *simbolica processione* or "symbolic processions" related in his narrative than they become elements of his testimony of the Nazi Holocaust.[1] And these unfold in his story *in eventu*, in the middle of the event, in a series of painfully rational articulations.

The gradual erosion of internal and external states of reality indicated in Levi's dream sequence is such that it yields further images that penetrate into deeper regions of his unconscious condition; as if the world itself has become porous, its contours washing into adjacent areas of time surrounding the psychic event. "Dreams," declares Reinhart Koselleck, "are not part of the armory of sources from which historical science normally draws, be it on account of a methodically inspired caution, or on the plausible grounds of deficient accessibility."[2] Even so, we intuit Levi's dream is in fact much more than just a fictional testimony of terror. Indeed, the procession outlined above, though readable only as a story of sorts, is a representation that has taken place by dint of Levi's unexpected survival. So even as an imagined manifestation, the dream is a presentation of terror: not simply a dream of terror but a materialization of it—a dream *in* terror, "terror which pursues mankind" in conditions of duress "even into sleep."[3]

[1] Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Letteratura italiana Einaudi, 1989), 107.

[2] Reinhart Koselleck, "Terror and Dream: Methodological Remarks on the Experience of Time During the Third Reich" in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 211.

[3] Reinhart Koselleck, "Terror and Dream," 211.

The ghastly images of the day pursue the dreamer into nightfall and saturate every last pore of his consciousness.

But the scene does not stop here. As Levi lies in his bed, "not really awake, only one step higher on the ladder between the conscious and the unconscious," his eyes closed, ears absorbed in noises, he hears the distant whistling of a train emanating from the "small-gauge track," where men work well into the night.[4] But now the clamor "does not come from an engine in a dream, it can be heard objectively." The sound: "a long, firm note, then another one a semitone lower, then again the first, but short and cut off," a sequence of tones heard so often by the inmates of Auschwitz it has become "associated with the suffering of the work and the camp," and thus "evokes an image like certain music or smells" which make an imprint on the mind.[5]

Thick with hostility, this locomotive motif works itself into Levi's dream, where it has already appeared once, and where its objective concretions start to produce deep unconscious meanings: resonances that disclose the external realities of the Lager from within a dream that is possessed by latent needs and fears, within which terror itself is contained:

> This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friend and many other people. They are all listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling: the whistle of three notes, the hard bed, my neighbor whom I would like to move, but whom I am afraid to wake as he is stronger than me. I also speak diffusely of our hunger and of lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people, and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely

[4] Here I am making use of Stuart Woolf's translation of Levi's memoir, titled *If this is a man* (New York: The Orion Press, 1959), 63. In Italian, the passage reads as such: "Ecco, ho volute, e ora sono sveglio: ma non proprio sveglio, soltanto un po' di più, al gradino superiore della scala fra l'incoscienza e la coscienza." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 103.

[5] In Italian: "Una lunga nota ferma, poi un 'altra più bassa di un semitono, poi di nuovo la prima, ma breve e tronca. Questo fischio è una cosa importante, e in qualche mondo essenziale: così sovente l'abbiamo udito, associato alla sofferenza del lavoro e del campo, che ne è divenuto il simbolo, e ne evoca direttamente la rappresentazione, come accade per certe musiche e certi odori." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 103.

> indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.[6]

An intense physical pleasure, *un godimento intenso*, chased away by total indifference. So different, indeed, is one affect from another, so violent the pang of recognition attended by Levi's personal discovery of being thoroughly ignored by his sister, that we can almost intuitively grasp the emotional response that the distinction gives rise to in the subsequent passage:

> A desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. It is pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim once again up to the surface, but this time I deliberately open my eyes to have a guarantee in front of me of being effectively awake.[7]

But this unchecked pain, its pulsions upending reality, discovers an unforeseen response when translated into thoughts and ideas that can be shared with others. Into stories that produce collectivities:

> My dream stands in front of me, still warm, and although awake I am still full of its anguish: and then I remember that it is not a haphazard dream, but that I have dreamed it not once but many times since I arrived here, with hardly any variations of environment or details. I am now quite awake and I remember that I have recounted it to Alberto and that he confided to me, to my amazement, that it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone. Why does it happen? Why is the pain every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?[8]

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[6] "Qui c'è mia sorella, e qualche mio amico non precisato, e molta altra gente. Tutti mi stanno ascoltando, e io sto raccontando proprio questo: il fischio su tre note, il letto duro, il mio vicino che io vorrei spostare, ma ho paura di svegliarlo perché è più di me. Racconto anche diffusamente della nostra fame, e del controllo dei pidocchi, e del Kapo che mi ha percosso sul naso e poi mi ha mandato a lavarmi perché sanguinavo. È un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile, essere nella mia casa, fra persone amiche, e avere tante cose da raccontare: ma non posso non accorgermi che i miei ascoltatorio non mi seguono. Anzi, essi sono del tutto indifferenti: parlano confusamente d'altro fra di loro, come se io non ci fossi. Mia sorella mi guarda, si alza e se ne va senza far parola." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 103 – 104.

[7] "Allora nasce in me una pena desolata, come certi dolori appena ricordati della prima infanzia: è dolore allo stato puro, non temperato dal senso della realtà e dalla intrusione di circostanza estranee, simile a quelli per cui i bambini piangono; ed è meglio per me risalire ancora una volta in superficie, ma questa volta apro deliberatamente gli occhi, per avere di fronte a me stesso una garanzia di essere effettivamente sveglio." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 104.

[8] "Il sogno mi sta davanti, ancora caldo, e io, benché sveglio, sono tuttora pieno della sua angoscia: e allora mi ricordo che questo non è un sogno qualunque, ma che da quando sono qui l'ho già sognato, non una ma molte volte, con poche variazioni di ambiente e di particolari. Ora sono in piena lucidità, e mi rammento anche di averlo già raccontato ad Alberto, e che lui mi ha confidato, con mia meraviglia, che questo è anche il suo sogno, e il sogno di molti altri,

The dream's content thus possesses the indexicality of a supra-individual history, a common element or thread whose features can be readily deciphered by those subjected to similar disorder and struggle.[9] Here we encounter what Levi will refer to as *un sogno collettivo*, or a collective dream.[10] By which he means to describe a specific procession of images shared by one and all: a public unit of experience in Auschwitz. This horrifying nightmare "without pause."[11]

Now, what will demand further comment is the way the dream shows us that the terror of the concentration camps assumes a greater significance, a general social applicability, in and through its inter-subjective resonances. Applicable for whom? For those at Auschwitz struggling to simply stay alive. The episode Levi presents to Alberto and others contains subject matter with which his audience is all-too-familiar, a story that could be told at any time, which every present listener can imagine and sympathize with, to the point of being able to see themselves in it—their own experiences and nocturnal hardships. Levi dreams in a way any inmate of Block 45 is accustomed to. Things proceed the same way in his dreams as they would in his neighbors' dreams. In this way his dream elicits recognition: Alberto, his friend, not only confirms it but can also lay claim to it as his own, can share it as well as participate in it,

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forse di tutti. Perché questo avviene? Perché il dolore di tutti i giorni si traduce nei nostri sogni così costantemente, nella scena sempre ripetuta della narrazione fatta e non ascoltata." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 104.

[9] "Dreams," writes Koselleck, "like all affairs that have an impact on someone, like all occurrences, are initially singular and related to individuals. All the same, groups of dreams have a supra-individual history." See Reinhart Koselleck, "Terror and Dream,", 212.

[10] Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 105.

[11] Stuart Woolf, Levi's translator, uses the phrase "without pause" for the Italian "senza tregua." In Italian the term "tregua" is a political and military term which implies a truce. This is relevant because Levi describes the dream as though it were an artillery barrage, an assault of sorts: "Allora il sogno si disfa e si scinde nei suoi elementi, ma si ricompone subito dopo, e ricominicia simile e mutato: e questo senza tregua, per ognuno di noi, per ogni note e per tutta la durata del sonno." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 105.

appropriate and translate it into images that can be applied to his struggle. In this way the terror of the unlistened-to story is transformed into a scene of everyday reality, a unit of common experience capable of striking deep roots in the minds of those who lived in Auschwitz.

But if the dream cuts through the thicket of individual experience to reveal an intelligible truth to others in Block 45, a truth that can elicit recognition and understanding *inside* the world of the Lager, the case in the outside world is not so. In the free world Levi is entirely alienated from his words as well as his actions, and is placed in the painful situation or position of demanding recognition from others who decline to hear him out. In the space of the dream it is Levi's testimony that has failed to meet the condition of being worthy of recognition. Indeed, in such a case, the victim can continue to exist only as an ontological burden. A lifeless presence to be avoided.

And so there is a certain blankness or silence that prohibits the subject from spontaneously expressing and acting on his reasons and desires and needs. That Levi is forced to speak to loved ones as if from behind a pane of glass, privately and mutely vocalizing his history, is indeed the cruelest of punishments. Extreme anguish and loneliness are correlates of not being seen and heard. *Una pena desolata*: a desolating grief so vast and pervasive it approximates the "barely remembered pains" of early infancy.

The salient point Levi is making is not that acknowledgment and recognition are general constituents of human sociality, of our participation in a social world. This line of thought is perhaps too abstract, too detached from the matter at hand. The suggestion, I sense, is that a specific kind of failure is at play in his dream, one that elicits a loneliness with specific contours and proceeding from very

specific circumstances: the unlistened-to story is the lived quotient of Levi and others aggressively being denied recourse to their own freedom in the midst of world disaster. Levi, in other words, represents his speechlessness not as something generalizable, as something reflective of normative social arrangements, but as involving modes of torture which alienate victims of political terror. The moral philosopher Rahel Jaeggi has described alienation in broad terms "as a failure to apprehend, and a halting of, the movement of appropriation," where appropriation denotes "the integration and transformation of what is given."[12] She regards this capacity as "disturbed" or "inhibited" when it obstructs freedom: the ability to "make what one does, and the conditions under which one does it, one's own," openly and without apology.[13]

Unlistened-to testimony is a concrete manifestation of a picture of alienation. It is a figural motif that emerges from Levi's experience at Auschwitz; a trope, equally decisively, whose truthfulness acquires collective significance. Whence, I presume, the general applicability of Levi's dream to the inmates of Block 45, whose nights are also haunted by scenes of unlistened-to testimony. The silence with which their voices are met prohibits empathic transformation, enacting that "failure to apprehend" which is a byproduct of totalitarianism's "inhibited" or "disturbed" relation to the achievement of human freedom. This is a relation wherein the given resists being turned into something new. In which speech aimed at exposing terror is distorted and directed away from intended recipients, from friends and family, and fashioned into an irredeemable,

[12] Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 1.

[13] Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 2.

incurable loneliness, an impossible burden that victims must shoulder in silence. Without any recourse to their own voice.

The primary point is this: Levi's dream gives embodied and realistic expression to his alienation from others; his separation from a world in which he can act and speak without punishment. His written account is a searingly truthful response to how his experience in the Lager and under Fascism deprived him of something essential to, constitutive of, his own freedom, namely the need to speak out in the face of an injustice. And to be listened to. Not just by the inmates in Block 45. But most crucially, by us—we who did not, could not, suffer as he did, but who are nevertheless ready to receive his grief.

*

What remains of the human voice when it testifies to man-made mass death? When the shapes of history of which it speaks seem more extreme than ever before? And when the fabric of a language, a way of life, a set of cultural norms, entire worldviews and ways of proceeding, get placed under unremitting strain? What is left of testimony when a witness, lurching under administered shocks, or condemned to live in disaster's aftermath, or impelled to speak on behalf of the voiceless by testifying on behalf of those who simply cannot bear witness; what is left of such testimony when its structures are threatened by the most careless forms of annihilation and cruelty? When breathing becomes a vexed task, when dreams partake of ongoing terror: What happens when the human voice endeavors to give an account of all this?[14]

[14] The phrase "man-made mass death" was deployed by the American philosopher Edith Wyschogrod in her seminal work *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Wyschogrod provides an account of how philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger have furnished useful sketches for grasping the "death event," whose manner of being "is to exist as the obliteration of cultures as the possible extinction of human life." (xi) Of course, there exists a massive literature on grasping the implications of man-made mass death. Indeed, several of the theoretical perspectives (Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben,

Such questions, to the degree they demand a response, propagate themselves through a cluster of related concerns that will require further interpretation and extrapolation, readings intended to access truths available nowhere but within the testimonial literary work conceived as a privileged cognitive medium. At issue is our understanding of the role of interpretation and reception from the point of view of the object received; that is, from the position of testimony. In the most practical, elementary sense this means grasping and reflecting on our role as listeners and interpreters with regard to specific kinds of utterances: passionate utterances that aim to bear witness to unprecedented world disaster. Neither a state of mind nor an activity enacted by an isolated consciousness, testimony is what I would characterize as a thoroughgoingly relational enterprise, a form of expressive disclosure arising between a speaker and an open addressee, frequently haphazardly, yet still guided by a series of identifiable verbal acts: storytelling strategies that shape the way a discourse at hand is to be received. Not just as utterances, but as narratives that endeavor to reflect on and tell us something meaningful about lived history.[15]

The present work is above all an experiment in the technique of inheritance: the act by which cultural objects are received and integrated into meaningful works of criticism that facilitate their ongoing reception and transformation. My aim is to develop responsive ways of receiving the significance of a rhetorically specific form of bearing witness: "literary" or "poetic" testimony, a genre of self-consciously fashioned creative or artistic writing that promotes

Jonathan Lear, Hayden White, Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, and so on) included in this dissertation have made invaluable contributions to this body of thought.

[15] Narrative, Hayden White reminds us, is a culturally endowed sense-making process whereby a subject—a historian, a novelist, a poet, a critic—encodes a complex of events and concepts as a story of a particular kind. For more, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 86.

the contemplation of history from the standpoint of human witnesses. My general contention in these pages is that unlike mainstream historiography, whose narratives have exercised considerable ascendancy over collective efforts to ascertain and comment on the destruction unleashed by modern disasters, the medium of poetic testimony with which I am concerned offers alternative perspectives—commonly ignored or repressed in history books—through which to empathically inhabit, perhaps even come to grips with, the composition of calamitous events whose textures appear to defy representation as such.[16] Inheriting such works requires us to evaluate our own proximity to them. And by extension our proximity to the voices and events represented therein. What has been inherited enters into a new life and can live on through further creative transformations, fresh renewals that augur the metamorphic power of an afterlife or *Überleben*: restorations that the critic Walter Benjamin taught us to view as together embodying the continuing stages of a work's reception and appraisal realized by listeners and readers.[17]

Put very succinctly, this study aims to develop the appropriate means for inheriting the afterlife of the testimonial works of two great poets, Paul Celan and NourbeSe Philip, both of whom search throughout their oeuvres for responsible modes of representing and bearing witness to world catastrophe. The following pages have grown out of an effort to understand the

[16] The idea of the Holocaust as an event with ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological "limits of representation" gave rise to a conference at UCLA in 1990, "The Final Solution and the Limits of Representation," organized by Wulf Kansteiner and Saul Friedländer. Papers given at this event were published in a seminal volume, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). In the forthcoming chapters I will expound an argument that is much indebted to several essays in this volume, as well as to its companion volume: *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, ed. Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, Todd Presner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[17] The strongest account of the salience of the notion of an afterlife in the work of Walter Benjamin can be found in Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings's astonishing critical biography of the thinker: *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Relevant pages: 59, 109, 112, 158.

specific capacities accorded to breath and voice in the late work of Celan, the Romanian-born, German-language poet, survivor of and witness to the Shoah, whose vast poetic enterprise, among the most remarkable inventions of twentieth-century literature and thought, furnishes that necessary movement of breath critical for the assembly of a robust post-Shoah lyric.

My approach to Celan is such that my readings of his work endeavor to bring it to bear on artistic perspectives and forms deployed by Philip, a poet and lawyer who was born in Tobago and currently lives in Canada. Beginning with the pioneering *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1988), a poetic reflection on the legacies of colonialism and Transatlantic slavery, Philip has produced a body of work that continually meditates on such themes, the most recent instalment of which was the publication of *Zong!* (2008). I assert that the linkage that obtains between Philip and Celan rests not on a shared historical origin but, rather, on a set of general artistic concerns: formal as well as ethical strategies deployed to bear witness to lived history. These in turn create the conditions for the past to live on in the present in acts of poetry which can be inherited.

All poetic projects are ethically situated: Philip's oeuvre elicits a Black feminist response to slavery and its many afterlives; Celan's that of an East European Jew's response to the Holocaust and its aftermath. These, of course, are embodied realities. But such facts do not foreclose the possibility of comparative assessment. Instead, they raise the question of what counts as a truthful resemblance. An affinity between Celan and Philip can be posed on the grounds that they take up, respectively, the task of recuperating speech in the wake of the Holocaust and New World slavery while also providing the kind of

experiential depth necessary to gain access to the matter of living freely in the moral context set by world disaster—in and against administered death. Their poetical narratives have to do with how, in a situation marked by loss, a voice could be understood to give a truthful account of itself to others while compelling that particular form of empathic listening intrinsic to testimonial art, where truthfulness emerges and is fully worked out through acts of attunement that arise between speaker and listeners.

By "attunement" I mean to describe the process by which we become more open to receiving the particular demands testimonial works make on us. This means enacting aural and visual responses that facilitate attentiveness, non-instrumental forms of human comportment capable of promoting solidarity as well as endorsing the non-alienated—that is, solicitous and creaturely—appropriation, transformation, translation, and transmission of our inheritances. In less abstract terms this denotes my readiness, as a reader and listener, to attend to testimony in such a way as to compel its compassionate reception. Such that the voice I am prepared to receive becomes the practical source for still further compassionate translations.

For Philip and Celan, poetic testimony is the medium through which the past speaks. By this I am suggesting there is something specific about their chosen mode of figuration, poetry, as opposed to novel-writing or academic history-writing, that affords them a degree of latitude to fulfill a very particular set of aims. Helping victims speak, sustaining voice, recalling the texture of that world to which language bears witness: realizing these demands is at once the principal task of their work and the subject of this investigation, an investigation intended to give the

afterlives of the Holocaust and New World slavery a robust ethical articulation. Perhaps an inheritance for the future.

The achievement of Celan and Philip is wresting poetry from catastrophe. My aim is to produce an analysis of such an accomplishment that will take the shape of a perpetual commentary, the task of which is to consider why their testimony should matter to us now, so much so that we feel compelled to reflect on it and commit it to our hearts.

These pages are sustained by a solid, and very pronounced, conviction: that the voices and works of Celan and Philip speak to us and our times. This is especially so when their bodies of work are read together, in chorus, as testimonial unit composed of historical and epistemological variances that happen to converge on a common theme: the representation of modern calamities, social and moral failures that gave birth to unprecedented forms of alienation. Knocking at the gates of our walled cities, washing up on our battered shorelines, Celan and Philip demand our attention by dint of the energies their works release when they are read aloud and sung—gestural, verbal, and sonic *tours de force*. Such dynamism hurls its ways toward us like an earthbound comet loaded with rhythms and timbres that await not metaphysical redemption but something entirely of this world: the lending of ears. For the labor of keeping watch over their work remains contingent on our desire to revise our listening habits while simultaneously transforming what we hear into works of our own, trials of attentiveness that bear new fruit.

To write in the aftermath of world disaster is to work through the *ex post facto* character of an event whose contours need some kind of substantive assessment. A report of general human significance. And one that will keep faith with the

moral dimensions of human life that have been shattered by the event itself. Such a retrospective survey is historical insofar as its reflective object is history: its material and social traces as well as what happened to it after the hammer blow. Both these experiences—that of the loss of a social world composed of shared rites and meanings and that of attesting to this loss amid cataclysmic historical and collective rupture—form the historical locus around which Celan and Philip articulate their respective projects, transposing longstanding silences and occlusions back into the rhythms of history.

What emerges is neither an encyclopedic inventory of everyday life under this or that belligerent form of political leadership, nor a record of the nostalgic yearnings that stem from the obliteration of a culture, but rather an attempt to live and write from within ruptures engendered by history. With dignity. And perhaps even freely. And against dangerous forms of political life.

I want to describe this genre of writing, the representational bearing it entails, as a kind of *catastrophic or holocaustal realism*, the narrative strain or mode wherein the realities of world disaster are related and relived in a testimonial format. That is to say from the stance of a witness, whose moral right is to give shape to a truthful and sincere account of the hurt visited on them and on their kin. The critic Erich Auerbach notes that with the birth of modern tragic realism, the genre of literary writing which recorded the convulsions spreading over Europe in the French Revolution's aftermath, writers such as Stendhal and Balzac captured new time-perspectives and historical forces through which they apprehended the world and represented it. Such was the consciousness of this post-Napoleonic world that it embedded humans in a social, political, and economic reality—the reality of European monopoly capitalism—which was

"concrete and constantly evolving" and whose significances for human life the great practitioners of modern realism endeavored to imaginatively survey.[18] Now, the class of literary works I am concerned with has its origin in the transformation of the world brought about by imperialism and colonialism, especially by the advent of modern European empire and global capitalism. Such pathbreaking works as Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* have made it impossible to speak of the histories of Transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust without reference to the ideological character and attitude, the crimes as well as the textures, of this lifeworld. So consequently, it will be seen that, not too unlike Stendhal and Balzac, Philip and Celan take up the problem of mapping their "present as history."[19] This involves inhabiting and reflecting on the historical cataclysms through which their voices and bodies are shaped. The shapes and qualities of experience on which their testimony lives and breathes.

Far from fashioning lachrymose accounts of an idealized version of the past, my claim will be that these two poets are responsible for providing realistic accounts and interpretations that reflect on the meaning of lived experience. Above all this entails reflecting on history. But it means doing so from situated points of view and with a special set of poetic strategies, tactics, and models which are born of an ethical demand to represent world disaster truthfully. This attitude, which I gloss as speculative, forms the basis of the specific kind of cognition their art contributes to history, a form of knowledge that is as poetic as it is keyed to the historical process as such.

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[18] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 463.

[19] See Erich Auerbach, Chapters 17 – 18 in *Mimesis*, 434 – 492.

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What is the speculative lyric? I arrive at this coinage after having wrangled for some time with the legacy of the philosopher of history Hayden White, whose contested body of work, set off by the publication of *Metahistory* in 1973, launched what is regarded by many as the most complete critique of the ideology of Western historiographical writing available to date in the Anglosphere. Animating this corpus is an attempt to demystify the writing of history as an inherently scientific or objectivist enterprise. White's breakthrough consisted in the avowal that all presentations of the past are informed by subjective and ideological judgments (he referred to these as "choices") and that these judgments are in turn mediated by possible types of emplotment: storytelling strategies and expressive typologies that determine how past events are inserted in historical discourses. Decisively, White argued in *Metahistory* that every attempt to narrativize history, even those set forth in purportedly "objective" or "scientific" historiographies, presuppose their own philosophy of history: a critically-informed set of reflections born of the attempt to judge and determine how the past should be construed from individual and collective points of view.

Such narrativizations of history, White claims, partake in the kind of reflective judgments formed by *speculative* philosophers of history such as Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche and Croce, who viewed their work as offering general principles for apprehending "the nature of human beings' existence with others in time."[20] What matters for us is not whether these thinkers did this adequately or not. Or whether, within the realm of theoretical reflection on history, the stories they offered, the ideologies they endorsed, were in the final analysis compelling.

[20] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 16.

The conspicuous distinguishing aspect of their thought is rather the assurance with which, in candid depth and scope, they synthesized and penetrated the depths of the historical consciousness of their time while simultaneously coming to terms with present conditions, not to mention those of the future.[21] The task of the speculative philosopher of history in nineteenth-century Europe was to ask: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we headed? The plural, first-person pronoun "we" touches on individual and collective destines that are articulated with the concretely lived or experienced past; the past that we commonly consult in our daily activities and which White, drawing on the work of Michael Oakeshott, will eventually characterize as "the practical past" in his late writings and thought.

This is the past of "memory, dream, and desire as much as it is of problem-solving, strategy and tactics for living," influenced and motivated by "practical" concerns. Here practical implies ethical: knowledge seeking an answer to queries such as, What is to be done? What ought I do?

> [The practical past] refers to those notions of "the past" which all of us carry around with us in our daily lives and which we draw upon, willy-nilly and as best we can, for information, ideas, models, formulas, and strategies for solving all the practical problems—from personal affairs to grand political programs—met with in whatever we conceive to be our present "situation."[22]

The speculative lyric: an ethically, existentially, and historically charged medium of testimonial cognition in which individual and collective destinies marked by disaster are registered in poetic narratives that reflect on the lived past. Such inventions have less to do with establishing factual truths than with

[21] Hayden White, *The Practical* Past, 16.

[22] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 9.

navigating the truth of an embodied feeling: that of having survived catastrophe. And of being endowed with oral abilities capable of bearing witness to it. This means being in possession of a voice which is suited to act as a point of mediation between the dead and the living, the past and future, as well as bringing a certain attentiveness to bear on "the practical past," that space in which as yet articulated desires and dreams demand a response, awaiting some kind of strategic fulfillment.

This establishes the scope and the general direction of the present study. What is still needed is a clearer view on how Celan and Philip's figurations of historical reality dovetail with those of a traditionally "speculative" kind. For this we will need to situate the former within the context of the latter. This means locating Celan and Philip's projects in a narrative account of the evolution of speculative thought and writing.

For White, the task of the speculative philosopher of history is related to that of the writer of modern literary fiction: the nineteenth-century realist novel became the "site where a newly legitimated dominant class could rehearse its role in the drama of desire's conflict with necessities which past generations had never dreamed of."[23] Balzac was thereby a not-so-distant cousin of Marx and Hegel. Their point of contact? Commitment to a form of reflection "invested less in the interest of establishing the facts of a given matter than that of providing a basis in fact from which to launch a judgment of action in the present," and from which to reflect on the collective fate of the group-in-fusion.[24] In Balzac and Stendhal, Hegel and Marx, the convulsions of post-Napoleonic

[23] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 14.

[24] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 15.

Europe became a principal object of novelistic and philosophical concern. What separates Balzac from Marx is not a matter of substance but of mode: in the former reflection on history is realized in the space of the modern novel; the latter in philosophy and political economy.

Speculative reflection on the past is not a homogeneous enterprise. White drives this postulate home in his final opus *The Practical Past*. As new events appeared on the stage of history in the early twentieth-century, so, too, did novel philosophies: psychoanalysts probed the rifts of the psychic event as phenomenologists and critical theorists rebuked historicism, criticizing methodological suppositions pervasive among nineteenth-century historians such as Ranke and "his progeny," who sought to transform the study of the past into a science with a formalized set of codes and norms.[25] Meanwhile, as corpses lay strewn about the battlefields of World War I, "Conrad, Proust, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Kafka, Stein, Gide, and others" formed a generation of modernist writers conducting radical novelistic experiments that accessed human mentalities in hitherto unseen ways.[26] After World War II these were overtaken by a rehabilitation of old forms: "the revival in the second half of the twentieth century of the early nineteenth-century genre of the historical" and realist novel (Balzac and Stendhal) indicated the kind of writing required for the figuration of "modern times."[27]

[25] It is worth quoting White at length on this topic: "With the transformation of history into a science [in nineteenth-century Europe], however, fiction in general and literary fiction in particular came to be viewed as the nefarious 'other of history and the kinds of truths about the past in which it dealt. Indeed, in Ranke and his progeny, the newly named category of 'literature' (which included such genres as romance and the whole of rhetoric) was made to serve as history's negative, so that, by the late twentieth century, in the field of history, history writing with distinct literary features was immediately recognizable as the work of amateurs or, at best, as the product of a historical sensibility fallen prey to the lures of fantasy." Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 13.

[26] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 17.

[27] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 17.

Cultural forms and figurative styles were recycled as in a Warhol painting. Speculative writing of history in the post-industrial age was forged by minds "as different as Pynchon, Mailer, Capote, DeLillo, Roth, Pat Barker, W. G Sebald, Coetzee, Grass, Danilo Kis, Robert Rosenstone, William Gass, and any number of others challenged the dogma which made 'historical facts' the standard by which to assess the realism of any discourse about the real past or present."[28] Thus the critique of an empirically-minded historicism initiated at the turn of the century lived on in "historical metafiction," where it had migrated from the realms of philosophy and modernist fiction into cultural society at large, spilling over into aesthetic media as varied as film and installation art. Once there it built up a broad range of talents from which a new generation of writers, artists, and thinkers would emerge.

All this would be no more than a form of name-dropping but for the fact that the figures mentioned above are made to stand for something pivotal: the development in the West of realistic forms of writing that have found their proper expression in literary, philosophical, and historical narratives promoting "speculative" and "practical" approaches to the past as lived experience. Yet from the outlook of the present this world of forms is now historical. By which I mean it can be contemplated and parsed as *belonging to the past*, inserted into stories—such as those of White and Auerbach—that have made it onto bookshelves and into doctoral theses, like this one, where they can in turn be scrutinized with renewed interest or with suspicion, mirroring the changes of taste and general preferences of future generations of readers and critics. The idea of an afterlife applies not only to literary works, whose procedures and

[28] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 19.

features undergo startling mutations when taken up anew. It applies, too, to the cultural and critical narratives into which these works are themselves inserted. Such that the ways in which we receive the works of White or Auerbach today constitutes an affair that is open to revision.

That I endorse White does not prevent me from addressing his limitations. The stories he tells about the development of literary forms are beholden to particular judgements which he repeats to his reader again and again. Such decisions are part and parcel of his preferences and critical attitudes. Without them his readings could not supply anything useful to a discourse on the tradition of metahistorical or speculative varieties of history-writing, which I take to be his overarching theme, from *Metahistory* until *The Practical Past*. The point is that at some point he had to make choices as to where and in what bodies of work this theme was presented. His vision contains limits of outlook. That is this so becomes evident in the way certain voices are afforded stronger degrees of emphasis than others in his story.

I think White overlooks the substantial contribution of poetry to the tradition of historical reflection his writings survey. Thus despite his redoubtable authority, his thought exhibits a lack of attentiveness to the kinds of knowledge modern and contemporary poets have brought to bear on the figuration of the practical past. The German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine once suggested that history ought to be recounted by poets, not historians: "a people," he surmised, "does not ask for faithful report of naked facts; what it wants is to see these dissolved again into the original poetry from which they sprang."[29] This is obviously a contentious point. But what I take it to suggest is that poetry, as opposed to other modes of writing,

[29] Heinrich Heine, *A Journey from Munich to Genoa*, cited in S.S Prawer, *Heine's Jewish Comedy: A Study of His Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), epigraph on title page.

affords unique modes of access to history: ripened channels of utterance through which voice and accent, rhythm and breath, take stock of and interpellate the past. *The Speculative Lyric* is an effort to show what these paths of truth consist of. And why attending to them draws us closer to events whose composition calls for something more than the reporting of facts.

My project supplies a counterpoint to White's enterprise in still another way. A cursory glance at the list of authors he cites in his developmental account of speculative history-writing is sufficient to reveal a bias toward authors whose works can be firmly situated in the cannon of Western literature and thought. As with Auerbach, that other doyen of occidental letters, one detects the predominance in White's exposition of Western European male perspectives. Such that its epistemological and geographical horizon is locatable within a largely uniform world with clear borderlines.

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By contrast, the compass of the present work is such that its reach is global. My theses arrange a constellation of voices made up of correspondences, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, wherein various standpoints, place-names, languages, and histories overlap yet still maintain their distinctiveness. I do not consider this a virtue of my approach but rather a criterion of it. The topographies of Celan and Philip's works are not reducible to a center. In the case of the former the Holocaust and its aftermath are figured as a kaleidoscope of events unfolding simultaneously but unevenly in regions as disparate as Copenhagen and Jerusalem, from the Dniester to the Bug River, the bloody territory where Jews were massacred as Hitler pushed eastward. In Celan's hands such variegated place-names are traversed by an open-ended

deployment of vocabularies and styles: high culture, as well as high German, is shot through with the languages and historicity of buried cultural forms, such as those belonging to Jews of Eastern Europe, the East Ashkenazim, with whom the poet readily identified, his birth to a family of German-speaking Jews in Czernovitz, Bukovina in 1920 cementing a lifelong affinity for a world razed through mass destruction.

Like Celan, Philip lyricizes on thresholds and across national borders. Her own lasting desire for justice has led her again and again into the annals of New World slavery, which she violates and reshapes in critical ways, breaking apart the event's archives in order to make them speak anew. What shines through her procedure is a poetic history of vast proportions, an adventure in empathic reenactment unlike anything on offer in our time. Here voices of the dead address us through myths and legal documents from which their heritage as well as their names are structurally omitted. In the course of all this paratactic and hypotactic styles are blended, Western tales are estranged from their context and reinscribed in stories of Black feminist liberation, and English is bent out of shape into something at once rich and strange—a thoroughly transcultural locution that slices through the erasures of legal documents to release a chorus of polyphonic motifs, in which the linguistic, the moral, the musical, and the physico-cosmological world of the deceased is brought to life.

As for Auerbach and White, the point of my project is not to repudiate their substantial achievements but rather to push them into as yet unmapped territory, providing the means for new narratives to arise within and beyond their legacy. The oeuvres of Celan and Philip are the optic through which this is realized.

Their inquiries into the nature of catastrophic reality are guided by a persistent desire for truthfulness that is integrated and centered on values but not systematic. To parse their work I avail myself of a tripartite schema to guide my readings. Breath, action, history: my chapters are ordered to configure these themes. Together they form the spine of my work, the progression from one frame of reference to another resembling a kind of transversal line where ideas and themes are connected as well as organized, figured in new critical sequences. But most importantly this progression allows me to tell a particular kind of story. One that pays heed to voices and desires.

It has been stated that one of Hegel's most incisive contributions to moral thought is the idea that the bearings of our social world can lose their grip.[30] That our norms as well as our roles of shared meaningfulness can fail us, the collective forms of rational agency that undergird a free life with others. The terror of Levi's unlistened-to story returns us to such a scene of failure. Here the foundations of freedom have entirely lost their grip and gone dead. Such that recognition, a desideratum of collective life, is presented as obsolete. Exposed to the ruthlessness of the world, alienated from his friends and family, Levi discovers he cannot give embodied form to his own speechlessness. Why? Because no one in his dream cares to attend to his as yet unheeded story. And yet, we can. By listening, we can give Levi's voice a place in the world from which it has been excised—our world. This, I feel, is our obligation to him. Attending to unlistened-to testimony is act that restores an afterlife to its object, without which a life with others would be lost.

[30] Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6.

Breath

> The world of social action and event, the world of time and process, has a particularly close association with the ear. The ear listens, and the ear translates what it hears into practical conduct.
>
> – Northrop Frey, *Anatomy of Criticism*

Stakes

This story has been long in the making. Its beginning dates to some six years ago, when I began to think about breath as an instrument of poetic figuration after several months of poring over Paul Celan's 1960 "Meridian" address: that dense yet soaring document in which the German word for breath, *Atem*, emerges as a principal figure and motif, appearing continually across its traversal.[1] Celan's address on the occasion of receiving the Büchner prize is a key text. It represents not only an attempt at a personal statement of poetic principles, but also a comprehensive appraisal of the state of poetry after World War II, in which a wealth of literary, historical, and philosophical allusions spring into life against the backdrop of a web of interconnected themes and figures. In this artifact, as well as in many poems, Celan presents breath as a human activity in which subjects partake amid moral and political duress. In both instances it is to the Nazi Holocaust that the trope responds: to the event itself and to the forging of a novel poetics in its wake. Thus a certain hazardous, fraught breathing became the focal point on which my

[1] Several scholars before me have touched on the figure of breath in Celan's work. See Lydia Koelle, *Paul Celans pneumatisches Judentum: Gott- Rede und menschlich Existenz nach der Shoah* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1997); Antti Salminen, "On Breathroutes: Paul Celan's Poetics of Breathing" in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2014) and Maya Barzilai, "One should Finally Learn How to Read This Breath: Paul Celan and the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible" in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (2019).

initial research coalesced, driven on by a particular inner compulsion, like the movement of shadow around a sundial.

But only after this textual background was articulated with an oral component did something resembling an interpretive route present itself to my thinking. This path was provided by Celan's voice. Or more precisely, by a set of cassette tapes released by DerHör Verlag in 1997 that were given to me by my mentor, Todd Presner, who encouraged me to parse the astonishing rhythms therein.[2] Through these recordings I arrived not only at the poet's voice but at the genesis and spirit of the present work. Close listening governed what followed. "Todesfuge," "Corona," and "Tenebrae," lyrics composed in the forties and fifties, did not simply sing the Shoah's aftermath. They charged its milieu with living breath. Celan's recitation of these early verses introduced me to his vocal delivery. They also helped me develop forms of listening attuned to his refrains, the particular qualities of which called out for responsive modes of reception. Aural dispositions keyed to lived history.[3]

The acts of listening that feature in ensuing chapters are not metaphorical. They arise from efforts to apprehend and respond to Celan's recorded voice: its texture and grain, breath and vitality, as well as its inflections and rhythmicity. All of the poems to which I respond were read aloud and committed to tape, their testimonial body offered to others, but the manner in which I do so varies. To the extent possible, my approach consists in allowing the poems to dictate the form of my encounter with them. Sometimes this involves commenting on

[2] Paul Celan, *Ich Hörte Sagen: Gedichte und Prosa*, DerHör Verlag, 1997.

[3] See Geoffrey Hartman's essay on orality, aurality, and the ethical implications of attending to Holocaust testimony: "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1995), 537 – 563. Excellent, too, is Dori Laub on the subject, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening" in *Testimony: Crises of Witness in History, Literature, and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.

Celan's voice as well as his breathing. At other times it calls for readings that aim to distill a general impression or bodily feeling evoked by his recitations: forms of receptiveness keyed to matters of a more atmospheric kind that can be received—not mastered—by our ears.

The delineation of this approach ushered this chapter into its present stage. My listening occasioned a key finding: the accent on *Atem* in the "Meridian" is supplied an aural complement when the recordings of Celan's own voice are considered in their expressive richness. In the former artifact a strong figural connection holds among three elements: the creaturely voice, breath, and poetry. This tryptic gets fully fleshed out when another element is added to the mix, namely an attentiveness to orality as such, where voice, breath, and poetry factor as central, if not indispensable, constituents.

I will come to show how this is so in time. More urgent is the need to account for how my method was informed by listening. To this end, it was Celan's recitation of his late work that exercised an indelible influence over my own imagination.[4] While early poems such as "Todesfuge" opened me to the grain of his voice, satisfying my search for a critical method, it was the poetry from the sixties and seventies that unlocked my ears and body, drawing me bit by bit into its shapes. Around this time the notion of a breath poetics took a decisive turn for me. It acquired, to be sure, a Celanian valence. In such works the breath of another somehow revealed itself to me, its addressee. I perceived these were sounds my ears could aim to translate into practical conduct.

[4] Celan insisted on a division between his early works and his later works, articulating this around the *Wende* or turn that birthed his late-style. See Pierre Joris, "Introduction," in Paul Celan, *Breathturn Into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2014), xl – xlvii.

With these coordinates in place the foundation of this chapter was laid. Yet by this time an event whose features were conspicuously characterized by the annulment of breath had attained a high degree of social visibility. On May 25, 2020, the death of George Floyd forced a reconsideration of racism's history in the USA. "In most of their daily affairs," writes Adolph Reed in his memoir on life during the Jim Crow segregationist order, "people normally aren't focused on the architecture of the social system that gives direction to and shapes the content of their lives, their dreams and fears, their sense of who they are and what they deserve."[5] This is a solid sociological truth. But what is to be done when these foundations, so well-worked and consolidated, suddenly begin to shake and founder around us? When the reproduction of the systems whose firmness went unquestioned only a moment ago produce certain circumstances which cannot be justly sustained? On May 25, I believe, that ground wavered.

Access to breath is not a guaranteed right. Nor is it equally distributed to the public. This is why Floyd's words, "I can't breathe," both registered and shattered the illusion of white supremacy, which, as Reed puts it, has peremptorily and arbitrarily sustained "the walls, floors, ceilings, and foundations" of American social and political life.[6] The cruelty visited on the souls of Black folk has made lives indecent and impossible, rendering breath precarious in ways incapable of this or that justification. It has destroyed kinship ties. It has eviscerated the moral bonds holding us accountable for our acts and words. What the fate of George Floyd, Freddie Gray, and so many others forces us to confront is not the fragility of mortal life. More specificity should be required here. With such losses, says Jamieson Webster,

[5] Adolph L. Reed Jr., *The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives* (London: Verso, 2022), 4.

[6] Adolph L. Reed Jr., *The South*, 4.

we are forced to account for those whom "we have treated as objects, whom we have reduced to were bodies, whom we have told they have no right to have, or whom we have never properly mourned," to be sure.[7]

Our failure to guard these lives signals nothing less than collective negligence. Ashon Crawley reminds us that the Hebrew term *ruach* holds the meanings of breath, air, wind, and even soul: talk of breath is talk of air's soulful formation.[8] What substantiates this is the "rather extraordinary fact that air should move," conveying the projection of soul or wind or air into an as yet undefined future.[9] The point is that breath's tendency is to disseminate itself throughout the body. This of course is due to the fact that the human organism needs recourse to air if it is to endure in life—at the very least.

Contrast this with death by strangulation, in which the body becomes alienated from the intuitive need to draw its own breath. Air should be circulating within the soul. Wind ought to vitalize the body's shapes. Yet it was the cessation of such passage that produced, unjustly, the loss of a life, the upshot of which was the erosion of a soul's capacity for temporal projection—across space and time, into the future. An abrasion of life, *tout court*: to situate this abdication of collective responsibility at the heart of racial violence is to direct the scope of our concerns toward the irreducibly social and political dimension of our ongoing failures and hostilities. We need not possess knowledge of Floyd's body or soul to grasp our collective attitude toward his being. Ours is a lifeworld hostile to the thriving of black life. Social reality participates in the objectification of racist attitudes and norms.

[7] Jamieson Webster, "On Breathing," *The New York Review of Books* (2021).

[8] Ashon Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham Press, 2017), 40.

[9] Ashon Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath*, 40.

With this I am proposing we view the phenomenon of racial violence from a standpoint that exceeds yet nonetheless encompasses the acts of perpetrators. As will become apparent, my present commitments move toward considering the responses of victims of political terror, as is the case in the work of Celan and Philip, both of whom figure breathlessness.

An upshot of racial violence is the circumscription of the domain of life. Death by strangulation is an apparatus of exclusion that determines whether a life ought to be valued or wantonly discarded. Such foreclosure of voice is of a piece with the silencing of a subject's right to speak and breathe and live with dignity. For Michel Foucault, racism's *raison d'être* is "to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum," affixing an extinguishable essence to bodies whose death can be socially mobilized.[10] Forced asphyxiation represents a deathly epistemology to the extent it allocates breath along an inequitable axis that regards certain lives as expendable and non-grievable.[11]

The forging of caesuras within our body politic forces us in turn to inhabit the aftermath of gratuitous death and suffering, the cause of which is bound up with the tenor of our attitude toward particular souls, and which is conditioned by our neglect. As thus envisaged, racial violence impels us to consider our duties to others, especially those who do not exercise the right to breathe in salubrious abundance. It requires we give shape to our losses by revising the grooves of our listening, the ossified, stillborn patterns of our care. Because the sustenance of breath is an activity that should concern us collectively, binding us to the source of our failure.

[10] Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York, Picador, 2003), 255.

[11] Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 75.

At stake in this view is the duty to act on the burden we hold in common. All this even if redress proves impossible.

Threads

I have arranged and conjoined the materials from which these pages draw. The readings that follow approach this constellation as a differentiated whole, deploying a variety of artifacts to instantiate what I will call a breath poetics. What these opening remarks must still do is forge a perspective that governs the terms around which our investigation will wager a measured response, however incomplete or rough it may be, to the phenomenon of breathlessness. Asphyxiation as an expression of a deathly epistemology and praxis has long been a hallmark of authoritarian regimes. But examined less habitually are some of the problems that such acts pose for the representation of disaster. Access to voice, I have argued, becomes imperiled when the context in which a body is situated ceases to provide the care that is necessary to sustain life. How do imaginative writers figure this event?

Just as voice can breathe itself into speech, so can it be mangled by violent acts. This zone of vulnerability was brought into terrifying relief on May 25, 2020. On that day a history of breathing materialized in and through a single body. I am speaking of the routine forms of black subjugation that have accompanied Floyd's death right up to the present day, a genealogy in which events such as Transatlantic slavery and the fortification of the Jim Crow laws play a major role. To represent such events is to enter into the "archives of breathlessness," a phrase coined by Christina Sharpe to describe the "deadly occlusion" that is part and parcel of black life in this country—an occlusion "continually reanimated"

by the caesurae, the racial gaps and divisions, that cut across our social arrangements.[12] In her work Sharpe draws our attention to what these divisions consist of while opening another line of interrogation: What kind of critical labor would it take, she asks, "to keep breath in the Black body," namely to preserve and care for it in a way that "protects" and "defends" the dead?[13]

To safeguard breath: this sets our discourse on a novel plane of moral, political, and artistic discussion. The grist of Sharpe's critical effort consists precisely in this, that it organizes traces of "deadly occlusions" into a call for dignified redress. Hers is a regenerative project in which the call to address the past is distributed equally among poets, philosophers, critics, as well as painters and installation artists. Here past and present emerge and are developed across multiple creative domains, with the purpose of finding responsible ways to grasp and present lived history against capitulation to the death-world.[14]

What is furnished is not simply an awareness of a narrative in the making, but something brave and necessary: an accounting that organizes the world according to a procedure that strips official history of innocent neutrality in the service of a particular collectivity.

Among those from whom Sharp draws inspiration is NourbeSe Philip. I cannot think of another contemporary poet who accomplishes the same brave historical exposure Sharpe achieves in her body of critical thought. Set in the *longue durée* of new world slavery, the title lyric of Philip's inaugural book,

[12] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 109

[13] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 108 – 113

[14] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 38 – 41

She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks, transposes a plea to safeguard the dead into the rhythm of these caesural cadences:

> When silence is
> Abdication of word tongue and lip
> Ashes of once in what was
> …Silence
> Song word speech
> Might I…like Philomela…sing
> Continue
> Over
> Into
> …pure utterance[15]

This sweet legume of "tongue and lip" gathers song and breath into itself. It hazards voice to contest silence and face up to a past vitiated by force. The point is to find an outlet for the past in the oscillations of poetic rhythm, delivering them over to "pure utterance."

In Philip's poem the stakes of remembrance are redoubled with mention to Philomela, whose rape by Tereus, King of Thrace, culminates in a violent act. Tereus severs Philomela's tongue to prevent her from testifying to his misdeed. In Ovid's recounting of the myth, the rape is an act that must be retrenched as speedily as possible so as to keep talk of it from reaching familiar ears. Most of all from Procne, Tereus' wife, who happens to be Philomela's sister. Yet the truth creates difficulties in its turn.

How? Philomela vows to canalize the source of her rage into a response. On a "clumsy native loom" she weaves in purple letters on a white backdrop the tale of her rape. Once her work is finished, she entrusts it to a solicitous attendant, who transports the work of art to Procne, who then learns of the event that has

[15] NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 72.

befallen her adored sister.[16] In this manner the loom on which Tereus' act is spun weaves in artistic form an evidentiary record of his unpardonable crime. Philomela's work discloses a reality that is not easily assimilated or ingested but around which social inequalities appear. The instance represented therein has a pertinence that is thoroughgoingly systemic: these are the deeds, it says, of Tereus, a scornful and dangerous man altogether unashamed of his lack of principles. And this is the manner whereby Philomela, flanked by her attendant and her sister, kinship bonds forged through abiding rage, manages to bring a perpetrator to heel, holding him accountable for his base acts.

Silence, then, as a vehicle for restitution. What marks Philomela is that she returns. In Ovid and Philip's stories she returns as an agent of dignity and justice. Both authors breathe an aura of freedom that derives from their material. In Philip's poem, however, such freedom acquires a markedly feminist texture. Here the divisions that structure gender norms are self-consciously exposed, thereby attaining a certain degree of truthfulness lacking in Ovid's presentation. Philip's Philomela is a survivor of disaster: her "pure utterance" is also her testimony, which her poem figures into an allegory—of feminine life under patriarchy, yes, but also of the yet to be written histories of those "we have treated as objects," "whom we have never properly mourned."[17]

Silence is no dead zone. From it exemplary acts and deeds and utterances flow. This is one of the reasons why Philomela continues so forcefully to speak to us, offering us an allegory of feminist agency in the face of abject violence. What I find compelling about Philip's variation on this theme is the way it

[16] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D Melville and Edward J. Kenney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 139.

[17] Jamieson Webster, "On Breathing," *The New York Review of Books* (2021).

preserves a linkage to myth that is anchored in the history of slavery. Hence the ethical thrust of her poem: the desire to apprehend the past arises when history is disturbed by violence and demands a robust poetical retort. The need is there for recasting myth and history from the perspective of black feminism, the situated lens through which Philip approaches her writing practice, inscribing her voice in the flow of time.

This is the first resonance that will emerge between Celan and Philip: theirs is a lyric utterance that aims to keep breath in the body of the vanquished in ways that are responsive to the possibilities and limitations of their craft, poetic art or literary writing. Here the past is developed through so many open, improvisatory utterances that dwell in the cleavages of modern catastrophe to lay claim to testimonial varieties of truth.

I am not positing an analogy between the Holocaust and New World slavery. This would be off-target: "Slavery's brutal arithmetics are precursive to those of the Holocaust," says Sharpe, who then proceeds to remind us that the Holocaust is accessible to us as human tragedy in ways that slavery and its afterlives are not, a lack of recourse to testimony typifying efforts to apprehend the latter.[18] Equally evident is the epistemic gulf separating Celan's poetry from Philip's. The structures of injustice subjecting their voices to harm are contrastive. And their subject positions incur incompatible forms of discrimination.[19] Such facts pose distinctions that require more than symbolic recognition. Even so, I embrace what Achille Mbembe calls the "vocation of life" to

[18] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake,* 34.

[19] The moral philosopher Miranda Fricker would refer to this difference as "systematic" because Celan's testimony renders him susceptible to injustices (racial, educational, legal political, and so on) that are different in kind from the social types of oppression that Philip's testimony incurs. See Miranda Fricker *Epistemic Injustice: Power & Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27 – 29.

orient my thinking on politics and culture—a claim predicated on the view that the composition of our contemporary struggles poses the problem of belonging in a world that is "common to all of us," in the spirit of dignity and freedom, with racism and anti-Semitism both operating as targets of condemnation.[20] Such is the art of Philip and Celan that the desire to partake of a common world is reflected in the breathing which saturates their lyrical utterances. In their work the way to a pure utterance is arrived at through speechlessness. Yet it culminates in a form of survival that hews to "the vocation of life," hazardously, indeed, but always passionately.

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Consider Celan's 1967 work, "Weggebeizt." Set like Philip's lyric in disaster's wake, it lingers over absence to reclaim a history, keying a suite of figural effects to voice. But where Philip's verses etched their way elliptically to a final utterance, Celan's procedure, corrosive and acid-like, burns its way toward an addressee. Such is Celan's title, translated by Ulrich Baer as "cauterized a-way," that it prefigures the very linguistic operation it will enact: to cauterize a wound means to burn it in order to aid "healing after a grave trauma."[21] Yet here the wound itself is left open. So that words set this fissure ablaze:

Weggebeizt vom	Eroded by
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache	the beamwind of your speech
das bunte Gerede des An-	the gaudy chatter of the pseudo-
erlebten – das hundert-	experienced – the hundred-
züngige Mein-	tongued perjury-
gedicht, das Genicht.	poem, the noem.

[20] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 176 – 182.

[21] Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 208.

This then is Celan's "noem" of liquidation: the term *Genicht*, says Baer, mimes the verb *Vernichten*, to destroy or comb through—a precious axiom of Nazi-Deutsch.[22] And so the idea is to burn through this verbal archive, thereby cauterizing it, clearing out a space for an Other, a *dich*, that the poem, *Ge<u>dicht</u>,* will facilitate. So the same voice that initiated this insurrection must construct a route through all the debris it has conjured:

Aus-	Evorsion-
gewirbelt	ed
frei	free
der Weg durch den menschen-	the path through the men-
gestaltigen Schnee,	shaped snow,
den Büßerschnee, zu	the penitent's snow
den gastlichen	the hospitable
Gletscherstuben und -tischen	glacier-parlors and -tables

The speaker's words struggle to ascertain the world as they would like to do. Snow obstructs access to voices which call to him from below, human-shaped souls caught in ice, awaiting fulfilment:

Tief	Deep
in der Zeitenschrunde	in the timecrevasse
beim	in the
wabeneis	honeycomb-ice
wartet, ein Atemkristall	waits, a breathcrystal,
dein unumstößliches	your unalterable
Zeugnis.	testimony.[23]

The way to testimony is paved with figures lodged in the sediments of time. To capture breath the poem clears away deposits that impede its advance.

[22] Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 187.

[23] Paul Celan, "Weggebeizt" in *Breathturn Into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2014), 18 – 19.

This short but dynamic lyric "literalizes the notion of a language drill."[24] Distillation through blasting: this is the sense in which the principle at play invests speech with a vehemence that exhumes layers of the lived past, boring through time itself to rescue breath.

What is an *Atemkristall*, a breathcrystal? It is the source of the poem's actuality, living testimony—Celan's "pure utterance," the force that keeps breath in the body. What this means in ontological and moral terms is indeed a further question, but we can at least explain our impressions, I think, in terms of what may be called a phenomenology of testimonial breathing, by which I mean to describe the state of affairs to which Celan's breathing aspires: to solidarity with the speechless. Hence a sensual immediacy that is above all mediated by layers of the past: "Deep / in the timecrevasse," from within the disaster, "your" voice speaks to me. This will have been a poem about what voice can provide for the silenced: a catalyst for breath in an open addressee.

Receiving, gathering, distilling: Celan does not insinuate a relation to testimony. He demands one. The exigencies of his lyric need more than a sympathetic ear. Only some kind of recognition or acknowledgment can begin to carry some of the weight needed to assume the place of loss. This entails a confrontation with absences. "Neither the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony," claims Giorgio Agamben; it is testimony "that founds the possibility of the poem."[25] What does all this mean? For Agamben, as well as for Marc Nichanian and others, impossible testimony elaborates a specific conception of the Holocaust as an event without proper witnesses. To their minds, the enactment of genocidal violence

[24] Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song,* 184.

[25] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 36 – 39.

engenders a testimonial crisis in as much as it undermines witnessing as such, a blow which realizes the "destruction of the factuality of fact and the erasure of the witness as such," full stop.[26] Voicelessness is the cause of an *aspirational annulment*. Testimony becomes impossible when traces of breath are effaced or *vernichtet*. This erasure robs victims of the world, too.

"Weggebeizt" addresses this circumstance. Here the silenced are not made to speak. Instead, their absence issues a strong call for new forms of witnessing. Celan's poem invites voice—poetry, song, testimony—to travel this other path. It proceeds by belatedly returning to a scene hitherto colonized by silence, cultivating breath where organized destruction says there ought to be none. Lives have been sundered. The death-drive set loose. Voice has been pierced. Lyric steps in to compel a testimonial relationship to such mass destruction. I attribute the richness of "Weggebeizt" to the manner it holds open time, tearing into it and cutting across it to blast open a vista for witnessing. The aporia into which impossible testimony is thrown is made to resonate. Voice demands attention not because it speaks in a coded or secret idiom. But rather because it renders strange the familiar habits of our listening, namely by bringing us to the very threshold of our everyday rapport with words and sounds, silences and absences.

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Since voicelessness is the upshot of what I call an aspirational annulment, breath will name the force that touches on the site from which loss surges, thus enabling a witness to wage a bodily struggle with impossible testimony.

[26] Marc Nichanian, "The Death of the Witness; or, the Persistence of the Differend" in *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, ed. Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kanister, and Todd Presner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 141 – 166.

The flow of "Weggebeizt" is cauterized to orient voice toward a zero-point. Utterances enact their self-unmaking so as to shatter and repose history. Therefore, voice is the source of an activity characterized by aggressiveness, by destructiveness toward whatever tries to come between it and mourning. "The destructive character," states Walter Benjamin, "knows only one watchword: make room." To what end? "Clearing away." All this when the desire for "fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred."[27]

Celan's lyric effaces itself to make room. To create a space in which to mourn. And yet this is only one side of the issue. At stake is not solely the problem of the recreation of what has been dissolved—an aim to which the poem applies its energies in the service of cultivating breath—but a special quality which has not yet been mentioned: that of the material weight, the physical mass of Celan's own voice. Only this opens up the space for a multi-dimensional narrative body to emerge. That the cadences of "Weggebeizt" offer a way into the past has been confirmed. Though yet to be explored are the uniquely physical possibilities of such access. So indispensable are the resources of Celan's breath that they transform what his poetic testimony can signify and do—a revolution in hearing and reception that reshapes the range of demands his utterances make on their audience. In representational terms, this furnishes an opening that is ethical as well as artistic. One that is helpful because it translates our visual contemplation of the text under question into the impact of an aural collision.

Which gives lyric the intensity of an event. And indeed, our readings must aim to stand at the confluence of these conditions, at the nub of the unique combination of possibilities that alone can explain the development of a breath poetics.

[27] Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998), 541 – 542.

Voice, breath, and poetry: together these compose a kind of figural materiality which I glossed earlier as possessing an intimate association with the ear. This is to say I am interested in and care about Celan's refrains as incident. As oral and aural incident: the turning loose of expressive features that come together in a robust, passionate utterance:

Weggebeizt vom	Eroded by
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache	the beamwind of your speech
das bunte Gerede des An-	the gaudy chatter of the pseudo-
erlebten – das hundert-	experienced – the hundred-
züngige Mein-	tongued perjury-
gedicht, das Genicht.	poem, the noem.

I circle back to these lines in order to present them in a marginally different way. Fragments shoot out of poems that make new claims on our ability to respond. Strange tremors are drawn to the surface. And after a time these seem all the more powerful because they force you to hear them as if they had appeared just now. As if they had never emerged there before. Because just yesterday you were sure they weren't there. Yet here they are, running wild within a context with which you are familiar, but which is nonetheless different, even authentically new, and which imbues the surface of the work with a new density.

The opening stanza of "Weggebeizt" is a veritable *Wunderkammer* of refrains, voicings, and nuances that, heard together, seem to make up their own universe. I feel that what our initial reading missed is something essential and immediate: the grain of Celan's voice does not sing these lines but tears through them. The occasion is as sudden as it is perilous. At stake is the devolution and recreation of sequence, line, color, rhythm, and tone. What is shattered is the German tongue. The idea of a language-drill reasserts itself, but it has now acquired sensual qualities.

Heavy and coarse, as hard as igneous rock, there is something about the recitation's opacity that sinks its teeth into ground.

What emerges is a restrained chromaticism characterized by a scraping away of extra matter: a blazing erosion of contours that sends rhythms flying in so many directions. "Affects are bodily feelings, emotions conscious states," writes Fredric Jameson.[28] The former embodies that "supreme form of theatricality" which flashes forth as *Rausch* or intoxication: that "feeling of plentitude and increased energy" which indexed for Nietzsche a vast "scale of unnamable bodily states" associated with music and the birth of art:

> For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: intoxication. Intoxication must first have heightened the excitability of the entire machine: no art results before that happens. All kinds of intoxication, however different their origin, have the power to do this; above all, the intoxication of sexual excitement, the oldest and most primitive form of intoxication. Likewise the intoxication which comes in the train of all great desires, all strong emotions; the intoxication of cruelty; intoxication in destruction; intoxication under certain meteorological influences, for example the intoxication of spring; or under the influence of narcotics; finally, the intoxication of the will, the intoxication of an overloaded and distended will.[29]

Intoxication as cruelty and destruction: the intoxicated character and tenor of "Weggebeizt," overloaded with passions, is a machine for the realization of new passageways in form and content, music and speech, feeling and comportment. What is more, the only physiological precondition for this experiment is breath. Without which there would no poetic art. No sunburst of life issuing from words. No riposte to the cruelty thrusted on voice.

Celan's poem makes room for response. Traversing lips and lungs and tongue, dense neologisms—*Strahlenwind*, *Anerlebten*, *Meingedicht*—collide with an assonant

[28] Fredric Jameson, "Narrative Bodies: Rubens and History," in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the Historicity of Forms*, (London: Verso Books, 2017), 6. The link between affect and bodily feeling is developed in greater depth by Jameson in another one of his studies: *The Antinomies of Realism*, (London: Verso Books, 2015), 15 – 77.

[29] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin, 1968), 82 – 83.

rhyme, *Genicht*. Terse strophic units attack melody as if it were a hinderance, not a means, to soul. And to affect. Which is there as body, as elemental flesh and heart. What has been bulldozed must now make way for a certain breathless chattering. This procedure is less motivic than textural: the context of each utterance is not given by the actual series in which it is articulated, but, instead, by the abrasive stammering that saturates the pores of the entire stanza.

The poem appears as though set alight. A redness envelops what is sundered. The destructive character is also a risk-taker, a personage with the resources and the necessary courage to face disaster with clarity. And to make sound choices in its wake. The oral complex that is the object of our hearing implies a retraction of voice that approximates the reality of destruction: Celan invests his breath with the same acerbity it directs toward the external world, which appears before us as if in tatters. If, as Jonathan Lear has suggested, the risks involved in cultural devastation include not only "malnutrition, starvation, disease, defeat, and confinement" but also the extensive "loss of concepts" orienting life, the capacity to "live well" under these conditions should also include the ability to destroy the world to fashion it anew.[30] Such an act would have to include the demand to represent the world in the face of conceptual loss with actionable passions.

What is being destroyed in Celan's poem? And what is being pieced back together? Breath scorches and cuts a route toward us, setting its ruthlessness into belated song. Voice weathers the weight of this burden: it pushes up against it and is pushed back; it drives itself past it and is driven back; crying out for air, it is plunged into fire. The poem is the space in which this back-and-forth motion is imbued with danger.

[30] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 123.

And risk, because what animates it is the struggle to obtain concepts and lessons by way of drilling into the breaches of history.

Such that what gets cleared away is the verbal storehouse or archive of disaster.[31] The idea is to compel destruction to undo a discourse that is at the same time an ordering: a speech ripe with taboos and stigmatized impulses, its staccato plosives hurled at Jews as they were transported from boxcars into concentration camps: *Achtung! Pass auf, pass auf!* At the core of the structure of the *Vernichtungslager* stood this verbal depository of fear and coercion, cemented by hate and mythical discord, built up over time—not transcendent but inherent to the past itself—and erected in defiance of dignity. And in contempt of life. Celan's tongue clamps over this tongue, a skeletal embrace that melds with history, absorbing and dispersing it wholesale. Here is what my ear catches: "Weggebeizt" accumulates breath in a way that releases its speech toward testimony, creating a language of stress that opens up space for breathing which through calculated assault makes room for intoxications to rise in disaster's wake—shadows in full bloom.

Directions

We might appreciate the force of such breathing by pouring our attention along the textual veins through which it is integrated in the discursive field of the "Meridian." This artifact stages a contrast: it locates, says Christopher Fynsk, the site "from which poetry may proceed in a step that liberates it from art."[32]

[31] "The archive," claims Foucault, "is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity […] but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. AM Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 129.

[32] Christopher Fynsk, "The Realities at Stakes in a Poem: Celan's Bremen and Darmstadt Addresses," in *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 165.

This will be a descriptive venture sending Celan in search of the conditions under which poetry, *Dichtung,* establishes itself as distinguishable from art, *Kunst*. From the outset these themes denote figures that are emplotted in a story of a particular kind—a story culminating in an instance of release where poetry wrests itself away from art in a sudden contradictory movement Celan will characterize as an *Atemwende*, a breathturn.

And so we begin with art: What is it? For Celan, to speak of art is to broach a network of concepts and practices that endure across a cultural timespan. Celan feeds in particular on art as a sign of the mechanical and the uncanny, as his own thoughts on the topic disclose:

> Art, that is the artificial, the faked, the synthetic, the manufactured: it is human- and creature distanced creaking of the automatons: it is, here, already, cybernetics, puppets readied for reception, it is man this and that side of himself: the cosmonaut, born from the womb of technology, for whom language means a fall-back to a pre-existence.[33]

So what we are left with is a picture as lonesome as it is terrifyingly alive. Art, we note, is deeply not a reciprocity. It conceives of relationality in terms of its alienated, split-off view of the world. As such it necessitates no interlocutor, the "distance" separating it from human bonds being a fact of its constitution. It is this commixture of moral naivety and invulnerability that is most uncanny. Art's "puppet-like" aura advances in lockstep with its "iambically five-footed" gait, foolishly and blindly, deaf to soulfulness.[34]

As the "Meridian" proceeds a web of figural relations coalesces around *Kunst*: "ideas are always elements in more complex signifying systems," claims Jameson,

[33] Now in German: "Kunst, das ist das Künstliche, Erkünstelte, Synthetische, Hergestellte: es ist das menschen- und kreaturferne Knarren der Automaten: es ist, schon hier, Kybernetik, eingestellte Marionette, es ist der Mensch diesseits und jenseits seiner selbst: der aus dem Schoß der Technik geborenen Weltraumschiffer, dem Sprache einen Rückfall in eine Vorexistenz bedeutet." See Paul Celan, "The Meridian," 124.

[34] Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 2.

"whose most obvious mechanism—the binary opposition—is only one of the relationships that organize that cluster of themes we call a meaning."[35] So it is with art. Its designation as mimesis operates as the most basic unit of a signifying system that contracts and expands around it, generating further series of oppositions.[36] Art would then simply be reality or nature "once one takes pains to imitate it."[37] But this connection remains a static and unproductive allegory, a homology, until additional elements appear around it.

We will ask at a later point if art merits the poor renown Celan gives it; if his take on the matter of *Kunst*, which is unflattering to say the least, is the consequence of a polarized standoff between two caricatured figures in which neither art nor poetry can be insightful about the other's position. Even so, his "hostility" to art is such that he starts by pitting it against poetry.[38] He does so in part to signal a rhetorical inflection point in his discourse that renders these figures distinctive by dint of forging a gap between them. Poetry appears in the "Meridian" as the fleshing out and working through of art. Its task is to announce something as yet hidden in the development of a story: the emergence of voice as human agency.

This whole metamorphosis is anchored in literary and historical sources, all of which gain expression and form through the consciousness of Lucile,

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[35] Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), xiv.

[36] For Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, art is a child of prehistory, so much so its origins precede the "philosophical designation of mimesis, and its execution or appropriation as representation, reproduction, semblance, or simulation." By these lights, we face art as a fundamental riddle whose claims implicate as well as transcend our knowledge, much like Martin Heidegger's *Dasein*, the primordial form of being into which we are thrown like so many fish in water, and whose determinations precede us to the extent they are 'always already there.' Lacoue-Labarthe takes this a step further. For him art is *Techne*: a form of being that effaces "difference from the things of being and nature." See Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Catastrophe," in *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 133 – 134.

[37] See Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Catastrophe," 134.

[38] "*Das Kunstfeindliche*" is the term Celan uses to characterize his hostility to art. See Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 124.

a minor character from Georg Büchner's drama, *Danton's Death*, who is nonetheless the true protagonist of the "Meridian," so much so she will eventually represent poetry for Celan.

Indeed, in reading the "Meridian" it is striking to find how well Celan's Lucile dovetails with Philip's Philomela. To be sure, Celan's discourse aims to do for Büchner's *Danton's Death* what Philip does for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: to render a past work available to the present by transposing it into the idiom of a subaltern writing of disaster, the perspective from which both poets reinvent history through a radical repurposing of Western cultural artifacts. Like Philomela, Lucile becomes an example of agency and discernment, a subject whose comportment strikes us as necessary and virtuous and thereby, as Aristotle was accustomed to put it, *Kalon*, a Greek term translated as fine or noble or beautiful. Jonathan Lear glosses it as thus:

> [*Kalon*] is something that strikes us and fills us with admiration when we witness it, and it fills us with pride, a sense of accomplishment, and meaningfulness when we participate in it. This capacity to act in ways that are *kalon*, Aristotle thinks, distinguishes our human manner of flourishing—happiness—from the manners of flourishing of other animals. The important point Aristotle is making is that there is something special about our capacity to act and create in ways that are *kalon*. The *kalon* is a crucial node of human experience: connecting the social experience of being recognized with respect and admiration with the personal satisfaction of knowing one is acting well. In the *kalon*, self and society and world come together in a manifest harmony.[39]

It is this form of flourishing that shines forth in Lucile and Philomela's acts. In Philip and Celan, the poem is the place where their deeds are recognized, where they are recreated "in memory and imagination" to engender human flourishing in the face of mass destruction.[40] As Lear admits, the lifeworld in which

[39] Jonathan Lear, "We Will Not Be Missed!" in *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 16.

[40] Jonathan Lear, "We Will Not Be Missed!", 17.

the *Kalon* made its home is no longer with us. The Greek polis is gone. Ovid's dulcet Latin has died. And Büchner is our antiquity. What endures, though, is the demand for noble or beautiful acts that survive time. Acts that are regarded with "respect" and "admiration" by us as well as by society.

Lucile elicits this kind of acknowledgment. She cultivates a form of being that can be described—strongly, I believe—as noble. As I have mentioned, her appearance in the "Meridian" signals the onset of poetry:

> But whenever there is talk about art, there is always someone present who … doesn't really listen. More exactly: someone who hears and listens and looks … and then doesn't know what the talk was all about. But who hears the speaker, who "sees him speak," who perceives language and shape and also—who could doubt this here, in writing of this order?—breath (*Atem*), that is, direction and destiny (*Richtung und Schicksal*). That person is—and you have known it all along, for she comes, often, and not by chance often quoted, she comes to you year after year—that person is Lucile.[41]

Language, shape, and breath: Lucile cultivates these resources amid destruction. Büchner's play unfolds in the hiatus between the first and second terrors of the French revolution—a topography of terror but also of many new beginnings.[42] We encounter Lucile in a crowd of onlookers who have gathered to witness the beheading of Louis XVI. But even as history is prepared to spring into life, *Historie* passing into *Geschichte*, bondage into freedom, monarchy into democracy, Lucile pushes against the clamor of the enlightened moment with her utterance, "Long live the King!" to which Celan adds:

> After all the words spoken on the rostrum (the scaffold, that is)—what a word!

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[41] In German: "Aber es gibt, wenn von der Kunst die Rede ist, auch immer wieder jemand, der zugegen ist und … nicht richtig hinhört. Genauer: jemand, der hört und lauscht und schaut … und dann nicht weiß, wovon die Rede war. Der aber den Sprechenden hört, der ihn 'sprechen sieht, ' der Sprache wahrgenommen hat und Gestalt, und zugleich auch – wer vermöchte hier, im Bereich dieser Dichtung, daran zu zweifeln? – und zugleich auch Atem, das heißt Richtung und Schicksal. Das ist, Sie wissen es längst, sie kommt ja, die so oft und kaum von ungefähr so oft Zitierte, mit jedem neuen Jahr zu Ihnen – das ist Lucile." See Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 3.

[42] By far the most impressive political and philosophical account of this terrain can be found in Rebecca Comay's *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

> It is the counterword (Gegenwort), it is the word that cuts the string, the word that no longer bows down before "the bystanders and old war-horses of history." It is an act of freedom. It is a step.[43]

Lucile is no partisan of an aging *Ancien Régime*. Hers is no counter-revolutionary slogan. But neither is it a paladin of new democracy. At least not in a precise political sense. Lucile's counterword is so constituted that no law other than poetry regulates its determinations. We receive it as a judgment. Or more exactly, as a form of free deliberation that "hears and listens and looks." And thus fosters the kind of soulful purposiveness and élan that is commensurate with stepping forth into the world. Poetry is at once a "step" and a release.

Release from what? Perhaps from tyrannical appetites that saturate the present. Perhaps from the idea of history as consisting of an aim or purpose or design. Perhaps from our wishful illusions of despair, which thrive when our resources of hope and creativity appear most incapacitated, and where mourning is forbidden.[44] Perhaps. Celan keys his address to this perhaps. Especially when he speaks of poetry. Which is Lucile. And which stages a breathturn:

> Poetry: that can mean an *Atemwende*, a breathturn. Who knows, perhaps poetry travels this route—also the route of art—for the sake of such a breathturn? Perhaps it will succeed, as the strange, I mean the abyss *and* the Medusa's head, the abyss and the automaton, seem to life in this direction—perhaps it will succeed here to differentiate between strange and strange, perhaps it is exactly here that the Medusa's head shrinks, perhaps it is exactly here that the automatons break down—for this single short moment? Perhaps here, with the I—with the estranged I set free *here* and in *this manner*—perhaps here a further Other is set free?[45]

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[43] In German: "Nach allen auf der Tribüne (es ist das Blutgerüst) gesprochen Worten – welch ein Wort! Es ist das Gegenwort, es ist das Wort, das den 'Draht' zerreißt, das Wort, das sich nicht mehr vor den 'Eckstehern und Paradegäulen der Geschichte' bückt, es ist ein Akt der Freiheit. Es ist ein Schritt." Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 3.

[44] Jonathan Lear, "We Will Not Be Missed!", 7.

[45] In German: "Dichtung: das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten. Wer weiß, vielleicht legt die Dichtung den Weg – auch den Weg der Kunst – um einer solchen Atemwende willen zurück? Vielleicht gelingt es ihr, da das Fremde, also der Abgrund und das Medusenhaupt, der Abgrund und die Automaten, ja in einer Richtung zu liegen scheint, –vielleicht gelingt es ihr hier, zwischen Fremd und Fremd zu unterscheiden, vielleicht schrumpft gerade hier das Medusenhaupt, vielleicht versagen gerade hier die Automaten – für diesen einmaligen kurzen Augenblick? Vielleicht wird hier, mit dem Ich – mit dem hier und solcherart freigesetzten befremdeten Ich, – vielleicht wird hier noch ein Anderes Frei." Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 7.

To partake in this passage is to allow its subjunctive features to guide us. Celan's nine-fold repetition of 'perhaps'; his rapid-fire deployment of dashes; the search for a still undetermined Other—these are the trappings of a poetical wager that is unafraid to exercise claims on behalf of possibility and freedom. The point is not merely that poetry involves honorable acts of courage, but that such acts involve a conversion of life into a pneumatically generous, soulfully differentiated mode of existence.

Such that what belongs to poetry is lifted out of nature as the achievement of a breathing consciousness which is responsive to the world and to time. At the center of this struggle is voice. Lucile's words provide the medium where divisions converge and gain reality, where a "further Other is set free." This "further Other" is not a dead soul but an accomplished form of being. One that gets us to consider the production of poetry as a form of agency. And fills us with admiration and respect.

*

We are now in a position to reassess the binary opposition with which this section has been involved, art and poetry. What more can be said of this pairing? Of this we can be certain, that Celan's attitude toward it is anything but neutral. Nowhere in his discourse do we doubt the reality of his preference for poetry. Poetry is aligned with breath as well as with voice and rhythm and soul. All this is allied with Lucile. This web is charged with negative and positive values which are themselves replete with specific conflicts and antagonisms. Lucile is to poetry as automation is to art; poetry is to rhythm as art is to meter. That is, art is seen as something bounded, "iambically five-footed," where poetry is a movement whose intervals cannot be determined by empty "time-segments,"

a purposiveness directed toward something other and more than "atomization."[46] We could even map such a ladder of associations vertically and horizontally, shuffling its parts into new configurations in the same way Jameson suggests we do with the interpretive levels of an allegory.[47]

But I am yet to be convinced that poetry and art are genuinely opposed. Undoubtably, a battle of concepts is at play, but the tensions they produce them seem more like a fantasy of a clear division than a truthful distinction. Are there not are rhythms that are neither entirely metric nor entirely free, such that the quality of the sounds themselves remain indeterminate?[48] Furthermore, could this not be true of freedom and poetry more generally? Must binary values be at issue here too? Must our thinking always be dyadic? Such a charge of reductionism applies to some of Celan's poetic proposals. His oppositions can be somewhat dated, the product of latent idealizations, effects of bold decision-making as opposed to subtle fruits of modesty. And yet, they disclose commitments. Actual positions that are like partisan alliances. Beliefs snuck in through back doors. Undying passions implying values and norms. What is the crux of these convictions?

To Hayden White, perhaps the most influential literary theorist of our time, narratives organize a web of judgments writers emplot in their discourses, which set them "across a temporal series" in a way that is not value-neutral.[49]

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[46] Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 120.

[47] Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 18 – 22.

[48] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Preliminary Thoughts toward the Study of Music without Clear Beat," 64.

[49] For Hayden White, narrative entails a constant process of de- and re-structuration: "The primary meaning of a narrative would then consist of the destructuration of a set of events (real or imagined) originally encoded in one tropological mode and the progressive restructuration of the set in another tropological mode." Accordingly, narratives participate in the elaboration and desedimentation of encoded forms of meaning- and sense-making.

What we are presently calling judgments are introduced into narratives in three very specific and interlinked ways:

> **Aesthetically** (in the choice of narrative strategy), **epistemologically** (in the choice of an explanatory paradigm), and **ethically** (in the choice of a strategy by which the ideological implications of a given representation can be drawn from the comprehension of current social problems).[50]

The stories we tell are composed of more than random articulations. They are imbued with decisions that express determinations of character, dispositional choices that give substance and meaning to worldly problems. This is the way in which we should try to understand Celan's espousal of poetry: namely, as the strategic setting-into-narrative of a handful of his aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic beliefs—as tactics for living.

So when Celan registers his "hostility toward art," he is mounting a defense for poetry. In practical terms, this means sorting through a storehouse of cultural practices and histories and worldviews to locate the specific tool or apparatus whose energies he will entrust to provide a counterpoint to art. Having assessed "current social problems," Celan arrives at the place from which he addresses the world in the Shoah's wake, the subject-position from which he will understand how best to judge the present. And so it is that poetry, and with it the question of how to comport oneself dignifiedly after world disaster, is arrived at by an exclusive, rather than inclusive, choice.

Let us take a closer look at what this means. We have already seen how Celan aims, above all rhetorically, to differentiate poetry from instrumentalized forms of being.

See Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 96.

[50] Hayden White, "Interpretation in History" in *Tropics of Discourse*, 70.

It is by unequivocally casting a vote for Lucile—that is, for poetry—that his address arrives at a repertoire of aesthetic and ethical strategies that are irreducible to art. And what are these? Rhythm, voice, breath. For Celan, poetry designates language shot through by "stoppages of breath"—a locution that, by turns "voiceful" and "voiceless," lays claim to "voice-moods" that feed on human "breathroutes."[51] "Both the poem, if there is one, and thinking, if there is any, are there because of this improbability of breath."[52] So claims Derrida, who sets breath at the heart of Celan's entire literary enterprise. This seems right to me. For without breath there can be no appeal to Lucile. And no testimony.

Celan's voice calls out to us because its rhythms are in search of an addressee. He instructs us: "Learn how to also read this breath, this breath-unit in the poem," in whose "cola meaning is more truthfully joined and fugued than in the rhyme."[53] *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that cola are "what a writer has in mind in discussing those forms in which the colon rather than the metron is felt to be the basic rhythmic unit" of a work.[54] More than constituting the basic rhythmic units of his own poetic compositions, cola are what Celan truly has in mind in discussing poetry and Lucile and breath, as well as freedom and rhythm and agency. "Shape of the poem," he writes, "that is the presence of the single, breathing one."[55] The point is to find an adequate "time figure" whose parts "require each other" yet

[51] Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 108.

[52] Jacques Derrida, "Majesties" in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, trans. Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 109.

[53] Paul Celan, The Meridian, 108.

[54] *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 277.

[55] Paul Celan, The Meridian, 108.

remain opposed to the "bound," one that can be "released" but not "determined."[56] Because to determine breath is to contain it instead of releasing it as "sense-movement toward an as yet unknown goal."[57]

Hannah Arendt deploys the term natality in her opus *The Human Condition* to characterize those human acts imbued with the remarkable ability to begin anew, the *sine qua non* for plural democratic agency in the aftermath of the Holocaust.[58] Nowhere in Celan is the idea of new beginnings articulated as straightforwardly and eloquently as in the following aperçu, which the poet gleans from his mother: "What's on the lung, put on the tongue."[59] This conjures up much more than the anatomical passage of air from the lungs to the nasal passages and mouth. It lays bare the zone of natality where the scars of birth rear their head. Birthing, like breathing, is about being alive: it is about coming, suggests Jamieson Webster, "face-to-face with the inability to completely understand, or square, the loss, implied in leaving, but leaving nonetheless."[60] Natality after the Shoah is about learning how work through the past by means of releasing it onto the tongue and the lungs. Such that when testimony is born it steps out into an undetermined future, reenacting that anxiety-ridden moment of natality through which life passes. Leaving me behind while calling out to you.

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[56] Paul Celan, The Meridian, 101 – 108.

[57] Paul Celan, The Meridian, 101 – 108.

[58] "The miracle that saves the world," writes Arendt, "the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247. For more on Arendt's text as a response to the cultural devastation wrought by the Second World War, see Mary G. Dietz's excellent essay, "Arendt and the Holocaust," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 86 – 112.

[59] In German: "Was auf der Lunge, das auf der Zunge." Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 108.

[60] Jamieson Webster, "On Breathing," 9.

Fissures

A poetics of the colon is the truest time figure of Celanian natality. With it the horizon of his judgments as well as his passions are disclosed, along with the aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic elements of his testimonial art. Celan invokes Lucile as the instrument through which his commitments combine to produce an example for apprehending the character of *Dichtung*. This setting of our compass toward a breathturn provides our context. In what follows I will try to show how this material and rhythmical event is imbricated in the shapes and contours of Celan's poem "Singbarer Rest." Assimilated to breath, the poem becomes a privileged aural and cognitive medium for working through the remains of disaster.

And a paradigm for responsible mourning:

Singbarer Rest—der Umriß	Singable Remnant—the outline
dessen, der durch	of him, who through
die Sichelschrift lautlos hindurchbrach,	the sicklescript broke through unvoiced
abseits, am Schneeort.	apart, at the snowplace.[61]

It is the outline or *Umriß* of a human figure that breaks through lyric's veil, summoning and casting the overtones that gnaw at the work's opening stanza. Diaphanous and driven asunder, voice weaves out of remains a nest for speech. What is torn is nursed in tones that come apart as readily as they cohere. If we allow Celan's recitation to serve as our guide, breath immerses us in a sound-world where alliteration and assonance dissolve speech into a chanted refrain. Lyric's generic unities discover in "Singbarer Rest" a work that does not fall in line. Here a reliance on fixed syllabic patterns, the distribution of beats into equal temporal measures, as well as a use of rhyme to engender euphony are supplanted

[61] Paul Celan, "Singbarer Rest" in *Breathturn Into Timestead*, 20 – 22.

by a decomposition of all of the above—a scattering of epochal proportions. What arises is the restructuration of rhythms in a new tropological mode. We would be mistaken to assert that the poem renounces a claim to musicality. Its lyricism is itself a detuning of disaster, wherein linguistic traces become disaggregated, broken apart, then refashioned, performing in writing and speech the mass destruction presented as event.

A detuning: there is no other manner to describe the way Celan's voice, placing heavy accents on words that either begin with or contain the letter *D*, breaks down this strophe into a set of compact, beat-driven particles. This procedure sets into the body of the poem a chain of punctuated articulations: voice enacts a staccato breakthrough of rhythms and accents that approximate dispersion. Granting allegiance to its sound patterning, the body writes to become rhythmic, transforming itself into an artifact that fashions visual, textual, and oral materials into an affective instrument expressive of a communicative urgency. Where "Weggebeizt" deployed a language-drill to tear into the past's sediments, here the noise of graphemes cut up history, the poem's smallest linguistic units dealing out combative shocks and thumps.

To make sense of these I will avail myself of a three-fold schema which will allow us to disclose the voicings and rhythms at stake in "Singbarer Rest." Voice_1, Voice_2, Voice_3: this is the aural framework whereby I will aim to make sense of Celan's voice as it moves through, traverses, the stanzas of his lyric. To this end, the term *Sichelschrift* found in the third line contains the noun *Sichel*, a sickle, from the Latin verb *secare*, which means to cut or sever. The term thus implies a mode of testimonial writing that is punctured. Celan's recitation takes hold of this idea. Its barbed rhythms crest and fall at

irregular points. This procedure—let us call it Voice$_1$—orients itself around the letter *D* as an intensive tonic value, inhabiting a somatic zone where verbal units are pulled apart to give rise to something conflicted and scattered: a severed yet multivalent collection of melodies that body forth a decentering characterized by various staccato bursts—lacerations of rhythm that body forth fierce cuts in the continuum of linear time.

Indeed, such madcap rhythms could very well have historical foundations: echoes, perhaps, of the sounds created by human bodies as they are choked; certain blockages of voice produced through bodily toil and exhaustion; epiglottal sounds akin to those recorded by the Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, who recalls the "croaking" noises produced by those inmates in Auschwitz who suffered from "typhus, dysentery, hunger, from the blows with which they were tortured" while "snapping for breath" in the vapors of Zyklon B as they died.[62] Such possibilities open the act of breathing up to a variety of interpretations. Voice goes wild in the teeth of diremption, to be sure, but my impulse as a reader is to move in a different direction altogether: Celan's *Sichelschrift*, I believe, becomes a sensible object in and through its repetition, fashioning itself as breath bereft of order and difficult to order, yet insistent and alive. And frighteningly so. Not unlike those radio broadcasts the Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer recalls listening to as a young Jewish boy in the spring of 1938:

> I heard one of Hitler's speeches during these feverish days. We were gathered round the radio; faces were sober. The scene itself lingered in my mind, but I also retained the memory of a raucous repetition, of a sort of alliteration that I did not

[62] Jean Améry, On Aging: Revolt and Resignation, trans. John D. Barlow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 123. In the Lager, Zyklon B (hydrocyanic acid), which was commonly used as a disinfectant and an insecticide, was dumped into gas chambers in the form of small, blue-colored pellets that would emit an almond-like odor upon vaporizing that stripped human bodies of oxygen, consequently bringing about death. The manner in which Zyklon B was tested and later deployed in labor camps has been recorded by the historian Christopher R. Browning in his work *Origins of the Final Solution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 256 – 357.

> succeed in placing in its proper context till the day when, as I was studying this period and reading the speech given by Hitler on September 26 of that year, I came upon the following sentences: '*An einem Tag, zehntausend Flüchtlinge, am nächsten zwanzigtausend, einen Tag später schon siebenunddreisigtausend, wieder zwei Tage später einundvierzigtausend, dann zweiundsechzigtausend, dann achtundsiebzigtausend, jetzt sind es neuzigtausend, einhundertsiebentausend, einhundertsiebenunddreissigtausend und heute zweihundertvierzehntausend*…" What I had heard, and could never forget, was the incantatory repetition of the word *tausend*, like the panting of some monstrous locomotive.[63]

Voice$_1$, monstrous and incantatory, is an aural cross-section of such repetition, its percussive alliterations slashing across the stanza without any respite. So what I hear, and will not forget, is a diction of stress in whose oral textures the time of the *Nazizeit* is kept alive, with very clear articulations, and exploited in all the sensory and linguistic potentialities the German language has to offer. But there is of course something else, for when these sounds are played back to me, when their richly shaded disposition reaches the peak of precision and diversity, it is indeed as though German itself becomes dispersed and split, fractured and endlessly echoed, the material sides of its excessively organizing features releasing affective sequences and rhythmical beats that abandon their relation to codified structures of feeling to take up instead a set of improvised moods, colors, and timbres that refuse to sit still.

The *Schneeort* or snowplace is the site where the accents featured in the opening sunburst of "Singbarer Rest" melt away into the lyric's first breathed pause. The entrance of Voice$_2$, shedding the anxious luster of Voice$_1$, enemy of tranquility, then pitches itself in a different register—an aimless drifting, emotionally charged yet also somewhat blank, that addresses us by making its articulations audible just enough to make them resonate, softly:

[63] Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, trans. Claire Messud (New York: Other Press, 2016), 26.

Quirlend	Whirling
Unter Kometen-	under comet-
Brauen	brows
die Blickmasse, auf	the gaze's bulk, toward
die der verfinsterte winzige	which the eclipsed, tiny
Herztrabrant zutriebt	heart-satellite drifts
mit dem	with the
draußen erjagten Funken.	spark caught outside.

Celan's voice crests to meet the cosmic sweep of this new verbal panorama. Mood churns on its axis. We began by collapsing words into ever smaller units. Now we move in the opposite direction in search of ever more capacious avenues for articulation: against the choppy fissures of $Voice_1$, speech acquires a particular elasticity that delays and stretches out the pronunciation of vowels, overriding the syllabic breaks built into words. The sound of the word "Quirlend," which contains two syllables, are extended into a sensuous vocal flourish, engaging voice's capacity to stretch out vowels in many directions at once, as though hitched to a kind of elastic chord.[64]

Rallentando: voice moves in the slow drifts of satellites and celestial bodies. We have been cast out into the vastness of the cosmos, only to discover an eclipsed heart-satellite emitting, without prior warning or cause, wild sparks in all directions. As the poem's tempo draws to a halt, $Voice_1$ returns with the force of a thunderclap. Breath starts to pivot on its axis, and sure enough, Celan reintroduces the letter *D*, whose heavy accents are work's tonic value, into the flow of his procedure. If only for a moment, $Voice_1$ and $Voice_2$ are made to overlap: the *Sichelschrift* slips into the cosmic stillness of the *Blickmasse*—a collision of opposing rhythmic particles

[64] "Several scholars have addressed," writes the musicologist Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers, "song's tendency to elongate vowels, which are less capable than consonants of conveying semantic information. (For example, the letters 'msc' takes us closer to the work 'music' than 'ui'.) The classic example is coloratura writing that stretches words out to such an extent as to render them unintelligible." See Julie Pedeault-Deslauriers, "Pierrot L." in Journal of the *American Musicological Society*, vol. 64, no. 3 (2011): 633.

that coincides with and intensifies the movement of the poem toward its ending. The Kessler effect warns of a dangerous possibility: the destruction of a satellite in low Earth orbit, traveling at around thirty thousand kilometers an hour, could give rise to a cascade that would endanger human activity in the realm of outer space. We are inclined to ask: Will the heart-satellite reach its destination? Or in the end will it fail to discover a safe landing-dock?

Because there is no guarantee that voice will reach me, move me, enjoin me. Because I can deny all the world-making powers of voice by failing to lend my ears. Because I am capable of a certain blindness that may lead me to believe that this breath does not merit my regard or solicitude. And because I can fracture or destroy any attempt at future restoration and repair.

Just as the second strophe draws to a close, Celan pauses to draw another breath. There is a subtle sensation of change, a rustling of air—then, after a dash, a final solicitation is wagered in the imperative:

–Entmündigte Lippe,	–Disenfranchised lip,
melde,	announce,
daß etwas geschieht, noch immer,	that something happens, still,
unweit von dir.	not far from you.

Melde: announce, bring forth, supplicate. So Voice_3 is neither a synthesis nor a composite of Voice_1 and Voice_2. Measured yet groping, registered in these lines is instead the problem to which the entire poem lends its rhythmical flourishes: speech's disenfranchisement, the body's dislocation, the grammar of wordlessness. Unlike Voice_1 and Voice_2, Voice_3 refuses to embellish the production of sounds. Its expenditures are as aware of their finite origins as they are versed in silence. Hence a voice, drained of surplus emotion, quivers on the edge of its entreaty. And what it solicits is a subjunctive speech-to-come. It is, I think, the possibility

of securing the fulfillment of this final course of action that drives the poem back into the world, reminding us how much work there is yet to be done. Thus $Voice_3$ safeguards the notion that the silenced may one day be redeemed… by lyric, if only as belated or spectral song.

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So much for the first voice that is developed in the work we have been discussing; its wild repetitions do not advance freely, partly because the texture of the second voice disrupts them, albeit momentarily, partly because they are intercepted and swept aside by the entrance of a third voice in a kind of sudden denouement. Either way a rhythmical translation occurs: the interplay of voices and stylistic levels, comparatively easy to hash out, is resolved in favor of declarative sincerity, against the linguistic machinery of a German overloaded with deathly resonances. The poetic temperament of "Singbarer Rest" is suited to a certain creatureliness, edifying in its patience and its openness, well-versed in the technique of listening, in which an encounter with an Other flashes out amid a picture of the Shoah, where life, reduced to ash, can still live on.

From the snowplace to outer space: Celan's voyage of discovery seems to have been set in motion to return us to something fleshly and earthbound, something flavorful and rich, effected by contrasts and prevailing through voice. A formless congeries of beats and rhythms swings like a pendulum toward ethics. Or at least toward an encounter whose basic dimensions resemble a dialogue. And what—Celan in effect goes on—did I mean to accomplish by this traversal? That you, my listener, will not suppose that the past must always be shaped by the desires of perpetrators. And that there is still a way forward. You must open your ears to discern what is in it. What is in and at stake in my voice. Which is in front of you.

And which I am giving up and over to you as an aspirated gift of our dialogue. And if you dig deeper, if you peel away the sediments of time, you will find what my own words reveal: a singable remnant.

I reported to have heard at the start of the third stanza a subtle shift of focus, a certain retuning of voice, that was embodied through a dash. What is in this dash? It seems to me that with this stroke Celan sets the tone for the final stanza, which bears witness to a rare treasure: the deliverance of voice into dialogue. As if what has come to pass, however irreversible its results, can now be responsibly documented and preserved. Celan's dash is a trace that leads him to draw for himself a necessary breath. And to reroute rhythm by recalibrating his voice. As Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda note, the German word for dash, *Gedankenstrich*, embodies a written stroke that "points to a pause in thought, a pause for thought, but also a short-circuiting or cancellation of thought." "The dash," they continue, "induces a moment of essential uncertainty in reading. It can mark the beginning of a break, but can also introduce an addition, a digression, a temporary detour."[65] Written signs retain multiple uses. The dash reproduces diverse visual and aural experiences, combining "hesitation and acceleration" while scattering what it also confirms, pointing to "dead ends and conclusions" while directing itself in all "possible directions"—as witness to another kind of knowing that Celan himself would designate as belonging to poetry.[66]

Celan's *Gedankenstrich* is an *Atemstrich*: his pause for thought is a stroke of breath. He deploys it not simply as part of a written sequence but as a bodily gesture. Even the most abstract manifestations of thought must draw on the sensible

[65] Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash—The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 7.

[66] Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash*, 228

embodiments of symbols and sounds, signs and strokes, to express meaning, or embodied forms of awareness which touch on what Comay and Ruda, following Hegel, call a speculative word:

> A speculative word is literally a contra-diction: it speaks against what it seems to be saying. Some speculative words have a *Doppelsinn*, a double meaning; some contain *Mehrfachsinn*, multiple meanings; some even bring together opposing meanings (*entgengengesetzte Bedeutungen*). Like the primal words (*Urworte*) in which Freud discovered a confluence of opposite meanings (*Gegensinn*), a speculative word condenses different meanings into a single signifier without any common denominator that brings these meanings under a unifying conceptual rubric. Its heterogenous meanings are tied together contingently through an arbitrary "quilting point" that brings the utterance into momentary focus.[67]

The appearance of $Voice_3$ is preceded by a dash which ties speech and silence together through a "quilting point" and which conjoins the conflicting rhythms of Celan's testimony into a unifying lyrical instance of verbal enfleshment. What is installed is a voicefulness that disturbs the logic of correspondence. It is a fluttering or agitation of breath that sets the poem on its own feet. It is a scattering or dispersal of language that impels us to listen closer, The poem is all breath bending toward silence and solicitude with the dead. A solicitude, moreover, predicated on futurity: the time structure of Celan's speculative word is a synchronic mass in which past, present, and future are rendered co-present and equally available in an instance. In this way his dash appears in time as rendered sensuous—a self-realizing display.

I think that something like this layering of differences is necessary to explain the conditions of possibility of a breathturn itself, the realization of which returns to us the instance of Lucile's splendid counter-word, her *Gegenwort*, which cuts through art. A tropic figure dense with many condensations, poetry is an ideal Celan takes pride in, a concept with which he passionately identifies: Lucile's words are glossed as a "step"

[67] Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash*, 56.

in the direction of "freedom" that discovers a resonance in rhythm, breath, voice. Poetry is thus not a thing or substance but an activity entailing a comprehensive form of self-consciousness—a living display of breathing in which the soulful capacities of a human's acts come together to establish form of agency. What Celan means to say is that this agency depends on recourse to breath in order to become free. And what's more, for such an action to count as free, it must fit in within an identifiable complex of practices and institutions wherein rhythm, breath, and voice gain coherent meaning as acts that institute freedom. And to his mind that institution is poetry.

Poetry is an act, authored within and responsive to the past, that gains an upper hand over linear time through its wielding of rhythmic temporalities; through the movement from $Voice_1$ to $Voice_2$, which is eclipsed thereafter by $Voice_3$, but only after Celan has drawn a breath that sets his testimony toward an Other. Though we scan his poem from start to end, moving in linear fashion from one voice to another, it is illuminating and instructive to try to understand it in reverse, with $Voice_3$ not as its denouement but as the element that haunts it from the beginning. Why? Because $Voice_3$ takes up the massive challenge of trying to mourn loss. So, to this end the breath that accompanies and saturates it presents itself to us as a narrative reconciliation or solution. To what? To what has not been shattered by history yet must still be limned in breath. In the form of a testimony that oscillates between the poles of memory and forgetfulness so as to gain access to voice.

A demanding task. Yet still a necessary one. But what cannot be resolved in reality might be reconciled belatedly—in a narrative. Or in a poem which will bear witness. Or in an embodied gesture, a breathturn:

> Poetry: that can mean an *Atemwende*, a breathturn. Who knows, perhaps poetry travels this route—also the route of art—for the sake of such a breathturn? Perhaps it will succeed, as the strange, I mean the abyss *and* the Medusa's head, the abyss and the automaton, seem to life in this direction—perhaps it will succeed here to differentiate between strange and strange, perhaps it is exactly here that the Medusa's head shrinks, perhaps it is exactly here that the automatons break down—for this single short moment? Perhaps here, with the I—with the estranged I set free *here* and in *this manner*—perhaps here a further Other is set free?[68]

I return to this passage after having cited it because so much comes together in and through its tone, guided by a 'perhaps.' In this formulation the dialectic of art and poetry concerning us in these pages receives its most mature expression. The dyad is conceived not in terms of a strict binary or conceptual opposition but as something malleable and nuanced: in just the same sense as Celan will want to treat art and poetry as distinct concepts ("perhaps it [poetry] will succeed here to differentiate between strange and strange"), he will also want to say they are, in the final analysis, articulated with each other: "perhaps poetry travels this route," which at the very same time is "the route of art." Such *perhapses* make up the quilting point wherein oppositions become interwoven. They recall those written dashes through which Celan's breath gives itself to us, limitlessly split and disseminated, conjoining the realities of catastrophe as readily as it disjoins and dismantles them. Because history itself can always be remade in the wake of its ludic undoing. Only in facing the abyss and the Medusa's head can we begin to wrest a new orientation from art, opening a path to truth as well as a hope for truth that will enable voice to acknowledge the force and scope of the tragedy it records while reenacting it and representing it to us.

[68] Paul Celan, The Meridian, 7.

Hence poetry, *Dichtung*, is the designation of an act that suspends, deletes, destroys, dashes to pieces a world that must be built anew, from the ground up.[69] Viewed as such breath is an act that shines through the surface of disaster. Indeed, this seems to prompt something quite remarkable, perhaps contentious to some, namely a consideration of breath in the service of an emancipatory ideal. Because what we are dealing with is the possibility of freedom after disaster. Of what it means to be free and act in a way that promotes the kind of trust on which social life—a life with others, dead and living—can be responsibly built. What we need, Celan is asserting, is a way of understanding ourselves and our relations to others and the world that is attuned to the attributes of poetry: not just to freedom—in the ethical realm my acts are free when I act on reasons of what must be done—but also to breath and rhythm, to the pause and the dash.[70] And this entails attending to voice in light of Celan's allegiance to *Dichtung*, a marker of the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of achieving and keeping alive the promise of a dignified breathing when the world itself is saturated by the toll of the dead—the practical position from which poetry could be said to initiate a dialogue with the present moment.

Recuperations

[69] Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash*, 112.

[70] The philosopher Robert Pippin characterizes this conception of freedom as central to post-Kantian philosophy: "In the practical domain, in Kant and the post-Kantians, I am free when I am acting on reasons about what ought to be done. This is a form of self-consciousness that, according to Kant, is paradigmatically embodied when I act wholly on reasons, and not just prudently or instrumentally, as when I act for the sake of ends I have not rationally determined I ought to have. To know on the basis of reasons that are likewise 'absolute' or, in Kant's terms, 'unconditioned' is a parallel form of freedom, even though the claim to such a self-consciousness seems extremely ambitious." The following chapter of this dissertation will take up this claim and develop it along the lines of Celan's poetry, with which it discovers a remarkable kinship. For more on this view of freedom, see Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in The Science of Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 18 – 31.

Forced asphyxiation, if that is what we will call the type of political violence at stake in this chapter, is a most unjust and terrifying instance of authoritarianism. To honor and hold fast to the victims of this circumstance requires sensitivity, if only because it negates what belongs to our basic form of mortality: breath. The trace of breath in voice as well as its inscription in a social order of life. It seems appropriate now to retake the question that compelled this investigation: What kind of lessons, if any, does the poetry of Celan read us with respect to dwelling in a world coming to terms with the deathly implications of this act? It first seemed to me, and seems to me now, that NourbeSe Philip and Paul Celan draw their own poems from specific silences—absences with particular dimensions and borders, with real depths and architecture—that are derived from breathlessness. And that they are both trying to return these silences to the verbal and auditory orders of testimonial experience in direct response to the world catastrophes in which they position their literary enterprises.

Throughout these pages I have suggested that a comparative reading of Philip and Celan—a reading wagered in good faith and solidarity—leads us to explore the ways breathlessness can be put under ethical and analytical discussion. Because experience must become embodied, because it cannot be limned from a sideways-on perspective, it must be made present to us, or become reenacted. This is the sense in which we could describe Philip's art as a dramatic exercise, an attempt, issued from a specific viewpoint steeped in both history and myth, to comprehend how to keep breath in the Black body through the medium of lyrically inflected accents and rhythms. With silences as well as caesurae. As with Philip, so too with Celan: the anchorage of his voice in my ear allows me to recover a breathing whose vitality becomes animated in a poem's cola,

a phenomenology of the breath-unit attuned to numerous historical occlusions. All this, I think, gestures toward a poetics responsive to what Sharpe calls the "archives of breathlessness," to that "deadly occlusion" which can be continually reanimated in the aftermath of catastrophe, albeit in ways that may differ for this or that collectivity, and in this or that locality.

Here fidelity to the vocation of life elicits a writing wherein absence demands some kind of intentional artistic presence, a meaningfulness whereby so many silences become accessible through the breathing of the one who animates them. Such intendedness is disclosed in the work, revealed by it, as a type of agency, an active form of *Lebendigkeit* or enlivening that unfolds through enactment. Likewise, the testimonies of Philip and Celan, displays of deeply held commitments, constitute representative attempts at a form of substantive historical knowledge. White suggests that when it comes to assessing artistic versions of witness testimony (more on this subject in the coming chapter), the question of factuality, of empirical verifiability, is of lesser importance than the mode in which a story is recounted. He challenges us to at least "consider the possibility that the witnesses of the kind of extreme events in which the last (and our own) century abounds might very well be speaking in a different mode of expression," such as "the interrogative" as well as "the imperative," or even in "the subjunctive."[71]

If the claims advanced by Philip and Celan tend to leapfrog official history, both scattering and suspending a reader's expectation for well-ordered plot, this is because their claim to voice rests in other epistemic and aesthetic domains. Which does not imply that they insist on distancing themselves from reality. The point is that their works have simply acquired other explanatory tools and

[71] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 39.

tropic procedures to figure extreme events: dashes and pauses, pure utterances and breathturns. In other words, discontinuous and episodic forms of cognition, suspended modes of intellection in which a correspondence ideal of truth is jettisoned in favor of subjunctive and speculative modes of literary exposition. My wager, both here and in what follows, is that Celan and Philip jointly press these figural techniques toward the fulfillment of certain human competencies (breath, voice, song) and certain moral virtues (dignity, freedom, truthfulness) that ought to remain intact, ought to be secured and protected, if moral life is to endure in the face of breathlessness.

At an earlier point in this chapter, I stated, following Agamben, that while poetry cannot reverse the death of actual witnesses, cannot seek to undue the impossible, it can still call forth an addressee—dead or alive—to the scene of its address. As such, poetic testimony concerns itself with the preservation and transmission of kinship bonds that would otherwise be lost in the disaster's mortal blow, social and cultural and genetic relations that facilitate the survival of testimony. Such is the strength of the tie between poetry and testimony in this formulation that the struggle to live in disaster's aftermath is given shape and direction. It speaks. As in the case of Celan's choice to transform his mother's saying, "What's on the lung, put on the tongue," an incitement to voice and breath, into a demand to intone what has been lost—to demonstrate, in the face of defeat, that something still remains, here and now.

Because when you breathe you give your body over to a world that precedes you and exceeds you, but is nonetheless yours, to the extent that it is the channel through which you insert yourself in the world, your acts and deeds, which arise in the place your voice has already abandoned.

So the final word, it so happens, turns out to be neither yours nor mine alone. Testimony is concerned with forging bonds with the past to cultivate listening for and in the future, making a case through its survival for the indispensability of reflective and aurally informed attention to carry its lessons beyond the present. The compatibility of Philip and Celan's work rests precisely in this conviction: that their representations resonate not only beyond any official historical record but also beyond the moment of their performative instantiation. When their voices begin to die away, we are left with something readable. And we can try to meet their silences, their pure utterances and breathturns, with the degree of integrity and compassion and responsibility they deserve, imbuing them with the same direction and destiny Lucile gives her free acts, and with the same aspirational purpose with which Philomela disperses the violence which has been foisted upon her.

I find myself in the position to speak of Philip's Philomela and Celan's Lucile as *Kalon*, as noble or beautiful or special, in a manner that affirms their kinship: Philomela's pure utterances and Lucile's breathturns are passionate speech acts that embody an aspirational attitude of living and acting in the world. They inspire admiration when we are lucky enough to hear them, and fill us with a sense of pride and well-being when we attend to them. There is, we can sense, something special, even magisterial, coming together here: the flourishing of human actors whose innermost capabilities and passions converge on instances of breathing and living posited through acts of choice. Such unconditioned forms of self-consciousness lay claim to the past and the present while also sustaining, subjunctively or speculatively, the hope that breath

and voice will reach a proper addressee, laying bare the catastrophe to represent an instance of meaningfulness for listeners.

Indeed, that Philip and Celan both aim to facilitate such a sense of meaningfulness should not be taken to mean that their artworks bring some universally applicable criteria of justice to bear on catastrophe's presentation, demanding that that reality somehow conform to the tactics they deploy. This would be a form of identity thinking from which their poetry abstains. Instead, the pure utterance and the breathturn emanate, as White puts it, from beliefs which are "needed for the living of a life under conditions of oppression, want, and necessity rather than of freedom, opulence, and desire, and the validity of those beliefs based on experience rather than on learning."[72] This is why we can speak of their testimonies as embodying an awareness of history as well as a demand for freedom: in grounding the past in existential and ethical concerns gleaned from oppression, the "individual subject" is consequently freed "to take responsibility for the authenticity if not the truthfulness of a version of where one had come from, who one was, and what kind of future one had a right to choose for oneself" in such circumstances.[73]

With this distinction, what is at stake in their testimony is thrown into relief. The fulfilment of meaning in this domain is made possible, demanded, by breath, without which echoes of the past cannot dwell in the zone of the living. Here the basic contingency of historical time is mediated by the transition to an equally unresolved time, a bodily time that gathers and disperses history on the basis of lived conditions and experiences lacking in definitive resolution.

[72] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 99.

[73] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 99.

Celan and Philip's response, if we can call it that, to dwelling in the wake of breathlessness consists in an attempt to understand such conditions better, drawing us closer to them and to the dead in their historical specificity, helping us comprehend the distinct forms of suffering inflicted on subjects whose dignity has been shattered by violence.

"Nobody can tell how long the breath pause—the testing and the thought—will last," asserts Celan in his "Meridian" address. Situated between speech and silence, the possibility of life as well as of its erasure, between lament and ecstatic renewal, breath brings "otherness into the present" in a waning instance of natality. Philip and Celan seize on creative ways to hold open this fleeting moment. To maintain and cultivate it and transmit history from one mouth to another. And yet, nothing guarantees this. And what is more, the poem can become the demonstration of a form of language that fails to reach an intended recipient. Which is why I have suggested that the first thing we can do to combat such a possibility of failure, and to avoid the various forms of pessimism and skepticism that proceed from it, is to listen. And to direct our attention to the breath-unit as its rhythms harden into something readable.

Action

How can the world be re-created in the wake of the world's destruction?

—Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

Exordium

I concluded the previous chapter by appealing to the notion of poetic testimony, an aesthetic form binding oral testimony to the media of breath, word, and rhythm. There I argued that Celan's testimonial art distinguishes itself from two other forms of discourse: the so-called "impossible" variant of testimony, which pertains to the silence of deceased victims, and declarative representations of the past tendered by traditional historians. I claimed that what serves to distinguish Celan's craft from the former is its drawing up of an account of survival that comes to grips with what might still be said, or what has yet to be said, of the real and symbolic entailments of bearing witness in the face of political persecution. And thus, to tell the story of this task, to narrate it, the poet avails himself of strategies about which I will say more, and which are at variance with traditional forms of historical writing: spectrality,[1] anagrammatic figuration,[2] and subjunctivity[3].

[1] The *spectrality effect* consists in the undoing of the differentiation between the past present and the future present. This is not to be conflated with the belief that ghosts exist or the idea of the persistence of the past in the present. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

[2] I have arrived at the phrase "anagrammatic figuration" by way of Christina Sharpe, whose concept of blackness is anagrammatical, in the literal and metaphorical sense. For Sharpe, "blackness opens up into the anagrammtical in the literal sense as when 'a word, phrase or name by rearranging the letters of another.'" And metaphorically: blackness emerges as anagrammitcal when it embodies a form of temporality that puts "pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made." Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 76. My intention is not to speak of the 'blackness' of Celan's verses—Fred Moten has recently conducted this experiment with thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Immanuel Kant—but to map the anagrammatic elements of his poetry in light of its Jewish heritage and provenance.

[3] For Laura Harris, "subjunctivity" describes a creative procedure whose coinage has its roots in the writing of speculative fiction. Yet she asserts that its use need not be circumscribed to this domain. To her mind, the term gestures toward a future that has yet to be fully realized, but is nonetheless…already operative in the present." Laura

To begin I want to furnish a clear account of what these strategies consist of, scrutinizing the types of psychical, moral, and social consciousness they foster. In general terms, my interest in Celan's late verse emanates from a desire to probe the ways poetic testimony endows with theoretical and practical meaning the representation of the Shoah's aftermath. To maintain this corpus quests for historical understanding will not be sufficient. Instead, hewing closely to Primo Levi, my aim will be to show how testimony furnishes "documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind" while also providing some kind of access to certain "disturbing" questions of political and historical provenance.[4] Hence, I submit that, like any form of writing that takes the past as its referent, Celan's poetic testimony incurs limits determined by its forms of reasoning, and by the forms of truthfulness it entails.

I believe that our primary concern here ought to be the decipherment of the status of Celan's oeuvre amid an ever-growing range of texts (novels, plays, historiographies, memoirs, philosophical treatises) and other artistic documents (paintings, performances, photographs, and films) that reflect on the Shoah's meaning. Following Hayden White, I suggest that such works are animated by a metahistorical thrust in so far as they entail substantive efforts to reflect on the "general" significance of past events.[5] And while the means employed by these

Harris, "The Subjunctive Poetics of the Undocument: C. L. R. James's American Civilization" in *Criticism*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2016), 205 – 230.

[4] Here is Levi in his preface to *Se questo è un uomo*: "Perciò questo libro, in fatto di particolari atroci, non aggiunge nulla a quanto è ormai noto ai lettori di tutto il mondo sull'*inquietante argomento* dei campi di distruzione. Esso non è stato scritto allo scopo di formulare nuovi capi di accusa; potrà piuttosto fornire documenti *per uno studio pacato di alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano*." Emphasis mine. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino, Einaudi, 1989), 7 – 8.

[5] Crucially, in *The Practical Past,* White includes artists and imaginative writers in his register of meta-historical thinkers. Such figures, he suggests, ought to be called "pastologists." Their work, like that of historians, "performs an essentially *poetic* act" that "prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories" to "explain what was really happening in it." See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-*

representational forms tend to differ—historians are seldom inclined to theorize and represent the past as novelists do—they converge on their emplotment of the past as a story or *fabula* of a specific kind.

Metahistorical reflection is many-hued. It is not restricted to any genre or style, nor does it connote a specific medium. It is an endowment of human creatures that permits us to draw inferences from the past and to present it in many ways. For White, the past opens itself toward exposition and reflection by dint of its emplotment: narrativization is the kernel of most substantive cogitation on history. The upshot of this is that, irrespective of conscious or unconscious intentions, speech-acts that figure the past through a particular narrative optic presuppose a theorization of their object. Accordingly, novelists, poets, historians, and artists partake in acts of judgment: they emplot the past in a manner that involves reflexive modes of interpretation and selection: choices that place the past under discussion in *this* way as opposed to another.

White begins *The Practical Past* by setting historical writing against literary writing. The task will be to distinguish "two species (genres, modes) of written discourse," both of which specify different ways of adjudicating the reality of past events.[6] While this founding gesture colors the text, its force is admittedly provisional. It so happens that such forms of written discourse are not exclusively oppositional. They can, in select cases, operate as potentialities of one another, despite obvious certain figural differences. For instance, writing considered poetic or literary need not distinguish fictive works: "not all literary writing is fictional any more than all fictional

Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xxx; *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 99.

[6] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, xii.

writing is necessarily literary."[7] This is a fallacy against which White's text will work. This, then, is an approach to literary and historical writing that resists construing them as categorically distinctive enterprises. [8]

White glosses his perspective as thus: literary writing is "language-use distinct from utilitarian or communicative (message) writing, by virtue of the dominance in it of the poetic function of speech," which is symbolic or relational or constellational in kind.[9] Whereas literary writing elicits a poetic temper toward the events it configures, historical writing cultivates an "iconic" or "coherent" relation to its referents.[10] White thus introduces the idea of standards, the determination of the degree or grade at which a written description satisfies a set of specifications that organize a discourse. Where literary writing deploys "recognizable devices of rhetoric or the patterning techniques of poetic diction," relaying its presentations in the symbolic idiom of "well-told narratives," historical writing aims to wrest from the flow of history the inferential, causal texture of past events.[11]

It will of course help to recall that such distinctions are by no means immovable. Far from it. They underscore tendencies or attitudes that prevail in the fields under description. They are also *provocations* that lead White to parse mutual filiations: the domains of history and literature, he insists, possess a mutual intimacy, even

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[7] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, xii.

[8] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, xii.

[9] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* xii.

[10] White derives the terms "iconic" and "coherent" from Charles Sanders Peirce, who described relationships between signs and their referents to be "determined on the basis of an analysis of *logical* consistency obtaining among the various propositions that make up the whole of the discourse in which the description is presented." The kind of logical relation in question is one that is predicated on "identity" and "noncontradiction" which "require that the elements of the description be first translated into concepts and then correlated as an 'argument about' the referent rather than as a representation of it." Contrastingly, literary writing is not predicated on this protocol but, rather, "improvises" its "rules and procedures," selectively applying them to "descriptions of individual (which is to say, individualiz*able*) situations in the past." Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 70.

[11] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* xv.

similarities, that cannot be driven away, despite efforts to keep such filiation in check. There are literary modes of historical writing and historical modes of literary writing. And as we shall see, White's endorsement of such hybrid representational models is the crux of his book. So too is his conviction that literary writing is not intrinsically fictional or fantastical. It can designate works—poems, novels, historiographies—that affirm the addition of rhetorical and poetic means to existing ways of writing and conceptualizing history within the limits of a specific discursive tradition that also embrace other presentational possibilities.[12]

At stake are the representational means by which history is rendered accessible as an object of reflection and writing, as well as a topic of social and institutional inquiry. Causality, the form of truthfulness that dominates modern-day professional historical writing, establishes a relation to the past that is evidentiary and indexical in kind.[13] This insight delegates to historians the crucial task of "correct[ing] or neutraliz[ing] or dissolv[ing] the distortions, myths, and illusions about the past generated by interests of a predominantly practical kind."[14] This is a moral and pragmatic assertion that acknowledges, without any reluctance, the nature of the historian's commitment to a model of representational truthfulness.

Yet *The Practical Past* will aim to pursue a qualitatively different line of inquiry. Its pages contend that there exists a specific subset of modern events to which historical writing is not equipped to respond. Throughout, White contends that

[12] For White, the paradigm case of a historiographical work that combines (modernist) literary and historical approaches is Saul Friedländer's *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939 – 1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007). See Hayden White, "Historical Truth, Estrangement, and Disbelief" in *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, ed. Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, Todd Presner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 53 – 71.

[13] The terms "evidentiary" and "indexical" operate in the same semiotic realm as "iconic" and "coherent" figures previously mentioned. These terms are employed by White to delineate the nature of historical writing's relation to truth. Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 70 – 71.

[14] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, xiv.

the advent of 'modernist' events—two world wars, mass famine, global warming, the atom bomb, racial cleaning—testify in the final analysis to the fragmented, inconsistent, contradictory, multipartite weave of an increasingly global modernity, therefore confirming the absence of any causal solution to their narrativization. What is required are presentational tactics that express, aesthetically and ethically, the shockwaves of reality's transformation. For White works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and W.G Sebald's *Austerlitz* personify the kind of metahistorical narratives adequate to the task of representing extreme events. Indeed, the flavor of these is increasingly "modernist" or "post-modernist" in kind, forms of writing premised on the "recognition that modernization has made possible not only new events," but also, and in a historical sense, "new *kinds* of events."[15]

The form of truthfulness that characterizes this figural temperament is poetical. Not linear but digressive: middle-voiced, disjunctive, multileveled, and elliptical.[16] As our literary cartographers of modern disaster, Morrison, Philip, and Celan, among others, situate their art amid the circumstance of events that unlace time and propel it out of joint. And so, to figure the dirempted event, these artists constellate—refigure, rearrange, transform—the data of the past into an aesthetic event that overcomes the inertia of causality in search of another relation to reality, something more speculative than declarative.

[15] The influence of the philosopher and literary critic György Lukács looms large in White's thinking. Like Lukács, White's discourse on the relation between history and literature is mediated by the persistence of forms, which are themselves taken to possess a historical meaning. White sees the tradition of the historical novel as passing through a series of stages: its incipient stages dominated by a form of realism that was cultivated at the hands of Scott, Dumas. George Eliot, Flaubert, and so on—only to be taken over by modernist practitioners (Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Kafka). In the late twentieth century, the form of the historical novel was reborn as a form of post-modern writing whose dominant genre is "historiographic metafiction." Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 80.

[16] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 71

Event

On September 31, 1941, days after the Wehrmacht exterminated 33,700 Jews in the Babi Yar ravine next to Kiev, Abraham Lewin—teacher, archivist, and author—composed a eulogy in honor of the Yiddish writer Yitshak Meir Weissenberg in which this astonishing passage of writing appears:

> The proportions of life and death have radically changed. Times were, when life occupied the primary place, when it was the main and central concern, while death was a side phenomenon, secondary to life, its termination. Nowadays, death rules in all its majesty; while life hardly glows under a thick layer of ashes. Even this faint glow of life is feeble, miserable and weak, poor, devoid of any free breath, deprived of any spark of spiritual content. The very soul, both in the individual and in the community, seems to have starved and perished, to have dulled and atrophied. There remain only the needs of the body; and it leads merely an organic-physiological existence.[17]

These words confront us with the force of the holocaustal situation they record. The restriction of breath; the blurring of the existential orders of life and death; the banishing of soulfulness from the scene of the crime—all signs of the incursion of modernist events into the rhythms and textures of collective and everyday life. At stake is the radical exacerbation of the capacity for destruction that totalitarian violence unleashes on the bodies and minds of subjects. Such events evoke disbelief and moral horror, responses that wrest from dehumanizing norms the haunting effects they impress on our understanding.

I came across Lewin's passage in Saul Friedländer's *The Years of Extermination*. The quotation appears as the epigram of the work's second section, "Mass Murder." Divided into three parts (terror, murder, Shoah), Friedländer's account of the Holocaust strategically uses Lewin's voice to prefigure the events that will be narrated in the section on mass murder, thus foreshadowing what is to come.

[17] Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988)

Whereas the first subdivision, Terror, covers events that transpire between Fall 1939 and Summer 1941, the second, Mass Murder, takes up the thread where the first ends. This division reflects the stages that shaped the war's unfolding by emplotting the stages through which the perpetrators of genocide had to pass to arrive at Shoah, that is, the phase of total extermination. For such is the design of Friedländer's book that it is strategically organized to produce a specific narrative effect: a tripartite story whose various individual phases link up in order to generate a "crescendo" toward total extermination. [18]

Political terror culminates in the actualization of a genocidal will and violence. To pass from 'Terror' to 'Mass Murder' is to register the shifting landscape of the war. In the former, small-scale deportations, the seizure of homes, the application of anti-Semitic laws, the disbanding of Jewish councils, and the looming threat of danger progress apace. Yet in these pages a German onslaught does not seem ineluctable. All this changes with the murders at Babi Yar which inaugurate 'Mass Murder.' Here the proportions of history shift as facts become "too monstrous to believe."[19] Thereafter, the Nazi conquest of expanses in the East portends "first and foremost the sudden possibility of implementing" Hitler's own "colonization dreams"; the SS's "low-key rhetorical stance with regard to the Jews" gives way to the "vilest anti-Jewish invectives and threats"; and finally, extermination itself is pictured and characterized as progressing at full force.[20]

[18] Friedländer describes these phases as linking up to form a "'logical' crescendo toward total extermination." See Saul Friedländer, "On 'Historical Modernism': A Response to Hayden White" in *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, ed. Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, Todd Presner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 74 – 75.

[19] Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939 – 1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 197.

[20] Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 233 and 272.

Words, slogans, and propaganda thus steadily acquire the concreteness of deeds. For Friedländer, mass death was implicit in Hitler's words before he ordained it.[21] *The Years of Extermination* reads as an historiographical expression of this principle, organizing its parts so as to intensify and reproduce a drive toward annihilation. An upshot of this is the sense of derealization that mounts as the story proceeds. As the SS stages its foray into the East, formerly inchoate aims attain a high degree of reality. Genocidal aims discover an administrative outlet in organized crime: "There is something at once profoundly disturbing yet rapidly numbing in the narration of the anti-Jewish campaign that developed in the territories newly occupied by the Germans or their allies. History seems to turn into a succession of mass killing operations and, on the face of it, little else."[22]

So states Friedländer as his narrative sets out to corroborate his own proposition. By Summer 1942 Nazi predation bypassed all claims to reasonable thoroughness. The impression is that of being led by a storyteller to the lip of modern disaster. *The Years of Extermination* configures its plot as a set of events unfolding in time, a fusion of evental appearances schematized as a concatenation of logical causes.[23] To write history means to represent it through shared words, images, and concepts. To the extent that is it is not imaginary, the distinction between literary and historical writing hinges on the manner in which the past is encoded and transmitted to others. Any separation between these ways of construing reality rests on matters of method,

[21] Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination,* 240

[22] Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination,* 240.

[23] I take Friedländer at his word when he claims to have used literary means, such as the middle-voice and the strategical arrangement of quotations excerpted from diaries, to *historical* ends, confirming the centrality in his book of causally inflected modes of reasoning. The text's literariness is thereby supplementary to its empirical or evidentiary heft. For in it the voices of victims are used to *corroborate* events that truly occurred. See Saul Friedländer, "On 'Historical Modernism'", 78.

requiring us to distinguish—conceptually and aurally—between speech acts and the judgments they direct toward an audience.[24]

Just as Friedländer's intentionalist recounting of the Shoah fulfills its social role, so, too, are we justified to inquire into the historical value of the poet's report. Telegraphically put, I am prepared to describe Celan's renderings of history as poetic because they perform a group of utterances that are identifiably literary. What does this mean? It implies that the nature of his response to the Shoah assumes the form of an anagrammatic outpouring, an invented spectral cartography of the unsung and unsaid. To emphasize the literariness of Celan's art is not to engage in tautological thinking. It is to stress the aspects of his craft that set it apart from what is already on offer. I shall argue that this entails, first and foremost, registering the various lessons it reads us with respect to the past, the present, and the future. For if, as the narrator of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* puts it, there is a sense of reality, there is a sense of possibility: "the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not."[25] In Aristotelian terms, this is another of way of stating that actuality does not countermand possibility: "what happened" seeks parity with the "what *could* happen." So not negation but, rather, dispersal of the reality-effect onto the domain of the unsung and unborn, as well as onto the unfulfilled and unspoken.

[24] For White, considerations of this kind "move us over into the domain of speech act theory, in which propriety of response to an utterance is 'context specific' and 'conditions of felicity' (which is to say, propriety) may apply." This is due to the fact that, "in the case of research into the past, there are *a number of different ways* of addressing, observing, hailing, or otherwise inventing the past." See Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 32 – 34.

[25] In German: "So ließe sich der Möglichkeitssinn geradezu als die Fähigkeit definieren, alles, was ebensogut sein könnte, zu denken und das, was ist, nicht wichtiger zu nehmen als das, was nicht ist." Robert Musil, *Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften* (Berlin: Rowohlt Verlag, 1957), 16. For the full passage in English, consult *The Man Without Qualities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 10 – 13.

Friedländer's status as the Shoah's great poetically-minded historian is not in doubt. What will be scrutinized is the moral relevance of Celan's historically-minded poetry, the salience of which rests on its speculative attunement to historical experience. Thus on its capacity to theorize and approximate the orders of what is not, what there might be, and what is still yet to come.

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"When I knead the lump / of air, our nourishment / it is leavened by the / letters' shimmer from / the lunatic-open / pore," writes Celan in "Unter die Haut."[26] This is the logic of transubstantiation gone awry. Leavened air, previously a divine source of nourishment, portends not life but loss. This shock of conversion is not theological. It confronts a present devoid of life. History is the "lunatic" morsel, the absurd remainder, on which the poem chews. Bad omens and electric signals, course through the ether like wave impulses on unsettled, premonitory nights. Recourse to breath is still the mark of a life, but one that is driven asunder and damaged, shot through with so many aftershocks that anesthetize the present and forestall the future. So whereto from here?

The disaster, a cosmic decentering, requires an equally unorientable ground. If knowing is *scire per causas*, a knowing through causes, Celan produces its obverse. On 17 November 1965, he composed a lyric, "Wo bin Ich," that met this aim. The form of subjectivity on display here is drawn around a conception of the self as a mediation of historical processes that registers certain seismic activities. Celan's voice emerges into embodiment against the backdrop of a landscape.

[26] In German: "Wenn ich den Klumpen Luft / knete, unsere Nahrung, / säuert ihn der / Buchstabenschimmer aus / der wahnwitzig-offenen / Pore." Paul Celan, "Unter die Haut" in *Breathturn into Timestead*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux), 36.

The work's tense is that of the present perfect continuous: something, we gather, has come to pass that is not yet completed.

Where crops once grew now rest bones. Voice sows and reaps the tarnished soil as a speaking emanates from this nonplace:

Wo Bin Ich	Where Am I
heut?	Today?
Die Gefahren, alle,	The dangers, all,
mit ihrem Gerät,	with their appliance,
bäurisch verhumpelt,	hickishly gamey
forkenhoch	pitchfork-high
die Himmelsbrache gehißt	the heavens-fallow hoisted

Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. Apostrophe carves out a place to address the present, interrupting the flow of time with the force of a question that brings the poem to a standstill. This demarcation of a present moment, however fleeting, makes a place for voice. And what of *die Gefahren*, the dangers? The noun seems suspended until it becomes affixed to *die Verluste*, the losses, through haunted, anaphoric repetition that weaves a thread:

die Verluste, kalkmäulig – ihr	the losses, chalkmouthed – you
redlichen Münder, ihr Tafeln! –	upright mouths, you tables! –
in der entwinkelten Stadt,	in the disangled town,
vor Glimmerdroschken gespannt	harnessed to glimmerhackneys

Thus anchored in time, the poem projects itself into the unfolding of a landscape. This act is the elementary inductor of narrative: it contributes something to the present that permits, in a piecemeal, episodic manner, a tale to be told and a stage to be set. Glimpses of the visible world are transformed into fitful acts of mnemonic retention. The narrator indexes the dead, a hefted sky, and a raised pitchfork, only to hoist

them onto a hackney that carries them away. Now illumined, the scene disappears. What persists are traces. Voice encrypts them.

What remains of breath and soul when they are left reeling from various blows? What can poetry do when the world to which it is held answerable becomes saturated by the toll of the dead? And how does lyric aim to initiate a complex reckoning with this moral finitude—not to mention with the terror visited on the lives of so many survivors, which it mourns?

Figure 1: Anselm Kiefer's *Die Sechste Posaune* (1996). Emulsion, acrylic, shellac, and sunflower seeds on canvas. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Where am I? The question implies the present demands decipherment and clarity. Words are dispersed about the "disangled town" as though in search of an answer. The *OED* tells me that a fallow designates a stretch of ground left uncultivated after it is ploughed or harrowed. The purpose of this is to restore the ground's fertility by

allowing the soil to recuperate and store organic matter while maintaining moisture. Fallowing also aims to conserve biodiversity. It manages pests and noxious weeds by restoring equilibrium to a landscape, mitigating all sorts of undesirable outcomes. Yet Celan augments this agrarian parlance by adding to it a distinctly modern twist: the *Himmelsbrache*, the sky's fallow, has been torn from its natural habitat. Nature denatured: the sky is emptied out; the clouds have been combed through; the gods tugged from their majestic thrones, their absence proclaiming the limit of the modern. What has been lost must be found, again, rediscovered and redescribed on the eve of and after the Second World War.

Such is the context into which Celan's protagonist has been thrown, breath and all. "Wo bin Ich" exists due to its appeal to the edges of a diffused human locution, whereby warmed-over significations release bold registers of speech and affect. Its titular shortening of *Heute* to *Heut* elicits the residue of words buried in words, evoking at once *Heu*, hay, and *Heuen*, to make hay, without proposing a clear linkage. The phrase "bäurisch verhumpelt," rendered as "hickishly gamey," justifies this connection without confirming it, along with allusions to implements such as hackneys, fallows, and pitchforks. Indeed, it is as though we can take up these appliances at any moment and make some kind of story with them. Yet the construction of this object-world remains vague, recalling a threadbare cadastral map whose contours must be deciphered with a magnifying glass to gain a more adequate lay of the land.

But to present these coordinates in empirical terms is to approach them naively. It is to assume that all that is past still holds good in a world that is no longer intact. This fantasy of containment is opposed to the destructive influences at play in reality,

and it exists in complete contradistinction to the testimony the poem itself bears. The practice of fallowing designates a transitional moment in an ecological sequence. "Wo bin Ich" transposes this figure from the sphere of agriculture into the heart of its "gamey" cadences. More than addressing us directly, it records the disaster, whose meaning it defers. The point is not to normalize loss but to demonstrate how poetry shifts our response to it. This involves a revaluation of voice's relation to temporality and historical reality. Voice, as we will see, does assert that we could transform the present into all sorts of things: but with a view to persisting in terrestrial life on earth—a fallowing that bears out a livable concept of mourning. It will do so by cleaving, to the best of its mortal abilities, to the experience of love, riveted to its worldly commitments.

But before we dwell on this it is important to flesh out the work's opening lines, drawing attention to effects that the poem's translation strives to reproduce. I am referring to its idiomatic or colloquial texture, confirmed by the word *Heut*. This is central to the assembly of an effect that disarms formal presentation. The point, I think, is that the poem's speaker has not just lost his bearings in the world but the linguistic appurtenances that any such bearing might itself entail. He is entirely disarmed, isolated from the conventions and materials of his art. Such a quarantine, however, is self-imposed: the poem demands distance to speak, to develop its loose-knit associations on the basis of sounds so fine-grained, so supple that they can break at any moment, and on which only our own affective responses bestow meaningful continuity.

I have taken stock of Celan's tendency to lineate his verses according to breath-units. I am interested here in a related concern: that of beginning to register certain tremors of the voice and tongue that go unnoticed, phonographic traces that call out for ears.

This brings us to the problem of linking sound to the creation of poetic meaning. Of this relation there is much to say with respect to Celan's reading of "Wo bin Ich." I want to speak of a quality that I take to be specific to its mode of presentation. My own listening centers on the aural deviance figured by the distinction between the sounds of the words *Heute* and *Heut*, which occurs at the level of official syntax, exploiting the difference between licensed usage (*Heute*) and colloquialization (*Heut*), and thus arrogating to itself certain demotic forces that are lacking in authoritative or formalized modalities of apostrophe.

So the aim is to aspire to say something which would officially remain unsaid. What I hear when I listen to Celan read the opening lines of his poem is not the commanding presence of a today, a *Heute*, a day that may appear in the calendar, but rather the uncertain enunciation of a date in attenuated, diminished form. His recitation plays on the destruction or reduction of power occasioned by the loss of a particular faculty—the ability to obtain air from the lungs so as to speak. *Heut* inserts a torsion into the poem's form which bends things out of shape. Everything hinges on the absence of this vowel, as the letter 'e' in *Heute* is missing. The word, dangling on a sharp consonant, awaits a resolution that it will not receive. Thus the present is stripped of all ground, along with any breath that would be able to carry it over into a flourishing utterance.

Vowels enable the passage of air through vocal cords without obstruction. *Heut*, the shadow-side and double of *Heute*, robs this movement of all its fluidity, a blockage not just at the level of the signifier but in relation to the body itself: a stripping of breath from the cadence; a cut or breach that forecloses aeration. This transformation adds a valence to the "today" from which the poem speaks, allowing us to distill of the range of effects that delineate voice's *spectral* edge.

Spectrality is that which makes the present waver, confounding our grip on things and leading us, against our will, to distrust the stability of the present where we dwell. Spectral words shake up the present in a way that promises nothing in return, much like a sudden drop in barometric pressure or an unforeseen dizzy spell, events that perplex as well as impart anxiety.[27]

Heute conjures up a fixed moment in which human action can secure a foothold. What happens when this figure lacks recourse to a present on which it can build? For Fredric Jameson, spectrality

> does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past is still very much alive and at work in the present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.[28]

At times our persistence in life, in the temporal flows that anchor our activities, is not secured in firm presence. For "exceptional circumstances," lurking outside our field of vision, could push the present's solidity to a point of disintegration. This principle recognizes that attempts to translate or transpose such wavering of the present back into the terms of our ordinary experience will falter and fail. We speak of the spectral resonance of words when this condition imposes itself on speech. Any contact that Celan's *Heut* makes with the present is registered as a wavering lack that organizes voice's relation to the world. Such a lack, moreover, designates a breaking with time, an inflection point that leads the poem away from nature and its temporal cycles, giving much more space to the nonsynchronous aspects of the "exceptional" present at hand.

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[27] See Fredric Jameson's impressive account of Derrida's concept of spectrality: "Marx's Purloined Letter" in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010), 142.

[28] See Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 142.

"Wo bin Ich" speaks in the aftermath of catastrophe's wholesale undoing of time. It figures a world—strained and breathless—from which resonant vowels are exiled: a high-wire display of sputtering and faltering that extends to the verse, dominated, in the final word of each stanza, by the blunt noise of alveolar stops: heu*t*, verhumpel*t*, gehiß*t*, gespann*t*. At work here is the cultivation of dissonance by means of repetition, a piling of consonants one on top of another such that every articulation, every gestural proposal, occurs with a sharp clack. Speech assumes the coarseness of the landscape from which it addresses the present. Unconfirmed and vacillating, it divests the present of any expectations we have for it. The ear wants something that will not and cannot arrive: not just the 'e' in *Heute* but the working through and casting away of the deathly caesurae that speech now incurs.

The poem's narratorial voice slides into view, bearing the mark of unlikely survival, as signs of loss stream across the earth and sky:

—Goldspur, entgegengestemmte,	—goldtrace, counterheaved,
Goldspur!—	Goldtrace!—
die Brücken, vom Strom überjauchzt,	the bridges, overjoyed by the stream,
die Liebe droben im Ast,	love, up there in the branch,
an Kommend-Entkommendem deutelnd,	niggling at the coming-escaping
das Große Licht,	the Great Light,
zum Funken erhoben,	elevated to a spark,
rechts von den Ringen	on the right of the rings,
und allem Gewinn.	and all gain.[29]

Two dashes cut across the poem, arranging it into a new terrestrial configuration. As a tidal surge collapses bridges, a plentitude of untapped, raw energy is spilled

[29] Paul Celan, "Wo bin Ich" in *Breathturn Into Timestead*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014) 132 – 135.

across earth. And since the present tells us nothing about itself, except by the aporias in which it throws voice, speech deploys its own full sensorial range to interrogate it, without presupposing anything. All the work has advanced thus far entails a present drained of all cause and effect. So now this hour, this *Heut*, must be taken up on its own account, as an intelligible unit of testimony that gathers and disperses its own modes of experiential depth, squaring tragedy with morality in a way that resists blunting the force of the former.

The former half of "Wo bin Ich" performs this effect as though in mourning. The topography it tenders returns its speaker to the landscape of his own heritage: to the persecuted place-names strewn across Eastern European Jewish history, from the banks of the Bug River to the Dniester River, traversed by cattle cars.[30] Though some of these places are no longer identifiable, they are still narratable.[31] And in the poem's space, where this heritage gets fleshed out and rendered visible to others, to its listeners, the work of voice acquires an inter-subjective quality. It bears witness to a dizzying and unorientable now-time stripped of all cause. Such that a blur constitutes the temporal position from which voice speaks. To proceed without origin, yet with a history that one aims to share: this, I believe, is the ethical nub of Celan's post-Shoah lyric.

His poem sets itself toward a place where it modifies and redescribes its moorings. Its decoupling of the present from the order of linear time culminates in a spectral undoing. Voice presents this collapse while imparting a sense of the changes possible within it. Anagrammatic is the term that characterizes this making and unmaking.

[30] John Felsteiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 15.

[31] For Todd Presner, the topographies of Celan's poems return us to the "nonexistent places of his own heritage," to locales that have been "largely destroyed" and which only exist now as "temporally layered memories." See Todd Samuel Presner, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains* (New York: Columbia University Press), 49.

The anagrammatical thrust of the swerve from *Heute* to *Heut* is a sonic spectacle: displacing sense and rearranging sounds, it recuperates meanings in the world. Interestingly, the prefix *Ana-* means "up, in place or time, back, again, anew."[32] In the heavensfallow the present is given over to a certain wavering transitivity. Yet this gesture, so subtle and disorienting, is the place from which "love" emerges, a matter of consequence for beginning anew.

What role, if any, does love play in reconstituting a world that has gone to seed? The work at hand offers no answers as to how catastrophe may be worked over. The only thing it can do is provide a map of what its mourning can be or become. Yet this caveat implies a complex gesture: it points to the loss of a beloved, which it now recollects, while underscoring love's return to the poem's space, having found its way into poetic remembrance.

"Pain," writes Sara Ahmed, "involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place."[33] Celan's speech is disrupted at its core by such an overflowing of boundaries—a founding act that carves through the iniquities that modernist events unleash on a world in which human beings are entangled, splicing and blurring the weft of the ordinary as well as its words and gestures. Voice is nothing if not the desire to address the realities occasioned by violence. The poem's latter half addresses this need. In it we find a lived acknowledgment of love in the teeth of an event that has rattled the fabric of body and mind. Amidst a day, a spectral *Heut*, that is unkind.

[32] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 76.

[33] See Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 35.

Psychoanalysis maintains that pleasure and desire often assume the place of a loss. Experiences of pain can be re-cathected, a wound reconfigured into an erogenous zone which precipitates the transposal of pain into a pleasurable association.[34] The notion of cathexis, an investment of energy that focuses attention and interest, could be deployed to describe the poem's dynamic, namely its distribution of attention in many directions at once: now here, now there; toward life, and toward the dead. A *dispersed* cathexis, then, as the elemental force supporting the work's presentation: the distribution of attention across a web of associations and libidinal investments.[35] As unchecked as it is compressed, voice cleaves throughout to objects as if they harbored traces of loss, till it seizes on love.

More than naming pain, the impulse of Celan's poem is to give it an adequate shape. It is the telling of a story, however unbearable, that confers free range on this task: love mingles with despair, satisfaction with pain, and ambivalence with clarity. Clarity because amid a suffocating reality of abuse, the poem affirms its beloved, an attachment underwritten by the relational bond that ties Celan's voice to a past. These bonds are social as well as historical. Grounded in the actuality of human loss, they are not reducible to "subjective" goals, such as the curing of narcissistic wounds. They are enacted so as to supplement pain, in a way that is entirely disinterested, so that whenever any unjust suffering is present, and whatever horrors are visited on you, there is still my responsibility to care for you, to make possible something that cannot be determined, in all its human significance: the feeling of love which has emerged between us in spite of, due to, our separation.

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[34] Darian Leader, *Jouissance: Sexuality, Suffering, and Satisfaction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 60.

[35] By this account cathexis, though it is never explicitly articulated as such, becomes virtually identical with the Freudian idea of association. Consult Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 86.

To love is to set free, without tyrannizing our beloved, who is never truly ours. This denouement is what elevates voice to a "spark" and drives its appeals home. Against the spectral undoing of *Heute*, voice accrues around the heavensfallow: residues of a damaged soul touched by a situation that is troubled and blurred. But, for all that, a *Heut* that can be remade. One that can be shared, between us, despite this abyss cleaving my life from yours.

Literary-Historical Variants

What emerges from this is a sense of lyric as a laboratory where human values and desires are broken down and reassembled against the backdrop of modern events, the perspective from which a poem gazes out at the world and interpellates it. What this consists of is for the work to decide in light of the present's demands. The poem, avers Celan, remains *zeitoffen*: it is time-exposed, temporally open to events and epochs, struggles and conflicts.[36]

Friedrich Hölderlin used the term *das Heiligtrauernde*, holy mourning, to stimulate his response to the flight of the gods in the face of a traumatological modernity.[37] This was at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the apex of modern capitalism. A century later Martin Heidegger added to Hölderlin's coinage a twist of his own. It read: *heilig trauerende, aber bereite Bedrängnis*, holy mourning, but prepared distress.[38] For Heidegger, Hölderlin conserved a relation to the divine as it was being severed.

[36] Paul Celan, "Die Dichtung Mandelstams," in Osip Mandelstam, *Im Luftgrab*, ed. Ralph Dutli (Zurich: Ammann, 1988), 73.

[37] Friedrich Hölderlin, "Germanien" in *Sämtliche Gedichte und Briefe in drei Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag), 334. The date of Hölderlin's poem is unclear. Scholars believe it was written in 1801. The work is often interpreted as a rumination on the aftereffects of the bourgeois revolution of 1789.

[38] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen "Germainen" und "Der Rhein"*, ed. Susanne Ziegler, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 39 (Frankfurt am Main: Klosterman, 1999), 137.

His ability to experience the gods' flight as abandonment ratified their divinity. As such poetry offered a belated linkage to the battered theological order of things, which enabled Hölderlin to rescue Being (*Sayn*), the honored spark of the gods poised to jump forth from his lips at the drop of a hat.[39]

Not so for Celan. He cannot afford to fantasize about conversions of this kind. "Wo bin ich" does not furnish a place for dialogue between humans and gods. Having come within an ace of death, its achievement is to have created a voice that emerges out of rupture to tell a story that has shattered the ability to tell. This involves the construction of a voice that reflects the fault lines of calamity. Thus language, drained of spiritual content, falls back on the needs of an enfeebled body and mind. What has been tarnished is the human bond that enables me to figure my love as something that could nourish you in your lostness to the living world, whose violence has sundered and torn you.

Modernist events denote the waning of the horizon in which so many lives transpire. They fail to preserve and reproduce the conditions under which care itself is possible. Yet the forfeiture of holy mourning need not be glossed as a blow to human life. It may also be a precondition for conjuring up experiments in living after the Shoah. Celan's art returns a witness to the scene of a crime where voices no longer tread. The shock of disaster calls forth the task of thinking in the wake of loss and defeat. Henceforth, reasoning, if there is to be any, must take place at the vertiginous point of a real chasm, in view of our finite vulnerability.[40]

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[39] Heidegger's lecture courses on Hölderlin stresses the need to understand the philosopher's reading of the poet's work, especially "Germania," alongside his contemporaneous thinking on Nietzsche, for whom the writing of lyric poetry operated as the recuperation of the essence of metaphysics. Tracy Colony, "The Death of God and the Life of Being: Nietzsche's confrontation with Heidegger" in *Interpreting Heidegger*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 197 – 216.

[40] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Of particular interest is the chapter entitled "Ethics at the Horizon" (55 – 100) in which Lear takes up a form of

Modernist events do not simply change the ways we talk about historical events. They transform their composition by means of a sudden qualitative conversion, akin to the replacement of one form of reason or *modus vivendi* with another. The relation of modernist events to modernist formal devices is not inclusive. The confusion rests here on White's displacement of a literary category to history. That the concentrationary world of Nazism dominates White's view of modernity is clear. Evident, too, is his view of the Holocaust as the fulfillment-figure of the twentieth-century, the vast "nature, scope, and implications" of which "no prior age could even have imagined."[41] And yet the kind of event under question pertains to a concomitance of historical, political, social, and ecological conditions that prefigure any artistic claims to a modernist mimesis—an invention of the twentieth-century, which the designation historically precedes.

So how can we rethink White's proposal? I am drawn to a passage in *The Practical Past* that lays bare the main problem at hand:

> I have argued elsewhere that, when it is a matter of dealing with those aspects of reality which force us to question the reality or even the possibility of our ideals of humanity—as in American slavery or the Holocaust—the writer interested in facing directly the ethical issues (the question: What should I do?) involved in the consideration of such phenomena might well take on the role of performing *in* writing the kind of action being presented as event.[42]

Interestingly, these lines are folded into a broader discussion of Morrison's *Beloved*. They register the author's decision to transpose the autobiographical facts of her protagonist's life into the register of her novel, an act that foregrounds the ethical

"reasoning at the abyss." Relatedly, the notion of acting without recourse to timeless aims or goals is the topic of Reiner Schürmann's Arendtian reading of Heidegger's late thought: *Le Principe d'anarchie: Heidegger et la question de l'agir* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1982).

[41] Hayden White, "The Modernist Event" in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 69.

[42] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 23.

circumstances with which Black women in America "in her situation and in her time had been confronted."[43] Margret Garner, the real-life person and her literary analog, is an escaped slave woman who kills her child rather than returning it to slavery. *Beloved* situates its literary recounting of infanticide against this historical backdrop. Its aim is to render Garner's act explicit in the context of a story in which she, in Morrison's words, comes to "represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom."[44] And so now, when we return to White's formulation regarding modernist events, we discover preliminary indications of a comprehensive reconstruction, theoretical and practical, of the concept's parameters.

His reading of *Beloved* engenders something of a quantum leap in this direction. In it the Holocaust and trans-Atlantic Slavery compose events that bring us to forcefully "question the reality or even the possibility of our ideas of humanity." What strikes me is the construal of history as a space in which events imply one another. White, it seems, is insisting that the very need to speak of modernist events springs from a problem the figure produces in its own right: that of the wholesale transformation of the world into a domain that violently undermines the flourishing of human ideals in general—the practice of freedom and mutual acknowledgment between rational subjects, as well as enacting contentful norms which provide grounds for dignity and trust.[45]

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[43] Hayden White, *The Practical Past,* 22.

[44] Toni Morrison, cited in Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 23.

[45] Norms possess, claims Robert Brandom, a conceptual content whose proper expression is that of recognition. "One must have the recognitive authority to hold another responsible in order for one's recognitive attitudes to count as suitably complementary and so be able to cooperate in instituting a determinately contentful status." From Brandom I take the idea that, without such recognition as a basis, our social norms and institutions lack the necessary content to endorse binding norms, such as dignity and trust. See Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 701.

I will advance a reappraisal of modernist events that proceeds from this deadlock, whose conceptual sources must be mapped onto a determinate historical milieu, namely on the dawn of modernity itself. This sets us in the long sixteenth-century. It underscores the development of a world in which the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Holocaust would come to pass. The transformation of the Atlantic into a hub of transnational merchant capital, the promulgation of world colonialism, the circumscription of nature emanating from multiple technological revolutions: these, in brief, are the sources that shaped modernization's abuses of power. The birth of the colonial-imperial order is a piece of the same historical matrix from which racism, slavery, and ecological calamity emerged into social being.[46] The next step is to derive from this structure the aspects that charge its lifeworld. This means pinpointing the forms of violence modernist events generally promote. To my mind catastrophe should not be the sole patrimony of any one collectivity. For Mbembe, global modernity condemns us and our histories to close proximity, such that "the links between modernity and terror spring from multiple sources," none of which possess an immutable origin.[47]

What are these sources? Authority entails a social relation between multiple agents. All authoritarian actions, claims Alexandre Kojève, express an ethical imbalance: they transmit the possibility an agent has of "acting on others (or on another) without these others reacting against him," despite being "capable of doing so." This minimizes "opposition" from all persons toward whom the act is directed.[48] My contention here is that racial thinking and colonialism, slavery and classism,

[46] Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), 206 – 217. See, too, Olufemi O. Taiwo, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 14 – 65.

[47] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 72.

[48] Alexandre Kojève, *The Notion of Authority*, trans. Hager Weslati (London: Verso, 2014).

are features of Western displays of authority. Taken together, they compose a map or genealogy of our global modernity that adequately distills its violent excesses. What we are contending with is the manifestation of an authoritarian life-world, an enterprise whose modern lineage explicitly entails the "instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations."[49] All in an effort to erode lasting human bonds.

Contrasts obtain: the local aspects of modern catastrophes are distinguishable. But these have now acquired a relation of co-belonging, a modality of inclusion expressive of what Achille Mbembe will refer to as a form of being in-common. Against appeals to values that indicate "some already constituted thing or entity," the in-common articulates the astonishingly prescient ideal of partaking of a "world that is the only one we have and that, to be sustainable, must be shared by all those with rights to it, all species taken together," dwelling in mutual proximity.[50] So to Mbembe's mind, the aim is very clear. It rests on jettisoning the death-world by mounting a resistance to authoritarianism, within and against the genealogy of a global modernity that promulgates barbarism, and which supersedes our capacity to begin anew by leveling the world's habitability.[51]

All this reflects a release, a loosening of discursive control, a desire to restrategize. I want to orient the idea of modernist events toward the place of the in-common. And to draw up an account of extreme events that bears in mind our co-belonging. The morality of this project is inclusive, and its aesthetic mood is subjunctive.

[49] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 68.

[50] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 40.

[51] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 9.

Because it aims to defend and safeguard the notion that life unfolds not just in the world as it is but as it should or ought to be.

Garner's refusal to consent to slavery is a decision that is universal in scope. Hers is an act that leads us to question the habitability of a world where mothers are driven to commit infanticide to rescue their kin from legal, ontological punishment. It was Kant who characterized the free or autonomous act as an instance that cannot be accounted for with regards to natural causality, in relation to a chain of causes and effects. Acts qualify as autonomous if they occur as a necessary cause, or as a "disposition" whose proper justification can only be sought in an agent who judges and chooses.[52] This movement from contingency to necessity is the true focal point of *Beloved*.[53] Garner's refusal to capitulate to social norms brings with it a measure of fulfillment. It is her way of disinterestedly caring for a soul that has been condemned to cruelty. Forged in the interest of mothering, her infanticide responds to human inhospitality. Such is the freedom of Morrison's Medea-like heroine that it is made to appear entirely co-extensive with … the destiny and freedom of our being-in-common. Which can itself be demolished, as in the historical case of the Holocaust and, equally so, the transatlantic Slave Trade.

Resistance

But where "Wo bin Ich" furnished a retroactive view of the Holocaust, "Frihed," an anti-fascist lyric composed in 1964, sets us in the midst of its unfolding, re-writing its vast political subtext. The type of writing proposed here interpellates history,

[52] This is what Kant calls a subject's *Gesinnung* (disposition), and it is the practical (that is to say ethical) counterpart of what he calls, in his first critique, the "transcendental unity of apperception." See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 43 – 44.

[53] On the movement from contingency to necessity as it pertains to ethics, see Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

to the degree that what I am calling "history" consists not just of events but of linguistic narratives that submit the past to imaginative figural transformations. This intervention is composed of several levels, the most basic of which is literal. By literal I mean to highlight the fact that the work is based on a historical fact: the Danish resistance's transportation of Jews to safety in Sweden in fishing and leisure boats in October 1943, in the midst of what were the final years of the war. Thus the poem's title, "Frihed," the Danish word meaning "freedom," memorializes an effort that saved Jews fleeing persecution.

This mission, noted in passing in Friedländer's history, arrived just in time. It came on the heels of the extermination of thousands of Jews from Salonika, and occurred amid the supercharging of mass death across the face of Europe. Denmark, though occupied by the Germans since 1940, was granted executive autonomy: its police and armed forces, its king as well as its parliaments, remained intact and issued decrees, such that all German stipulations were, in principle, to be negotiated diplomatically. Avoidance of conflict was of course advantageous to the Nazi's strategic interests: Denmark, a crucial supplier of agricultural products, was not just a reliable business partner; its location afforded passage to Norway and Sweden and was close to the English coast, and therefore proximal to enemy lines. Moreover, collaboration was justified on the grounds that Danes, like Germans, were thought to belong to the Nordic Race. [54]

Antisemitism in Denmark never became a generalized social phenomenon. Danish society, which was homogenous in composition and lacking in profound class variations, had little reason to demote its small population of Jews to pariahs.[55]

[54] Saul Friedländer, *Years of Extermination*, 545.

[55] See Hans Kirchhoff's entry titled "Denmark" in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 147.

Nazi occupation was in general viewed by Danes with a great deal of suspicion, which swelled when Werner Best, SS military official, decided to impose martial law in the region. Within a year of his arrival the date of the solution of the "Jewish question" was set. On October 2 Denmark's Jews were to be rounded up, deported, and exterminated. Yet the Swedish government, keyed to this operation, offered to take in the Jews. The proposal was immediately rescinded by forces in Berlin. And thus the deportations were initiated. They failed to materialize: "on the eve of the German move," records Friedländer, "around 7,000 Jews were ferried over to Sweden in a coordinated operation supported by the vast majority of the Danish population," who shuttled them to freedom.[56]

Spearheaded by the Danish Freedom Council, a group of political dissidents organized to contest Nazism's spread in Denmark, this endeavor culminated in the opening of a small body of water between the Øresund and Kattegat shores that conveyed Jews to safety. It is the narrative of this coalitional enterprise that "Frihed" folds into its own lines. The resultant transformation figures history as a space in which freedom accumulates collective force:

Im Haus zum gedoppelten Wahn,	In the house of double delusion
Wo die Steinboote fliegen,	where the stone boats fly
überm	over
Weißkönigs-Pier, den Geheimnissen zu,	Whiteking's pier, toward the secrets,
wo das endlich	where finally with
abgenabelte	cut cord the
Orlog-Wort kreuzt,	man-of-war-word cruises,
bin ich, von Schilfmark Genährte,	I, reed-pith nourished, am
in dir, auf	in you, on

[56] Saul Friedländer, *Years of Extermination*, 546.

Wildentend-Teichen,

ich singe –

was sing ich?

Der Mantel
des Saboteurs
mit den roten, den weißen
Kreisen um die
Einschuß-
stellen
–durch sie
Erblickst du das mit uns fahrende
frei-
sternige Oben –
deckt uns jetzt zu,

der Grünspan-Adel vom Kai,
mit seinen Backstein-Gedanken
rund um die Stirn,
häuft den Geist rings, den Gischt

schnell
verblühn die Geräusche
diesseits und jenseits der Trauer,

die näher-
segelnde
Eiterzacke der Krone
in eines Schief-
geborenen Aug
dichtet
dänisch.

wild ducks' pond

I sing –

what do I sing?

The saboteur's
coat
with the red, with the white
circles around the
bullet
holes
–through them
you sight the with us driving
free-
starry Above–
covers us now,

the verdigris-nobility from the quay,
with its burned-brick thoughts
round about the forehead,
heaps the spirit round, the spindrift,

quick
the noises wither
this side and that side of mourning,

the crown's
closer
sailing pus-prong
in the eye of one
born crooked
writes poems
in Danish.[57]

[57] Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2014), 68 – 73.

In typical Celanian fashion a formation is enacted by a web of verbal articulations. The past becomes readable insofar it passes through an operation of figural coding: the fishing and leisure boats on which Jews were transported to safety appear as *Steinboote*; and the colors of the Danish flag, red and white, are superimposed onto the Saboteur's coat. And the word *Orlog*, a German idiom meaning "war" that survives in the naval lexicon of Scandinavian regions, would appear to affirm a linguistic proximity to actual historical reality.

Fleet ships, courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

I want to take a step back to consider the terms of the artifact under discussion. The preponderance in "Frihed" of history makes it difficult to classify it as fictional.

Rather, we will describe Celan's presentation of the resistance as literary in kind, insofar as this designation, as denoted at the outset of this chapter, pertains to works that emplot actual historical events in a register best described as figurative. The fact is that we are dealing with a literary mode of writing, as opposed to a strictly historical one: "Frihed" indexes the past by fashioning it into a story that figures an event by means of poetry, such that it becomes available to reflection by dint of its inscription in a work that oscillates between the poles of historical and literary figuration while also unifying them.

Metahistory entails narratively self-conscious reflection on the past's meaning. A contention of this chapter is that this facility is not restricted to historians. It can be the concern of artists of all kinds: poets, painters, filmmakers, composers. So we should not be surprised to discover Celan reflexively mediating history, manifesting evidence of literary forms of emplotment with regards to his object. I read "Frihed" as a poetic artifact cast as a condensed metahistorical romance. Romance is fundamentally a "drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness," whose theological meaning or code resides in the "transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall."[58] To Fredric Jameson's mind, it is the generic expression of a wish-fulfillment aiming at the wholesale "transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality" is "effaced."[59]

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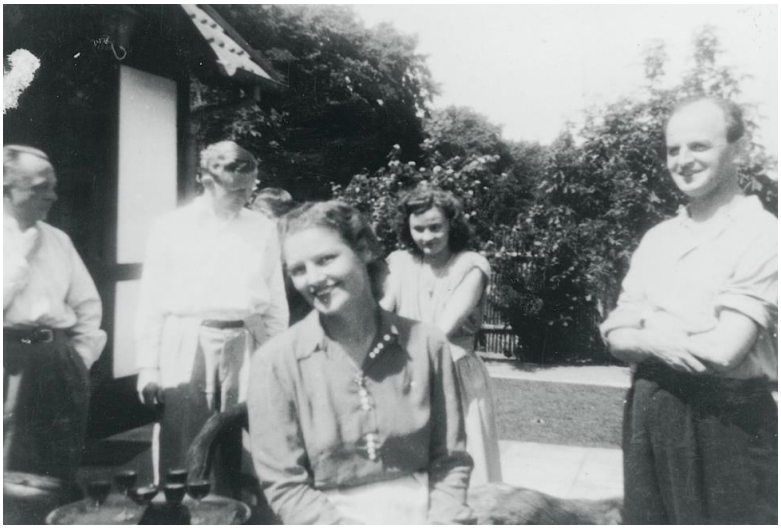
[58] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 8.

[59] Historically, the genre's early exemplars, the knight's tale or the *chanson de geste*, provided a narrative-based solution to a social issue: in the late Carolingian period, the positional notions of good and evil played themselves out against the disappearance of centralized political rule. For Jameson, that romance crystallized such dissolution reflects its salience as a poetic form: the emergence of the figure of the "hostile knight," clad in armor and his identity "unknown", harmonized with the appearance of "marauding bands and robbers and brigands" who ranged "geographical immensities with impunity," threatening the unity of the new feudal nobility. It was the confluence of these conditions

So romance, then, not just as transcendence but as restoration or fulfillment on a higher plane: the anticipation of a world-to-come which will nevertheless "still contain reality."[60] Thus the positional binary of good and evil so central to the genre is to be defeated and overcome, unmasked and dissolved into the old ideological backdrop from which it sprung. That such terms provide a useful template for our discussion of "Frihed" is beyond doubt. The poem stages a conflict between fascism and anti-fascism that it spontaneously overcomes in the interest of some greater transnational ideal which it linguistically strives to instantiate or perform. "Frihed" is notable for its bold underscoring of a morally committed standpoint: by singing the deeds of the Danish resistance, it projects onto history the unfolding of a political narrative of collective action whose moral aim is to register and transcend the travails of defeat and mourning.



Elizabeth "Lis" Bomhoff, née Nielsen, a Danish Resistance fighter with her friends. Courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

that shaped romance narratives during this period, stamping the knight—his "insolence" and "refusal of recognition"—as a true "bearer of evil" whose figural existence recalled that of the knight and henceforth reflected the social anxieties of an entire historical class. Yet the knight, once defeated and unmasked, is stripped of his aura of frightening unfamiliarity, and thus simply becomes yet another "knight among others." See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 118.

[60] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 110

Diesseits und jenseits der Trauer: appearing in the penultimate stanza of "Frihed," this refrain is, I feel, inadequately translated as "this and that side of mourning." What this rendering misses is Celan's effort to push beyond, by social allegory, mourning to an as yet unannounced and fulfilled form of collective mindedness. I want to be bold and suggest a new formulation: "within and beyond mourning." Pedagogically speaking, this is the sense in which the moral and aesthetic thrust of Celan's refrains find their source in what I have glossed above as a coalitional political ethos. And by parsing his phrase as such, my idea is to amplify the moral character of his work, whose aim is not to rehash a critique of our moral categories in the tenor of Nietzsche but to endorse a set of attitudes which are, simply put, anti-fascist through and through.

Vandalism at a synagogue in the province of Copenhagen. The graffiti, though difficult to decipher, reads: "You Jews earn gold in the war from our country. Down with Moses." Courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

In the universe of "Frihed" acts are not seen as the product of individual talents. They are folded into the broader struggle from which their necessity radiates. "Bin Ich […] in dir" ("I am […] in you"): not alongside or amongst you, but truly inhabiting or attuning myself to you; so that we can take hold of us, such that this unity that consensually forms and determines us expresses a cause that binds us together, you and me, as friends and comrades against barbarism. Fidelity to acting "within and beyond mourning" is a vindication of this principle. If I am "in" you I hold myself responsible for the reasons guiding your actions. In assuming responsibility for you I acknowledge you can make and unmake me. That our project could flourish or die, that the world we love could perish. These are potential corollaries of our choice to undergo the process of freedom. So not only am I constituted by you but the voice with which I speak *speaks us*. Because for resistance to count as ours, it must fit intelligibly within a complex of practices within which acting in this way, in our coming together to sunder fascism, can attain a coherent and rational meaning. On this account, freedom is described as involving adequate forms of responsiveness to the destruction of social values, such as dignity and respect—norms which form the basis of, that give and demand, the practical necessity of sharing the world.

The sphere wherein self-realizing deeds attain meaning is the social ensemble. Celan thematizes the issue of freedom by fashioning liberation as a process of co-constitution whereby agents express unity through adhesion to a common cause. "Frihed" takes up this moral axiom and reposes it as solidarity beyond mourning. It does so through a real historical optic: the destruction of human fraternity and dignity marking the encroachment of fascism on communal life in the 30s and 40s. For Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism survives on vitiating the spontaneous quality of

human acts, smothering the capacity for natality that abets new beginnings.[61] "Frihed" takes a stand against this principle. Its content and form illuminate the past as a domain of experience whose contours are ultimately alterable by actors making themselves into agents over historical time. The work's procedure culminates in a gesture of aesthetic solidarity in which a coercive form of political existence is dispersed in the name of secular democracy, an event which now demonstrates the possibility of a change through its suspension of the authority of an occupying force. The intervention of collective life into time: a social act that breaks the chains of voluntary servitude, one which the world can in turn acknowledge as consistent with the universal ideals of justice and dignity.

For Kant, the French Revolution was a sign of history in the threefold sense of *signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognosticum*. Danish Resistance, on a smaller scale, was an instance through which the recent memory of Fascist authority echoed, demonstrating the need and possibility of change and desire for greater freedom.[62] "Frihed" reads as a blueprint for how to recalibrate moral life amid disaster. We cannot ascend to the level of theoretical observation without first venturing to say something first about the historical reality the work compellingly mediates. On this level, the work partakes of an historical framework to the extent that it enters into alliance with a real cause—the Danish resistance—premised on the rejection of political terror. The mission, we recall, to convey Jews to safety was accompanied by many risks. What continues to strike contemporary historians eighty years after the event is the degree of social cohesion that animated the enterprise, making it a *sui generis* instance of the Shoah.

[61] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 460 – 479.

[62] See Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London, Verso, 2012), 34.

Now Danish opposition, a product of decency and good manners, combined with changes in the content of human acts, was realized on multiple levels of society, coming not just from the King, bishops, universities, and the Supreme Court, trade unions and the Danish Employers' Confederation, but also from doctors and farmers, as well as ordinary citizens—many of whom came forward to assist Jews in flight without playing any formal role in the Resistance movement, returning thereafter, often namelessly and soundlessly, to their everyday lives.[63] By 1943, once "dissention concerning the Danish government's policy of collaboration" with Nazis had effectively "torn the nation apart," the people of Denmark could spontaneously "join in a task where political and moral decisions were easy to answer, amounting simply to whether one was for or against a crime."[64] Outrage canalized into action: the situation required, in addition to a swift response, a politically organized world in which agents of all kinds could insert themselves, individually and collectively, in the name of a collective like-mindedness which legislates norms in the spirit of freedom.

[63] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

[64] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

Salomon Tschernia, member of the Danish Brigade, Den Danske Brigade, a military unit made up of Jewish refugees during the war. Courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

Now Danish opposition, a product of decency and good manners, combined with changes in the content of human acts, was realized on multiple levels of society, coming not just from the King, bishops, universities, and the Supreme Court, trade unions and the Danish Employers' Confederation, but also from doctors and farmers, as well as ordinary citizens—many of whom came forward to assist Jews in flight without playing any formal role in the Resistance movement, returning thereafter, often namelessly and soundlessly, to their everyday lives.[65] By 1943, once "dissention concerning the Danish government's policy of collaboration" with Nazis had effectively "torn the nation apart," the people of Denmark could spontaneously "join in a task where political and moral decisions were easy to answer, amounting simply to whether one was for or against a crime."[66] Outrage canalized into action: the situation required, in addition to a swift response, a politically organized world in which agents of all kinds could insert themselves, individually and collectively, in the name of a collective like-mindedness which legislates norms in the spirit of freedom.

"We find it difficult," observes Arendt, "to realize that there may exist a freedom which is not an attribute of the will but an accessory of doing and acting," a disinterested freedom which can be experienced "in the process of acting" and making and beginning and "nothing else."[67] "Frihed" reproduces this thorny order. In it the old forces of good and evil are politically and historically framed as

[65] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

[66] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

[67] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 163.

the agon between fascism and democracy, despotism and pluralistic freedom. The story Celan tells resonates with other historical accounts already on offer.[68] But where "Frihed" breaks with this framing is in its reposing of the problem of freedom as a de-personalized, socially-oriented process wherein the dividing line between opposed factions signals an instance whose "solution" calls for that form of action kept alive by collective resistance.

I am tempted to characterize the literary means Celan employs to communicate this truth as a form of *transpersonal figuralism*. The point, I believe, is that the Danish case demanded the work of multiple hands: it called for the police and coast guards to protect the Jews' embarkation to Sweden; authorities needed to be willing to desist from condemning all freedom of movement; even local fisherman needed to risk their lives, albeit in exchange for a high payment.[69] Celan's procedure, much like a mirror lens, gathers these various deeds into itself, ordering the past as a fresco, a verbal canvas through which history itself woven, and in which so many isolated subjects forego glory for themselves in order to partake in the anonymous outcomes and pleasures, the sweet returns, of social agency.

So not just ethics, but morality: the choice to endorse resistance is not strictly forged within a poetic consciousness but given expression in the social ensemble, among other intelligent subjects, radically undermining the idea of intuition and action as fixed in individual beliefs or causes. What gives the movement sense is its coming-together amid a historical situation that is indeterminate and provisional, amid a conjuncture that could crumble to pieces or suddenly change on the fly.

[68] See, especially, Leni Yahil's account of the event, which is considered by many to be the most comprehensive version available. Leni Yahil *The Rescue of Danish Jewry*, trans. Morris Gradel (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969).

[69] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

As always, Celan's account is oriented from a deep commitment to a standpoint: through the "bullet holes" of the saboteur's coat we glimpse a soaring "with us," the *mit uns*, a formulation that ascends from the isolated economy of the self, and its asocial resistances, to a more general economy of communal mores. It is the "nobility" (*Adel*) of such sociality that is the poem's ultimate subject, the resonance of that movement of which political life is the proper manifestation. The result is the birth of a democratized unit whose narratorial voice is porous and structured by a law of substitutability: the *mit uns*, a figural or symbolic structure, is at the same time the expression of a movement whose culmination reveals a polyvalent mode of being-in-common—a poetic theory of social justice by which a voice becomes a voice in its proximity to collective forms of self-determination, which ultimately transform it into what it is.

A memorial to Danish Jews who were deported to Theresienstadt in 1943. Courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

Recall that Romance recodes reality by restoring to it either the conditions of a lost Eden or by anticipating the birth of a moral order that effaces older norms. The point is that Celan performs a similar operation by taking hold of the form's dynamic and transposing it into a crisis of twentieth-century history and politics. What he thus exposes is the idea of totalitarian rule as an immobile political fact. That fascism smothers our breathing and reduces our ability to begin anew is unquestioned. The form and content of Celan's work, however, suggest that the capacity to determine the limits of our world can be remade anew. And with hope. In its redescription of history "Frihed" thus rearticulates the importance of our commitments, reposing the question of Freedom by linking it to an ethic and aesthetic of collective cohabitation, on whose meaning and direction and spirit and reception the fate of the world itself rests.

Morality takes root, states Agamben, "only when the good is revealed to consist in nothing other than a grasping of evil," so that, at bottom, "every consolidation of paradise" is "matched by a deepening of the abyss."[70] And this may be the case. Even so, the celebratory yet principled key struck by "Frihed" shores up paradise. That the ensemble appears; that the multitude speaks: this is the work's catharsis. The self-grasping of evil ratifies the good, which speaks in favor of acts of solidarity. Fascism is the coercive political abyss into which the Danish resistance descends in order to free the lives imprisoned therein—the ethical aim to which voice aspires. Yet it becomes important, right away, to consider such a resolution in conjunction with the realities of history, and to ask whether the poem's celebratory key furnishes an adequate response to the event it figures. This means asking whether the work relays a truthful representation of world disaster.

[70] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1993), 13.

Speculative Inconclusions

Cast as a literary narrative, Celan's orientation toward the Danish case disposes his reflection on it in the direction of a fundamental struggle between good and evil, inflected, as I have showed, towards the "solution" of this dynamic by way of a secular democratic upheaval. The social pressure his work creates is canalized into such a dramatic denouement. And so, the ideological valence of this coda confronts, fundamentally, the historian, who may or may not be prepared to accept it as an appropriate possibility of emplotment—after all, the historian's craft makes certain preliminary claims for the event's adjudication that caution us against presenting the fate of Danish Jews in idealized terms.[71]

So does "Frihed" ratify this perspective? Does it tend toward idealizing history? And if so, is it responsible for domesticating and blunting the force of a tragedy, thus making sense of it in what can seem like a form of avoidance or repression? Note how the problem itself is formulated: the question is not whether Celan's work should be received as a contribution to historical writing or historiography as such, but whether his own literary romance constitutes a satisfactory and meaningful response to a particular event's figuration. There is a clearer way of putting all this: Does his romance—an aesthetic form of writing which differs from tragedy and comedy, to be sure—approach the historical case of Danish Resistance in a truthful manner, such that his evaluative assessments or judgments of it justify understanding the event in the way that is being suggested? And if the horrors that we feel when we read or learn about the Holocaust generally seem to mean something truthful to us, and if tragedy is regularly a vehicle for this, should we accept "Frihed," a romance, as a responsible paradigm of Shoah writing? Or does it fail to meet the requirements

[71] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 145.

of what can count as historical knowledge, the significance of which counts as much on the accurate representation of the past as on the truthful assessment of matters of great significance to human life in general?

In the instance of "Frihed" nothing makes the disjunctive proximities between literary and historical writing more palpable than probing the poem's absences, of which there are discernably two. The first is socially and politically determined. It concerns the poem's unequal distribution of attention across the public sphere. Celan's condensed yet multiperspectival portrait of Danish resistance organizes a plenum of subjective agencies into a unity that acts, bound by its opposition to Nazi sovereignty. This figural unit, the *mit uns*, is composed not just of Danes but of Jewish victims and survivors, among whom we may count the poem's speaker: Celan the poet, Jew, and Holocaust survivor.[72] Yet against this spirit of democratic plurality, the work itself fails to utter a word, not a syllable, about those who failed to receive adequate protection and care in the face of mounting fear and social instability. Of these lives Celan does not speak.

As many historians have noted, a striking aspect of the Danish case was the differential vulnerability of human lives with respect to their economic standing. Here class featured as a distinguishing element. Unsurprisingly, poor and immigrant Jews were most affected by German occupation, excised from the community's safety net and exposed to various forms of negligence, including but not limited to death.[73] That "Frihed" knows no trace of the lower strata is a matter its author sidesteps. Equally questionable its democratic presentation of the liberation process itself. For it has been determined that Danish efforts to resist Nazi hegemony were

[72] I am referring, here, to the title of John Felstiner's biography of Celan.

[73] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark: A Light in the Darkness of the Holocaust? A Reply to Gunnar S. Paulsson" in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1995), 467.

dependent on forms of political collaboration which implied lending political, economic, and moral support for Hitler until 29 August 1943, when martial law was officially declared throughout Denmark. In the final analysis, the rescue of Danish Jews, though heroic, was the result of a process of compromise that gave rise to a gray zone—bereft of Manichean distinctions—amid "good" and "evil" forces. Indeed, such collaboration delineated a system of legal checks that protected Jews: Kirchoff asserts that the Danes threatened resignation "if Germans introduced anti-Jewish measures," a pact that was scraped when the Final Solution was declared throughout Denmark. Yet it was ultimately Werner Best, a Reich plenipotentiary, who derailed the proceedings by recalling his troops from looting Jewish homes, restraining his squadron of 1,800 men from preventing Jews to embark, "more or less openly, often haphazardly" to Sweden.[74]

To be sure, Best himself was not impartial. His decisions were most likely shaped by a mixture of bureaucratic duplicity and self-interest that enabled him to keep his grip on power while offering the Danes a symbolic gesture of goodwill that would mollify them—a purely symbolic gesture aimed at cementing his own standing.[75] But as the nature of his motives remains a subject of intense scholarly debate, history places its empirical and ethical limits on a reading of Celan's poem. The work seems to fail to hold up basic scrutiny on a certain fundamental level, due in significant part to what it excludes, to what is omitted from its account, as even the most cursory historical reflection on its contours would illustrate. But even if "Frihed" appears to collapse under the weight of close inspection, we would still do well to persist in probing the conditions of its production,

[74] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

[75] Hans Kirchoff, "Denmark," 148.

if only to illumine the acts of choice and judgment that saturate its composition, the metahistorical content of its artistic form.

Images from Werner Best's personal collection of negatives picturing his household north of Copenhagen. Courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

I want to submit that the document's relation to historical reality can be fairly considered only once its literary-poetic aspects are fleshed out piece by piece. Therefore, it seems to me that the poem belongs to that class of works that, much like Morrison's *Beloved*, draws source materials from an historical archive

whose shapes it reinvents and reshapes through the telling of a *fabula* or story. So to regard "Frihed" as a metahistorical romance or a modernist speculative romance is to delineate the attitudes it brings to bear on the event it encodes. The work signals the need for reading habits for which we must be prepared, confronting us from the outset with a tale that mimes the gap between history and literature: "Im Haus zum gedoppelten Wahn, / Wo die Steinboote fliegen". Consider the materiality of such a scene: the image-figure of flying stone boats entails a paradox of Newtonian proportions, taking its distance from the laws of well-ordered physics to present us with a line that breaks loose from gravity's frame yet still manages to conform or cling to it. Because history remains in the picture: these are the same boats that tore open the frontier from which freedom erupted, giving birth to a struggle for autonomy the work will subsequently comment on, and whose claims it will improvise for us.

Such is Celan's operation that it posits history as immediately as it remakes it. His tale stands in the same doubled relation to reality as the Majorcan storytellers, whose fairy tales start with the preamble "Això era y no era" (it was and it was not). From this vantage the storyteller inflects narrative toward the domain of the possible. No longer hampered by a purely indexical function, the attributes of events become the primary features of a speculative act of poetic construction that disclose a world. Verisimilitude or likeness is conceived less in terms of a correspondence between objects but rather as a specific quality of the way these objects are placed under discussion—namely, as imaginative speech acts which fabulize or compose their referent on the basis of furnishing knowledge about history as a space of experience made up of precarious utterances and acts.

A multidimensional compound, Celanian address erodes the barrier between historical and literary presentation, which is not, as White maintains, the same as saying it dissolves the line separating truth from lies, sincerity from fraudulence. As thus construed, the political tenor of "Frihed" does not render it untruthful. Rather, the document's standpoint is of a piece with its remediating procedure, which consists in an imaginative act that restores to the past a sense of possibility whereby the force of collective moral agency restores order and justice to a world that has been bent out of shape, damaged and destroyed, by unprecedented calamity. In light of the Shoah's tragedies, such a conclusion could seem more fantastical than realistic, but we would do well to recall that what is really at stake here is that poetry, in order to show and reflect on the meaning of history, must work with reality in order to work through it, that is, to take up the challenge of envisaging practical solutions beyond the horizon of the given.

Werner Best, photographed at the funeral of those killed in the Royal Air Force's attack on the German police headquarters at Shellhuset. March 21, 1945. Courtesy of the Museum of Danish Resistance, 1940 – 1945, Online Archive.

The demonstrative point about the subject position from which Celan's work speaks consists in the fact that he was not present at the scene he depicts.[76] By this Celan means to say that his work is other than, even the opposite of, the kind indexical or coherent conceptuality prevailing in most historical writing. Only in its otherness to that form of figuration does "Frihed" contribute something crucial to the representation of its object, and that is, exactly as Aristotle and White and other creative writers would assert it, the articulation of a dimension of human knowledge that is not reducible to a form of strict causality or correspondence but is rendered intelligible and articulable in the rhetorical mood of the subjunctive, namely as a speculative literary narrative whose claims express not what happened but, rather, what could or ought to happen.

The refrain "bin ich in dir," I am in you, posits a grammatical tense that can either be qualified symbolically as an expression of solidarity or subjunctively as a wish fulfillment. The authorial agency of the poem and the brand of transpersonal figuralism on which it stands is established on a state of affairs that could not have been but for lyric's claim of possibility. That must mean: in its mode of truth. Such an act has no precedent in the empirical context set by the poem itself. Its lesson, I suggest, has to do with how, in such a world, or in the wake of such a world, acts of projection and imagination are still possible, and how they respond to a particular demand: how to inhabit the world with freedom in its destruction. Above all this will boil down to a matter of how to comport oneself respectfully,

[76] Biographically speaking, Celan's poem is the product of his personal reckoning with historical monuments. The poet traveled to the two major sites where the Danish resistance is publicly commemorated. In 1964, before composing the poem, Celan visited the Frihedsmuseet (Freedom Museum) in Copenhagen. Later, on a visit to Jerusalem in 1969, he visited the Daneship monument on Kikar Denya (Denmark Square), which preceded, and likely influenced, the writing of the 1969 lyric "Es Stand." However, the present chapter does not aspire to a form of biographical or investigative criticism; the impact of private or personal events on Celan's work will not be assessed here for methodological reasons. For more on this topic, see Pierre Joris's commentary on these works in Paul Celan, *Breathturn Into Timestead*, 490 and 617.

with the form of solicitude that can be extended toward human beings who are subjected to suffering, unjustly and cruelly, and whose lives call upon your solidarity. But this is not a conclusion to be imitated, or a generalizable thesis to be argued for. It is a very particular response Celan found himself able to give to the disaster, as a poet and survivor of the Holocaust. And so the kind of justification we may expect from its most imaginative archivist.

The birth of Celan's mediator is articulated with the birth of a new sociality. His is a redemptive story related to us from the standpoint of a communal witness. Such that the event under description, now multiplied, appears as the fulfilment of a latent potentiality on which voice spontaneously seizes. "Frihed" is such a movement. It denotes that elusive yet palpable point toward which collective agency strives, and from which voice must draw if it is to work through problems of a social kind toward the historical achievement of nonalienating institutions and practices. What is real, and what elicits recognition, is this ensemble of bodies at work in a determinate space and time, in a shared cultural world, without which there can be no world, no space in which corporeal positions and empathetic projections themselves become intelligible, in unison. As if this unity were the felt outcome of coordinating and attuning subjects to freedom by arriving at a common task, overcoming conflict through the intersubjective work of the ensemble's participants, who vehiculate a new possible form of life.

I therefore want to assert that narratological subjunctivity rears its head as a writerly response to the epistemic gaps and erasures posed by modernist events. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, an exemplary present-day practitioner of this method, the capacities of the subjunctive avail themselves to those writers and artists who narrate the "lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved,"

and who, in their efforts to represent events that resist positive representation, partake in the desire for a "liberated future."[77] Such creative writers, dissatisfied with forms of pessimism and despair on offer, tend to opt for grammatical moods that express "doubts, wishes, and possibilities" and are speculatively keyed to ongoing and emergent forms of sociality based on non-instrumental means.[78] This is to say, then, that theirs is a search for subjective agencies capable of transforming objective social forces—within and beyond the far-reaching forms of terror that encapsulate their literary art.

Neither historiography, nor reportage, nor naturalistic fiction, nor fantasy, the task of subjunctive writing is to gesture toward "a future that has yet to be fully realized, but that is nonetheless," as Laura Harris maintains, "already given, already operative in the present."[79] What I want to call the literary texture of Celan's poetry incurs a resonance with this position: its metahistorical cast, its moral and ethical postulates, as well as its suspended forms of cognition. Whereas traditional romance narratives register an originary or foundational traumatism at the heart of Western culture—the determinative event of mankind's fall and the inhibition of worldly paradise—Celan poems choose to mediate the secular cataclysms of their present, restoring to history a pledge to freedom that suffuses and determines their composition.

Imaginative writers, operating within the bounds of the subjunctive sensibility, reaffirm the unity of the social ensemble without tempering their global mission.

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[77] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" in *Small Axe*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2008), 12. An earlier articulation of the subjunctive writing of history can be found in Todd Presner, "Subjunctive History: The Use of Counterfactuals in the Writing of the Disaster," *Storiographia: Rivista annuale di storia,* No. 4 (2000), 23 – 38.

[78] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 11.

[79] Laura Harris, "The Subjunctive Poetics of the Undocument: C.L.R James's American Civilization" in *Criticism*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2016), 219.

In Morrison and Celan, freedom and justice crystallize around human actions that assume a markedly political and moral tone: Trans-Atlantic slavery and the Holocaust, respectively, are the backdrop against which such notions discover their fulfilment. I have already noted that modernist events lay waste to the world. That they vitiate new beginnings. It is also worth asserting—in the same breath—that they snuff out hope and love, and with these, the future.

The task of a speculative poetics today consists in keeping these resources alive. Techniques that once flourished in the hands of Celan and Morrison have discovered a new life in the hands of writers, or pastologists, such as Saidiya Hartman, NourbeSe Philip, and Olga Tokarczuk, who, at the end of her recent metahistorical epic, *The Books of Jacob*, reminds us all, "firstly, that so many things remain quietly connected, and secondly, that history is the unceasing attempt to understand what it is that has happened alongside all that might have happened as well or instead."[80] Discovering what these links consist in, and elucidating the literary, historical, and moral uses to which we can put them, could very well be the chief venture of literary criticism and theory of history today. Meanwhile, while the jury is still out, the writings of Celan and Morrison continue to constitute an invaluable resource for contemporary thinking and strategizing, which continues to unfold amid so many old-new calamities and failures.

[80] Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2022), 5.

History

> Instead of a 'crumbling away' of the mother tongue, I would rather speak of its shrinking.
>
> —Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*

…From Philip

When, if at all, does a patchwork of silences coalesce into an historical signification? Under what conditions can an absence of testimony catalyze a search for redress? The task of NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* is to take possession of questions of this kind. Across its six sections, which Philip labels "movements" (the musical analogy is key), it becomes clear that her poetic account of disaster compels a ticklish undertaking: that of telling, as Jenny Sharpe writes, "a story for which the evidence works against its telling"—a narrative that will ride roughshod over juridical proof as such.[1] For such was the muted fate of those African souls murdered aboard the *Zong*, a Jamaica-bound ship that set sail from the Guinea coast with 470 slaves in 1781, that their lives as a social phenomenon were legally retracted, and thereby made impossible to retrieve in any living form.

Of these lives not a single residue remains. Save for a two-page gloss on *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the only public record from the Court of King's Bench hearing of what took place in open seas; and two vouchers filed under "Documents Related to the Case of the *Zong* of 1783" at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. Philip structures her book around the first of these: "the tombstone," she maintains, "the one public marker of the murder of those Africans on board the *Zong*" to set "it in time and

[1] Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 23.

space."[2] Therein the act of killing is formulated against a backdrop of suppressed legal reasoning, cast in the lifeless rhetoric of marine insurance law. Throughout, the toll of the drowned is accounted for in terms of loses in goods and property. Personhood rendered a conceit of the law, demoted to *dicta,* footnotes, in the annals, in which the lives in question are omitted.[3]

"There is no telling this story; it must be told." [4] So begins "Notanda," the coda to *Zong*! A negation, bisected by a semicolon, lurches into the imperative while completing the affirmative thrust that suspends as well as completes the paradox. Philip, a lawyer and poet by trade, vocations sharing an "inexorable concern with language," appraises the *Zong* case as thus:

> In 1781 a fully provisioned ship, the *Zong*, captained by one Luke Collingwood, leaves the West Coast of Africa with a cargo of 470 slaves and sets sail for Jamaica. As is the custom, the cargo is fully insured. Instead of the customary six to nine weeks, this fateful trip will take some four months on account of navigational errors on the part of the captain. Some of the *Zong's* cargo is lost through illness and lack of water; many others, by order of the captain are destroyed: 'Sixty negroes died for want of water … and forty others … through thirst and frenzy … threw themselves into the sea and were drowned; and the master and mariners … were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes.'[5]

The resultant impression is that of the positing and piecing together of the past, the adjudication of which has passed over into the uncontestable ownership of perpetrators—a *fait accompli* of History.

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[2] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! As Told to the Author By Setaey Adamu Boateng* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 194.

[3] Philip writes: "The basic tool in the study of law is case analysis. This process requires a careful sifting of the reported case to find the kernel of the legal principle at the heart of decision—the *ratio decidendi* or simply the *ratio*. Having isolated that, all other opinion becomes *obiter dicta*, informally referred to as *dicta*. Which is what the Africans on board the *Zong* become—*dicta*, footnotes, related to, but not, the *ratio*." See M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 199.

[4] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 189.

[5] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 189.

"All refutations," writes Agamben, "leave a residue in the form of an exclusion."[6] The event on which Philip's book is based records a negation of vast proportions. And if, as Agamben and others maintain, a result of modern atrocities such as mass murder is the effacement of evidence, what can be said of Philip's enterprise; of her recounting of transatlantic slavery by way of its absences, the contours of which have been likened to a sealed crypt consisting of "fragments of lives and pieces of time" that preclude historical consolation yet still necessitate some form, however circumscribed, of moral renewal?[7]

Zong! proceeds by cutting up phrases of *Gregson v. Gilbert*—Philip writes of her desire, by turns literal and allegorical, to decimate the artifact—only to organize them in new sequences that gradually overwhelm their documental source as they develop. This from the section "Os," Latin for bones:

the good of overboard
justified a throwing

of property
fellow

creatures
become

our portion
of
mortality

For that mortality, pitched into the sea, has vanished, to be replaced by further losses, with similar inhumanity and an equal claim to value. But we ignore this replacement in the name of capital—a deathly substitution:

provision

a bad market

negroes

want

[6] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 65.

[7] Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits" in *Refiguring the Archive,* ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Cape Town: Kluwer Academic, 2002) 19 – 22.

for dying[8]

Here Philip, with the past behind and before her, full of memory and aware of the present, proceeds to dismantle *Gregson v. Gilbert*, transforming its utterances into so many fragments. A kind of deterioration ensues whereby words crumble away like perishing moths, their dissemination across the page compelling the unmaking of their legal origin. The eye is drawn toward a line at the bottom of the page where proper nouns, presented in small print in serial fashion, are positioned in a manner that separates yet affixes them to the new text that has emerged—a reconstructive gathering of sources that touches on what goes missing in the historical record.

Names. One, two, three, four, five of them: Abioye, Gulai, Sekelaga, Dalili, N'Nanna. This gesture, "the closest Philip comes to a creative act of recovery," an act of defiance against the subordination of black lives to the law of profit, approximates the diversity of people passed over by history.[9] Seizing on the plenum of languages spoken in the African continent, from Yoruba to Arabic, Philip transplants a heritage posed on the basis of a common ancestry into a circumstance of controlled amnesia.[10] More than just a performative gesture, such transposal draws its contents from a reserve of cultural and linguistic rites that have, systematically and ruthlessly, become objects of conquest and plunder. Philip invents names for the drowned, thus appealing to breath that could have flourished had it not been foreclosed by premature death, damaged and silenced due to negligence.

[8] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong*, 16.

[9] Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 45.

[10] Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives,* 45.

Nowhere does *Zong's!* oppositional force become more explicit than through performance. Live recitation refigures the textual space: Philip has been known to intersperse the list of African names at the bottom of the page in her fragmented reading of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, moving freely between these registers to carve out an alternative order in the legal record. What has been cast away is drawn to the surface. "In this way," comments Sharpe, "the names introduce individual identities to the African voices being released from the blank spaces in the public record of the trial," where they're caught.[11] Silence is wrested from its juridical setting and dispersed into an aqueous "fugue."[12] Names appear like wayward lightning bolts in the place where they have been banished: whole cultures and standpoints are interlaced in a lyric that radiates music.

Zong! derives power from its belated position with respect to transatlantic slavery: coming after it, and surviving beyond it, the demand arises to figure it in its wake. Philip endeavors to tell a story that contains "multiple registers of silence."[13] What rears its head here is a motif that runs like a red thread through her oeuvre: that of the presentation of absence as part and parcel of the human dispossession. We will recall the way Philip rehabilitates the mythical scene of Philomela's fate in the title poem of her earlier book, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, which played an integral role in the narrative of first chapter of the present work. There I considered how Philip's poem works through Philomela's predicament, repositioning a tale from Ovid into a black feminist allegory of lived oppression.

[11] Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives,* 45.

[12] "The fugue," writes Philip, "was a frame through which I could understand *Zong!* […] *Zong!* is a counterpointed, fugal antinarrative in which several strands are simultaneously at work." Beyond this allusion to a musical form, the visual artist Stan Douglas's practice of recombinant narrative techniques is cited as a key influence on the book's conception. See M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong*, 204.

[13] The cited phrase is taken from Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 50.

Tereus' blind rage aims above all to prevent the dissemination of her testimony to others: Philomela's tongue is severed, the boundaries of her body are violated, her speech is retracted. Yet she still goes on to bear witness to the silence that has been brought on her. All this is in Ovid. But Philip's poem aims to add an unexpected twist to the well-known myth.

At the close of her work, as Philomela's testimony is carried over into "pure" song, Philip seizes on the moment to overlay her voice, her song, and her vocation as poet into the arc of this story: "Might I," she dares to ask, "like Philomela … sing / continue / over / into / … pure utterance." Philip is taking responsibility for her standpoint as a black female poet and thinker, self-consciously making a case for re-writing the myth of Philomela on the existential grounds of her own heritage. Which entails an awareness of one's history. And the demand to keep the past alive. In accord with lived culture.

Now a certain preoccupation with silence typifies Philip's approach in *Zong*! Yet the trope has undergone a sea-change. It delineates a void effected by torture that acquires a texture that cannot be inferred on the grounds of human survival. Whereas the endurance of Philomela's voice is the precondition of her testimony, those murdered aboard the *Zong* did not persist in life and could not bear witness. These lives will in effect require the voice of another to testify on their behalf. For no archive, no historiography, no poem can stabilize the aporia left behind by their voiceless condition.

Figure 1: Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*. 1840. Wikimedia.

That *Gregson v. Gilbert* stands for the balance sheet of slavery's immorality is incontestable. That it enacts the point at which human lives become disposable is unquestioned. Marc Nichanian asks: "What remains of testimony when it has been destroyed as such?"[14] His response: "What remains is the death of the witness."[15] It is the "act of the genocidal will" and the "practice of torture" that performs the killing.[16] To become the victim of the fulfillment of this procedure is to be voided from being. It is to be denied recourse to a present without which life cannot be determined as possible. Contrast this with Philomela's fate, which is figurable on the basis of her perdurance, which is fixed in a breathing body, and will live on in and through memorable deeds.

So insistently does the *Zong* case appear to neutralize positive presentation that efforts to say anything about it demand a reckoning with the limits of representation.

[14] Marc Nichanian, "The Death of the Witness; or, The Persistence of the Differend," in Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture, ed. Fogu, Kansteiner, Presner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 154.

[15] Marc Nichanian, "The Death of the Witness," 154.

[16] Marc Nichanian, "The Death of the Witness," 154.

Philip herself is profoundly aware of this. In "Notanda" she speaks of the need to tell a story that contests order and rationality:

> The not-telling of this particular story is in the fragmentation and mutilation of the text, forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray. I teeter between accepting the irrationality of the event and the fundamental human impulse to make meaning of the phenomena around us. The resulting abbreviated, disjunctive, almost non-sensical style of the poems demands a corresponding effort on the part of the read to make sense of an event that eludes understanding.[17]

This is the sense in which we can interpret Philip's desire to go to war with *Gregson v. Gilbert*. To smash it, pummel it, unmake it. *Ungeschehenmachen*: the making unhappened of history's archives.[18] After this? A vigil:

> Re-reading *Specters of Marx* by Derrida has clarified some of my own thoughts and confirmed me in my earlier feelings that *Zong!* is a wake. It *is* a work that employs memory in the service of mourning—an act that could not be done before […] This imperative for identification, this necessity to lay the bones to rest echo the remarks of the young forensic scientist.[19]

Read to re-read. Unmake to make a wake. Philip seeks acts that "could not be done before" to correct a history "gone astray." In this Hamlet is an obvious precursor.[20] Yet the appeal for "identification" is hers.

…To Celan

While Philip likens *Zong!* to a fugue, affirming a musical analogy I will parse later, this is the place at which to comment on a citation woven into her polyphony. I am drawn in particular to a fragment by Celan that Philip reproduces at the outset

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[17] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 198.

[18] *Ungeschehenmachen* is a term used by Freud in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, and the phrase "making unhappened" is a literal rendering of the term proposed by Strachey in his translation of the text. Lacan, in turn, uses the term in his seminar on anxiety to characterize a way of discovering signs *beneath* the signifiers of history. See Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, trans. A.R Price (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017,) 62.

[19] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 202.

[20] Derrida's *Specters of Marx* flows from Shakespeare, particularly Hamlet's utterance: "The time is out of joint." See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

of "Ratio," the fourth section of her book. Here, set against the backdrop of the blank page, italicized to reinforce meaning, rests the epigrammatic refrain: *No one bears witness for the witness*. This inscription reflects and encapsulates a theme about which I will speak in the forthcoming pages: the testimonial function of lyric's bearing witness to modern disaster. This is a topic I will try to touch on through the optic of Philip and Celan's poetry. What ensues is an effort to underscore some elective affinities that obtain between the artists in this specific thematic and figural register—correspondences that converge on the figure of the poet as *terstis superstes*, the surviving subject or "third" who aims to testify as "heir, guardian, guarantee" to "what was and is now gone."[21]

But most significant at this stage of our traversal is to account for Philip's citation, the upshot of which is to furnish a thread that draws together disparate sources. Celan's words express themselves within and through the folds of another material—within and through the skins of a new text. Philip conjures Celan by wrenching his pronouncement from its textual context: Benjamin, we will recall, used the term *herausrissen* to describe the mode of production proper to quotation. Philip's translation is made possible by a translation from German to English. There is, therefore, a movement of amplification, a desire for figural expansion, that endows the original with new meaning yet also takes on a life of its own. And not merely in a tropological sense but in a thoroughly historical manner. It is as if two bodies of work, and the histories that subtend them, are made to touch

[21] Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, trans. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 73-74.

without crystallizing into a causal linkage—an affiliative interleafing of sources that hints at a kinship, without affirming one.[22]

Fragmentation, superposition, translation. Just as these terms furnish a ground for discussions of Philip's attempt to recount a story recalcitrant to the act of telling, so, too, does Celan's commitment to such figural techniques come to the fore in "Aschenglorie," their deployment occasioning an effort to transcend impossible testimony by way of poetic witnessing:

Aschenglorie hinter	Ashglory behind
Deinen erschüttert-verknoteten	your shaken-knotted
Händen am Dreiweg.	hands at the threeway.

So whose ash? Whose glory? Behind whose hands? Your hands, deine Hände, which, perhaps, grope for mine. A handshake? Celan, in a letter to Hans Bender: Nur wahre Hände schreiben wahre Gedichte. Ich sehe keinen prinzipiellen Unterschied zwischen Händedruck und Gedicht. I see no principal difference between a handshake and a poem—a dictum from which Claudia Rankine, a reader of Celan, derives an equivalence, namely that poems and handshakes model "our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another." And so we chant: Hineini! Here I am! But here our hands, our handshake, and our poem are intersected by a third way that binds and unbinds us, denoting a path that cannot be traversed by two, by dialogue as such.[23]

Pontischen Einstmals: hier,	Pontic erstwhile: here,
ein Tropfen,	a drop,
auf	on
dem ertrunkenen Ruderblatt,	the drowned rudder blade,
tief	deep
im versteinerten Schwur,	in the petrified oath,
rauscht es auf.	it roars up.
(Auf dem senkrechten	(On the vertical
Atemseil, damals,	breathrope, in those days,
höher als oben,	higher than above,

[22] By "affiliative," I mean to designate what the critic Edward Said takes to constitute the social and cultural relationships that writers consciously forge, or invent, as opposed to those organized by local filiation or inherited location. Edward Said, *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 19 – 20.

[23] Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, (Saint Paul: Greywolf Press, 2004), 130.

zwischen zwei Schmerzknoten, während	between two painknots, while
der blanke	the glossy
Tatarenmond zu uns heraufklomm,	Tartarmoon climbed up to us,
Grub ich mind in dich und in dich.)	I dug myself into you and into you.

From Mangalia on the Black Sea (Pontus Euxinus), where Ovid composed his Pontic epistles, and where Osip Mandelstam frequently sojourned, a poem returns. Celan, in a letter to his friend Petre Solomon, with whom he spent a summer at a hotel on the Pontus: C'est quelquechose comme l'anamnèse de Mangalia. Or it (the poem) is something like the anamnesis of Mangalia. 1947. The poem's date? '64. And the epistle to Petre? '67. Damals, In those days. Words stoked like ashes when loss is rendered the only source to come. Yet something still roars up, aufrauschen, from memory's crypt: a drowned rudder blade. Wiedemann posits its linkage to Lia Fingerhut. Death by drowning. For Lefebvre, the figure is connected to the death of Corinna Marcovici. Derrida appends to this list the name of Maria Tsvetaeva. Death by hanging.[24]

Aschen-	Ash-
glorie hinter	glory behind
euch Dreiweg-	you threeway
Händen.	hands.
Das vor euch, vom Osten her, Hin-	The cast-in-front-of-you, from
gewürfelte, furchtbar.	the East, terrible.
Niemand	No one
zeugt für den	bears witness for the
Zeugen	Witness.[25]

The poem's mode of production approximates the etymology of witnessing. In German, *Der Zeuge*, the witness, and *zeugen*, the verb 'to witness,' partake of a semantic chain that connotes at once begetting, procreation, and proliferation. "Aschenglorie" doubles phrases across stanzas: "Aschenglorie hinter" opens up the

[24] All this is elaborated in Pierre Joris's commentary on "Aschenglorie," in Paul Celan, *Breathturn Into Timestead*, commentary by Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2014), 489.

[25] Paul Celan, *Breathturn Into Timestead*, 64.

first stanza and reappears in the penultimate, with difference: in the latter the compound noun is bisected by a dash, rendered as if anew, its mood altered. So, too, are pronouns displaced in the swerve from *dein* to *euch*, singular to plural possessive, an addition from two to three—dyad to triad—that multiplies the recipients begotten by the poem's mode of address.

1855 Spruneri Map of the Black Sea or Pontus Euxinus in Ancient Times. Wikimedia.

Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen: A last gasp of testimony amid the death of the witness? Or an invitation—belated but epigrammatically solid—to new forms of witnessing? Or perhaps the line's syntactic ambiguity, its well-nigh Mallarméan suspension of the question of who is pursuing whom, points us in a different, and less binary, direction altogether? For Derrida, the refrain should not only "lead us to think of this fearful thing: the *possibility* of annihilation, the *virtual* disappearance

of the witness," or what we have been calling the death of the witness, "but also of the capacity to bear witness."[26]

Holo-caust, a burnt offering. The poem, then, as testamentary oblation that begets ashes. For Derrida, ash is the name and wager of "what annihilates or threatens to destroy even the possibility of bearing witness to annihilation," the cause of that fevered forgetting which roots out all "remainder" or "decipherable archive."[27] An acknowledgment of destruction by flames, and recognition of the need for a third or a witness that can account for yet contravene the zero-sum logic of holocaustal annihilation—in "Aschenglorie" such determinations are disclosed by an act of poetic witnessing that responsibly seals and ties the outer edges of speech to a witnessing that is scorched.

Hence the oath and the knot: What are these if not figures attesting to lyric's desire to reach across its ashen conjuncture, near death and not close enough to life, to that place where it can ask another, that plural other, to take up its appeal and begin to breathe for its cause? To risk the erasure of a recounting in and through the telling of what resists representation. In practice, this means hearing the demand to bear witness behind the reality of annihilation, the poem behind effacement, particularly when the death of the witness controls discussions of what seems most central to holocaustic experience.

I therefore claim that Philip and Celan announce their vocation as poets precisely where the appeal to recount that which has disappeared through annihilation is undergone as imperative. To belatedly undercut comprehension of the middle passage and Nazi holocaust, respectively, as historical events without a witness;

[26] Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," 68.

[27] Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," 68.

to posit a space in which the wagering between possible and impossible testimony, between present and absent witnesses, may proceed without clear metaphysical resolution—these, I assert, are the central wagers of their poetic work, the burden and trace they retain of the disaster.[28]

*

I continue to be caught by the itinerary of a poetics that expounds a mode of witnessing that materializes as the ability to bear witness confronts the possibility of wholesale erasure. More than a rebuke to legal positivism, the notion of a self-eroding witness seems to signal something fundamental, if still swelling, in the dispensation of a certain style or tendency in contemporary poetics that grasps the figure in question as internal to its creative procedure. Consult, for example, this passage from Nathaniel Mackey, who is reflecting on his book of poems, *Eroding Witness*, written in 1985:

> If somebody were to say to you that poetry is an act of witnessing, that would conjure some pretty definite images, pretty reassuring and familiar images of what the function of poetry is. But for somebody to say that the function of poetry is to simultaneously witness and erode its witness, to witness and erode its witnessing…announces a different vocation for poetry, a trajectory that differs from that more common understanding.[29]

Though there have of late been a few attempts to rehabilitate this sentiment, most notable among these for our purposes is Rachel Zolf's *No One's Witness*. Therein Mackey's judgment is not just cited but reanimated by way of Celan. What distinguishes Zolf's enterprise is its drawing together of perspectives—mainly from black studies, continental philosophy, queer theory, and psychoanalysis—around

[28] The notion of the Nazi holocaust as an "event without witnesses" was set forth by Dori Laub as early as 1992. To be sure, Laub's belief that the collapse of witnessing took place during a time when "history took place without witnesses," appears unlikely, if not epistemically incomprehensible, given the sheer variety of testimonial accounts that aimed precisely to bear witness from within the event itself. See Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80 – 82.

[29] Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritcal Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 309.

a reading of "Aschenglorie" which reintroduces Celan's witnessing to a present-day readership.

Where Mackey speaks of eroding witnesses, Zolf elaborates a "monstrous poetics," a mode of writing that enacts the position from which Celan's *Niemand* speaks; that strange, possibly "gender-neutral third (or more) grammatical person" neither caught up in the "specularity of the I-you binary" nor in other "normative ways of thinking life, the subject, witnessing," even "form itself." Here normativity entails aspects of the sovereign individual, "self-possessed agency and subjectivity," which reinforce certain bygone categories: "the shopworn white-western-imperialist scope of man."

"No One is a slippery concept," holds Zolf, one that, "particularly in the context of Celan's work, could encompass God and the poet and the reader and the poem—though [Fred] Moten might argue that those No Ones can be black things too."[30] Who or what is thereby implied? Part ethical bearing, part social praxis, No One is speech which resists conceptual capture in its appearing "through dis/appearance," offering a "future anterior push at the now."[31] But it is also "more and less than that." "No One is an unhomed site to think about no-things that refuse received notions of subjectivity, oneness, twoness, and thingliness."[32] So conceptually, what seems to be at stake is an attempt to tender a construct capacious enough to englobe the forms of subjugation—ethno-racial, legal, political, epistemological—borne by No Ones across space and time.

[30] Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness*, 5.

[31] Hence a recapitulation of the Derridean, or more properly, Benjaminian "theological-political limit concept." See Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness,* 5.

[32] Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness*, 5.

A polyphonic choir of subaltern motifs, the introduction to *No One's Witness* gathers materials and citations into an assemblage that converges on a topic: the presentation of No Ones in literary, theoretical, and historical documents. For Zolf, Celan's *Niemand* evokes the laconic refusal of Melville's Bartleby, whose openness to failure and loss of self "enacts what it refuses (a waiting that is a writing)," while recalling Kafka's Ordadek, a remanent without a "fixed abode."[33] No Ones impel a reckoning with the dead of Auschwitz, the Muselmänner, while calling on us to face up to the "the ontology of chattel slavery's violence," bearing out Sylvia Winter's call for "a new genre of the human" as well as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's call for an "underground sociality" of interracial means.[34] Such that what Blanchot writes of Bartleby applies to the disposition of No Ones: they "have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go."[35]

But can the plodding steps of the dispossessed be set into a liberating dance? Can the homogeneity generated by destruction give birth to something numerous? The challenge consists in transforming this no-man's-land into a conceptual apparatus that speaks not only in the place of the drowned but in the name of freedom and futurity, tuning our ears to Celan's refrains.

Niemand / Zeugt für den / Zeugen: lines that pivot on their contradictory coherence. Contradictory, because nothing in them coheres, rhetorically and conceptually. And coherent, because everything in them cries out to be committed to memory. There is of course the matter of the *für*: What kind of work does it perform?

[33] Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness, 2.* Also, we will of course recall Ordadek's famous reply to the question, "Und wo wohnst du? Unbestimmer Wohnsitz." See Franz Kafka, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" in *Ein Landartz: Kleine Erzählungen* (Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1919), 95 – 102.

[34] Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness*, 3.

[35] Cited in Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness,* 3.

Derrida outlines three distinct possibilities. Perhaps, he claims, it refers to bearing witness on another's behalf, as when one is asked to bear witness for the defense in a legal proceeding. Or, refuting this, it could denote a form of proxy-witnessing whereby bearing witness for another implies testifying not on their behalf but rather in their place or in their absence. The final option, jettisoning the first two, posits a mode of testimony that takes place in front of a witness, before them, so that the one for whom I testify is present at hand, within reach, both visually and aurally, as it were.[36]

As in Schoenberg's dodecaphonic works, in which equal weight is exerted on the various possibilities of every tonal event, a dissensus emerges from within the poem's final three lines for which there is no common interpretive denominator. Bracketing off the vast issue of translation, which alone may become an object of investigation, we must parse these lines in full awareness of their discrete parts. But do they ultimately relay to us a stern command or a recalcitrant paradox? Can we read them as a definite statement; a demand consecrated to status, as in a constitution, a legal decree, a sovereignty? Or do they somehow defy declaration by displaying a closer kinship to the riddle, the verbal-puzzle, the sly *détournement*? Meanwhile, as our readings become increasingly fine-grained, their corollaries necessitating taxonomies as elaborate as those fashioned by particle physicians, more determinations appear.

Zolf observes that the function of "Aschenglorie" is to enact for us "the limits not only of poetic interpretation but of witnessing itself."[37] Maybe so. But to stop here would be to get caught up in the mirror-play of witnessing's endless

[36] Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," 88 – 89.

[37] See Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness*, 2.

doublings, condemned to indeterminacy, as if the act itself was not expressive of a yearning for a tertiary witness.

Fortsetzen: to go on despite uncertainties. To dig a path where none is at hand. Zolf's advance is conceptual and rhetorical. It entails a movement that inflects the emphasis of poem's final stanza in a specific direction, laying bare the nature of Zolf's own aesthetic and political commitments as a strict choice—a wager from which Derrida abstains. "What precisely happens," Zolf inquires, "when No One *does* bear witness for the witness?"[38] To accept this proposal is not only to endorse the conjectural itinerary of its rhetorical thrust. It is to begin to hear Celan anew, as if his words were played to us in a new key, their expressive features organized in a way that amplifies their speculative thrust. Thus the command "No one bears witness for the witness!" gives way to this: No One can and will bear witness for the witness—if we are ready to listen.

I hear this dictum as the fulfillment of what remains unresolved in Celan's lyric. Such a vision remains bound up with forms of witnessing that facilitate an expressiveness that braids silence ("There is no telling this story") and solidarity ("it must be told") into an eroded utterance that calls upon me to breathe für you. Because it is not a matter of course, but an ontological fact, that by breathing we find out with whom we are in community.

It would then seem clear that the subject-position of No One consists in the displacement of a poetic figure into a set of discrete yet overlapping contexts. So as the motif, viewed through the optic of Mackey's eroding witness, rapidly assembles its trajectory of reference points, we traverse literary and historical themes until we reach the summits of high theory: allusions to Bartleby and Odradek open

[38] Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness*, 2.

rapidly onto the concentrationary milieux of Auschwitz and New World slavery, migrating from there to the provinces of Black Studies and French post-structuralism, whose concept of theory, it should be stated, is prefigured in the procedures of modernists, such as Benjamin and Brecht.[39]

A congeries, then, of loose odds and ends, replete with several access points, all held together by a resolute reading of the closing lines of "Aschenglorie." Zolf's composite is such that it allows us to speak of multiple No Ones at once: the minoritarian No One (Deleuze), the aporetic No One (Derrida), the messianic No One (Benjamin), the No One of black feminist raw materialism (Ferreira da Silva), the No One of Afro-Pessimism (Wilderson), the No One of Black Optimism (Moten). And why not? For if, as Zolf maintains, the death of the author signals the birth of the reader as an artifact's "coproducer," this situation also invites us to forge new possibilities in realm of Celan scholarship.[40]

Yet all this cannot be bought at the cost of a reification of theory over history. It is precisely the decentered structure of No One that lets us wheel the aesthetic category around in multiple directions, repurposing themes and rhetorical emphases in an abstract frame into which narrative content can be shuffled and arranged. The theme is thus available on condition that its levels are not yet differentiated, a critical fusion or *Verschmelzung* that dialectically requires *Trennung*, separation. What is needed is not an elaborate taxonomy of No Ones but a situational mapping of the position as such. This will require us to reach behind the concept to grasp

[39] The work of Mark Christian Thompson has shown us in exemplary fashion the extent to which Black thought emerges from within, and reorders, the legacies of German philosophy and critical theory. See his crucial book, *Phenomenal Blackness: Black Power, Philosophy, and Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022). I would argue that this inheritance is also visible in the work of Fred Moten, in which Brecht and Benjamin play, I believe, a crucial role. See, by way of example, "Liner Notes for *Lick Piece*" in *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[40] What I am referring to as the homogeneity of Celan scholarship is a corollary of the field's historical reliance on modes of criticism that can safely be described as Euro-centric. See Rachel Zolf, *No One's Witness*, 4 – 5.

its historical content and variations of feeling—a grasping of materials that keeps each item at a slight distance from others.[41]

So our traversal is still to be completed. For insofar as eroded witnessing does dissolve the elements of testimonial speech, capsizing the parameters of the said and the unsaid, it creates new ways of hearing: at once both splintered and unbroken, proximal and distant; keyed to silences and mutterings, drawn to the stammer; to pauses and breaths. And yet concepts do not bring about such a modification. Instead, the actual facts of "embodied storytelling" guarantee this quantum leap. Here is Fredric Jameson on Bertolt Brecht:

> Long before the official terminologies of the so-called semiotics of narrative (or narratology), it was no doubt dimly or unconsciously understood that writers tend to organize the events they represent according to their own deeper schemas of what Action and Event seem to them to be; or that they project their own 'subjective' fantasies of interaction onto the screen of the Real, even when such projections are taken in tow by a whole cultural and collective episteme, and shown to be social and thereby 'objective' beyond and even through their very subjectivity.[42]

To narrate is to organize, by dint of performing, the social content of our words. Here, I believe, we hit on yet another connection that binds Celan to Philip: their voices imply the survival of "collective epistemes" in their dispersal. Such differences are themselves historical: they rest on how artists mediate the past "according to their own deeper schemas."

Back Again: To Philip (Heavy Mass)

[41] Such a situational map would have to bear some fundamental resemblance to the notion of a "cognitive map," the point of which is to enable the "situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole." See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 51.

[42] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso Press, 1998), 35.

"Listening," observes the novelist Javier Marías, "is the most dangerous thing of all." It means "knowing, finding out about something and knowing what's going on." Because "our ears don't have lids that can instinctively close against the words uttered, they can't hide from what they sense they're about to hear." To listen, therefore, is to acknowledge that my effort to block out, obstruct, or conceal the voice that addresses me is "always too late." I hear as one who has already been addressed. Voice has already impressed itself on me.[43]

I owe my first encounter with the poetry of NourbeSe Philip to Gil Hochberg, who, in November 2016, days after Donald Trump clinched the White House, invited students enrolled in her UCLA graduate seminar on the archive as a site of knowledge production to attend a recitation of *Zong!* by Philip in Royce Hall. To be present at this event was to partake in a special kind of musical offering, at once gestural and lyrical, passionate but controlled, in which the underpinnings of the poet's art were conveyed through the expressive media of voice and song. Philip's forensic sounding of *Gregson v. Gilbert* left us with the impression of having borne witness to a display of virtuosity.

And demanded our attentiveness. With the deep historicity and literariness of *Zong!*, there is connected another quality that was brought out through its performance: *inventio*, the musical and rhetorical practice of developing voices contrapuntally, so that these get systematically felt out and sounded in many directions at once.[44] *Zong!*, maintains Philip, "is a sustained repetition or reiteration of various themes, phrases and voices, albeit fragmented," modeled in its form on the fugue,

[43] "Escuchar es lo más peligroso, es saber, es estar enterado y estar al tanto, los oídos carecen de párpados que puedan cerrarse instintivamente a lo pronunciado, no pueden guardarse de lo que se presiente que va a escucharse, siempre es demasiado tarde." Javier Marías, Corazón Tan Blanco (Barcelona: Penguin Random House, 1992) 88.

[44] Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 127 – 130.

that elastic Baroque musical form in which motifs get "stated then reiterated in second, third, and subsequent voices."[45]

Repetition and reiteration, but fragmented: such descriptors shed light on the structural principles of *Zong*, keying us to how it should be recited and received. Because speech, too, can itself be fugued:

> Clusters of words sometimes have meaning, often do not—words are broken into and open to make non-sense or no sense at all, which, in turn, becomes a code for another submerged meaning. Words break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound—grunts, plosives, labials—is this, perhaps, how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?[46]

The question belies an answer. What is clear, though, is that such elementary sound, flush with historical allegories, was the basis on which Philip organized her reading, the raw material that turned her written text into another kind of verbal object. Like the first, this new object was made of words, but its discourse had shifted. The breaking apart of words into sounds, performed now as song, generated a new dramatic situation, a novel sequence of gestures, which proceeded fitfully, held together by pauses, when *Zong!* came alive.

This is how Philip's performance began: A voice like a blank duration inserted itself into a present that was yet to be articulated—a discomposed speech composed of layers, wielding a tone that directed itself toward the depths of the room where we were assembled. There was the sudden sprout of a whispering: the zygote of a half-song, rudiment of a melody; labial and struck with background; the root of a name, part silhouette, part sunburst. A tuneful, unannounced blooming mutely developing like a budding rhizome.

[45] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 204.

[46] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 205.

This set the tone for what was to come. From a far end of the room, across from the stage, Philip now appeared among us. Our backs were turned to her when she appeared. Such a ghostly ingress, it seemed to me, was crafted to catch us off guard in the university's warm, affluent setting. Which was until now saturated with chatter but had all of a sudden grown silent.

An invitation, perhaps. And a question mark. Philip was clad in white if I recall correctly. She moved about the room barefoot, her gait marked out in slow paces. Footsteps. Mingling with the sound of her voice. And imparting a sense of confusion, all sounds amplifying that muffled speechlessness evoked by the power of calamity. Perhaps this is why Philip took her time as she made her way across the room, emerging from its depths into the foreground: to let something buried materialize as silence. Not a scream but a submerged song.

Now, without any preamble or warning, Philip broke off to scrutinize us all. She stared at us individually and collectively. And what did her open gaze transmit? Neither guilt nor implication. But obligation. A sense of enjoinment that lent shape and contour to ethical considerations defying recourse to any readymade solutions. It was Brecht, that doyen of a gestural poetics, whose method affirmed a close linkage between ethics and theatre. For him, the idea of an epic theatre delineated a space in which embodied forms of consciousness become fleshed out, no gesture too minor for (self-)criticism, through the participation of actors and spectators. Here, claims Jameson, demands are made for "a reduction of action and gesture alike to the very minimum of decision as such," "within a situation itself reduced to the most minimal machine for choosing."[47]

[47] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 77.

So it was with Philip's stare. A gaze boiled down to a minimal choice: Yes or No. You can stay with us or leave. Either way, your choice will not be met with shame. Because there is work to do. Because we must do this together here and now. I cannot coerce you to hear me. So if you leave the room, you will simply not partake. Though listening cannot be reversed it is never too late to abstain from the act. What happens on the stage occurs only once, disclosed through its contradictions. Each stroke of silence—a Yes or a No.

Philip continued on thereafter at her stride, fastening with care on loose bits of song, inverting the hierarchies of the shared space: bystanders becoming actors, foreground passing to background, history sliding into poetry, minor figures into major. Poethical embellishment reconfigured as breath as well as embodied gesticulation. So reads "African Majesty," an early lyric:

Hot breath
death-charred
winds
depth-charged
words:
rainfall
magic
power
the adorn of word
in meaning,
the mourn in loss
safe safety save
mute
muse
museums
of man—
Berlin, London, Paris, New York
Revenge seeks the word
in a culture mined
to abstraction[48]

[48] Philip, "African Majesty: From Grassland and Forest" in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 22 – 23.

Or we could rewind our narrative reel and quote anew from "She Tries…", the work cited in the first chapter of this work:

That body might become tongue
Tempered to speech
And where the latter falters
Paper with its words
The crack of silence;
That skin become
Slur slide susurration
Polyphony and rhythm—the drum[49]

All that is present in these lines as graphic dramatization (*illustratio*) acquired a monstrous degree of sensory and visual immediacy when Philip read aloud from sections of *Zong!* Skin thence became "slur slide susurration," the percussional "crack of silence" in words, as history flashed forth in episodic thunderclaps, its temporalities arranged in a dramaturgical procedure that was thoroughly lyrical, conveyed through staccato apostrophe:

w w w w a wa
w a w a t
er wa s
our wa
te r gg g g go
o oo goo d[50]

It will therefore be observed how the bare-bones minimalism of earlier poems, a modernism tending toward silence, is turned loose into the depths of the ocean. Voice dispersed into its abyssal source.

"It is stated in the declaration," reads *Gregson v. Gilbert*, "that the ship was retarded by perils of the seas, and contrary winds and currents, and other misfortunes, &c. whereby the negroes died for want of sustenance."[51] Such rhetoric can speak

[49] Philip, "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks" in *She Tries Her Tongue*, 72.

[50] Philip, *Zong!*, 3.

[51] Philip, *Zong!*, 211.

for itself: strong participial constructions, clarifying connectives, comparative hypotaxes—a legal deflatus in which not a single shadow or breath lurks. Where everything is swept aside by wave after wave of subordinating clause, every piece of information received and ordered with regard to its significance for the state. This form of realism was consummated by Livy, Caesar, Tacitus and other agents of empire, for whom administrative genius was thought to constitute a noble task demanding the great tools of style and syntactical construction.[52] Erich Auerbach detects in the literary and legal prose of the Roman golden age a tendency to "simply report" historical "matters of fact" by way of an "excessively organizing language, in which the material and sensory side of the facts is rather viewed and ordered from above." As a result, events are relayed "in general terms." Such that "the stuff of reality," though malleably articulated, is indirectly and even euphemistically truncated, rationality subordinated to political interest, giving writers "freedom to suppress certain facts and to suggest doubtful details without assuming explicit responsibility."[53]

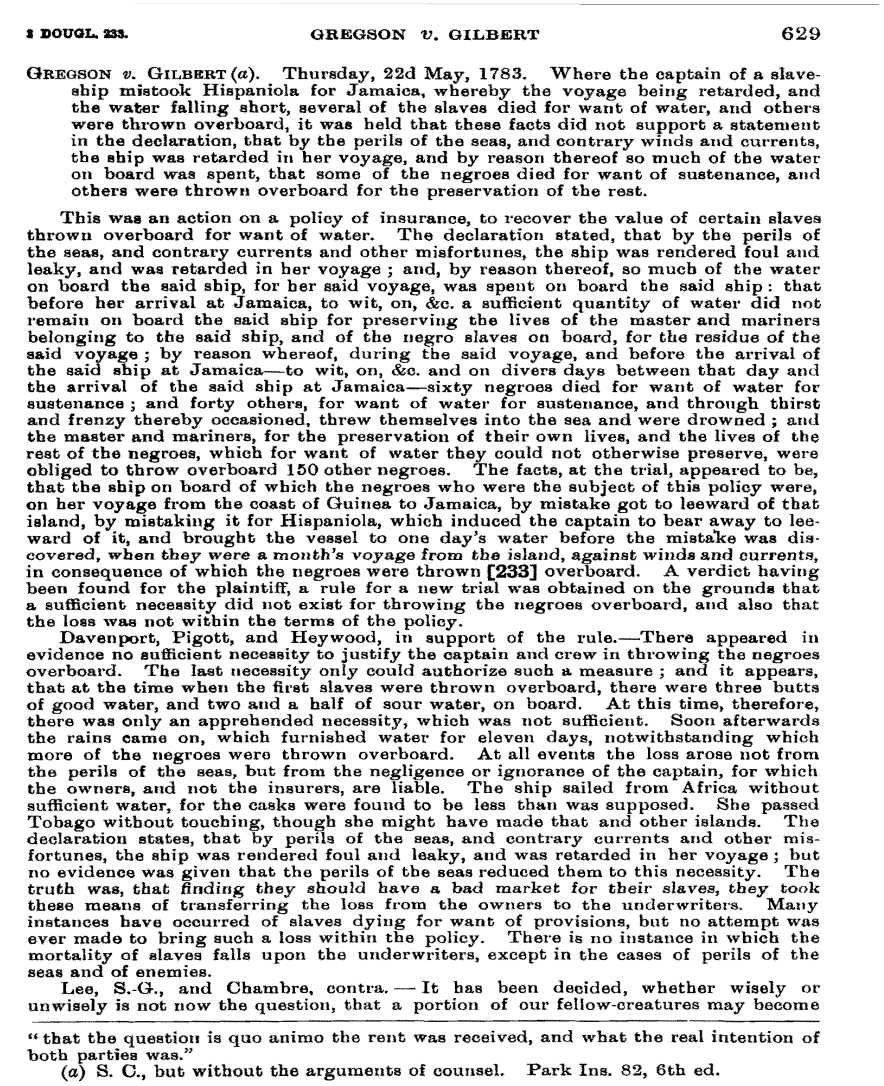
It was this aerial, hypotactic view of things that Philip's performance foreclosed. One could identify in it the presence of an effort to invert such a perspective. To cut through the decadence of legal grammar to release something confined in it. And to wrest from the former a new flow, an alternative sequence of historical events, which was reconstructed on the basis of poetic rather than juridical forms of truth. This brought us to recognize the conflict in which these two positions are engaged, in matters of rhetoric as well as in truth.

[52] On the development of a hypotactic style in the West, consult the opening four chapters of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Task (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3 – 95.

[53] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 89.

Zong! is a work that organizes voices from below as they call to us from depths, shadowing the same eclipse it mourns:

Waa wa wa
w w waa
ter o oh
on o ne w one
w o n d d d
ey d a
dey a ah ay
s one day s
wa wa[54]



3 DOUGL. 233. GREGSON *v.* GILBERT 629

GREGSON *v.* GILBERT (*a*). Thursday, 22d May, 1783. Where the captain of a slave-ship mistook Hispaniola for Jamaica, whereby the voyage being retarded, and the water falling short, several of the slaves died for want of water, and others were thrown overboard, it was held that these facts did not support a statement in the declaration, that by the perils of the seas, and contrary winds and currents, the ship was retarded in her voyage, and by reason thereof so much of the water on board was spent, that some of the negroes died for want of sustenance, and others were thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest.

This was an action on a policy of insurance, to recover the value of certain slaves thrown overboard for want of water. The declaration stated, that by the perils of the seas, and contrary currents and other misfortunes, the ship was rendered foul and leaky, and was retarded in her voyage; and, by reason thereof, so much of the water on board the said ship, for her said voyage, was spent on board the said ship: that before her arrival at Jamaica, to wit, on, &c. a sufficient quantity of water did not remain on board the said ship for preserving the lives of the master and mariners belonging to the said ship, and of the negro slaves on board, for the residue of the said voyage; by reason whereof, during the said voyage, and before the arrival of the said ship at Jamaica—to wit, on, &c. and on divers days between that day and the arrival of the said ship at Jamaica—sixty negroes died for want of water for sustenance; and forty others, for want of water for sustenance, and through thirst and frenzy thereby occasioned, threw themselves into the sea and were drowned; and the master and mariners, for the preservation of their own lives, and the lives of the rest of the negroes, which for want of water they could not otherwise preserve, were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes. The facts, at the trial, appeared to be, that the ship on board of which the negroes who were the subject of this policy were, on her voyage from the coast of Guinea to Jamaica, by mistake got to leeward of that island, by mistaking it for Hispaniola, which induced the captain to bear away to leeward of it, and brought the vessel to one day's water before the mistake was discovered, *when they were a month's voyage from the island, against winds and currents*, in consequence of which the negroes were thrown **[233]** overboard. A verdict having been found for the plaintiff, a rule for a new trial was obtained on the grounds that a sufficient necessity did not exist for throwing the negroes overboard, and also that the loss was not within the terms of the policy.

Davenport, Pigott, and Heywood, in support of the rule.—There appeared in evidence no sufficient necessity to justify the captain and crew in throwing the negroes overboard. The last necessity only could authorize such a measure; and it appears, that at the time when the first slaves were thrown overboard, there were three butts of good water, and two and a half of sour water, on board. At this time, therefore, there was only an apprehended necessity, which was not sufficient. Soon afterwards the rains came on, which furnished water for eleven days, notwithstanding which more of the negroes were thrown overboard. At all events the loss arose not from the perils of the seas, but from the negligence or ignorance of the captain, for which the owners, and not the insurers, are liable. The ship sailed from Africa without sufficient water, for the casks were found to be less than was supposed. She passed Tobago without touching, though she might have made that and other islands. The declaration states, that by perils of the seas, and contrary currents and other misfortunes, the ship was rendered foul and leaky, and was retarded in her voyage; but no evidence was given that the perils of the seas reduced them to this necessity. The truth was, that *finding they should have a bad market for their slaves, they took* these means of transferring the loss from the owners to the underwriters. Many instances have occurred of slaves dying for want of provisions, but no attempt was ever made to bring such a loss within the policy. There is no instance in which the mortality of slaves falls upon the underwriters, except in the cases of perils of the seas and of enemies.

Lee, S.-G., and Chambre, contra. — It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become

"that the question is quo animo the rent was received, and what the real intention of both parties was."

(*a*) S. C., but without the arguments of counsel. Park Ins. 82, 6th ed.

[54] See Philip, *Zong!*, 3.

Figure 3: Transcript of Gregson v. Gilbert, reprinted in *English Reports*, Page One.

"Writing," states Freud, "was in its origin the voice of an absent person." "Order," the compulsion to repeat, "decides when, where, and how" a specific thing ought to be done.[55] For Philip writing implies ciphering voices that are without utterable archival origin. And which are without a dwelling house where they can retire when tides churn. Hence what remains are the traces of broken grammar "absolved of authorial intention."[56] Voice of "grunt and groan, moan and stutter." Tongue "fragmented and broken by history."[57]

The unfulfilled, the depth-charged, the discontinuous—figures *Zong!* links to an impersonal narratorial voice drained of anchored unity—are what Philip brought to the fore in her search for a quality of voice capable of furnishing a site for remembrance and obligation. And for collectivity, without which the text's performance would lack an open addressee. To hammer words down into fragments, collapse them into ever smaller units and insert them into the flux of a song: Does such virtuosity not call for assembly? And does it not in some manner bring into being a particular form of morality or ethics of production (Jameson's term) that flourishes owing precisely to the "historical and collective actions of people" and their publics?[58]

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[55] "Writing was in its origins the voice of an absent person; and the dwelling-house was a substitute for the mother's womb, the first lodging, for which in all likelihood man still longs." See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1961), 43 and 46.

[56] "Had I approached this 'story,'" clarifies Philip, "in the manner of wanting to write the story *about* the *Zong* and the events surrounding its fateful journey, I would not have chosen a white, male, European voice as one of the primary voices in this work. My 'authorial intention' would have impelled me toward other voices. And for very good reason." Philip, *Zong!*, 204 – 205.

[57] Philip, *Zong!,* 205.

[58] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 60.

Poetry's temporality is flush with music. Its material, words voiced as fleshly sounds, is organized and acted on by a speaker. Caring about poetry means caring about the sounds that rise from its constructions. Marx distinguishes between the form of a commodity and the commodity itself: the latter diverges from the former by dint of being designed by human hands. By labor. We owe this contrast to the fact that, under capitalism, the value of a commodity's form is determined by laws of profit that neutralize the labor latent in production, the toil that is needed to build sensuous objects.[59] With Philip this equation is reversed: her craft offsets the commodification process, protesting the capture of black life by finance. Here that degree of human intensity absent in the annals is thrown into relief on all sides. Not only by voice but by silence's capability to speak in place of the drowned. Such that absent voices organize a call to resistance by aesthetic and political means, in full view of history.

Philip's embodied recounting brought this principle to a kind of standstill. Into her polyphony she set many Names. Interspersed among bits and pieces of words, Masuz, Zuwena, Ogunsheye, Ziyad, Ogwambi, Keturah disclosed a kind of radiating surface, against which the fictions of *Gregson v. Gilbert* were measured and parsed—then dispersed. Fugued with the archive to release layers of depth concealed by juridical facts. Philip's dramaturgical procedure radiated from transpositions of this sole artifact, creatively bringing voice to bear on law through the former's desedimentation of the latter. Her aim? To devise a voice capable of subjecting the archives of slavery to a ludic undoing. In which whispers, moans, and ululations

[59] "Mit dem nützlichen Charakter der Arbeitsprodukte verschwindet der nützliche Charakter der in ihnen dargestellten Arbeiten, es verschwinden also auch die verschiedenen konkreten Formen dieser Arbeiten, sie unterscheiden sich nicht länger, sondern sind allzusamt reduziert auf gleich menschliche Arbeit, abstract menschliche Arbeit." Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Vol. 1 (Berlin, Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1962), 52.

would become sources of intention and soulfulness turned against the abstractions of genocidal reason.

The temporality of this operation uncovers a problem about which I wish to speak. Running through *Zong!* is a thread directed as much at fragmenting and disassembling official representations of history as setting in motion a critique of the life-world that fosters them. This explains the plenum of Western cultural artifacts that appear across Philip's text: *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the Baroque counterpoint of Thomas Tallis; passages from Shakespeare and Celan, St. Augustine and Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas and, yes, the Old Testament. Onto all these Philip grafts her interpretations and elaborations of black aesthetic practices, as part of a civilizational re-writing of, and alternative to, the impasses of the occidental cannon, absorbing yet confuting its totalizing concept.

Ingesting it piecemeal. "A real work," maintains the composer Pierre Boulez, "annihilates the urge that produced it." This is a rigorous dialectical process that uncovers substantive meanings through its "formal methods," which show either "deep contradiction or deep unity."[60] Philip's methods embrace the former. They seize on caesural forms of representation that appropriate Western sources while rigorously exploding their unities as a means for greater aesthetic and political freedom.

Vital to this gesture, which aims to invert the forms of a dominant master-culture, is that its effects are shown to operate within the grander design of Philip's work: the "odd and bizarre combinations" whereby words arrange themselves across the pages of *Zong!* approximate the "verbal equivalent of the African American dance style 'crumping,'" a display in which the body is contorted and twisted

[60] Pierre Boulez, *Music Lessons: The College de France Lectures*, ed. Jonathan Dunsby, Jonathan Goldman, and Arnold Whittall, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 21 – 23.

into intense positions that often appear beyond human comprehension."[61] Words can be counterpointed and crumped, fugued and twisted, "so that the ordering of grammar, the ordering that is the impulse of empire is subverted."[62] So is such crumping a less uniform display of counterpoint anchored in the body? A form of expression in which the coordinates of a Cartesian geometry are bent into shapes that defy all causal arrangement?

the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue. The question is, first, whether any necessity existed for that act. The voyage was eighteen weeks instead of six, and that in consequence of contrary winds and calms. It was impossible to regain the island of Jamaica in less than three weeks; but it is said that **[234]** other islands might have been reached. This is said from the maps, and is contradicted by the evidence. It is also said that a supply of water might have been obtained at Tobago; but at that place there was sufficient for the voyage to Jamaica if the subsequent mistake had not occurred. With regard to that mistake, it appeared that the currents were stronger than usual. The apprehension of necessity under which the first negroes were thrown overboard was justified by the result. The crew themselves suffered so severely, that seven out of seventeen died after their arrival at Jamaica. There was no evidence, as stated on the other side, of any negroes being thrown overboard after the rains. Nor was it the fact that the slaves were destroyed in order to throw the loss on the underwriters. Forty or fifty of the negroes were suffered to die, and thirty were lying dead when the vessel arrived at Jamaica. But another ground has been taken, and it is said that this is not a loss within the policy. It is stated in the declaration that the ship was retarded by perils of the seas, and contrary winds and currents, and other misfortunes, &c. whereby the negroes died for want of sustenance, &c. Every particular circumstance of this averment need not be proved. In an indictment for murder it is not necessary to prove each particular circumstance. Here it sufficiently appears that the loss was primarily caused by the perils of the seas.

Lord Mansfield.—This is a very uncommon case, and deserves a reconsideration. There is great weight in the objection, that the evidence does not support the statement of the loss made in the declaration. There is no evidence of the ship being foul and leaky, and that certainly was not the cause of the delay. There is weight, also, in the circumstance of the throwing overboard of the negroes after the rain (if the fact be so), for which, upon the evidence, there appears to have been no necessity. There should, on the ground of reconsideration only, be a new trial, on the payment of costs.

Willes, Justice, of the same opinion.

Buller, Justice.—The cause of the delay, as proved, is not the same as that stated in the declaration. The argument drawn from the law respecting indictments for murder does not apply. There the substance of the indictment is proved, though the instrument with which the crime was effected be different from that laid. It would be dangerous **[235]** to suffer the plaintiff to recover on a peril not stated in the declaration, because it would not appear on the record not to have been within the policy, and the defendant would have no remedy. Suppose the law clear, that a loss happening by the negligence of the captain does not discharge the underwriters, yet upon this declaration the defendant could not raise that point.

Rule absolute on payment of costs (*b*).

THE KING *v.* THE INHABITANTS OF TOTTINGTON LOWER END. Saturday, 24th May, 1783.

(Reported, Caldecott, 284.)

PALMER *v.* EDWARDS. Saturday, 24th May, 1783.

(Reported, ante, vol. i. p. 187, n.)

(*b*) It was probably this case which led to the passing of the statutes 30 G. 3, c. 33, s. 8, and 34 G. 3, c. 80, s. 10, prohibiting the insurance of slaves against any loss or damage except the perils of the seas, piracy, insurrection, capture, barratry, and destruction by fire; and providing that no loss or damage shall be recoverable on account of the mortality of slaves by natural death or ill-treatment, or against loss by throwing overboard on any account whatsoever. See *Tatham* v. *Hodgson*, B. R., E. 36 G. 3, 6 T. R. 656. As to insurance upon animals which have been killed by the perils of the seas, see *Lawrence* v. *Aberdein*, B. R., M. 2 G. 4, 5 B. & A. 107; *Gabay* v. *Lloyd*, B. R., H. 5 & 6 G. 4, 3 B. & C. 793.

Figure 4: Transcript of Gregson v. Gilbert, reprinted in *English Reports*, Page Two.

[61] NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 205.

[62] NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 205.

Or does an ordering assert itself again here, not in the form of Tallis but of Raphael, whose proto-Baroque paintings exhibit figures bent out of shape, contorted, and revel in the body's "intense positions"?

Either way, in the background of Philip's bodily presentation stood the question-mark of an ever more dangerous possibility: that of the breakthrough of a new kind of time into the compositional frame of her reading that transformed the text itself. It was this plentitude that Philip exhumed. I recall being struck by how the poet's crumping of words lent a thickness to the present in which the work unfolded. This was a thickness that made time progress by slowing it down as though by will. What was most distinctive about it was its hijacking of ordinary time and speech; the way it replaced these with a gestural lexicon that surged up out of Philip's body, emanating an opacity of pure somatic depth. So that the sounds that came from the stage were slowed down, as if caught in honey, with the added effect of temporal delay. This cumulatively relayed the impression of silences being opened up *between* words, as the spaces between them increased in size.

Such lyrical ventriloquism, emptied of subjective signature, took hold of our surroundings, superimposing a set of overlapping time-spans onto space, the dimensions of which contracted and expanded before our own eyes—a network of live retentions and protentions. This then was a form of underwater slow motion that harmonized with the matter at hand: the notion of a "resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed" was actualized here.[63] So, too, did the "wails, cries, moans and shouts that had earlier been banned from the text" discover an appropriate form. For it has been stated that "water is a much more sound-efficient medium than air,"

[63] NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 203.

bringing Philip to wonder whether "the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo" in the sea's "bone beds."[64]

Scrutinize this oceanic sequence from below: Philip, a salvage diver, sets out in search of the drowned, a collateral witness to crime. And as she descends the voices rise to meet her. There in the deep where sound and space are amplified by the passage of time. There where the manuscript "weighs heavily," and where lyric, "having exploded the words," "having scooped the stories out of the magma of the text," finds its catalyst in voice.[65] There. Where everything acquires a slowness. Where you cannot stabilize a sound. All things amplified by history's heavy mass. Which purges itself through amnesia. But which comes back to us as remembrance, once it has been triggered by this sea-song.

And you are the passenger of this inquiry, which is neither a nightmare nor a thorn in your side but a no-frills invitation to hear. To listen with all your anxiety and shame. But still, to listen—without compensation. For this moment, despite our shattered pride, is ultimately worthy of our attention.

Back Again: To Celan (Ash-Hiccup)

As for Celan, there are few modernist poets, possibly none writing in German, in whose work the raw incidence of poetic speech seems so closely linked to the historicity of musical forms; an inevitable, if still ambivalent and entangled, confluence that opens his works to musical interpretation and appropriation. Individual titles seem to fortify this judgment: "Todesfuge," "Stretto," and "Cello-

[64] NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 203.

[65] NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 203.

Einsatz": the tie to Classical music is evident, not least in a philological sense.[66] While critics probe the polyphonic richness inherent in the works' construction, German high schoolers and teachers aim to make their conflicting rhythms audible, putting them to work in drilled recitations.[67] So far, so good. But we ask, to what end? All consensus on the matter is unresolved.

Yet nowhere are its moral and aesthetic stakes posed more clearly than in John Felstiner's reflection on the limits of musical analogy with regard to Celan's poetry. Here a principal concern becomes explicit:

> They [German teachers] aim to make the polyphony audible, but what about that unresolvable dissonance the art of a fugue makes with Nazi genocide? A closer look at the teachers' journal doesn't elicit much hope. A dozen meticulous paragraphs analyze the contrapuntal elements in "Todesfuge," but not one sentence recognizes that the poem's very form, the rhythm and repetition so amenable to pedagogic technique, may itself—in miming German mastery—indict the nation that orchestrated mass murder.[68]

Felstiner draws out undesired corollaries that haunt such instances of instruction. In stressing the work's proximity to the fugue, learners fail to grasp its main point: Celan's decision to formally estrange the time-honored techniques of counterpoint. So, his titular appeal to musical mastery becomes part of the same thrust which places tradition under "unremitting duress."[69]

There is thus in the life force of the poet's rhythms a dialectical tension among the poles of order and disorder, tradition and upheaval, that also runs throughout *Zong!* Philip's crumped counterpoint wrangles with tradition in a way that "mimes" it.

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[66] See, for instance, Axel Englund, *Still Songs: Music In and Around the Poetry of Paul Celan* (New York: Routledge, 2016). My approach to the subject of music differs from Englund's. Most evident in this respect is my interest in tarrying with the Celan's own voice, which does not interest Englund.

[67] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge': Rhythm and Repetition as Metaphor" in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 240.

[68] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 240.

[69] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 241.

As a formal procedure, her method cultivates a relationship to the fugue that dissembles its hierarchies and voicings through the twining of the human body. This is a region in which order, if it emerges, arises through a series of rapid superpositions, a balancing-act tempering tongue to speech by means of breath. Voice cuts across the threshold of convention to become the signature of its bearer, who faces in turn the demand of renewal.

So it is with Celan—within certain limits. To claim his poetry is musical is not a judgment but a fact of its passionate creation. And yet, as illustrated by Felstiner's case study, the forced conjunction between these domains obscures more than it clarifies. For it is not the fugal form of "Todesfuge" that makes "this lyric irrefutable" but, rather, the way its rhythms and repetitions body forth the arid rhythms and repetitions of the *univers concentrationnaire* itself.[70] What is more, upon closer inspection the poem's "various motifs do not proceed fugally, but are more loosely permuted," their jagged perambulations calling to mind not so much Bach as old-fashioned German beerhall tunes and *danse macabre*.[71]

Musical forms, much like literary forms, possess their own kind of ethical content. Celan distanced himself from the tendency of post-war German poetry toward "melodiousness" and "euphony," stating: "I don't musicalize much anymore, as at the time of my much-touted 'Todesfuge,' which by now has been threshed out in many a textbook."[72] Instead, what had taken hold by the Sixties was a search for more "truthful" forms of utterance, certain rhythms capable of presenting transformations undergone by the social totality in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

[70] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 246.

[71] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 248 – 249.

[72] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 250.

What emerged, in short, was a new pulsating nomenclature: the contrapuntal maneuvers of earlier works were supplanted bit by bit by something more caustic and cramped, halting and groping. Because the poetic principle in question needed to be sought in the operations of rhythms purged of their consent to barbarism. Drained of complicity to mastery as such.[73]

Written in 1965, "Deine Augen Im Arm" is part of this class of dissenting works. In it so many mismeasured (*vermeßt*) and unmeasured (*entmeßt*) amalgamations of words combine to stir up a probing lament:

Deine Augen Im Arm die auseinandergebrannten, dich weiterwiegen, im fliegen- den Herzschatten, dich.	Your Eyes In Your Arm, the scattered by fire continuing to cradle you, in the fly- ing heartshadow, you.
Wo?	Where?
Mach den Ort aus, machs Wort aus. Lösch. Miß.	Make out place, make out word. Turn off. Mix.
Aschen-Helle, Aschen-Elle – ge- schluckt.	Ash-brightness, Ash-Elle – swal- lowed.
Vermessen, entmessen, verortet, entwortet	Mismeasured, unmeasured, located, unworded
Entwo	ywhere
Aschen- Schluckauf, deine Augen im Arm, immer.	Ash- hiccup, your eyes in your arm always.[74]

Voice draws a boundary in which things are made to appear in their inexorable decay. Places hold back what they impart in order to generate hidden reserves of absence, drawing silences into each other while furnishing an interval for their jointure.

[73] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 250.

[74] Paul Celan, "Deine Augen Im Arm," trans. Marjorie Perloff, see "Paul Celan at 100: Marjorie Perloff tribute" Jacket2, November 23, 2020. https://jacket2.org/commentary/celan-perloff

That which marks and is granted by such erasure also partakes of continual renewal. The past's unwording is an event that visits Celan from an unsettled "Entwo." It delimits the reach of poetic address where lives have been reduced to ash, furnishing the remainder of what is lost.

To sharpen the point, the term *Fugue* designates a cleft where things are joined. A separation in unity that partitions outside from inside while holding them together. In Celan's lament what is scattered may also be "cradled" in a "flying heartshadow." *Mach den Ort aus, machs Wort aus*: here *ausmachen* partakes of a two-fold meaning. The verb designates not only an act that determines its object by measuring it, but one that aims to extinguish something—a fire, a light, a voice, a noise, a wish.[75] To be unmeasured is to stand among objects that gain and lose their equipoise in the testimonial rifts which cleave them.

We can carry this fugue analogy further. The noted BACH motif, a musical cryptogram, describes a succession of notes—B flat, A, C, B natural—that spell out the composer's name, and which he used in a number of his works, including as the final fugue subject in the last Contrapunctus of his opus *Die Kunst der Fuge*. Such a transposition occurs in Celan's poem, though it generates a different set of effects: *Ashen-Helle* harvests overtones of the poet's family name, Antschel, whose resonances are then collocated with a dampened verbal remainder, *Ashen-Elle*.[76] From bright (German: *Helle*) to her (French: *Elle*) a loss is therefore registered: that of the poet's mother, whom he loved. Whom he could not rescue from ashes. She who died in a German *Vernichtungslager*. This is the tale of the drowned and the ashen. There is always a story to be written. Enveloped by tidal flows, dispersed by

[75] Werner Hamacher, "Amphora (Extracts)," trans. Dana Hollander, in *Assemblage*, No. 23 (1993), 41.

[76] Werner Hamacher, "Amphora (Extracts)," 41.

fires, and without recourse to origins and archives, theirs is not a happy story. How can we attend to it responsibly today?

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I want to stress that by the term crumped counterpoint I meant to designate a poetic technique, to be sure, but also something other and more: the underlying ethical substance of the literary operation Philip employs to represent the past. It seems to me that the fragmentariness of her method, its disordering of order, lays claim to a pragmatic, concrete result. *Zong!* presents itself as a tool to be used in the present moment for practical ends. Its aim is not to furnish a contemplative picture of history but to alter its presentation by acting on it, rigorously and fearlessly. Namely by choosing to wage a war with it.

Polyphony entails progression through a chord and a gradual realization of its levels. Counterpoint is situated in this lineage. Here a sense of tension and release is supplied by a musical motif presented in a tonic key that undergoes elaborations: once stated, a motif can be subject to any number of permutations and possibilities which develop in relation to the way motifs are handled in the course of a work, alternating from tonic to dominant, major to minor, augmentation to diminution, and which typically culminate in a dramatic overlaying of these figures or sediments. The fulfillment of the formal principle of *Zong!* consists in the derailment of such advance: the fugue's forward-march is halted by the recalcitrance of underwater flows, its search for release frustrated again and again by the pressure brought to bear on it. Crumping sets in where narratives of progress bury their repressed element to erase the costs of the civilizational project.

Gregson v. Gilbert is Philip's tonic key, the master-text she gradually derealizes to arrive at a confrontation with power in which history becomes an object of

dismemberment: a confrontation where nothing stays put, but where everything is drawn to a standstill; an encounter made up of failed contracts and infidelities, sudden about-faces and old contradictions, not to mention a foundational violence. To read ever deeper into *Zong!* is to sense the gravitational pull of buried voices. As Philip proceeds words from different languages break into the structure of her text. In *Ferrum*, the book's final movement, voice tears through the veil of Legal English, reaching a wholly new state of affairs: "I feel as if I am writing a code," says Philip. "And, oddly enough," she continues, "for the very first time since writing chose me, I feel I *do* have a language."[77]

And thus dawns the awareness that one form of speech can replace another. *Zong!* entails an operation in which history is poetically wrested from perpetrators. This reclamation is guided throughout by the actualization of a formal principle: the logic of aesthetic forms being ethically applied or put to oppositional ends. This is the content of Philip's crumped form, the representational means whereby she transcends the limits of a master-discourse. Indeed, her gesture is programmatic to the extent it fulfills this aim.

As we speak of Philip's derealization of the language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, we note in works such as "Todesfuge" and "Deine Augen Im Arm" a similar propensity. Due to the cleavage of time that separates these latter works from each other—"Todesfuge" was written after the war; "Deine Augen Im Arm" twenty years later—I sense a shift in their poetic mode of attack that transforms the way I receive them, one that can be squared with Celan's comments on his evolving attitude toward the musical or musicalizing elements of his earlier and later works. I locate the source of this shift in a specific kind of embodied, rhythmical adjustment.

[77] NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, 205.

Much like the discovery of an as yet unknown prime number in a mathematical series, this metamorphosis emerges as a textual and musical transition from one phase of Celan's poetic continuum to another.

So much at least is suggested by the movement from the smoothly metered cadences of "Todesfuge" to the cramped maneuvers of "Deine Augen Im Arm." In the former, breath immediately discovers and lurches into a steady beat by the leading stanza, despite a lack of punctuation:

> Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
> wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
> wir trinken und trinken[78]

It is this *wir trinken sie abends*, a unit that distributes a beat over two metrical feet that rise on an accented syllable, that extends its thrust over the following lines, "with no release of tempo or tension, iterating and reiterating a few turns of speech." A relentlessness where a "timing of day-in, day-out fatality" proceeds without pause, an "eternal recurrence under what Nietzsche would call its 'most dreadful' aspect."[79] Compare this rhythmical allegory with the opening lines of "Deine Augen Im Arm," where even the slightest hint of a metered pulse is swallowed up by a time that appears more splintered than uninterrupted:

> Deine Augen Im Arm
> Die
> Auseinandergebrannten
> dich weiterwiegen, im fliegen-
> den Herzschatten, dich.

In the absence of a stabilizing beat the unit onto which one can hold is the letter "D," whose echoing (*Deine, Die, Dich, Den*) signals not the passing of euphony

[78] Paul Celan, "Todesfuge," quoted in John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge'", 255- 256.

[79] John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge," 246.

but of human life: it is the loss of a living addressee, and hence of a *Dich*, that Celan's lyric now mourns. It has been said that the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem-Tov, once forgot everything except for a single letter of the alphabet, but that by clinging to this lone letter, and using it as support, he was able to rediscover a world.[80] What remains after the Shoah is a litany that with the letter *D* as its point of departure strives to recuperate a witness.

And the vanishing persistence of the past. All this two decades after that which came to pass. So not the time of the Lager, in which life went on with a gray and endless step. But rather the temporality of its aftermath: the irreversibility of the disaster and the burden of confronting an existence enduring beyond death itself. That Celan persisted, in German, in writing poems on behalf of the dead implies he was committed to envisaging the meaning of the silences trailing in their wake. Absence in itself does not possess a history. What it requires is a living disposition to discover and express it. To give it Names. Without this, the experience of loss is sundered from its proximity to remembrance, the arena in which unspoken thoughts and lives move, as if preserved in amber.

So it is that poetry becomes an agent of historical experience in its own right, emerging as the carrier of kinship bonds that were destroyed during the war. If it has become axiomatic to view the forms of Western classical music as reflected in the battered consciousness and fragmentary vision of "Todesfuge," "Deine Augen Im Arm" confounds this picture: here accents are totally uneven, the line breaks refuse to clip into one another, and rhythm is itself disjunctive. On the whole, it is fair to say the lyric's ashen impression is a far way away from reconciling the ideals of counterpoint with the lager's historical actuality.

[80] I discovered this little anecdote in Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Other Press, 2020), 24.

And further still, I think, from endorsing the theoretical possibility of a superficial, empty German-Jewish musical symbiosis.

Celan will make no such concession. Rather, like Philip, he inverts an order. The color line and the Jewish question were posed from without by enlightened authorities, their socio-political aim being to alienate minorities by turning them into a problem.[81] For Philip and Celan the realities of exclusionary politics entail a conflict whose aesthetic solution demands the wielding of presentational forms human agents are free to use to combat the hegemony of perpetrators.[82] Peel away the baroque patina of "Todesfuge" and the tunefulness of its metaphors. Cauterize the advance of its polyphony so that its cadences acquire a less fluid design. Pare these elements down such that they produce mute flashes of recollection. Turn off (*Lösch*) and mix (*Miß*) them with the migrant flavor of their source. Aspirate into the remnants. Stoke the ashes till all the flames kindle and dance. Now disclose what conforms to the admixture: the shadow of Celan's mother-tongue, to which "Deine Augen Im Arm" pays tribute.

This commitment to minimalist technique spells no retrenchment of horizons. Rather the reverse: it wrests from German new temperaments and formations that must be set apart from the polyphony of earlier poems, in ways related to form as well as content. To do so I propose to limn the aural impression "Deine Augen Im Arm" makes on its hearer: the tones supplied by Celan's reading of it, and the impact it furnishes on the ear. Because his craft, as I have asserted,

[81] On the political stakes of Jewish emancipation, consult Hannah Arendt, "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question" in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 3 – 18. On the forging of the "color line" in American social life, there is, I believe, no work more perceptive and trenchant than *The Souls of Black Folk*. Consult W.E.B DuBois, *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 357 – 548.

[82] Hegemony englobes the forms of consent and coercion generated by advanced capitalism's power structures, accrediting the notion that "the dominant mode of bourgeois power in the West—'culture'—is also the determinant mode." Perry Anderson, *The Antimonies of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Verso, 2017), 92.

turns on voice, my subject is the quality of those bare inflections and tones that compel me to assert a work must have begun and concluded with the apprehension of certain tuneful materials and concepts, such as the cast of a melody or the shaping of an aspirated rhythm.

*

Could it be, in the first place, that the terms 'polyphony' and 'counterpoint' fail to reflect the musicality to which "Deine Augen im Arm" aspires as a literary artifact? That these are not the apt words to apply to Celan's mode of recitation because they restrain a view of what he is really up to?

Such is what my hearing affirms. To close I want to draw attention to just three facets of Celan's poetic invention. First, to the silences that saturate its delivery. Second, to the monophonic texture of its voice. And third, although this could very well amount to the same thing, to what I will refer to, entirely unironically, as the Jewishness of its rhythmical disposition.

I want to call attention to what Bernard Williams and Paul Grice describe as a conversational implicature: "the fact that in a given context [a] speaker "says one thing rather than another" to a hearer, thereby intimating P as opposed not not-P.[83] Because speakers have "beliefs and many different ways of expressing them," the choice to express something in one determinate way as opposed to another enables truthful implicatures to appear as more than just another indeterminacy.[84] Fundamental to the thrust of "Deine Augen im Arm" is the way it aims to place as much emphasis on muteness as it does on the sounding of its individual parts.

[83] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 101.

[84] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 101.

There is a proliferation of quietude, as in the late compositions of Morton Feldman, the secret of which consists in the composer's choice to give silence its own reality without forcing it to fit into a logical pattern or design: a context from which sonic events emanate but to which no hand can compel them to submit.[85] Like Feldman, Celan is careful not to push words around.

His reading resounds for sixty seconds. Half of its duration is made up of pauses that form little eddies around each other, augmented throughout by deflated tones, until an elegiac current of voice suddenly carries the lyric forward into a new region. One aspect of the recording's distinction is the way it organizes this trade-off: the vocal alternations complement one another, working as cues for whatever comes before or after them—a precision that results less from perfect timing than from a willingness to open up a space for needs and convictions to work through cycles of encirclement and withdrawal while providing a way into the text's density. What matters most is this play of shadows. Celan's vocals, set against a grayness, blow a funeral wind across the ensuing stanzas.

Lament crests into recollection and lost time. Speech advances gropingly as if haunted by the consciousness of the irretrievable: not memory, because writing can recapture that, as in Proust, Primo Levi, or Saul Friedländer, but, rather, the massive blow of being denied access to a past and the mores that once sustained it. Because that world has been shattered, its practices razed along with the buzzing of its milieu, leaving in its tracks the glimmer of worlds no longer recognizable. Or habitable. "Deine Augen im Arm" wants to be fully present at this scene of disappearance. To demand attention in the face of leave-taking. To speak on behalf of a muteness. This, I believe, is its offering.

[85] Morton Feldman, "The Future of Local Music" in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000), 157 – 159.

Yet a voice emerges through Celan's recitation that transcends valediction as such. How does "Deine Augen im Arm" radiate sincerity when its form is so restrained? How does it evoke such varieties of truthfulness when its tone is so dampened? How does its music, so mournful and staggering, carry the steadfastness of revolt, keeping for itself a trace of hope—despite all?

Celan's voice is indeed sumptuous. His rhythms transmit not ideas but passions. Convictions whose truthfulness is embodied in incidents of lyrical forthrightness. Fruits of integrity are ripe for the picking: to attend to Celan's reading is to be present at a display in which the corrosive verses of "Deine Augen im Arm" are offset little by little by the tenderness of a breathing which sets out, blindly but fondly, to locate absent witnesses. "Not all great poets—like Wallace Stevens—are great singers," said Bob Dylan in 1969, "but a great singer—like Billy Holiday—is always a great poet."[86] Such was Dylan's decree. And it may be true.

Celan and Philip wield words movingly. Here the criteria of poetic distinction enhance the mission of the performing arts. Orality and gesture conspire to produce works that are less concepts than events partaking in a struggle poetry wages against catastrophe: inhabiting the world with freedom and dignity, living and enduring in the face of barbarism, and struggling with word and deed against brutality. We may also go on to ask ourselves whether that trident of "the soul, the eye, and the hand" that emerged with the figure of the storyteller, and which is "becoming unraveled" as the world in which it is cradled vanishes, happens to recover its own belated echo here—in the hands of catastrophe's latter-day poets, for whom the

[86] See Greil Marcus, "Self Portrait No. 25" in *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writings 1968 – 2010* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 18.

enactment of poetry restores the act of listening to its collective setting through direct and passionate forms of disclosure.[87]

Through voice, that abiding stamp of character. *Zong!* climaxes with a polyphony wherein words, effacing their legal origin, are multiplied until they surpass themselves, cutting across the crudeness of court English's phrasing to release something more elemental: the outer limits of absences whose recovery contests the limits of representation. "Deine Augen im Arm" arrives at a similar end, it must be said, but its *means* are different. Their vehicle is not polyphony but monophony. In a musical sense this is significant because, as in the liturgical folk music of Eastern-European Jews, or the Arabic *maqam,* monophony has flourished in non-Western cultures. To this end it has been stated that from the standpoint of Western polyphony, the tonality of monophonic works seems ambiguous, as though many "different keys were indicated" or implied "but not sufficiently elaborated," their relations to one another yet to be clarified.[88] A dearth, then, of tonal coherence? Or signs of a system that defers to other norms?

In the mode of polyphony, writes Judit Frigyesi,

> individual vocal lines are based on harmonic functions [are] reflected by the chordal system, wherein one or more tones can represent the same tonal function: for example, in C Major, the tones C, E, and G may, in any register, play the same role in the harmonic process. Thus, in polyphonic melodies, harmonic functions contrast with each other through their respective representative tones.[89]

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[87] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 91. In German, the sentence in question reads: "Jene alte Koordination von Seele, Auge und Hand, die in Valerys Worten auftaucht, ist die handwerkliche, auf die wir stoßen, wo die Kunst des Erzähler zu seinem Stoff hat, dem Menschenleben, nicht selbst eine handwerkliche Beziehung ist?" Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelten Schriften*, Vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 465.

[88] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Modulation as an Integral Part of the Modal System in Jewish Music" in *Musica Judaica*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1982 – 1983), 66.

[89] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Modulation as an Integral Part of the Modal System in Jewish Music," 55.

Monophonic melodies are configured differently:

> They are built from melodic units, each of which comprise a distinct mode. The contrast among these units creates much the same tonal tension as do the contrasting chords in polyphonic music. The essential difference, however, lies in the role of the single tone: in homophony, melodic segments are correlated to the harmonic system while in monophony a group of tones or even an individual tone has a distinct tonal function.[90]

And this is what I hear in Celan's delivery: the creation of overlapping but discrete units arranged in stanzas, laminated yet subdivided; a weaving of contrasts through these segments, which are drawn and redrawn, disfigured, and refigured, according to expenditures of breath, which surface thereafter through rhythmical fluctuations. What develops the melodic units under discussion are the implicatures of voice: the care taken to narrate lines in a specific way. To show where voice should pause. To illustrate which limits need to be respected. So, when Celan amplifies a refrain, he is showing us how to attend to the unwording of vocalizations as they work through their own layered historicity.

Paul Antschel, who renamed himself Paul Celan after the war, builds on silences.[91] Perhaps the recollections of the disaster that engendered his words will one day include the liberation of the lives that were eclipsed by it. Certainly, their voices will be inscribed into the ledger of his unfinished record of the Shoah. To be sure, no listener will forget that what persists for them is not silence but voice, even after their banishment from the common world.

Which leads us to our final concern. How to localize the bare refrains that remain? In the present work I have stressed the convergences between Celan and Philip. Having sought in the first chapter to forge a filiation around their breath poetics,

[90] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Modulation as an Integral Part of the Modal System in Jewish Music," 55.

[91] John Felsteiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3.

I proceeded to furnish a framework in which their works can be productively read. Spectrality, subjunctivity, anagrammatic figuration and critical fabulation are terms I used to characterize a speculative poetics capable of responding to the realities of modern(ist) events. Such elective affinities must now be supplemented by a further set of figures, such as the tertiary or proxy-witness, the eroded witness, and the tropisms of No One. What springs from this is the basis of a toolkit for reflecting on the moral, aesthetic, and political value of poetry's response to catastrophe that is rooted in testimonial poetic artifacts.

Envoi

I will complete this survey with a coda. It is, indeed, from the seemingly ambiguous standpoint of Celan's monophony that something resembling an ending comes into view. Reflected in the microunits of the poet's voice—in its improvisatory elongation of melodies, its extension of tone groups, its ductile rhythms—is the macro-perspective of a human cosmos: the liturgical folk music of East-Ashkenazim, whose culture was razed during the Holocaust.[92] Suffice it to say, the expressive forces which governed this tradition were thoroughly monophonic. At its center lived the cantillation—flexible and speechlike—of non-biblical textual works, such as prayers of diverse style and language, including psalms, poetry, and ancient blessings. These were realized as "large-scale musical dramas" in local communal settings.[93] And when performed by a specific individual, they called for "elaborate musical

[92] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Orality as Religious Ideal: The Music of East-European Jewish Prayer," in *Yuval: Studies of the Jewish Music Research Centre*, Vol. 7, ed. Eliyahu Schleifer and Edwin Seroussi (2002), 117 – 118.

[93] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Orality as Religious Ideal," 120 – 123.

improvisations" that consisted of ample ground for musical variations that have been admirably catalogued by musicologists.[94]

What concerns me is less a direct mapping of this tradition onto the formal disposition of Celan's poetry than a demonstration of how specific works express its functional tendencies. East-Ashkenazi music, like Gregorian Chant, is best viewed as a dynamic rhythmic culture instead of a fixed repertoire, its consistency derived not from an overarching form but from the demands of particular texts whose composition delineates no vocal style, and whose rendering varies with each reading depending on the disposition of the singer.[95]

Toward the end of his life, as loneliness gave way to remembrance, Celan spoke of heritage: "For me," he claimed, "especially in a poem, Jewishness is not so much a *thematic* as a *pneumatic* concern."[96] So reads an interview from 1970. And his words ought to give us all pause. For what, if anything, can they be said to suggest? To Saul Friedländer, survivor of the Shoah and its most eminent historian, to be a Jew means to continue, inexhaustibly, "from generation to generation, to tell a story with blurred outlines."[97] Fidelity, then, to the ambiguities out of which the past proceeds and from which the content of one's own practical experience issues. To be attentive to history's eroded fault lines is to recount the disaster that makes and unmakes me as time and memory set in.

Paul Antschel's Jewishness was a matter of finding a way to wear his namesake on his sleeve. This implied, above all, obtaining a way to breathe; to graft a mother-lung on a mother-tongue, joining the vitalities of text with those of the human voice.

[94] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Orality as Religious Ideal," 122.

[95] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Orality as Religious Ideal," 123.

[96] John Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 280.

[97] Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 65.

Through his monophony the rhythms of East-Askenazi liturgical chant return to us. In that tradition, melodies which are rarely fixed are developed by a given singer on the spot, their realization reflecting the reciter's affective state and the mood evoked by the occasion.[98] Nowhere is the musical Jewishness of Celan's craft on greater display than in the lines of "Deine Augen im Arm." "In the large-scale form of a hazzanic performance," argues Frigyesi, three or more rhythmic styles can be developed at once to create dynamic effects."[99]

If the poem's first rhythmic grouping materializes around repetitions of "D," short breath-units cut across the next section:

> Wo?
>
> Mach den Ort aus, machs Wort aus.
> Lösch. Miß.
>
> Aschen-Helle, Aschen-Elle – ge-
> schluckt.

For a brief instant the lines seem to come apart. To become a dead set of features without form or control, much like the prelude to a scream, when the face's contours become slack and when voice begins to choke against its silence. But only for an instant. Having thus ingested the ashes suffused with the name of his mother, history—that indifferent agency—must go on. The third melody seeks a rhyme, discovers one, falls into a certain meter, courts a sturdy beat, then fumbles it—as all euphony now goes fully to seed:

> Vermessen, entmessen, verortet, entwortet,
>
> Entwo

[98] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Preliminary Thoughts toward the Study of Music without Clear Beat: The Example of 'Flowing Rhythm' in Jewish 'Nusah'," in *Asian Music*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1993), 69.

[99] Judith Laki Frigyesi, "Preliminary Thoughts toward the Study of Music without Clear Beat," 70.

Where to turn when the beat gets lost and where my voice fails to reach you? Where to seek a proper ending when the ground on which I stand always trembles? Celan concludes with a promissory note on which his voice does not default. Assertions assume their role in the transference of language from one source to another by virtue of being taken to be direct—sincere and accurate—expressions of personal beliefs.[100] Pledges, in turn, belong to a class of assertions that provide a "protective hedge" against the "possibility that the agent fails to deliver simply because he was changed his mind," thereby securing the conveyance of knowledge in the face of changing desires or whims.[101] That Celan ends his poem with a promise implies he will always contend his past. Hence his final melody is one of tenderness, as well as of solicitude and truthfulness:

> Aschen-
>
> Schluckauf, deine Augen
>
> im Arm,
>
> immer.

The tale of ash is a report on blurred outlines, hiccupped and swallowed in the spirit of trust: I will hold you on my breath.

Immer. Always. In the end there can be no poetics and politics of solidarity in our time without the realization of this rudimentary yet speculative command—to defend and act on behalf of our dead. Celan and Philip have drawn up a map of gestures to which we ought to pay heed. For we have become their inheritors, through water and fire, as well as through the incomparably generous historical vantage point their work affords our own time.

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[100] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 79.

[101] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 80.

Afterword

> The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal. In such debates, ideas do not and indeed cannot float free; they are tied to speakers by whom they are announced.
>
> – J.M Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

In the preceding chapters I have expounded the idea of "the speculative lyric" by furnishing a series of comparative readings that center on the poetry of Paul Celan and NourbeSe Philip, two artists whose work confronts an essential issue: the representation of world catastrophe. The interpretation defended was that Celan and Philip embrace literary modes of history-writing to fulfill this task. And that their projects are characterized by an attempt to come to terms with, reflect on, the challenge of living freely and dignifiedly in the disaster's wake. Above all, this entails wrangling with the weight of the dead and their silence, historical occlusions that require response. For Celan, this implied forging a new lyric in the aftermath of the Holocaust, one that enabled him, a survivor of the event, to lay bare a witness's cry of terror with great depth of feeling: a testimony of disillusionment and despair yet also of solidarity and hope. For Philip, a contemporary poet, squaring with the history of Transatlantic slavery involves a direct encounter with its archives, records in which names of the dead are conspicuously absent but which nonetheless provide a space where history itself can be reenacted, yet also torn to shreds.

Throughout these chapters I have asserted that these bodies of work ought to be examined separately, as unique attainments, distinct projects in their own right, but that elective affinities—formal along with ethical—also obtain between them.

Yet, reading over these pages, I see that the amount of space given to Celan is indeed significantly greater than the number of pages afforded to Philip. Such an imbalance is a structural flaw, I think, but not one without explanation. I began this dissertation with the hope of writing a book-length study on Celan, a study similar to Fredric Jameson's pioneering book on Jean Paul Sartre, in which the philosopher's ideas are used as a guide to understand his work, as well as a point of departure to explore the rich antagonisms animating it. This approach failed me for several reasons.

First, Celan, a poet by trade, has gifted us a corpus built on words and rhythms, on passions and convictions, not on ideas—certainly not in any systematic form. That his poetry generates its own distinctive form of knowledge is apparent: a way of openly reflecting on experience from an embodied standpoint, along with achieving a form of collective knowledge at a moment in time. This is especially so with regard to history, or with speculative historical thought. For Celan, questions such as "who are we?" and "where are we going?" are imbricated with the issue of practical self-knowledge and collective awareness. And yet, the more I became acquainted with the poet's repertoire—its visual and sonic means, unexpected reversals, epistemologies of estrangement—the more I felt the need to approach it in a way that would honor its concerns, none of which cohere into a "systematic" or "consistent" set of propositions. Even the "Meridian" address evinces a productive failure to cohere, its preference for polysemy of all kinds corresponding to the deeper movement of its author's intelligence, which arrives at knowledge of the world through fluctuations and suspensions, through allusion and digression.

Now, once all this became explicit to me, I had to decide how Celan's late poetry would be best served in a critical survey that aimed to take stock of it. At bottom, this meant discovering a useful and meaningful way to receive it, as a propagator and explicator of its themes as well as an inheritor of its testimony. Which is to say that I had to make judgment. A choice that would determine the way I approached a voice, its passions, and desires.

I decided that Celan's non-systematic form of poetic intellection would be best served in a comparative study that brought it to bear on other examples, other works with which it evinced a kinship, a similar range of structural concerns. The "speculative lyric" is not a shorthand for Celan's stock taking of the Shoah. Rather, the concept is best illumined when viewed as belonging to a genre of poetic works that address the struggle of living in the shadow of world disaster. The Holocaust was surely a world disaster. Yet so too was New World slavery. In both cases, it seems to me, we are speaking of events that challenge the limits of literary and historiographical presentation. Events that crushed collectivities and forced writers of different kinds to face up to the challenge of bearing witness to certain structures of evil in a realistic way; political edifices that attest to how, as Hayden White states it, "civilization" has been implicated in the realization of "incarceration, exclusion, destruction, and that kind of humiliation" which "goes beyond any reasonable thoroughness."[1]

A book-length study on Celan, I realized, could not address matters of this kind. Nor could it adequately speak to social problems of a more immediate origin. A further limitation of this approach was brought to light not by an explicit engagement with Celan but by the moment in which I was thinking and writing.

[1] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 5.

Allow me to explain myself a bit more. There is a cast of criticism to which my own orientation adheres—that of Marxist literary criticism—that insists on viewing cultural forms as reflective of the social ensemble from which they emerge. Celan and Philip's reflections on justice and freedom arise from conditions of speechlessness and breathlessness generated by forms of authoritarian violence. I tried to make this explicit in the opening chapter of this dissertation. Without reference to such foundational violence we cannot apprehend the overriding insistence on the caesura, on gaps and blanks, that typifies their writerly practices, the shared logic of aggressive discontinuity that confirms an affinity between them and leads them to a radical revaluation of the past. My second chapter developed the meaning of this insight along historical lines. In those pages I suggested that we cannot speak critically of modern catastrophe without acknowledging the ways it is a thoroughly social and political phenomenon, engineered by perpetrators and emerging from conditions tied to authoritarian ideologies of terror which sully the world.

All this should be more or less evident. But what I also tried, and perhaps failed, to clarify is the extent to which the thrust of my project cannot be understood without reference to its specific moment. Such that the relation between its theses and the social ensemble from which they arose cannot in any way be refuted. Works of literary criticism need not be touched by the flow of current events. The fact of the matter is that my project is.

"New things," maintains Fred Moten, "new spaces, new times demand lyrical innovation and intervention, formal maneuverings that often serve to bring to the theoretical and practical table what meaning can't."[2] Implication resides therein.

[2] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

The Speculative Lyric is a wholesale attempt to pay heed to Moten's *cri de coeur*. In it, I hope, readers will discover certain theoretical and practical resources for thinking through the issue of how we should comport ourselves in the wake of breathlessness, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd and others, historic and current—those whom we have lost and those whom we have not adequately mourned, despite our concern. A book-length study on Celan, I realized, could not address matters of this kind. Could not bring to the table the kind of attention new spaces and times demand.

Or at least not alone. Not as a solo effort. What is needed are more capacious forms. Spaces of attention where different voices might reveal themselves to one another with the aid of a recipient who is able to bind them together into something rich. Into utterances that let witnesses step into the foreground and hold a dialogue across time and space—a sonic translation. The fruit of attentiveness and generosity. A poetic history of incommensurable pasts. But one in which incommensurables are also allowed to touch. Because history is not something outside us but an expanse into which we are thrown. And which we share.

An overlapping of voices that hinges on a listener's ability to receive testimony. Indeed, such a condition is only the first step toward an as yet unrealized aim: to respond to voices in a way that compels further ethical and moral reflection, additional scenes of listening whereby testimony is given a new articulation. Such that the demand to receive, and to be open, unfolds in the act over time. This would seem to suggest that our stake in listening is wedded to how we let voices live on, given that testimony is subject to the response of others. Wherefore opening our ears means being able to feel our stake in history,

on the one hand, and the nature of our responsibility to others, on the other. What we do with this burden is our choice.

But the kind of dialogical listening set forth here can be established only by an imaginative act founded on and in the service of a certain will-to-attend. "The psychological space of experience is not an organic but a mechanic space: it consists of fractals, fragments, detritus, waste, parts, and junk, none of which can be organically connected with anything else expect by thought, language, discourse," writes White.[3] If this is true, and I think it is, then the type of attention enacted in this study serves as the instrument through which fractals of testimony are sutured to one another to imbue the cognitive zones of historical experience with a degree of moral urgency intimately bound up with an awareness of our being-in-common: the world in which we collectively partake and for which we care, the linchpin of social responsibility.

These conditions impelled me to search for a new way of approaching Celan. In effect, they licensed me to abandon the idea of treating his oeuvre as if it were a closed monad, an inert bundle of texts and ideas made accessible only through its singularity, in and through its so-called self-sufficiency or autonomy. With the dissociation of the work from such a frame, it immediately became possible to obtain resonances from it that would prompt new appraisals. Evaluations which hitherto went unnoticed. And which I emplotted into a story influenced by a transcultural set of concerns. In this way, *The Speculative Lyric* seeks to do with Celan what Achille Mbembe urges we do with global modernity: anchor it in a context that will enable us to determine how disparate histories

[3] Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 100.

of violence are constitutive of one another, and how they disproportionally affect the lives of those deemed unworthy of care.

I arrived at this perspective not all at once but rather in a cumulative fashion, writing and rewriting my chapters so that they would reflect an emergent unity. A constellation or ensemble of impressions mediated by my own continuous reception of the works of Celan and Philip, and by the emergent social reality in which their voices were jointly attended to.

This is the prism through which I approached the issue of understanding how the Holocaust and Transatlantic slavery are bound up with certain "civilizing" ideologies and projects in the West that have sought to undo, dismantle, mutilate the space in which subjects breathe and live.

To close, I would like to return to the place where this dissertation began: with a reading of Primo Levi's book on his time in Auschwitz, *Se questo è un uomo*. We must not forget what Levi's unlistened-to story stirred into our discussion. Through this characterization a province of experience was thrown into relief. I am referring to the event of being silenced and alienated from one's words, which Levi describes as a kind of death: a space where he feels his isolation from his voice as part and parcel of his distance from his own freedom. Recall the procession of "symbolic images" in which Levi, inside Block 45, drifts off to sleep and finds himself at a gathering among family and friends. Recall the way in which the friends to whom he wants to relate his story, his testimony of his life in Auschwitz, get up and walk away from him. Remember their indifference and their unwillingness to follow what they hear. Levi's unlistened-to story is therefore an instance of unattended-to testimony:

no one attempts to hear, or cares to listen, to what is at stake in his own words, the experiential depth of which is paralyzed.

A reader who takes the time to reflect on this dream grasps what it is about: avoidance. Or the failure to acknowledge the pain of a fellow human being. And we do not need access to Levi's innermost thoughts to understand the sidestepping of responsibility, the brutal indifference, that typifies this attitude, the uncanny blankness that underpins it and sends a chill through our bodies. Moreover, an attentive reader is able to detect what is *absent* from the dream: a receiver. Or an addressee outside the walls of Auschwitz who is capable of caring for, watching over, whatever Levi fails to say to the people in his dream. What is needed above all is a receiver: a witness capable of completing his story by shuttling it forth into the present, its blankness and uncanniness asking us to take charge of what has been ignored.

And so, miraculously, Levi invents one. His testimonial memoir fabricates a witness. So strong, he contends, was his experience of alienation in the Lager that he felt a need to recount it to "others" in a *fabula*:

> Il bisogno di raccontare ali "altri", di fare gli "altri" partecipi, aveva assunto fra noi, prima della liberazione e dopo, il carattere di un impulso immediate e violento, tanto da rivaleggiare con gli altri bisogni elementari: il libro è stato scritto per soddisfare a questo bisogno; in primo luogo quindi a scopo di liberazione interiore.[4]

Or in English:

> The need to tell "others," to make the "others" participate, had assumed amongst us, before the liberation as well as after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of rivaling other elementary

[4] Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Letteratura italiana Einaudi, 1989), 9.

> needs: the book was composed to satisfy this need; above all for the purpose of inner liberation.[5]

The point is that *we* are the "others." And that the story is of course Levi's. The promise of an inner liberation was foreclosed by existence in the Lager, Levi clarifies in these moving passages, yet such freedom could be brought to completion, could fulfil elementary needs, after Auschwitz, once the Lager could be represented in words and signs in which the outside world could participate. Redemption, then, by way of testimony: Levi writes his book so as to share with readers and listeners that alienation from the self which was a vital part of life in Block 45, and in so doing frees himself from the terror of needing to repeat and relive still another unlistened-to story.

In this sense, it seems the monumental labor Levi undertakes to write his own history has less to do with remembering it than with giving it a readable form, which he can then bequeath to the future. The role of the listener is indispensable to the affirmative fulfillment of this gesture. Here the testimony which is held out to us invites us *to bear witness*, fashions us as a third party, as part of its rhetorical appeal to "others"—a categorical appeal that implies the kind of ethical stance we must take in order to satisfy Levi's call. We become witnesses only insofar as we offer our assent to his appeal, to his call. Only if we can in some way affirm it. Which is to say, only if we can attend to it.

A testimony without a listener is perforce a testimony without an afterlife. The unlistened-to story has no afterlife because others have failed to listen to it. Luckily, redemption holds forth the promise not of resignation but of bringing about the kind of change necessary for redescribing whatever has been cast aside.

[5] My translation.

On this basis it is never too late to take up the work of listening and translation, in which an afterlife emerges through care.

FINIS

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