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Independent Scholar

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“All that has room within it / even without / language”: the poetic technique of Paul Celan

Abstract:

The eastern European poet Paul Celan (1920–70) asserted that poetry is non-aesthetic: neither a work nor a process of art. His uncompromising approach, which became increasingly concerned with language’s capacity not only to broach the unspeakable, but also bring that unspeakability into his poems, continues to influence and shape the work of contemporary scholars, translators and poets. In this paper, I use apophasis – a centuries-old philosophical and rhetorical approach developed to deal in language with what lies beyond language – as a lens through which to examine Celan’s extraordinary relationship with and handling of words; and how he manages to shave language to its sheerest extremes. I investigate his diction and register, his wrenching and deforming of the German tongue, his inventive reworking of selected vocabulary into neologism, and the effect of this compressed energy on the structure and tone of the poems. Arguing that Celan achieves a verbal and dynamic dislocation that draws attention to what the poems stop short of saying, I consider what might usefully be drawn from his radical example, in order to shape a contemporary poetics whereby a poet might deal with what can be said against the mightiness of what cannot.

Biographical note:

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Introduction: “What’s no more to be named” [1]

Imagine the feeling of diving to great depths. The ocean, acting like a sphincter on your body, crushing and buckling even the tiniest cells and capillaries. Hydrostatic pressure, pleating tissue, abbreviating breath. Then imagine your body is language, and the ocean is silence. You, floating in nothing but the vapour of the unsayable. And yet, from this vapour, words still emerge. Poems emerge. Compressed, skeletal, electrifying, showing how poetic language can behave under pressure, the closer it veers to silence. Such are the conditions inhabited by the poetry of Paul Celan (1920–70), whose work, in broaching the unspeakable, and bringing that unspeakability into his poems, shaves language to its sheerest extremes.

In this essay I examine Celan’s extraordinary relationship with and treatment of language: a poetic and performative accomplice/victim/survivor that Celan not only pushes to its dialectical extremes, but also co-opts as witness to a world *in extremis*. I consider what might usefully be drawn from Celan’s radical example, in order to shape a contemporary poetics whereby a poet might deal with what can be said against the mightiness of what cannot, and respond poetically to “all that has room within it / even without / language” (Celan, 2001, p. 237).

My interest in Celan and his poetics arises from an enduring creative and critical interest in the uses of apophasis (ἀπόφασις) [2] to inform a contemporary poetic practice which grapples with the challenge of articulating the inarticulable. Apophasis is the rhetorical practice of defining things in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are which, since Platonic times, has been used by philosophers, theologians, poets and mystics in both Eastern and Western traditions, as a means of addressing, in language, phenomena beyond the known and the expressible. Apophasis would seem to help us capture, or at least signal, moments where meanings, emotions and mysteries evade articulation. It is not purely a verbal tool: in visual art, its presence might be signified by apparent emptiness; and in music, by silence. Any artwork of any genre that renders – literally or implicitly – silence, absence, blankness, space, light or dark as a component or theme, provokes interpretations that are apophatic in nature. Whenever we are invited to, or feel compelled by reading a poem or listening to a piece of music, to slip through the spaces or silences to focus on the un-wordedness that lies beyond, we are responding to a resonance that is profoundly apophatic.

A writer’s work necessarily includes incomplete pieces or projects. I have electronic folders full of aborted poems: folders named “The Disappointment of Previous Drafts”. “Scraps”. “Failures”. “The Undead”. Once, I would have been tempted to blame these failures on not being able to find the right words. I would have made language’s instability and occasional unavailability as the scapegoat for my own lack of confidence – and insight – into how poetic language can work. Sometimes I can revive the undead and breathe life into the corpse. I can apply a clinical approach – nip and tuck a verb here, shave off an adjective there, transplant those stanzas – and these interventions may restore blood flow and the black marks and spaces start to become more sinewy, more responsive to each other. The clinical approach restores ink and words. Ultimately what I seek, however, is not ink and words, but lymph and

vapour. The intake of breath while the thought is still forming. How do I put *that* on the page? Because in the midst of this simultaneous fascination and frustration with language, I have always suspected that for a *real* poet, inarticulacy can be far richer poetically: that imperfection, brokenness, incompleteness can be sources of creative possibility and dramatic tension. Why else would the speaker in poem 1700 (undated) by Emily Dickinson (1830–86) insist:

To tell the Beauty would decrease
To state the Spell demean – (Dickinson, 1970, p. 692)

This poem suggests that language is not enough to capture what poetry is capable of expressing, despite the speaker’s best efforts: “My Will endeavours for its word / And fails” (Dickinson, 1970, p. 293). And yet, for the poem’s speaker, the outcome for this descriptive “failure” is not disappointment, but:

A Rapture as of Legacies –
Of introspective Mines – (Dickinson, 1970, p. 693)

This outcome, I intuit, is far *better* than words: a revelatory, transcendent yet inarticulable experience, hovering at the extremes of consciousness. It is a source of ecstasy and richness that any words, arrived at too easily, might obscure and yet, towards which, through its declared inadequacy, the poem is able to gesture. Thus, without diminishing the mystery of the poem, these concluding lines reinforce the message of the poem’s opening: that to “state the Spell” would indeed “demean” it. The Spell’s supernatural particularity can only be expressed through the declaration that it is inexpressible. As critic Terry Eagleton suggests: “[Poetry] is the most complete sort of human language that one could imagine – though what constitutes language, ironically, is exactly its incompleteness” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 22).

But this paper is about the poetics and technique of a “poet of the mouth and eye that fill with dirt” (McHugh, 1993, p. 116) whose epoch, culture, language and frame of reference were different to Dickinson’s, yet whose poetic speakers might be considered to share kinship with Dickinson’s recondite voices. Celan’s speakers, however, are not grappling with beauty so much as with another extremity of experience: horror.

Celan was born to Jewish parents who lived in Czernowitz (then part of Romania, now part of Ukraine). Domiciled in France for most of his adult life, Celan chose to write poetry in German, his mother tongue, his mother’s mother tongue and “his mother’s murderers’ tongue” (Felstiner in Celan, 2001, pp. xxi–xxii). Both of Celan’s parents perished in the Nazi death camps, and it is this tragedy, together with the wreckage of the emotional, cultural and geopolitical legacy of the Shoah that is generally, though not universally, agreed by critics of Celan’s work to underwrite most of his poetry and prose. Celan also experienced severe depression, an illness that steadily worsened in the 1960s. He killed himself at the age of 50.

In Celan's poetry, we are confronted by the apparently insurmountable gulf between the speakable and unspeakable, and how language – particularly apophatically-inflected language – may represent that gulf at the same time as attempting to overcome it. Celan's poetics illuminate how poems might operate in order to witness and to participate in an exchange which can neither be concluded nor closed down, even when flensed of even the smallest excess, the words framing the exchange ever sparer and more compressed.

Scholar William Franke, proponent of a "philosophy of the unsayable," and a leading authority on the history, role and function of apophasis, makes the radical assertion that when "language is exposed in its inability to express" (Franke, 2014, p. 135) it displays "its greatest, perhaps its only genuine, expressive power" (p. 135). The implication here is that language shows its true drama and dynamism – its full performative range – when linguistic fluency is most under pressure, and language is thrown into relief by hesitation, evasiveness, ambiguity, aposiopesis, and stammer. And, by invoking a lexicon of negation and denial, "in which unnameability is not only asserted but performed" (Sells, 1994, p. 3), apophasis can provide a framework for language's "inability to express" (Franke, 2014, p. 135), and can perform, explicitly or implicitly, the myriad dynamics of a "saying away". Of Celan's work, Franke suggests that: "It is not what the poems say but what they point to and decline to say or prove incapable of saying that bears the burden of their pathos" (Franke, 2014, p. 85).

My reading of Celan's work throws up two main (and related) reasons for exploring how an apophatic approach can sharpen the execution and effect of extremity within poetry. One consideration relates specifically to poetic technique: what Celan does to and with words, and how this textual manipulation casts language as witness to the abyss. The other consideration, again connected to language, is more concerned with understanding the implications of Celan's radical and uncompromising attitude to poetic language, chiefly his insistence that poetic language is non-metaphorical (Celan in Wolosky, 1986). Scholar Shira Wolosky quotes Celan's declaration from his famous 1961 "The Meridian" speech: "that language is not an abstract concept of speech, but language become reality ... mindful of the boundaries established for it by language, of the possibilities laid open for it by language" (Celan in Wolosky, 1986, p. 208). Wolosky argues that this rejection of abstraction is linked to traditions of Judaic and (specifically) kabbalistic linguistic mysticism, in which "language is reified, granted an ontological status" (p. 198) [3]. This conjecture leads Wolosky to a logical, yet still somewhat startling conclusion that "Celan's ... is a poetic which cannot be identified with an attempt to represent the ineffable" (p. 208), an assertion which brings into question the very substance of ineffability in the context of Celan's outlook and oeuvre. While I do not propose to enter into a discussion of Judaic mysticism, it is worthwhile considering, in the light of Wolosky's claim, how much of a bearing this reification of language, as manifested in Celan's writing, might have when considering how his poems hover at the extremities of what can be expressed. Indeed – and as this paper seeks to explore – for a poet such as Celan, do these extremities even exist?

A per(version) of language: the German outside of German in Celan's poems

Discussing Celan's poetics and their relationship to the Holocaust gives an opportunity to address the often-quoted (and sometimes misinterpreted) assertion by Theodor Adorno (1903–69) that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, 1983, p. 34). However, rather than arguing for poetry's proscription post-Holocaust, Adorno is suggesting the opposite. Historian Peter E. Gordon explains that: “Like Adorno, Celan knew that in the midst of ongoing horror the old values of lyricism and transcendence could not persist ... Poetry could still be written, but it had to be as fissured and fractured as the world itself” (Gordon, 2020). And indeed, even before attempting to analyse a Celan poem, attention is caught by its form and materiality, and the realisation that the poet's register is already heavily freighted; for Celan's use of German is a deeply considered (per)version of the language: structurally and visually, idiomatically and symbolically.

Speaking in 1958, Celan refers obliquely to the Holocaust, suggesting that language survived “in spite of everything” but “it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting” (Celan, 2001, p. 395). Effectively, language underwent its own apophatic experience: this nullification “gave back no words for what happened” (p. 395) and yet language did endure, for “it *passed through* this happening” (p. 395; emphasis added). The resilience of language: surviving in order, on the one hand, to give agency back to the writer, and on the other, to exact a toll from that writer because of the terrible narratives that demand, somehow, to be written.

Noting that Celan uses German for all his poetry, scholar James K. Lyon remarks on Celan's “unique word material” (Lyon, 1983, p. 50), consisting of obscure archaisms, specialist terms, and elaborate compounds (Lyon, 1983). Lyon claims that: “from a list of [Celan's] vocabulary reduced to its component parts one could hardly recognize this poetry as belonging to the middle decades of the 20th century” (p. 50). Strikingly, the effect of this “German outside of German” (Bruns in Gadamer, 1997a, p. 17), as will be shown in the following example, is not compromised by its translation into English [4]. In the following lines from “A Rogues’ and Gonifs’ Ditty Sung at Paris Emprés Pontoise by Paul Celan from Czernowitz Near Sadagora,” Celan makes wordplay with the name of the almond tree (the scent of bitter-almond is associated with the hydrogen cyanide used in Zyklon B):

Almond tree, Talmundree.
Almondream, Dralmondream.
And the Allemandtree,
Lemandtree. (Celan, 2001, p. 160)

There is a singsong, mesmeric quality to the rhythm of these lines, a sort of tumbling, iterative, waltzing motion set up by the repetition of the first four dactylic metrical feet; and then a pause (as if in a dance) for the “And the ...” before the rhythm picks up again with “Allemandtree”. Allemand is the French word for Germany, and so John Felstiner's rendition into English is a clever trans-creation, preserving the poetic voice and the riff of the rhyme structure from Celan's original:

Mandelbaum, Bandelmaum.

Mandeltraum, Trandelmaum.
Und auch der Machandelbaum
Chandelbaum. (Celan, 2001, p. 159)

Sounding deceptively like a nursery rhyme, these lines use lilting language to gloss unspoken atrocities. Their musicality recalls the camp orchestras created by the SS, and how these prisoner ensembles were ordered to play music as unspeakable horrors played out around them (Fackler, n.d.).

Thus in Celan's poems, a German that belongs to the aggressor – the language that “passed through this happening” (Celan, 2001, p. 395) and that was changed and deformed by that happening – emerges in its subsequent deformity (even when musically rendered) as the aggressor *against* itself. Jed Rasula notes Celan “*executed* the language from within ... the German language itself becomes the means of its own disembodiment ... more and more of the language simply goes up in smoke” (Rasula, 1983, p. 115; emphasis in original). German thus is its own means of extermination, showing how Celan offers another approach to the apophatic in the form of a *literal* saying away, whereby language is witnessed in the act of undoing itself. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) notes that: “in [Celan's] poetic German, there is a source language and a target language ... an extraordinary crossing ... of cultures, references, literary memories, always in the mode of extreme condensation, caesura, ellipsis and interruption” (Derrida, 2005, pp. 99–100).

As shown in the following lines from an untitled poem in *The No-One's Rose* (1963), Celan's speaker identifies with language, makes it a “fellow-star” complicit in the experience of being threatened, persecuted, at risk of annihilation. Speaker and language are the only recourse – and the only resource – left to bear witness, and so the speaker, already implicated in the act of writing and witnessing, calls on language also to hold itself to account:

Who awakened? You and I.
Language, language. Fellow-star. Earth-cousin. (Celan, 2001, p. 187)

This poem fulfils its purpose as “one person's language-become-shape” (Celan, 2011, p. 9) that “wants to head toward some other, it needs this other, it needs an opposite” (p. 409). As I have studied Celan's poetic approach, I have often been compelled to wonder whether the most urgent and intense dialogue in Celan's work is not between poetic speaker and reader, but between poet and language itself. Celan states that a poem “becomes conversation – often despairing conversation” (Celan, 2001, p. 410) in which “what is addressed takes shape only in the space of this conversation, gathers round the I addressing and naming it” (p. 410) [5]. This attitude is pragmatic, for if there is no “I” in the poem, then how can the poem address a “you”? While the “I” being present in the poem apparently happens at enormous cost to Celan in terms of his psyche, in terms of his poetry we see how Celan turns on the full force of language's capacity to bear witness to and be mouthpiece for the real, even when that language must shatter in order to do so.

Yet Celan's manipulation of the German language is apparently no artistic or lyrical affectation, nor is it wordplay executed to attract critical attention or praise, and his attitude to poetic language is radical in its implications for a poetics of apophysis. This is an attitude which, "notwithstanding its inalienable complexity of expression, is concerned with precision. It does not transfigure or render 'poetical'; it names, it posits, it tries to measure the area of the given and the possible" (Celan, 1986, p. 16). Accordingly, Wolosky notices "there are many, many Celan texts which refuse the power of language to render a coherent image of reality" (Wolosky, 1995, p. 178), explaining that it is the coherence that is at stake, rather than reality. According to Wolosky, Celan's work:

is not a poetry of failed representation but of interrupted discourse. The words fracture, the syntax slants, the ellipses penetrate in recognition of the founding of language in exchange, interchange, address offered and received, and also in response to the foundering of language when such interchange becomes ruptured. (p. 178)

The "foundering of language" here being the deliberate maiming of German language in order to break silence and push words "toward what hurts and haunts the word" (Franke, 2007b, p. 13).

It would seem that one way of hurting the word may be to distort it: for Celan's work is known for its extraordinary re-shaping and torque of language. His work is scattered with constant recastings of language about language: "the ensilenced Word" (Celan, 2001, p. 79); "hoofsayings" (p. 47); "blueblack syllables" (p. 49) "wordspoor" (Celan, 2014, p. 13); "speechfog" (p. 305); "the written hollows itself" (p. 67); "bone-Hebrew" (p. 54). There are also constant references to mouths, tongues, teeth and jaws, and to the ways in which these apparatuses of speech may be exercised in performing an inexhaustible repertoire of saying: barking, asking, singing, hollering and harping.

Another method of hurting the word comes through what the poet terms "Wortaufschüttung" [wordaccretion] (Celan, 2014, pp. 16 & 17): deliberate distortion of a compound word. German nouns, adjectives and verbs are commonly constructed as compounds: for example, "der Fallschirmspringer" – an amalgamation of three words Fall (fall/drop), Schirm (cover/umbrella), Springer (jumper) – means "parachutist". Celan imitates and draws attention to this mode of construction by plundering the German vernacular to create neologisms, which not only mimic the grammatical convention of German, but also weaponise it. As Celan wrote to his wife Gisèle Lestrang: "the language with which I construct my poems has nothing to do with the one that is spoken here or elsewhere" (Celan quoted in Kligerman, 2007, p. 124). The impression emerges that when every word uttered by Celan's poetic voices seems to come at such enormous cost, the poet has found it perhaps more effective to bolt words together in a compound construction, such that the lead word drags its associates along, sometimes smoothly, often not.

Celan's propensity for re-forming language is far from unprecedented in poetry [6], yet few poets have sustained the density, inventiveness and frequency of his practice, inciting

language to turn on itself. Celan combines noun with verb, adverb or adjective; yokes abstract noun to concrete noun; doubles up adjectives to make outlandish, often troubling, yet deeply compelling combinations which, cleverly transcreated here by Pierre Joris, are powerfully reframed:

Latewoodday under
 netnerved skyleaf. Through
 bigcelled idlehours clammers, in rain
 the blackblue, the
 thoughtbeetle

Animal-bloodsoming words
 Crowd before its feelers. (Celan, 2014, p. 33)

Celan's poetic compression in this untitled poem from *Breathturn* (1967), and quoted here in full, is masterful. In the first one and a half lines we have a wood of deciduous trees; a canopy comprising leaves that are broad enough to filter the late afternoon light; patterns of veins, a dendritic nervous system tingling in each leaf; enough density of leaf so that, for one looking upwards, they pass for a sky. All this in just four "words". In the second stanza appears a classic Celanian reference to "Animal-bloodsoming words" (Celan, 2014, p. 33), in which the speaker casts language as agent, co-protagonist, mobbing the thoughtbeetle.

The poetic repercussions are intriguing and contradictory. On the one hand, this practice apparently serves to increase the number of inventive phrases in the Celanian lexicon and thus the expansion of their wider meaning; yet on the other, by depriving component words of their customary autonomy, it performs a visual contraction of language that seems cumulatively to effect a dismantling and undermining of words and their independent significance. While I suspect this latter outcome to be more relevant to Celan's poetics, with regard to Wolosky's theory about his reification of language, the bolting together of words highlights another contradiction. It may appear that these compound words deliver a more immediately accessible image – "latewoodday" and "skyleaf" being so direct and economical – and thus may seem less effortful for the poem's speaker to usher into being (the first part-word easing the way for the rest), yet the length and complexity of these compound words do nonetheless arrest the reader's eye. The difficulty of their pronunciation causes the tongue to stumble. Moreover, combining two or more monosyllabic or disyllabic words has a rhythmic impact on the ear, sometimes smooth, sometimes irregular. The technique seems simultaneously to promote fluency and unevenness, accretion and dismemberment of language, resulting in a shorthand and intensely imagistic impact, which draws attention to language's powerful malleability. Aggregating sequences of nouns and adjectives into new descriptors means that the poet can patch up any apparent shortfall in language ... with language. No seamless, invisible mending this, however, but a suturing of word to word that simultaneously shows the joins and threatens to rip them wide apart.

It is interesting to speculate about the effect of experimenting with a similar compound word technique for an original poem in English. This is not necessarily with the intention of using

the English language as an aggressor against itself in order to make a faux-Celan “English outside of English” poem, unless such an intention would best serve the poem’s aims. Rather, I am thinking about how trying out unusual combinations of words might foster a sense of awkwardness, or unease; or of labouring for invented terminologies that can exist only as a performative overwriting of the unsayable. Under these circumstances, an unusual neologism would immediately draw attention to itself, not necessarily because of its musical elegance – as in “couple-colour” or “dapple-dawn-drawn” (Manley Hopkins in Gardner, 1972, p. 787) – but because of its unwieldiness. Aggregates of “slant-words,” my co-opting of the term “slant-rhyme” in which poetic lines come close to rhyming but in fact are not exact or “perfect” rhymes, could serve as approximations or indications of things that cannot directly be said. A clustering of words or sounds evoking an onomatopoeic or homonymic association with something else; approaches that suggest the straining of language for expression, or a circling around whatever is trying to be said. Repeated vowel sounds that reverberate through a poem as echoes of themselves, like a bell tolling, or perhaps the sibilance and trip of consonantal wordplay. When taken in the context of an apophatic poem, these near-misses may perform a more accurate expression or representation of the inexpressible, manifesting as language in the process of being repelled by, or itself repelling the force of ineffability. I would like to offer an example of this “circling around” in an extract from my own work, with a Celan poem starting: “The bright stones ride through the air” (Celan, 2001, p. 177). I take and slightly adapt this phrase, then use its sounds to make my own:

Bright stones ride through air, bright stones ride as thrown, though they own air, the right ones hide, their throats wear tones of rough, they stun the throw, slide bones through hair, rope rites and brighten, toughen brides to whitened stone, owe no bite, no stare, none better, no. (Webster, 2020, p. 209; italics in original)

What builds up here is an amalgam of sound, pace and tone, where coherence of “meaning” is subordinate to the music of words. This is language parallel to sense. There is repetition of the long o vowel sound, and the diphthongs ai and ie, which cause a braking effect between the consonantal plosives and fricatives. Such vowel sounds could produce an impact that is arguably soothing, and yet words like “rough,” “stun,” “bones,” “rites,” “brides,” “whiten,” “bite” and “no” gesture towards a context and a sensibility that are unmistakably off-kilter.

Language: the one real thing “in the midst of the losses”

The conventions of poetry often involve figures of speech such as metaphor and simile, but Celan – contemptuous of the “Metapherngestöber,” translated as “metaphor squall” (Celan, 2001, p. 277), and “metaphor-flurry” (Celan, 2014, p. 89) – regards these figures as obfuscations of language that get in the way of “Truth itself” (Celan, 2001, p. 277). Why is this denial and rejection of metaphor so critical to Celan’s poetics? Various scholars have commented on this issue (Kligerman, 2007; Lyon, 1983; McHugh, 1993; Steiner, 1972; Waldrop in Celan, 1986), attributing this denial to the fact that Celan felt assigning metaphoric status to his poems would be to obscure or perhaps even soften or lyricise the horror of the events to which they allude. Scholar Rosmarie Waldrop, however, hints that this conjecture, reasonable though it may be, still does not really get to the heart of Celan’s

relationship with poetic language. In the introduction to her translation of Celan's collected prose Waldrop comments that the poet "refuses to talk 'technique'" (p. viii), adding that language and poetry "was not a game for him, not experiment, not even 'work'" (p. viii).

Celan comes to his material – words – with an attitude that reflects the conflicted nature of that material, mediated as it is through the unspeakable. This is not an ineffability that owes itself to the unknowable so much as the rout of language, caused by events that defy description. The acts of witnessing and exchange are central to Celan's work, and his poetic personae use language as a representation of witness and exchange. Poetry may be the literary medium that, for longer than any other, can maintain and survive an unwavering gaze at the most difficult and extreme of experiences. It is the genre through which language, coherently or incoherently – for incoherence may ultimately be the only reasonable response – can best bear witness. And poetic language is the mode through which the act of witnessing is communicated, for as Celan says: "a poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, heartland perhaps" (Celan, 2001, p. 396). Language, maimed and compromised though it is for Celan, can and must bear witness, because Celan's poetics depend on this conviction that language is what survives and insists, tempered by the indescribable:

You are still, are still, are still
a dead woman's child,
vowed to the No of my longing. (Celan, 2001, p. 63)

The lines above, quoted from the poem "In Front of a Candle" from *From Threshold to Threshold* (1955) seem to invert and echo Peter's denial of Christ. The speaker identifies the child three times, as if this repetition can imprint the truth, or wring the corporeal fact of the child out of the words. The act of witnessing – of seeing, hearing, and experiencing – must however be completed through representation, in this case, poetry.

Derrida, citing Celan's work, suggests that: "all responsible witnessing involves a poetic experience of language" (Derrida, 2000, p. 180). The witness (the person observing, whom we understand as the poetic speaker, the "I" of the poem) is petitioning the reader to believe something at which the reader was not present. In other words, the reader is witness of the witness. Derrida clarifies that:

The addressee of the witnessing, the witness of the witness, does not see for himself what the first witness says he has seen; the addressee has not seen it and never will see it. This direct or immediate non-access of the addressee to the object of the witnessing is what marks the absence of this "witness of the witness" to the thing itself. This absence is therefore crucial. (p. 189)

Celan remarks that: "poetry is by necessity a unique instance of language" (Celan, 1986, p. 23): the same language as that which "passed through this happening" (Celan, 2001, p. 395)

and survived, to become the instrument by which the poet attempts “to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was and where I was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself” (pp. 395–396). Thus, as Waldrop explains, for Celan a poem is not static upon a page, but *Atemwende* (breathturn), a word coined by the poet to describe (and not metaphorically):

[T]his death-in-life when our breath is taken away, yet turns and re-turns ... [j]ust as, on a smaller scale, the constant *Atemwende* we know, the constant alternation of inhaling and exhaling, allows us to practise the encounter with both air and its absence, the condition of our life and the “other” which will eventually end it. (Waldrop in Celan, 1986, p. ix)

As Lyon notes, “for Celan ... the primary concern of language is no longer to create a world of symbol or metaphor” (Lyon, 1983, p. 46). The poet himself insisted that the “black milk of daybreak” (Celan, 2001, p. 30) alluded to in his early and perhaps best-known poem “Death Fugue” [“Todesfuge”] “is *no longer* a figure of speech or oxymoron. It is *reality*” (Celan quoted in Kligerman, 2007, p. 129; emphases in original) [7]. In fact, through the apophatic “saying away” from “all tropes and metaphors” (Celan, 2001, p. 411) performed by Celan’s speakers, the poet himself radically renounces poetic language [8]. As Wolosky elaborates, in Celan’s poetry, “the concrete, the particular, the temporal – the immanent world of human activity – all these are insisted upon as the sphere of language and the mode of creative endeavour” (Wolosky, 1986, p. 209).

In a later analysis discussing what she terms Celan’s linguistic mysticism, Wolosky notes how Celan’s language works in relation to silence: “language is the focal, pervasive image in [Celan’s] work, which explores the borders of language as they verge upon the limits of expression. In Celan, however, the territories of language and silence shift from metaphysics as such to more specifically historical questions” (Wolosky, 1995, p. 267). Wolosky’s reading of Celan’s work is premised on the supposition that, for Celan, the ineffable does not lie beyond the temporal realm of history, nor the temporal and material world. Implicit in this claim is that there is nothing that language cannot say, hence Wolosky’s assertion that Celan’s poetic is not representing the ineffable (Wolosky, 1986). On the contrary, it is challenging the notion of the ineffable as a phenomenon beyond the reach – or not made – of words, and it mounts this challenge not through prolixity, but through its opposite. By offering a sense of how poetic language *qua* language can engage with what lies beyond words – yet according to Celan, not beyond the world – Celan’s example has important implications for how a poet may frame an apophatic approach to address extremity.

The unspeakable yields a poetry

Over Celan’s 30-year writing career, it is possible to trace a gradual movement, linguistically and stylistically, towards a starker poetics in his work. Joris notes how, by the 1960s – the last decade of Celan’s life – Celan’s poems “were pared down, the syntax grew tighter and more spiny, and his trademark neologisms and telescoping of words increased, while the overall composition of the work became much more serial in nature” (Joris in Celan, 2014, p. xl). There is little flesh on the poems, only the bones show; effectively there is nothing to

soften the bleakness and disturbing angularity of what must be spoken in order to allow what cannot be spoken to come through. The Celan poem thus becomes scaffold, skeleton, supporting structure for the ragged gaps and gasps of the unsayable. By subjecting language to an ever-increasing torsion, Celan builds a sense of pressure and friction in his poetry, accentuated not so much by what the poetic lines actually declare so much as what manages to escape through the warping of their phrasing.

In this poet's work we have an example of how apophasis – a rhetoric that deliberately makes use of denial – may yet be the best means of expression towards that which, even if it seems indescribable, must never be denied. Wolosky attests that in Celan's writing, "apophasis ... asserts some radical, even originary break, but one that retains a kind of positive force" (Wolosky, 1995, p. 253). In Celan's poetry, apophasis is a vehicle for the unspeakable to find some means, however broken or deficient, of being "spoken". It is also a way of showing, through that deficiency and brokenness, the inadequacy of language to frame the magnitude of an atrocity such as the Holocaust, and, consequently, emphasising that magnitude:

What's no more to be named, hot,
hearable in the mouth.

Nobody's voice, again. (Celan, 2001, p. 117)

These anguished lines, from "An Eye, Open," in *Speech-Grille* (1959), vibrate not so much with a propositional negation as with a hortatory one. Nobody's voice *should* ever again have to sound the name of this. Nobody's mouth (or mind) should even have to shape a name for an atrocity like this. So, in contrast to an apophasis that strives to grapple with subjects beyond language and knowledge (as in the mystical tradition), this is apophasis that recognises an ineffability inherent in a reality that is only too human in its inhumanity: a hideous reality that threatens to defeat language and defy articulation, a monstrousness that must be rejected. Of Celan's work Paul Auster notes: "the unspeakable yields a poetry that continually threatens to overwhelm the limits of what can be spoken" (Auster, 1983, p. 102). And yet language, the broken survivor of this reality, is also the ultimate witness of that reality, as well as the means of rejecting the horror of what has happened.

Celan's attitude to poetic language is itself apophatic: for, by denying that the language of his poetry is "poetic" or metaphoric, Celan instead insists that the language of his poems must be considered literal. For the poet, the closer to the limits of language that poetry comes, the sheerer and tauter that language must be. Language's forms and possibilities are at first dictated and constrained – damaged even – by terrible realities, but then, at the hands of the poet, have to break beyond them to embody more possibilities and additional forms, including the ultimate apophatic "statement" of silence. This is a silence arrived at through the actualisation of language "set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens" (Celan, 1986, p. 49). Thus, in the shearing off and withdrawal of words, into what Celan called "the non- or not-poem" (Joris in Valentine, 2015), ultimately both poem and poet may

disappear from the page. It is almost as though Celan's poetry becomes progressively starved of breath, such that the poems are the tortured and effortful exhaling of constricted (or poisoned) lungs. In Celan's work, we witness how this master of the pressurised poetic pushes a poem towards what the poet himself suggests is the true *telos* of a poem: "showing a strong bent toward falling silent" (Celan, 2001, p. 409). But just as language "went through" (Celan, 1986, p. 34) the Holocaust, yet could "resurface, 'enriched' by it all" (p. 34), this disappearance of words and poet turns out to be an erasure without expiration. For in Celan's work, both poet and poem re-emerge, as if with a new intake of breath – *Atemwende* – causing oxygen to flow back into the compromised lungs. Celan's poems move through apophasis towards a transformative and radical eloquence "deep in the glowing / text-void" (Celan, 2001, p. 361).

Conclusion: "Nobody's voice, again"

In trying to surmount the difficulty of finding words for the inexpressible, poets can either choose to fall silent, or find ever more inventive and oblique strategies to land on a description or image. The poem – constructed of these words and spaces that interact and overlap – becomes ice-like, capable of bearing only a certain weight of phrase. Yet the poem can only come into being through this process: that is, the calibration between restraint and pressure, stability and collapse, and the relationship of these to the structure beneath. Poems are made of this fretwork; they are made of this "fret" work, enacting the dynamics of their making.

Apophasis asserts and affirms uncertainty. It does not make poetry about ineffability easier to write; but it does indeed help to broaden, deepen and extend a poetic and lyrical scope. Poets who address the challenge of the ineffable are addressing issues that evade or exceed human consciousness or experience, and thus elude our capacity to articulate them. These issues, by their very nature, can only be spoken of and contextualised on a hypothetical basis ... using words that, even at best, cannot measure up. However skilled and experienced they are, poets and writers cannot take it for granted they will always find what they might consider to be the "right" words. If, however, we regard writing solely to be a question of finding the right words, not only do we risk limiting language's power and possibility but potentially, also our own expressive and aesthetic capacities. An awareness of apophasis can lead to a deeper and richer engagement with language at the very point where language falters and frays.

Poets constantly push at the limits of language, seeking access to metaphysical and expressive thresholds around which words crumble and recede. The urge to express something that seems to be beyond words is not, however, the preserve only of poets and poetic writing, but something that touches us all, because just about everything we can and do say is shaped and conditioned by what we leave out, withhold, hint at, do not, or cannot say (Franke, 2014). Celan's work shows that we are all implicated in a wider conversation about the significance of what is being said through *not* being said. A conversation that acknowledges the language we use and encounter in our daily lives is often – most usually – inarticulate, fragmentary and disjointed. Inarticulacy and disjunction might imply a troubling

defect in language and communication, and yet we need not view it as such, or at least, need not be discomfited by it. In a world that regularly challenges our capacity to make sense or to understand, inarticulacy and hesitation may be the most productive modes of engagement, of “making sense”. The feeling of being tongue-tied may be the most meaningful and sincere response to interactions that cause joy or agony, or to relationships and situations that confound our desire for certainty. The encounters that tip over into the realm of the unsayable are the ones most likely to challenge many of us to invent new vocabularies, phrases, and euphemisms in order to articulate the effects of these experiences, even if we cannot adequately describe the experiences themselves. Yet these are situations that continue to provoke and invigorate artistic, philosophical and ontological responses among thinkers, scientists, artists and poets. Poetry that offers a language to engage with language’s disintegration at the extremities of knowing or feeling or – like Celan’s oeuvre shows us, both repels and extends those extremities – is a poetry vital to the world.

Notes

[1] From “An Eye, Open” (Celan, 2001, p. 117).

[2] Scholar William Franke notes that the literal interpretation of the word apophysis reads “... as ‘away from speech’ or ‘saying away’ (*apo*, ‘from’ or ‘away from’; *phasis*, ‘assertion,’ from *phemi*, ‘assert’ or ‘say’)” (Franke, 2007a, p. 2; emphasis in original).

[3] Wolosky (1986) argues: “in Judaic tradition and mysticism ... it is language which is granted an elevated status” (1986, p. 197), adding that “such reification of language is persistent throughout Celan’s work, and indeed, is implicit in his whole linguistic model” (1986, p. 198).

[4] I am relying on English translations by Celan scholars John Felstiner (2001) and Pierre Joris (2011, 2014).

[5] The intensely dialogical nature of Celan’s poetics have been discussed in Davies (2002); Klink (2000); Stamelman (1987); Wolosky (1995, 1986).

[6] See Lewis Carroll (1998); Ogden Nash (1994); Gerard Manley Hopkins (1986); Ted Hughes (2003).

[7] Steiner (1972) observes that: “Celan himself often expressed a sense of violation in respect of the exegetic industry which began to gather around his poems” (1972, p. 45). Joris (2015) notes: “Celan had witnessed how his most famous poem ‘Deathfugue’ was open to misuse as its lushly lyrical musicality made it a very pretty and easily hummable tune while its rich verbal metaphoricity allowed some badly intentioned critics to deny it’s [sic] obvious link to the historical horrors of the Holocaust by claiming these images to be just surreal productions of the poet’s mind. Celan realized that he needed a new language, one in which, as he put it, metaphors, images, tropes can be lead ad absurdum, while the language gets greyer, more object-related, or is [sic] he wrote poetry’s language now needs to be “more sober, more factual. It distrusts beauty. It tries to be truthful...The language wants to relocate even its musicality is such your way that it has nothing in common with the ‘euphony’ which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors”” (Joris in Valentine, 2015).

[8] Referring back to Derrida’s comment about responsible witnessing (p. 12), Celan’s renunciation of poetic language does not, however, preclude the reader’s/witness’s *experiencing* of Celan’s language as poetic.

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