On the Way to Language: Reading Celan Philologically

Thresholds, Encounters: Paul Celan and the Claim of Philology, edited by Kristina Mendicino and Dominik Zechner
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Paul Celan (1920–1970) is critically acclaimed as one of the most internationally important poets of the twentieth century. Following the completion of the translation from German into American English by Pierre Joris (in 2020) of 11 slim volumes of incisive yet sometimes impenetrable poetry, the *Boston Review* placed Celan "among the most innovative poets of European modernism, he forged a new path for poetry after the terrors of the twentieth century" (Gordon 2020).[1] Many South African readers will be familiar with the multiethnic, multi-tongued German-Jewish-Romanian-French author's canonical Holocaust poem *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue) that contrapuntally entwines the fate of the camp victims with that of the death-bringing "master from Germany." Composed while Celan was still living in Bucharest (Romania) and published in the first volume of poetry *Sand aus den Urnen* (Sand from the Urnes) in Vienna in 1948, Celan later barred its republication, the most likely reason being that this hypnotic and incantatory vision of the Nazi camps would be misread as premature release from Germany's historic guilt during a time when the Federal Republic busied itself with economic reconstruction after World War II. Besides, Adorno had questioned the very possibility of writing verse "after Auschwitz,"[2] something Celan's oeuvre was to not only prove wrong, but his poems together with powerful narrative and poetological work have been seen by leading critics, including Adorno, as being one of

1 The sentiment expressed in the *Boston Review* in connection with the completion of Joris's work: *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry: A Bilingual Edition* (Celan 2020), is merely an indication of Celan's ongoing popularity among literary theorists and critics in the United States and elsewhere. See in this connection also Lozinski-Veach and Groves (2023).

2 This much quoted dictum from "Culture Critique and Society" (originally written in 1949) in *Prisms* (a collection of essays published in 1955), is based on a somewhat misleading translation.

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the most important examinations of the Shoah, its causes, and its consequences. Critics have regarded as pathbreaking Celan's relentless probing of language's referential and representational capability, not to mention his unparalleled talent as empathetic translator of poetry from Romanian, Russian, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, English, and Hebrew into German. Most of all, though, it is the poet's sounding of the unspoken that make him such an astute witness to the life, literature, and politics of his time, acutely attuned to the challenges of scientific and ecological change during the tumultuous 1950s and 60s.

Eschewing in his later texts—particularly from *Atemwende* ("Breathturn," 1967) onwards—the "word music" in the form of mesmerising metaphoricity that had originally drawn him to the poetry of Rilke, Hölderlin, and Trakl, Celan's work has been an inspiration to philosophers from Derrida to Badiou, Levinas, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, Blanchot, Gadamer, and others. They all wrestled like Celan with Heidegger's epochal *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) while recognising language as the place for performing existence and constructing identity (*ipseity*), not as representation but as presentation of being, a being inexorably tasked with *Mitsein* (being with an other) in dialogical reciprocity. Derrida was so taken by Celan's verbal receptivity that he devoted a monograph, *Shibboleth* (orig. paper presentation 1984; French 1986; Engl. *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* [2005]) to the poet's "Engführung" (Stretto, 1959), which many see as a companion piece to "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue).

But Celan's growing worldwide reputation and continuing reach extended beyond philosophy, literary theory, and criticism, having touched besides Japanese novelist Yoko Tawada not only French poets, for instance Yves Bonnefoy and André Du Bouchet, or the Belgian Jean Daive and German Durs Grünbaum, but also the Martinican Monchoachi and the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, not to mention his impact on Anselm Kiefer's magisterial paintings. Could it be because of Celan's relentless pursuit of poetry as force that "doesn't impose but that exposes"? In 1969 he had asserted in French: "La poesie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose" in epigrammatic brevity in *Gesammelte Werke* (Collected Works) (1983, 181), an insight utilised by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben to firmly assert: "philosophy is chiefly a poetic problem" (Agamben 1995, 49). Agamben, too, noted multilingual Celan's insistence on using his mother tongue German, comparing it with Dante's use of the vernacular as proof that "language is always already uniquely present before any individual utterance" (Agamben 1995, 48). Celan was adamant to write poetry in German, in that "uniquely present" language though as a French speaker living in Paris, France, he could have written poetry in two or three languages, one being Romanian. But it was the "vernacular" of his homeland, the Bukovina "a landscape where both people and books lived," as he recalled in his acceptance speech for the Bremen Literature Prize in 1958.[3]

3 This is one of the two important public addresses Celan gave; the other is the *Meridian*. For the full, short German text see Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (1983, 185–186).

(The Bukovina being the thickly forested, hilly "landscape" around Czernowitz, the town where he was born as Paul Antschel to an orthodox Jewish father and a mother steeped in High German literary culture. It was a cosmopolitan, multilingual place at the periphery of imperial Austria before it became part of Romania in 1919 and now, as Chernivtsi, is part of Ukraine after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.) More importantly, German, literally Celan's "mother's tongue" was also the language of his mother's murderers, shot dead in a Romanian camp in 1944, thus rendering the claim of German absolute since so much of the poet's work is furtively addressed his mother and also to his father who perished in a labour camp. However, writing in the language of the oppressor should not sound strange to South Africans remembering Ingrid Jonker (1933–1965). Denouncing, in the language of the oppressor, the increasing censorship of literature and the media under apartheid, her attitude resonates with Celan's mental unease about postwar Germany's forgetting about Nazi atrocities. In addition, both sadly took their own lives: Jonker by drowning herself in Cape Town's Three Anchor Bay and Celan (additionally traumatised by false accusations of plagiarism by the widow of the poet Yvan Goll) committed suicide by jumping into the river Seine in the spring of 1970.

"I have included in my poems an extreme of human experience in our times. As paradoxical as that might sound: it is precisely this that keeps me going," Celan wrote to a friend, affording a rare glimpse into his troubled life.[4] Its specific biographical and historical circumstances have recently been compassionately documented by the keeper of his estate, Frenchman Bertrand Badiou. His *Bildbiographie* (Pictorial Biography, 2023) traces the poet's life, shedding light especially on Celan's mental illness and exhausted relations with his wife and friends during the last five years in which he nevertheless kept teaching at the École Normale and writing intensely personal poems, still with general appeal pointing to deeply existential questions. *Bildbiographie* merely extends the wealth of biographical references drawn from extensive correspondence between Celan and his wife, graphic artist Giselle Lestrange, his lovers, among others the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann, friends, and publishers, now largely available in English translations. The extensive epistolary exchange seems to justify criticism's renewed interest in a biographical approach to literature, particularly since Celan often spoke about how concrete personal experiences, meetings with friends, or political events triggered poetic composition, something we now know from his correspondence. Yet we also know that he never tired of opposing biographical explanations of his work, always insisting that it is enough simply to read his poetry.

The 2023 scholarly essay collection *Thresholds, Encounters: Paul Celan and the Claim of Philology* does just that. Edited by Kristina Mendicino and Dominik Zechner as part of the thought-provoking SUNY series "Literature … in Theory," the book leads through the poet's oeuvre, especially the later texts with recourse to the narrative and poetological works. Twelve "chapters" are organised into two parts: while part 1, "Ex-

4 Cited in Badiou (2023, 505). Translation mine.

posing the Poem" (15–152) speaks in two essays each to issues of "History," "Ecology," and "Aurality," part 2, "Language Dislodged" (153–306), again subdivided into two essays each, enquires into Celan's articulations in relation to "Encounter," "Positionality," and "Translation." These two parts with their somewhat forced subheadings are prefaced by the editors' compact and insightful introduction, counterfactually titled "Dis-positions" (1–11) that provides brief but succinct exposés of the essays to follow. While often illuminating single poems, the essays always engage with previous readings like those of Derrida and Hammacher if they do not also speak to encounters with Adorno, Benjamin, Cixous, and a host of other iconic thinkers. Importantly, Mendicino and Zechner give the collection a twofold perspective, captured first in the two nomina "Threshold Encounters" placed side by side without conjunctive or prepositional relationship, thus leaving open their particular connection while nevertheless allowing the reader to get a sense of the poet's creative process by occasionally incorporating a poem's genesis in the discussion. Secondly, the title's extension: "Paul Celan and the Claim of Philology" unequivocally underpins an exegetical method of deep reading of what I call near-sighted, existential, and timeless poetry against "more recent scholarship that would presuppose the disciplinary and categorical formations that Celan's poetry troubles" (3). Put differently, the essay collection sets itself a twin task: first it seeks to elucidate Celan's later texts that register with exceptional sensitivity the verbal tremors of an unhoused, damaged life in late modernity, always testing the limits of language. Secondly, the collection wants to make good on "the Claim of Philology" put forward in Hamacher's "95 Theses on Philology."[5] Pinpointing his fourteenth thesis: "Poetry is prima philologia" (2), Mendicino and Zechner pay homage to the German-American critic by engaging his many facetted exegetical work with which he shone light on Paul Celan's poetry. Hamacher's exemplary "philological performances" are for the editors "a point of departure" for addressing the ways "in which the poetry of Paul Celan uncloses unforeseen threshold-spaces for encounters with the idioms of nature, philosophy, and literature, while opening those idioms, in turn, to possibilities for speaking otherwise" (3).

To recall, the late Werner Hamacher (1948–2017)[6] was one of the first deconstructive literary scholars in Germany who, incorporating readings by literary critic and Celan's filial friend Peter Szondi (1929-1971), drew inspiration from philosophical voices like those of Blanchot, Levinas, and especially Derrida and their respective critiques of hermeneutics. Expounding the profound implications of misreading and appropriation resulting from narrow hermeneutical explications of "meaning," Hamacher felt Gadamer and Ricœur-type hermeneutics were doing violence in interpretation besides foreclosing reading. Instead, taking his lead from poststructuralist thought and evoking Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Critique of Violence,"[7] Hamacher opened the path to

5 For Hamacher's "95 Theses on Philology," see Hamacher (2019a).

6 Three important texts in English that are relevant for Hamacher's readings of poetry by Celan and others are: Hamacher (1994, 219–265; 1996) and Hamacher et al. (2015).

7 See Benjamin (2021).

a new philology. Philology, he suggested, just like poetry, can offer a space where violence is suspended, a place where a genuine encounter with the other or with otherness can become possible. Thus, contrary to the traditional pursuit of restoring linguistic data and its meaning, Hamacher's mode of exegesis employs attentive, rummaging reading as tool for thinking in and with language, illuminating its linguistic and historical possibilities, its limits, and its silences. Mendicino and Zechner regard this kind of philology exemplary as attuned to Celan's "rich and inexhaustible poetic threshold-language" (5) that "in no way keeps to itself but restlessly gives way to word of others" (156). Thus, unperturbed the editors consider Hamacher's philology as the comportment toward poetic expressions that "emancipates the interval from its border phenomena and, going a step farther, opens up phenomena out of the interval between them" (2).

How a reading praxis operates that takes up the idea of "a split attention toward working through tradition and breaking off toward new entry paths" (5), Sarah Stoll demonstrates in chapter 9. Her contribution, "Occupiability" (199–229), affords a good glimpse into Hamacher's kind of attentive reading (203–208) by discussing and building on his analysis of the poem "Aus dem Moorboden" ("From the Moorfloor") that she sees as both framed and dictated by compositional (interlinear) and conceptional (occupiability) aspects showing how even a poem's structural components like "line breaks" or a "word-stump" like "Häm" offer a minimal "anatomic syllabic component—an atom" in "any linguistic constellation" that keeps the text open (204) "as a communication or a dispute among the meanings that arise in the various languages" informing this strange syllable "Häm" (205) that Hamacher made the focus of his reading. Those meanings, according to Stoll reading Hamacher reading Celan's poem "'do not correspond with each other, but rather controvert one another.' And it is only in this most extreme tension that the poem seems to begin to speak" (206) since "both the semantic and syntactic aspects are interlocked, and they are not available separately from each other." The "occupiability" invoked by some poems "is therefore generated on the one hand semantically, through the inhibition of the German language, the word's syllabic character (*Silbigkeit*) and its opening up to other languages, and, on the other hand, syntactically through grammatical indetermination" (206). Hamacher, Stoll suggests, reads Celan's (Shoah) poem "Aus dem Moorboden" as a poem on hope, which presents itself "as a weapon, as a protective and combative device that is launched in a political and linguistic struggle, a struggle over language and politics, over the politics of language and the language of political history" (208). Recognising with Hamacher certain Celan poems as configurations of "language as a temporal structure of intention," Stoll follows his philological approach because in her judgement it seeks to honour the integrity of the speaking voice, while also acknowledging the complexities and challenges inherent in the act of interpretation. Her beautiful, detailed explications of the poems "Ein Leseast" (One Reading Branch), "Offene Glottis" (Open Glottis), and the final lines of the famous "Meridian" speech testify to philological reading when, in the intertwinement of the three texts, the importance that the notion of "occupiability" (222) held for Celan becomes visible "in the figure of Lucile" who demonstrates the

extent to which the poet's "suspension of breath, [and] the resumption of breathing, is itself mirrored by the movement of occupation (*Besetzen*) and de-occupation (*Entsetzen*)" (236), thus weaving into the poems' conscious compilation of semantic and syntactical chunks the early memory of disaster, a lost home and family.

Movement between contradictory points and liminal crossings seem to have prompted Mendicino and Zechner to focus their essay collection on one of Celan's keywords, "threshold" (*Schwelle)*, taken from the eponymous 1955 collection of poetry. By tying non-syntactically *Thresholds* in their study's title to *Encounters* they highlight Celan's fundamental positioning in the "in-between"—the interstice *between* languages, cultures, experiences, identities, homelands, histories, and so on. It is this position of being quite literally on the *Schwelle* (threshold) that forms the dividing line between an inside and an outside or a slightly raised stepping line between two rooms. A *Schwelle* constitutes an existential locus that marks an original spacing, suspended between two sites or spaces that are separated by it and yet directly connected *across* the threshold, understood as a relational trope articulating an in-between state that can never really be touched. Out of this placing in the in-between arises what Benjamin once called "threshold knowledge"[8] that makes for a kind of "threshold thinking." As thinking of non-binary difference it determines Celan's poetry, something Mendicino seems to have in mind when she speaks of an "interval" across a "borderland" and insightfully circumscribes in detail the semantic reach of the signifier *Schwelle* in her essay "*A limine*" (chapter 7, 153–174).

Again, building on Hamacher's philological approach, she evokes, albeit in a footnote, Benjamin's "Schwellenkunde" (threshold knowledge, 169, n 3) using it to deliberate on "the moving thresholds of Hesiod's and Parmenides's lines [that] will be carried further still with, among others, the language of Paul Celan's collection of poems *From Threshold to Threshold*" whose "title alone should indicate the liminal character of poetic speech" (154), defined in Celan's own words by "the never-coming-to-rest of the poetic, and there with too the—straight-out unfulfillable—infinite claim (or: claim to infinitude) of every utterance in this area"(155), adding:

> With these remarks, Celan makes clear that the syntagma "from threshold to threshold" does not describe a trajectory between two determinate locations, marked off by two instances of the same substantive. Rather, he elucidates how the phrase signifies a "trait of the poetic," which, as such, would traverse and exceed the limits of every single poem, as well as any "utterance" that should occur in the area from and to which poetic language speaks. Before any cosmic, juridical, or architectural limit that one may come across, as well as any metaphor besides this very transport—this over-stepping and carry-over [Übertritt und Übertragung] of the threshold "itself." (155)

8 See Menninghaus (1986), who devotes a whole study to this notion that I prefer to call "threshold thinking," particularly since it chimes with Agamben's philosophy of language as outlined in his *Idea of Prose* (1995).

Discussing in her contribution the poem "With a Changing Key" (*Mit wechselndem Schlüssel*), Mendicino uses and enhances Hamacher's previous reading of the poem by putting Hesiod's and Parmenides's Greek into conversation with Hamacher's analysis in order to open up the poem for further engagement across perceived "borders" or "limits" set by Heidegger's translation of Parmenides's fragment from which Celan drew the title for "With a Changing Key" (163). Hers is a singularly important essay that with its comprehensive and comprehensible look at the whole volume sheds light on the essay collection itself since it so finely elucidates the notion of threshold by bringing into direct conversation Greek antiquity with Hamacher's "Philology" and that of others in order to determine how each linguistic component of the poem works as a "threshold-word that interminably opens to others beside itself" (166) thus underscoring the philologist's insight: "Once again, as Hamacher will have written, Celan's exposition of language occurs not in the Heideggerian 'House of Being,' but the 'out' of being" (167) to which I would add that a *threshold-being* like that of Celan is at bottom an *unbehauste*, unhoused being, albeit forever seeking contact with an other/Other.

That a critical Heideggerian sense of being includes thinking together *mit* (with) others in and through the poem, Pasqual Solass explains in his essay "With—Paul Celan" (175–196). Nodding briefly to Hamacher's explication of "HÄM: Ein Gedicht Celans mit Motiven Benjamins," in *Keinmaleins: Texte zu Celan* (2019b), Solass probes the full semantic connotations of the seemingly ordinary preposition "with" (179–181) that as prefix in so many German verbal constructions denotes concepts of closeness, standing in for the English (Latin) "con-." He calls them "co-words" that in a specific sense are "no-words or unwording words, withdrawing from 'themselves.' Celan writes in another place: 'The with-one-another of words in a poem: not only a with-one-another, but also an against-one-another. Also a towards-and from-one-another. Encounter, dispute and parting in one'" (175–177). Remarking like so many other critics before him on the dialogic character of Celan's poems sounded in the informal second person singular address "Du," Solass proceeds to examine the kind of dialogistic situation conjured by it, asking after the what of the address and to whom the poem speaks in encounters between the word, the place of address, and the addressee. Besides signalling ready openness toward an encounter, a poem like "Streak" (*Schliere*), for example, importantly "speaks of a *Mitlaut* [consonant] and enters a constellation with [the prose text] 'Conversation in the Mountains' that con-sonates" (179) the "blank middle" always already sounded in the silence of the un-pronounced of the consonant. Thus, resonating with the idea of both speaker and poem being in-between and constituting an interval or interstice between two thresholds whereby the "mit" functions, according to Solass, also as "consonance, silence that speaks with … mute vibrato: in such paradoxical considerations," when "'blind spots' co-appear with the 'streak in the eye'" in the afore mentioned poem (181). The "blind spots" resonating with Heidegger's Metaphysics point to the way in which

> Celan is thinking with the "with" which introduces an interval into the com-posites of "con-science" (*Mitwissen*) and "connivance" (*Mitwisserschaft*) and thus renders the other(s) to which conscience and connivance open tangible. The other remains an unsublatable counterpart, and the author, as a Mit-Wisser who is con-genital with the poem, loses her privileged status once the poem enters a "with-one-another" (*Miteinander*), once it opens up and bares itself as know-able (wiss-bar) to others. (188)

Although "every poem," Solass quotes Celan, "necessarily raises the claim to singularity, unrepeatability," language's inexhaustible visibility—contrary to its audibility—"lets the possible 'co-appear [*miterscheinen*]. Speaking with … and entering a 'with-one-another' (*Miteinander*) means that within such a 'with-one-another/ of those that are other to each other the 'with' withdraws and thus lets them remain other, lets them dwell within 'the realm of the possible'" (188). Most importantly "visibility of language in the poem is the possibility of remaining other while with one another. The 'with' is always also the withdrawal from itself, however, a withdrawal that co-appears as such, precisely because it is with a 'with-one-another'. Therefore, the 'with-one-another' is permeated with the possible. It remains open" (184), perhaps towards ever new encounters.

The *mit* (with) is the theme, too, of Dominik Zechner's sophisticated essay "For Shame of Language" (231–256) that, based on an exchange between Adorno and Hanmacher, including reference to Hegel, discusses how the notion of "shame" resonates *with* the poet's writing, dominating Celan's linguistic self-awareness (242) despite ever really becoming thematic. Referring to Adorno's characterisation of Celan's poetry as "surviving speaking-with of language's de-posing in a poem that suffers the withdrawal of experience," Zechner contends: "His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative" (231). On reading Zechner reading Adorno I am reminded of the latter's famous assertion in the *Aesthetic Theory* with reference to Celan and Beckett, that *all* art today must be of the *Grundfarbe schwarz* (base colour black) given the mid-twentieth century disasters and the increasing cheap thrills of the culture industry (Adorno 1973, 476). For Zechner as for Adorno: "the will-to-language-as-will-to-withhold-language … is the only remaining way in which Celan's poems can express themselves" (235). "Shame names the surviving speaking-with of language's de-posing in a poem that suffers the withdrawal of experience" (241). Zechner surmises after recalling the Adorno-Hamacher discussion:

> Poetry and shame permeate one another ["Lyrik . . . durchdrungen von der Scham"]). Hence, the analogy structuring Hamacher's formulation signals an entangling co-implication according to which poetry as shame would mark language's dislodgment. It is through a shameful residue of language, not more than an echo, decoupled from any referential object or phenomenal experience, that the poem may speak. Shame is poetry's mode of evoking a language essentially distanced. Hamacher proceeds to

> characterize this language as: the pre-language of every language and therefore the language of language … (238)

Meticulous reading of the poem "For Shame, For Despair" (Vor Scham, vor Verzweiflung, 243) enables Zechner to explicate grammatical, syntactical, and lexical structures in the poem that are tinged with "shame" in the way in which Adorno once described the feeling of shame[9] Kafka's Joseph K. experiences at the end of *The Trial*. Interestingly, Zechner enriches his initial textually immanent reading of the poem with bibliographical source material of its genesis that links "the creation of Celan's poem" to an "encounter with the 1935 novel *Of Time and the River*" (247). However, at issue for Zechner is not so much the biographical trace but rather the way in which Celan's language articulates shame running up against existing representational structures and still conveying a visceral experience of horror (*Entsetzen*) that demands a de-positioning of a logical set. Referring to a recently published essay by Hamacher, "*Dichtung ist Sprachferne*" (Poetry Is Verbal Distance), Zechner claims: "This structural undecidability that states that the subject of shame is at the same time enwrapped by shame and spatiotemporally distanced from it does not halt before the affective state itself" (246), drawing attention to Hamacher's claim that Celan's use of language needs to be perceived as "a proto- and para-language that speaks with every language as a silent reservation against speaking, as the unspeaking denial of speech" (n 11, 253). Yet, what Celan calls "*Vielstelligkeit des Ausdrucks*, the aporias and undecidabilities unfolded by an expression that occupies multiple linguistic places do not, however, serve the purpose of making things more opaque; on the contrary, the multiplicity of places nonetheless guarantees something like poetic precision" (254). Zechner, remarking further on Celan's language, adds:

> To the degree that language is thrown back at, but in this very solipsism also split away from, itself, there remains an irreducible distance between language's expression and that which unsayably reverberates in it. This distance turns out to be unbridgeable, nothing the use of language could manage to overcome. It inherently determines any possible utterance, immanently threatening while at the same time remaining inconceivable. (237)

Not all encounters are with Hamacher's readings. For instance, in Michael G. Levine's (chapter 1, 15–34) "In the Swell of Wandering Words," Celan's "Sprich auch du" engages Derrida's brief glosses on the poem "Speak, You Too" and the "Meridian" speech. Critiquing Derrida in his "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan" for not having "read" but only "cited" the poem (19) to highlight the implication of historical dates, Levine gives the full text of the poem (15–16) and traces in its last strophe the notion of "swell and "swelling" that he understands as a temporal "moment of indecision held open by an uncertain wavering back and forth, by a refusal or failure to sever the yes from the no" (26).

9 For Adorno's discussion of the concept "shame," see Adorno (1973, 477f.).

In the essay immediately following, "A Different Withness: Bearing with the Past in Paul Celan's 'Engführung'" (chapter 2, 35–57), Simone Stirner provides a more extended response to Derrida's famous analysis of "Engführung" (Stretto) of 1958—"a poem that will extend over 180 lines and several pages, frequently fragmented, moving through a poetic landscape marked by loss" (35, see Levine above for text). Famously "in dialogue with Alain Resnais's film 'Night and Fog' (*Nuit et brouillard*)," the poem is seen as a direct comment on and departure from the aesthetics of Celan's "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue), with which it shares a commitment to "testify" to the Shoah. In "Engführung" Stirner recognises "an *ars poetica* that posits poetry as the site of an intersubjective corporeality that opens to the depth of history. Rather than seeking to represent the past," she suggests, "the poem compels a practice of reading—and with that of remembering—by which the past is experienced as implicated in the present of reading. This argument has to be understood in the context of a broader shift in Celan's work" (36). It a "shift" toward a more "obscure" aesthetic, "the passage that intercepts vision and foregrounds a sense of physical touch as well as an encounter through breath, that reads like a meta-poetic statement" (43). With it "Engführung" appears to prefigure "a moment from the *Meridian*, in which Celan famously states: 'Poetry: that can mean an *Atemwende*, a breathturn [Dichtung, das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten]'" (42). Importantly Stirner reminds her reader

> breath operates semantically in Celan's poetry and poetics—as a term, trope, metaphor, or figure. If we conjoin the English "breath" and the German "Atem" with the Greek "pneuma" and the Hebrew "ruah" and "neshima," then the term opens up to notions of inspiration and animation, unsettles the boundary between the spiritual and the corporeal, and reminds us of the threshold between life and death. (44)

Two essays placed under the currently popular thematics of "ecology," Jan Mieszkowski's "Flower Talk" (61–82) and Natalie Lozinski-Veach's "Poetic Involution: Adorno, Celan, Nature" (83–105) examine the poet's very sparse landscapes which, stressing the inanimate and foregoing nature imagery, suggest an analogy between the restrictive voice and a necessary reduction of flowery language to minimal utterances to counter the Nazis' misuse of metaphor. At this point, the reader would do well to keep in mind Celan's note, quoted by Solass above (181): "The stone, the inorganic, the mineral, is the older, that which stands toward and opposite man from the deepest time-layer, from prehistory—that is also man's prehistory. The stone is the other, the extra-human [*Außermenschliche*], … with its silence it gives direction and space to the one who speaks." Rather than locating the flower image within this wider context, Mieszkowski recalls the place of botanical thought in aesthetics from Kant to Elaine Sacarry before reading with the latter a couple of poems from the collection *Niemandsrose* (No-ones-rose), emphasising the use of the image "Blume" (flower) in conversation with critics Gadamer and Szondi (77). In contrast, Lozinski-Veach attempts in an unusual inversion to read Adorno with Celan on the figuration of nature against identitarian structuration (93). Looking at the corpus rather than single poems, she concentrates on the imagery of stone and star without attending sufficiently to the

placing and spacing of words in their syntactical and spatial exposition on the page. (Celan was always meticulous to check on the spacing of his text on a page as we know from his editor, Reichert.)[10] However, "Poetic Involution" iterates an essential aspect of Celan's poetry, which emerges from the chasm between *Muttersprache* and *Mördersprache* (mother tongue and murder tongue) as a new, uncanny idiom, "a spectral German, both haunting and haunted" (83). The idea of "involution" as the act or an instance of enfolding or entangling an involved grammatical construction, usually characterised by the insertion of clauses between the subject and predicate drives the essay, asserting: "Celan's poetic involution bends this line [the Darwinist concept of progress], not once, but again and again. In this way, it not only collapses such hierarchies but renders them impossible through careful attention to the intricate connections between different forms of life that arise in the poem" (95). Moreover involution "forms a point of connection between Celan's poetry and Adorno's aesthetics that is, among other things, crucial to understanding the philosopher's much contested remarks about the purported inorganicity of Celan's language in *Aesthetic Theory*." Adorno's reading of Celan hinges, Lozinski-Veach makes clear, "on his own notion of mimesis, an affinity with the other that resists objectification and that can arise only through art" (84).

Adding to an assessment of the visual components in Celan's corpus are two essays under the heading "Aurality" (109–149) that engage with "intermedial studies" by focusing on the much-discussed "musicality" of his poetry. Michael Auer's "Allophony: Celan's Niemandsrosen-Lieder" ("No-Man's-Rose Songs," 109–126), critically examines "a group of poems whose seemingly unprepossessing form has led to an undue marginalization: the *Lieder* Celan wrote right after publishing *Sprachgitter* and collected in *Die Niemandsrose* in 1963" (110). Taking a close look at "poems such as 'Selbdritt, Selbviert', 'Eis, Eden', 'Nachmittag mit Zirkus und Zitadelle', 'Kermorvan', or 'Was geschah'," Auer demonstrates their "specific sonorous and rhythmic features" (110) by introducing allophonic readings. Paying attention to alphabetic combinations considered to be the same sound although they are different phonetically in terms of aspiration, voicing, and point of articulation, he identifies these poems as "Folksong" (115) and claims all the *Lieder* Celan collected in *Die Niemandsrose* are "folksongs" that literally explore with their rhythms and their rhymes the "edges" of the "syllables" in order to yield "new potentials of phonation and resonance" (110). The musical and music-philosophical contexts are decisive for Celan's engagement with the lyrical form of the Lied (113) with which "he wants to anticipate the submersion of the word in the tone—which, for Adorno, is the achievement of setting texts to music … And to do this, he [Celan] lets the differential logic that phonology and langue are based on founder upon the infinite continuum of an allophonic parole" (115). Thus augmenting the scholarly work done on *The No-One's-Rose* that "predominantly explored the complex intertextual play in which the long poems (particularly the ones that are found in the final, fourth cycle) engage with the literary, religious, philosophical, and political

10 See Reichert (2020, 113–118).

traditions of Western and Eastern Europe" (110), Auer reminds the reader of the fundamental audibility of Celan's poems. According to him, their fine-tuned allophonic balances defy the common assumption of their graphism, underwriting the need to hear and not only see the text. Incidentally, Celan's readings—available on YouTube[11]—in his Austrian accented cadence of recitation, that sounded provincial to the ears of the West Germans and that seems strangely old fashioned to today's listeners, support Auer's assertion, even though his claim might not entirely convince that "children's song" lets "the entire volume [of *No-Mans-Rose*] pivot back and forth uneasily between a faded, and yet remembered, song on the one hand and a completely new song on the other, a song that will have to be voiced in the future but that, for now, remains external" (111).

Contrary to Auer, Naomi Waltham-Smith's **"**A Chest Full of Cello Boughs: The Sonorous Force of Writing in Deconstructive Readings of Celan" (chapter 6, 127–149) understands Celan's "audibility" merely metaphorically. Rather dependant on Bennington in her reading of Derrida's discussion of writing versus voice (131), she proposes reading Celan's poem "Celloeinsatz" with Cixous's reimagining of it "in *Jours de l'an*," and Derrida's remarks on Celan's poem in *Shibboleth* because of her essay's intention to "explore a nexus of deconstructive readings although there is no direct contact between these reading" (132). Taking up Derrida's more than half-a-century old musing on the "frontier between poetry and philosophy" and the question of whether to draw a line between the "theory/practice" relation (127–128), Waltham-Smith's ambitious three-sided interlocution between Derrida, Cixous, and Celan displays much empathetic imagination but her "hybrid between a reading and a creative rewriting of Celan's poem" (135) amounts more to affective association than to insight when she sees Celan, in Cixous' words, "created for singing" after "escaping the shovel of the Apocalypse" and beholds "him standing on the silent soil, his chest full of cello boughs. Only thus are we able to advance, by beginning at the end, death first, life next, teetering life next, so teetering, so chancy, so cela(n)tive" (135).

The final two chapters (11 and 12) devoted to "Translations" are especially apposite in South Africa's multilingual context where translation beyond mere (commercial) linguistic instrumentality connects cultures and knowledge production. Perhaps the time has come for more translations like those from isiXhosa to English by Sibabalwe Oscar Masinyana of Athambile Masola's 2021 award-winning poetry collection *Ilifa*.[12] Perhaps philologically inspired readings across the wide spectrum of South African writing can produce more translation and aid exploration of existing translations? Christine Frank's "The Mimetic Desire of Translation: Reading Celan and Derrida with Girard" (287–305) and Irina Kogan's "Celan's Radio Essay 'Die Dichtung Ossip

11 There are several recordings available that can be googled under "Paul Celan reads." Some even provide the German text next to an English translation so that a listener can follow the voice, for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySr7nULEQd0

12 See in this connection "Three Newly Translated Poems by Athambile Masola, from Ilifa" translated by Masinyana (Masola 2024).

Mandelstamms'" (259–286), albeit different in nature, are particularly interesting in this respect. They tackle a wide arena of verbal transfer that holds important lessons for local writers. Interestingly, Frank speculates on what motivates translation with respect to Celan. She tries to fit the climactic "Goll affair" with biographical and anecdotal reference into Girard's "scapegoat theory" (294), claiming audaciously that Celan's language can be read in light of Girard's mimetic desire. Celan's insistent desire to be recognised as belonging in the German language Frank offers as its evidence. After an insightful overview of Girard's influential approach to reading, she sees "sacrifice" as driving Celan's penchant for translation. "My thesis is," she states, "that Celan did in fact recognize the mechanism behind the opposition he was facing—and that he sought to react to it in his Bremen address as well as in his poems and translations" (298) in order to keep at bay the hostility on part of the press and some German critics who thwarted his sense of "belonging." The "radical demand for the recognition of a common origin and his resolve to mourn in 'our' language—the German language common to him and the others—have made Celan the scapegoat of German postwar society" (299). Following Frank's exposition with an eye to so-called second-language speakers in South Africa, it is worthwhile to ask the question of linguistic *Heimat* or belonging and recognition by its speech community. But it is equally important to perceive translation as "a liberation in another language space in the sense of another form of speaking (the space of political resistance, the space of poetry)" (301). In Germany after having reforged language so grossly misused by politics and Nazism, Celan's "singular signature" Frank, quoting Derrida,

> would be a counter-signature to the German language and, at the same time, something that happens to the German language—that comes to pass in both senses of the term: something that approaches the language, that reaches it, without appropriating it, without surrendering to it, without delivering itself to it; but also something that enables poetic writing to occur, that is to say, to be an event that marks language. (302)

Less interested in psychological effects that might have prompted translation, Irina Kogan focuses her reading of "Celan's Radio Essay" on poetological innovation born from Celan's encounter with the work of Ossip Mandelstamm (1891–1938) that he translated in the late 1950s and introduced to the German public in a radio address. (The Russian poet was persecuted by the totalitarian Soviet state for failing to conform to the parameters of language and thought prescribed by it, and his poems were posthumously erased from the state-sanctioned cultural discourse.) Noting empathetic kinship between Mandelstamm and "Celan's own experience of persecution" at the time "by slanderous accusations of plagiarism [the "Goll Affaire"] and thus by attempts to erase the accused poet's singular relationship to language, his singular poetic idiom," Kogan sees "Celan's introduction to Mandelstamm's poetry "as a particularly poignant missive from one literary emigrant about another, directed toward the speakers of the German language, in Germany—a defiant gesture of poetry against exclusionary borders, categories, and idioms" (265). Based on a careful reading of the "Radio Essay" in comparison with other Celan's reflexions on art and writing, Kogan situates Celan's introduction to the

Russian's oeuvre on "what it means to write poems—within his contemporaneous reflections on what it means to translate poems" (277). Although Heidegger's thoughts on poetry and art affect the poet's diction, displayed, according to Kogan, in his usage of the term "availability" (278, *Vorhandensein*) in relation to poetry's fundamental openness and hospitality, Celan's insistence on only using "languages in the plural (Sprachen)" in place of Heidegger's use of the singular "Sprache" (language as such) signals critical distance to Heidegger's idiom. Contrary to a Heideggerian generic-poetological definition, speech acts always take place under the "'angle of inclination of one's existence [*Neigungswinkel seiner Existenz*]'" (272), meaning Celan "envisions poetry in terms of a single, concrete poem whose singularity lies in its inextricable tie to a someone who … (*dessen*). That is, the poem as poem is of someone: of someone, more precisely, who is aware of his or her singular moment of speaking [the *Neigungswinkel*] of particular lived experience" (272). Rejecting the "seeming correspondence (*entsprechen*) of languages to one another—insofar as they are thought to be uniform tools of communication" (278), Celan sees an unbridgeable gap between languages rendered visible in translation that makes "the poem … a place of confrontation and tension within and through language" in an appositive, critical sense. The poem is the "space in and through which something takes place—and not just a univocal some thing but rather a relation and, moreover, a relation of tension" (270). Proceeding with a characterisation of Mandelstam's poems that could be read as a characterisation of Celan's own texts, Kogen cites Celan saying:

> "These poems are the poems of a perceiving and attentive one, of one who is turned toward that which appears, one who questions and addresses that which appears; they are conversation. In the space of this conversation, that which is being addressed constitutes itself, becomes present, gathers itself around the I that is addressing and naming it. But that which is being addressed and, as it were, becomes a you through the act of naming brings with it its otherness and foreignness." (272)

Evolving from active linguistic transference, the quote defines Celan's creative endeavour while a similar sounding text from the Introduction to the 1959/1983 edition of his translation of Mandelstamm's poems in *Gesammelte Werke* define, "The poem [as] the place where is gathered what can be perceived and achieved through language. It is gathered around such a middle point from whence it receives its shape (Gestalt) and truth and from where the *Dasein* (existence) of an individual, her hour together with that of the world, her heartbeat and that of the eon are questioned."[13]

Mendicino, Zechner and most of their fellow contributors succeed in *Thresholds, Encounters: Paul Celan and the Claim of Philology* to show the extent to which Celan's poetry and his concern for language as expression, medium of history, linguistic community and critical reflection concerns us today. For "poems," as Celan writes in the notes to *The Meridian*, are not "messages," not "information"; they are rather, as he

13 Celan in his Introduction to Mandelstamm's poetry in *Gesammelte Werke* (1983, vol. five, 623–624, here 623; translation Kogan).

puts it, “underway on routes on which language becomes voice, […] encounters, routes of a voice to a perceiving you” (Celan 2011, 11).

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