

The Expanse of the Sky: Nature, History, and Dwelling in Celan and Hölderlin

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how history is inscribed in the landscape in Paul Celan's and Friedrich Hölderlin's work. It argues that the past does not endure as a terrestrial phenomenon but lingers instead as a star that marks the limit of the horizon and stands as a visible reminder of what would otherwise be forgotten. For Hölderlin the history of a people is bound up with their relation to the gods, and this relation is evident in the stars that guide them in their daily life. For Celan, the stars bear witness not to divinity but to the absence of the divine, which contributes to the fragility and finitude of human life. Yet that fragility becomes a shelter when understood as the condition for all utterances and projections for the future. This paper considers Celan's "Stretto" (*Engführung*) and Hölderlin's "As when on a holiday" (*Wie wenn am Feiertage*) in light of the idea of the cosmos sketched in these poems and its relevance for the question of dwelling on earth.

KEYWORDS

Celan, Hölderlin, Benjamin, Heidegger, *Engführung*, *Wie wenn am Feiertage*, history, dwelling, stars

Does nature have a voice in Celan's and Hölderlin's poetry? Does it speak in each poet's work? Does it make itself felt as an agent in its own right operating according to laws that are difficult for us to comprehend? It would be churlish in an age of cataclysmic climate change to deny nature's intrinsic power or its vulnerability to external threats, and yet the fact remains that to be an agent, nature must be able to communicate itself as something unique that is not derived from anything else¹. What is the nature of language such that we can say that there is a language of nature that calls on us to be heard?

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¹ At issue in these lines is not so much nature as the claim that it is a subject, power, or agent. If nature is an actor in its own right and subject to its own laws, it is an autonomous being, and the same criteria that apply to human beings, long considered the sole self-legislating being, also apply to it.

In *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (1916), Benjamin contends that everything that exists takes part in language to the extent that it seeks to communicate what he calls its spiritual or mental being [*geistiges Wesen*]². Although Benjamin does not define this term directly, a few hints can be gleaned from his account of the relation of a thing's mental or spiritual essence to its linguistic being. What is spiritual is what is imparted, what permits its communication, which is not the physical existence of a thing but its inclination toward language, its ability to express itself. To illustrate this point, Benjamin gives the example of a lamp that imparts its being, though it does not speak in words: "The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression"³. Benjamin collapses two distinct terms in this passage. The capacity of the lamp to communicate in whatever fashion (i.e., "the language of this lamp") converges with its communication of itself (i.e., "the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression"), allowing for a union of signifier and signified or subject and expression⁴. The lamp is communicable, as Benjamin would have it, because it has a language, and what it repeatedly says is that it is something intellectual or ideational – another translation of *geistiges Wesen* – which is also what enables it to speak and to rise above the contingencies of its existence. In the vocabulary of new materialism, we might say it has the status of an agent.

Yet Benjamin also differs from new materialists in his insistence on a hierarchy of languages that places human beings above nature. Man is the sole being capable of naming whatever in the universe imparts itself, and in performing this task, he becomes "master [*Herr*] of nature"⁵. The retrograde nature of Benjamin's formulation notwithstanding, it is worth considering what distinguishes the name from all other expressions and the language of words

²The term *geistig* is notoriously difficult to translate. It could be rendered as spiritual, intellectual, ideational, intelligible or mental. Jephcott translates it as "mental," which has the advantage of being more neutral than other terms, though it does not necessarily illuminate "idea" of a thing imparted as its essence.

³Benjamin (1996), p. 63.

⁴Benjamin implies that the thing represents both the medium and the communication (*Mitteilung*) in a remarkable anticipation of Marshall McLuhan's famous maxim, "The Medium is the Message". The relation of these two texts is closer than it would seem. McLuhan points to the lightbulb as a medium that changed our world, even though – or perhaps because – it communicated nothing but itself. It was the light it shed. See McLuhan (1994), pp. 8-9.

⁵Benjamin (1996), p. 65; (1991), p. 144.

from that of gestures. While all things impart their spiritual being in language, and that being is identical with their linguistic nature, only names draw attention to language itself as the essence of the human being and his link to divinity. Two statements are noteworthy in this context. The first reads, “[I]n the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God”⁶, and the second continues, “The name is that ... in which language itself communicates itself absolutely. In the name, the mental entity that communicates itself is language”⁷. Benjamin would appear to contradict himself in these two statements, identifying first humans and then language as the content expressed in every name. Yet this is less of a contradiction than it would seem, if one accepts with Benjamin that the human is in essence language, “that language as such is the mental being of man”⁸. Because the human is essentially language or, put otherwise, because language defines his being, he can name things which, in imparting themselves, speak in as well as to him and offer themselves up for his cognition. What nature communicates of itself in language, man enshrines in a name. He translates nature’s expressions into a manifest language: the language of words⁹.

Such a process is the basis of knowledge but also the source of error. Benjamin is adamant on this point in his interpretation of the first three chapters of *Genesis*. God creates the world with words, thus anchoring it in language, but when it comes to man he opts to make him out of earth as an image of himself. True to this determination, God endows man with the language that had “served *him* as a medium of creation”¹⁰, but in man this language loses its creative power and becomes the medium in which man recognizes things and names them, reading, as it were, the divine word inscribed in them. With the fall from grace, however, the language of man changes. It no longer functions as a translation of divine language into discrete names but as an “uncreated imitation of the created word”¹¹ [*unschöpferische Nachahmung des schaffenden Wortes*¹²]. Human language after the fall is “uncreated” as it pertains not to anything God spoke into being but to something he did not say and which consequently does not exist and has no place in Creation. One could call this other evil, but such a charac-

⁶ Benjamin (1996), p. 65, emphasis in original.

⁷ *Ibidem*, emphasis in original.

⁸ *Ibidem*, emphasis in original.

⁹ Benjamin invokes translation when he describes naming as “the translation of the language of things into that of man” (Benjamin 1996, p. 69).

¹⁰ Benjamin (1996), p. 68.

¹¹ Benjamin (1996), p. 71.

¹² Benjamin (1991), p. 153.

terization requires explanation. In the essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” written in 1916, as in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, completed in 1925, Benjamin observes that on the seventh day God looked at Creation and pronounced the words, “And it was good.” From this pronouncement Benjamin deduces that knowledge of evil has no object. It is knowledge of nothing and attests to the nothingness of knowledge in a postlapsarian world. For Benjamin, human knowledge crystallizes in the language of judgment that condemns nature and robs it of its voice. It is this muteness in language that gives Friedrich Hölderlin’s efforts to forge a new community via poetry and Paul Celan’s poetics of mourning their impetus.

For Celan, what remains after the Shoah is a language scarred. As he reminds us in his Bremen Prize speech, the German language went through “[a] thousand darkneses of murderous speech” without a word for “what happened”¹³. This failure puts his poetry in conflict with itself. It cannot speak of the past without interrupting itself, drawing attention to the silence of language by splintering and silencing language in a double negative structure that never results in a synthesis¹⁴. At the same time in questioning and punctuating itself, it casts a spotlight on the process of its own emergence, its unfurling as an utterance. Hölderlin’s poetry, though written in different historical circumstances, is likewise aware of the loss of the sacrality of language and the need to recover it if a community is to have a shared destiny. As he comments in *Being Judgment Possibility*, a brief note he drafted in his copy of Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge* around 1795, judgment (*Urtheil*) arises from the division or *Ur-theilung* of being into a subject and object, and this division makes it all but impossible to represent the whole of being save through the sacrifice or death of the poet¹⁵.

Celan’s work is preceded by this sacrifice and the fact that it has its death “before” it in both the spatial and temporal senses of this term enables it to rise up from a void and open like a flower – a *Niemandsrose* perhaps¹⁶. If this description resonates

¹³ GW 3, 186.

¹⁴ As Aris Fioretos pointedly observes regarding the poem *Engführung*, the text “chooses the language of the deprivation of language in an attempt to circumscribe the incomparable” (Fioretos 1994, p. 321).

¹⁵ See FHA 17, p. 156.

¹⁶ I discuss the double meaning of “before” in Heidegger’s analysis in *Being and Time* of being unto death in conjunction with the poem *Entwurf einer Landschaft*, which includes in its title the Heideggerian term *Entwurf*, designating the map of existence or projection that Dasein makes in becoming a ground unto itself and embracing its thrownness and being-unto-death as its ownmost possibility. See Tobias (2006), pp. 34-41.

with Heidegger's definition of *phusis*, this is not accidental. For Heidegger, the Greek concept of *phusis* expresses something lost in its Latin translation as *natura*. *Phusis* is not a collection of material phenomena but an event – in particular the event of emerging, standing forth, and providing a locus for everything hidden to flourish: “*Phusis* is the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time”¹⁷.

Whether or not Celan had this statement from *An Introduction to Metaphysics* in mind when he wrote the poem *Stehen* [To Stand] is unclear. A link is possible given that Celan did not compose *To Stand* until 1963, a full decade after Heidegger published his volume. Whatever the case, this much is clear: the two share the conviction that poetry, like *phusis*, rises from a void and provides a shelter for what is otherwise hidden:

STEHEN, im Schatten
des Wundenmals in der Luft.

Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.
Unerkannt,
für dich
allein.

Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,
auch ohne
Sprache. (*GW* 2, 23)

TO STAND in the shadow
of the scar up in the air

To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized
for you
alone.

With all there is room for in that,
even without
language. (*Poems*, 225)

What is unique to Celan's writing is that it charts its emergence out of nothing to *stand* as a grave “for-no one-and-nothing,” which are not only negative terms but the terms we reserve for everything nameless: “With all there is... / even without / language.” Nature may or may not speak in Celan's oeuvre – we cannot verify either proposition – but what is certain is that his work rises up from

¹⁷ Heidegger (2000), p. 16.

nothing and generates a place in which an otherwise effaced Other can rest and perhaps breathe, if not take our breath away. Celan indicates as much in the poem *À la pointe acérée*, whose geological motifs could not be more overt:

Es liegen die Erze bloß, die Kristalle,
die Drusen
Ungeschriebenes, zu
Sprache verhärtet, legt
einen Himmel frei. (*GW* 1, 251)

The ores are laid bare, the crystals,
the geodes.
Unwritten things, hardened
into language, set
a sky free. (*Poems*, 193, translation modified)

The kernel of Celan's poetry are "unwritten things" that it bears within itself not only as a stone (one meaning of *Stein*) but also as the pit of a fruit (another meaning of *Stein*), both "hardened into language" [*zur Sprache verhärtet*]. As Werner Hamacher observes, his poems read themselves to find the trace of an unnamed other within them and to set this other free¹⁸. In what follows I will discuss the place for another that Celan's work creates through a reflection on *Stretto* (*Engführung*), in which the process of crystallization serves as a metaphor for the poem. I will also compare this shelter to the sky in Hölderlin's *As when on a holiday* (*Wie wenn am Feiertage*) to develop what it means for a poet to be exposed to the elements.

* * *

Stretto is divided into nine sections, or what Celan called *Partien*: a musical concept associated with the fugue from which the poem's title is also taken. In a fugue, the term *stretto* refers to the interval between sections in which a new theme is introduced before the previous one has ended. The overlap of themes creates the impression that the tempo has accelerated and the composition has gotten denser. The division of Celan's poem into nine sections also requires a brief explanation. Dante's *Inferno* consists of nine circles, and to the extent that the epic is alluded to explicitly in the sixth section of the poem, it is reasonable to assume that it also informs

¹⁸ See Hamacher's comments in *Die Sekunde der Inversion*, on how *À la pointe acérée* reads itself (Hamacher 1998, pp. 364-68). Drawing on the language of the first stanza, he remarks, "*Auslegung ist Freilegung*" [Exegesis is setting free] (p. 366).

the structure of the work¹⁹. The influence of Dante is arguably evident in the poem's opening lines:

VERBRACHT
ins Gelände
mit der untrüglichen Spur:

Gras, auseinandergeschrieben²⁰.

Displaced into
the terrain
with the unmistakable trace:

Grass, written asunder²¹.

As many critics have pointed out, the poem opens by doing something to its reader: it displaces and disorients her, propelling her into a “terrain” that is still unknown and whose only apparent feature is an “unmistakable trace”. How “unmistakable” this trace depends in large part on one's willingness to read between the lines. The trace is the colon in the third line, which is neither vocalized nor spelled out but still constitutes a part of the text. As soon as the reader crosses this mark, she finds herself immersed in a space that materializes as if by magic with each successive word. The warning posted at the Gates of Hell in the *Inferno*, “Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here” [*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*], applies to this orthographic gate, which, like its predecessor, represents a point of no return: a point at which the poem begins to rise, although it is yet to become a shelter.

This shelter will materialize only when a star appears in the night sky not only to illuminate the earth but, more crucially, to mark the end of the horizon. The night star establishes how far the eye can see, and the expanse revealed in the process comes to define our surroundings. We accept that there are other planets and

¹⁹ Maria Behre discusses the allusions to Dante at some length in her essay (Behre 1993, pp. 165-84). One of the more direct allusions to *The Divine Comedy* are the lines “yes, we / read it in the book” and “It also stood written” which have been said to allude to the scene in Dante's epic where the lovers Francesca and Paolo read together the story of the lovers Lancelot and Ginevra. Celan felt a particular attraction to this scene given the relation of his name Paul to Paolo and the echo of his wife's French nationality in the name Francesca. Jürgen notes a further biographical reference in the scene. The name Lancelot contains within it Ancel, Celan's birthname in its Romanian spelling, which he changed when he emigrated to Vienna in 1949 by reversing the first and second syllables. See Lehmann (2005), p. 455. Theo Buck acknowledges the allusion to Dante but adds a further reference. The nine sections in *Stretto* correspond to the nine stanzas in Hölderlin's elegy *Bread and Wine* (p. 158).

²⁰ GW 1, p. 197.

²¹ Celan (2020), p. 227.

galaxies, but they are not part of the world we inhabit in which things speak to us, and we to them, because we belong to each other. I suspect that this is the world that Heidegger conceives in *The Field Path* (*Feldweg*), one of the few quasi-fictional narratives he wrote and which serves among other things as a tribute to an agrarian form of life that even in 1947, when Heidegger composed the piece, was in the process of vanishing. Heidegger underscores that the field path gathers and carries: it gathers the various occupations from farming and logging to blacksmithing that constitute a pastoral form of life and which would not contribute to each other, were it not for this one path connecting valleys, mountains, and rivers. In gathering these occupations, it also carries and sustains them, ensuring continuity between past and future generations. Taken together these two acts (gathering and carrying) constitute a spatial and a temporal axis, and the mutual implication of the two finds its most potent expression in the oak tree, introduced at the outset of the narrative.

The oak is not only the first station in the narrator's walk. It is also the fixture that connects every stage of his life from his childhood when he made boats from the tree's bark to his young adulthood when he sat on a wooden bench in its shade and read works of philosophy. The supposed majesty of this one tree – and it goes without saying that Heidegger is speaking here of the German oak – is that it stretches from deep in the earth to the sky and in so doing provides the basic conditions for dwelling: a foundation at our feet and a roof above our heads. In such a configuration nature can speak to us:

The oak itself spoke that only in such growth is grounded what persists and bears fruit and that growing means to open oneself to the expanse of the heavens and simultaneously to take root in the darkness of the earth. Everything genuine and native thrives [*alles Gediogene nur gedeiht*] when man is both ready to answer the demands of the highest heavens and enclosed in the protective embrace of the bearing earth²².

Nature speaks to human beings in a two-fold manner: it showers them with the gift of its bounty, so that they may reside “in the protection of the bearing earth” and it obliges them to be good stewards of the earth in exchange for heavenly favor. These two relations are encapsulated in the phrase: “Everything genuine and native thrives” [*alles Gediogene gedeiht*]. Nature thrives when embedded in a world that is committed to preserving it as its primary task. But human beings also thrive when embedded in a world that

²² Heidegger (1983), p. 88, my translation.

continues to provide for them. For Heidegger, this is what it means to be native to a place: to belong to the soil, which is an implicit argument in *The Field Path* and with its echoes of *Blut-und-Boden* ideology represents one of the most disturbing aspects of the text.

Heidegger will make similar claims in his interpretation of Hölderlin's poem *As when on a holiday*, which Peter Szondi characterizes as a transitional work between Hölderlin's elegies and odes and his later hymns²³. The elegies draw their impetus from the poet's wants and needs, whereas the hymns develop a more impersonal style, in which the poet is no longer an individual figure but a necessary participant in a cosmic drama. For Heidegger, the poet in "As when on a holiday" is such a participant. He endures the strife at the heart of being to generate a world in which mortals can dwell, secure in the blessings of the heavens: "The holiness is transformed, through the quietness of the protected poet, into the mildness of the mediated and mediating word"²⁴. Yet to make this case he must ignore significant aspects of the poem. Specifically, he must turn away from the unfinished eighth and ninth stanzas, in which the poet calls himself a false prophet, punished by the gods for having ventured beyond his station. The omission is all the more striking given Heidegger's insistence throughout the essay that he consulted various editions of Hölderlin's poetry as well as studied pages from the poet's manuscripts. The fragmentary ninth stanza of the poem reads:

Ich sei genaht, die Himmlischen zu schauen,
Sie selbst, sie werfen mich tief unter die Lebenden,
Den falschen Priester, ins Dunkel, daß ich
Das warnende Lied den Gelehrigen singe.
Dort²⁵

That I approached to see the Heavenly,
And they themselves cast me down, deep down
Below the living, into the dark cast down
The false priest that I am, to sing,
For those who have ears to hear, the warning song.
There²⁶

For Szondi, these lines point to a problem in Hölderlin's conception of the poet at this stage of his career. He is still too much of an individual to serve as a vessel for the gods, too needy to forget himself, too lacking to be anything but a false prophet.

²³ Szondi (1970), pp. 37-40.

²⁴ Heidegger (2002^b), p. 92.

²⁵ FHA 8, p. 559.

²⁶ Hölderlin (1994), p. 399.

It goes without saying that Szondi's emphasis on the poet's "self-inflicted wound"²⁷ could not be more different from Heidegger's lionization of the poet as an intermediary not only for the gods but also for a holiness that precedes all beings, earthly or celestial, as their origin.²⁸ The poet's extraordinary role in mediating a holiness that otherwise resists all mediation would seem to place him at the outskirts of any religious community, any social order, and any political body. In one of the most unexpected moves in the essay, however, Heidegger locates him in the countryside. The poet is not only a prophet but also a peasant who surveys his fields after a storm. Heidegger bases this interpretation on the comparison that governs the opening lines of Hölderlin's poem:

Wie wenn am Feiertage, das Feld zu sehn
 Ein Landmann geht, des Morgens, wenn
 Aus heißer Nacht die kühlenden Blize fielen
 Die ganze Zeit und fern noch tönet der Donner,
 In sein Gestade wieder tritt der Strom,
 Und Frisch der Boden grünt
 Und von des Himmels erfreuendem Reegen
 Der Weinstok trauft und glänzend
 In stiller Sonne stehn die Bäume des Haines:

So stehn sie unter günstiger Witterung
 Sie die kein Meister allein, die wunderbar
 Allgegenwärtig erziehet in leichtem Umfängen
 Die mächtige, die göttlichschöne Natur²⁹.

As when on a holiday, to see the field
 A countryman goes out, at morning, when
 Out of the hot night the cooling lightning flashes had fallen
 The whole time and the thunder still sounds in the distance,
 The river enters its banks once more,
 And the fresh ground becomes green
 And with the gladdening rain from heaven
 The grapevine drips, and gleaming
 In quiet sunlight stand the trees of the grove:

²⁷ Szondi (1970), p. 52.

²⁸ Michel Haar is particularly critical of Heidegger's concept of the "holy" in this essay, which he sees as nothing but an effort to avoid the theological issues at stake in the poem and to reframe them as ontological ones. Heidegger treats the "holy" as a synonym for being or an ontological ground, which engenders nature and the gods but withdraws behind the very entities it fuels and establishes. He refers to this move as a "threefold distortion" of Hölderlin's theology. "God of heaven" and "Father" are translated into "neuter ontological terms"; the personal dimensions of the gods are effaced; and, finally, the relationships among the gods, both Greek and Christian, and the gods and man are ignored (Haar 1989, p. 92).

²⁹ FHA 8, p. 555.

So in favorable weather they stand
Whom no master alone, whom she, wonderful
All-present educates in a light embrace,
The powerful, divinely beautiful nature³⁰.

As Heidegger points out, the first two stanzas present an extended analogy: “Like a countryman on his walk who lingers in the fields, rejoicing in the protection of his world, ‘So in favorable they stand’ – the poets”³¹. One could add to the parallels between the countryman and the poet. Both find themselves ensconced in a resplendent nature after a storm which threatened to erase all landmarks and to return the earth to its original chaos. Both evidently enjoy the favor of the gods, as can be seen in the fact that they emerge from the storm unscathed.

Yet the parallels, however much they suggest themselves, are also forced. Heidegger ignores what Adorno might call the parataxis of the opening lines, which, in refusing to prioritize one element over another, allows for multiple interpretations³². The analogy in the first two stanzas is not only between the countryman and the poet, but also between what happens “on a holiday” and “in favorable weather.” The list of possible events turns out to be quite long: “a countryman goes out,” “[a]nd the fresh ground becomes green,” “[a]nd with the gladdening rain from heaven / The grapevine drips,” “and gleaming / In quiet sunlight stand the trees of the grove.” The last possibility has particular resonance, as the “standing” of the trees would seem to be taken up again with the introduction of the poets, about whom the poem says: “So in favorable weather they *stand*.”

The exuberance of the opening of *As when on a holiday* stems in large part from the fact that nature and humans have weathered a storm and emerged stronger from this baptism by fire. The sacred nature of this event is indicated by the drenched grape vines, which will yield the fruit for wine, the beverage associated as much with Dionysus as with Jesus. To withstand this trial, however, both the trees and the poet must continue to stand, and the fragmentary verses drafted for the eighth and ninth stanzas of the poem call this outlook into question. The poet tossed from the heights recalls a tree felled in a storm. The vision of a nature rising becomes in the

³⁰ Heidegger (2000^b), p. 69.

³¹ Heidegger (2000^b), p. 75.

³² In the essay *Parataxis*, Adorno claims that Hölderlin’s poetry is organized paratactically and this syntactic arrangement ensures that no claim or utterance dominates over any other. Unlike hypotaxis, which divides sentences into main and subordinate clauses, parataxis represents a structure in which all elements in a statement have equal worth and weight. See Adorno (1981), pp. 473-79.

drafted conclusion an ignominious fall. Not only are the landmarks that enabled mortals to navigate the earth all but gone, but the figure who would plant the signs, i.e., the poet, finds himself searching in the dark: “they themselves cast me down, deep down / Below the living, into the dark cast down / The false priest that I am.”

In Celan’s *Stretto* the poet finds himself similarly in the dark and in a terrain emptied of all signs of life. But in the absence of a field path that gathers various forms of life together and preserves them for posterity, the poet opens a “*Sprachweg*,” a path through language to learn what is buried in words and what can be rescued from oblivion. Consider again the first section of the poem:

VERBRACHT
ins Gelände
mit der untrüglichen Spur:

Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. Die Steine, weiß,
mit den Schatten der Halme:
Lies nicht mehr – schau!
Schau nicht mehr – geh!

Geh, deine Stunde
hat keine Schwestern, du bist –
bist zuhause. Ein Rad, langsam,
rollt aus sich selber, die Speichen
klettern,
klettern auf schwärzlichem Feld, die Nacht
braucht keine Sterne, nirgends
fragt es nach dir³³.

Displaced into
the terrain
with the unmistakable track:

Grass, written asunder. The stones, white,
with the stalks’ shadows:
Stop reading – look!
Stop looking – go!

Go, your hour
has no sisters, you are –
are at home. A wheel, slowly,
rolls out of itself, the spokes
climb,
climb on a blackish field, night
needs no stars, nowhere
are you asked after³⁴.

³³ GW 1, p. 197.

³⁴ Celan (2020), p. 227.

Szondi's essay on *Stretto* from 1971 has largely shaped the reception of these verses. According to him, the poem transports the reader to a linguistic landscape, as evidenced by the fact that the initial adjectival clause is not attributed to any subject. We merely learn that someone or something has been displaced, and the absence of a bearer for this predicate displaces and disorients us, driving us into a terrain where we do not know our way and where we must rely on the few traces we find for guidance. So opens Szondi's literal reading of the poem, or, rather, his reading of the poem as a uniquely literal utterance. He insists that *Stretto* does not refer to a space outside it; it embodies the referenced space, since the landscape it describes is finally a landscape of inscription in which subject and object can no longer be distinguished: "The scenery is a landscape, but one described as written: grass is written asunder"³⁵. Put otherwise, and following a performative logic, Szondi claims that the poem is what it says and says what it does as a groundless text that conjures itself into being by taking itself as its own object.

Szondi's explanation of how the poem generates space also offers hints as to how an abandoned terrain can be transformed into a dwelling for the reader and a memorial for those who can no longer speak for themselves. No sooner do we cross the gateway marked unmistakably by the first colon on the page, then the poem opens up several paths for us, provided we are willing to read it to the letter. If the grass is, as the poem says, written asunder, it is pulled apart, such that each stalk stands out and offers a potential path for us. In short, we choose how we construct the text. This could mean we read the word "*Gras*" not only from left to right but also from right to left, such that it forms the word "*Sarg*" (tomb) or that we detect in the verb "*klettern*" (clamber) the English word "letter," which reminds us that we will need the spokes of the poem's self-dismantling wheel to build our own Jacob's ladder. Whatever choice we make, whatever marks we heed, we enact our being as readers who not only realize the text but are also defined by it.

The poem's stuttered utterance, "you are – / are at home," would seem to express this point. Moving in this textual space is tied to the acquisition of being, and it would not be far-fetched to say that the addressee of the poem finds herself in the same situation as Dasein in *Being and Time*. Heidegger underscores that Dasein is thrown naked into what is not yet a world and is forced to be its own ground in the absence of any other being that could be said to author, justify, or found its existence. As he puts it, "Dasein

³⁵ Szondi (1978), p. 347.

is never existent *before* its ground, but only *from it* and *as it*"³⁶. So too the reader of *Stretto*, in choosing her path becomes the text she reads, as if it were waiting for her in advance, even as she realizes it through her readerly engagement. She turns the condition of being displaced into the state of being at home through the mere act of reading that at once constructs and reconstructs the text.

This state is tenuous. Being at home is not a condition that once acquired remains valid in perpetuity. It must be regained, and in the context of *Stretto*, this means that the reader must become the text, which resists appropriation, as it addresses, among other things, profound self-alienation. Such alienation arises when one no longer listens to language, although the reverse of this statement is true as well: when language no longer registers one's experience, it becomes a tool of alienation. We see this circular process, in which we not only forget language but language forgets us, in the poem's second section. It is important to pay heed to the pronouns at the end of this passage to understand the equivocal nature of this process:

Nirgends
fragt es nach dir –

Der Ort, wo sie lagen, er hat
einen Namen – er hat
keinen. Sie lagen nicht dort. Etwas
lag zwischen ihnen. Sie
sah nicht hindurch.

Sahn nicht, nein,
redeten von
Worten. Keines
erwachte, der
Schlaf
kam über sie³⁷.

Nowhere
are you asked after –

The place where they lay, it has
a name – it has
none. They didn't lie there. Something
lay between them. They
didn't see through it.

Didn't see, no,
talked of
words. None
woke up,

³⁶ Heidegger (1996), p. 262, emphasis in original.

³⁷ GW 1, p. 198.

sleep
came over them³⁸.

What would initially seem to be a statement about a group of anonymous individuals, lying – or not lying – in an equally anonymous place, becomes a reflection on the slumber of language that fails to rise to the occasion. Indeed, a recursive structure seems to be built into these lines: Because no word was awake enough to capture the trauma of being driven into an uninhabitable terrain, the displaced did not have a language to name where they were situated or to describe their situation. Whether they were even sitting, lying, or standing becomes an open question. Something lay between them that clouded their vision. At the same time, and according to the recursive logic of these lines, their inability to grasp their situation dulls and mutes language further, such that whatever power it has to differentiate is gradually eroded. One of the unwritten puns in this section, is the word for situation (*Lage*) in the repeated verb to lie, *liegen*. (The other is *Lager*, which is as close as Celan ever comes to referring explicitly to the camps.) That a situation (*Lage*) can even become a lie (*Lüge*) is written into these lines in which multiple articulations coincide. In the absence of a word for their situation or *Lage*, those uprooted and transplanted can only speak empty words, and this emptiness alienates them from their circumstances, while also hollowing out their language. The poem refers to both the unnamed individuals and their words when it states, “sleep / came over them,” and if there is anything even modestly hopeful in this pronouncement it is the mere fact that we hear distinctions, where none exist, as a result of the labor of this text.

How to awaken language and enable the voiceless to be heard is the singular preoccupation of *Stretto*, and in the sixth section it turns to mute matter to explore this subject.

Although the section does not constitute the middle of the poem, it dwarfs all the others in its length. In the copy of the poem that Celan gave Hans Mayer, he inscribed the words, “There is nothing but atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion [*Meinung*]”³⁹. The statement is a variation on two fragments by Democritus that Celan found in Wilhelm Capelle’s invaluable compendium *The Pre-Socratics*. The first reads, “A thing only appears to have color, it only appears to be sweet or bitter. In truth there

³⁸ Celan (2020), pp. 227-29.

³⁹ Behre (1993), p. 170.

is nothing but atoms and empty space”⁴⁰. The other is, “In reality we do not have knowledge of anything; each individual’s opinion is based on the [sense images] that flow toward him”⁴¹. Democritus’ position that reality consists in nothing but atoms and emptiness is registered more or less explicitly in the poem:

Orkane.
Orkane, von je,
Partikelgestöber, das andre,
du
weißt ja, wir
lasens im Buche, war
Meinung⁴².

Hurricanes.
Hurricanes, from whenever,
particle flurries, the other,
you
know this, we
read it in the book, it was
opinion⁴³.

The apparent glibness with which the poem dismisses the validity of anything but “particle flurries” is belied by the fact that it must delay its arrival at its conclusion (“was / opinion”) and appeal to the authority of a book. That the book is, moreover, a *Buche*, a beech tree – so it is written – adds to the complexity of the passage and raises the question whether anything is itself or something other, a chance collection of particles. How do we distinguish between truth and opinion or truth and meaning?

The poem does not answer this question directly but implies that it is the failure to look beyond what is written that produces a deadly silence:

Es stand auch geschrieben, daß.
Wo? Wir
taten ein Schweigen darüber,
giftgestillt, groß,
ein
grünes
Schweigen, ein Kelchblatt⁴⁴.

And it stood written that.
Where? We

⁴⁰ Capelle (1935), p. 399, frag. 7.

⁴¹ Capelle (1935), p. 436, frag. 113.

⁴² GW 1, p. 200.

⁴³ Celan (2020), p. 233.

⁴⁴ GW 1, p. 200.

put a silence over it,
poison-stilled, huge,
a
green
silence, a sepal⁴⁵.

What is disconcerting in this passage is the association of a deadly silence with plant-life, as if a toxin could be said to grow and flower with sepals at the base of its blossom. At the same time the association directs our gaze back to something that is not expressly said in the poem but instead “written asunder.” On the one hand, the poem maintains the silence of its collective subject “we,” as seen in the abruptly suspended sentence, “And it stood written that,” and, on the other hand, it forces us to fill in the blanks. We return to the particle flurry and hurricanes at the outset of the section. In meteorology, a hurricane is an umbrella concept that includes among other things cyclones, which is a word that would have stood out for Celan, given the gas used at Auschwitz, Cyclone B. The description of those who either chose to remain silent or were silenced as “poison-stilled” calls to mind the deadliest of all poisons used in the camps. The inclusion of “*stillen*” in this neologism is also reminiscent of the “the black milk of the morning” in *Death Fugue*. It is a milk that nurses (or in German *stillt*) and turns everything into a *Stilleben*, still life.

Cyclone B was delivered to the camps in the form of crystal pellets sealed in airtight containers, since the contact with air turned the pellets immediately into gas. This too is registered in the poem. The silence that is first said to grow like a plant is transformed into a rock. In its mineralogical state, however, it continues to spread, much like sand grains spread in a dust cloud. (Of note is that the other historical trauma Celan identified as influencing this poem was Hiroshima and the particle flurry mentioned at the beginning of this section is indeed reminiscent of a mushroom cloud). In one of the most disturbing passages in *Stretto*, the speaker recites a litany of predicates that apply equally well to plants, rocks, and crystals:

Körnig,
körnig und faserig. Stengelig,
dicht;
traubig und strahlig; nierig,
plattig und
klumpig; locker, ver-
ästelt –: er, es

⁴⁵ Celan (2020), p. 233.

fiel nicht ins Wort, es
sprach
sprach gerne zu trockenen Augen, eh es sie schloß⁴⁶.

gritty,
gritty and stringy. Stalky,
dense;
clustery and raying; knobbly,
level and
clumpy; loose, bran-
ching –: he, it
did not interrupt, it
spoke,
liked speaking to dry eyes, before it closed them⁴⁷.

There is something macabre in this passage, which draws on human, vegetal and mineralogical vocabulary at a moment of acute vulnerability. Jürgen Lehmann points out that all the mineralogical terms invoked designate “imperfect crystals,” whose internal structure is not perfectly symmetrical. Whether that imperfection is linked to human vulnerability is a matter worth pursuing but exceeds the scope of this essay⁴⁸. Democritus is reported to have said that “moist eyes are better than dry ones for seeing”⁴⁹ on the grounds that the efflux of atoms a body releases are best seen if reflected in a pool of water (i.e., the eye’s moisture). To speak to dry eyes is consequently to speak to blind ones, and the only question is whether these eyes are blind because a chemical agent has insinuated itself into the body or, alternatively, because this agent in its gaseous form is nowhere to be seen. Whatever the case, the language of this invisible agent is deadly. The poem gives it a name: it is the silence that grew as a plant, then returned as a rock, and finally seeped into the air as a vapor.

Gases leave no trace. For a poem that defines itself as reading traces, this poses an acute problem, for traces are the only means we have to access the past. Without them, the world would have no history. It would be reduced to whatever exists in the present and presents itself as a phenomenon. History, however, is preserved not only in physical objects but also in words, and it is in the language of crystallography that the poem finds its ways back from the silence that would otherwise engulf it. The sixth section of the poem closes with an oddly jubilant moment of creation: “the world, a thousand crystal, / shot forth / shot forth” [*die Welt, ein*

⁴⁶ GW 1, p. 201.

⁴⁷ Celan (2020), p. 235.

⁴⁸ Lehmann (2005), p. 459.

⁴⁹ Capelle (1935), p. 431, frag. 97.

Tausendkristall, / schoß an, schoß an]. We are told that something – a word? a particle? – has intervened to mend a torn membrane and the result is a “thousand crystal” that can be traced back to the “particle flurry” named at the outset. Crystals, like plants, form from seeds: any particle can trigger the process whereby a crystal lattice forms that organizes the atoms and the space between them. Democritus’s conviction that there are only atoms and empty space finds its affirmation in crystals, which can be as rare as diamonds or as common as ice and in most cases are transparent.

Yet the moment, I would argue, is not as jubilant as it would seem. Although the thousand crystal is linked with the emergence of colors in the subsequent section presumably because the crystal serves as prism to refract light, a crucial element is missing from this constellation: the sky and, more specifically, the stars that illuminate it. Here is where the mode of the crystal’s emergence, “shot forth, shot forth,” becomes significant again. *Anschließen* is a technical term that describes how some crystals form; they solidify rapidly from a liquid state. This could suggest that the dry eyes that had all but lost their light become flush with water again and can now serve as the basis for a new world. Yet such a new world would remain hampered by the past. Eager as the poem is to plow ahead “with the new / hours,” it is thrown back to the hour that “has no sisters” mentioned at the very beginning of its journey. This inaugural hour makes itself felt again in the violent act of aiming and shooting that launches the new world: “shot forth, shot forth.” The repetition of the phrase twice here and twice at the start of the next section punctures the poem with holes or bullet marks. These are the scars the text bears and to which it seeks to give voice.

The wound is not acknowledged until the penultimate section of the poem which begins much like the first section with a series of predicates that are not immediately attributed to any subject:

In der Eulenflucht, beim
versteinerten Aussatz,
bei
unsern geflohenen Händen, in
der jüngsten Verwerfung,
über
Kugelfang an
der verschütteten Mauer:

sichtbar, aufs
neue: die
Rillen, die

Chöre, damals, die
Psalmen. Ho, ho-
sianna⁵⁰.

In owlflight, near
petrified leprosy,
near
our fled hands, in
the latest fault lines,
above the
bullet trap on
the ruined wall:

visible, a-
gain: the
rills, the

choirs, back then, the
psalms. Ho, ho
sanna⁵¹.

Each of the predicates introduced in this long list is concerned with a place over and above our hands and heads, though this does not mean it is a site of transcendence. On the contrary, one of the places named is an execution wall, and even the petrified leprosy pustule would suggest mortality. The subject that unifies these various locations is not a person or thing but a trace. It is the “rills,” which refer to the furrows etched into the ground by small streams. It can also be used for the grooves in a phonograph, which is not insignificant. In this poem, however, the rills are etched into the sky by the prisoners in the camps pleading for help. The Hebrew *Hosannah* means, “Help us, Lord.” According to the poem, the rills are visible on the horizon, and it is not a stretch to say that they are visible as a kind of writing that the poem asks us to read. The sky opens in *Stretto* with the appearance not of a God, but of a trace that reminds us of the cries of the victims of the Holocaust and makes them sound in the space between syllables, in words written asunder: “Ho, ho- / sanna”⁵². This is not the triumphal rising of

⁵⁰ GW 1, p. 203.

⁵¹ Celan (2020), p. 237.

⁵² Eric Kligerman shrewdly observes that the pried-open plea “Hosanna” can be read as the bullet holes in the wall and the call of the owl both named in the section (Kligerman 2008, pp. 205-206). Orthographically the syllables “Ho, ho” resemble the holes as acoustically they reproduce the bird’s song. The failure of God to save those sentenced to death by firing squad undermines and empties out any salvation narrative, including the secular narrative of history proposed by Hegel in *Philosophy of Right*, in which the flight of the owl of Minerva serves as a metaphor for the historical process in which spirit comes to realize itself and thus completes and closes history. No loss, no sacrifice can be repaired and redeemed in the world of *Stretto*, but it can be remembered. Kligerman’s insight that the repeated o’s in “Ho, ho- / sanna” come back in the penultimate section

phusis that, according to Heidegger, provides a refuge for all things. Nor is it the steadiness of the oak that supports both heaven and earth, as he argued in *The Field Path*. If anything, it is closer to the trees in Hölderlin's *As when on a holiday* which can also fall. *Stretto* ends by turning the barren terrain into a temple in which "A star / still / has its light." The trace of the departed is the star under which we build our dwellings. In *Stretto*, it is the asterisks between the poem's nine sections, which, as Aris Fioretos points out, do not so much say something as open a space for something still unimaginable and unintelligible to speak⁵³. The asterisks mark the limit of what the poem can say and where it must yield instead to other voices and other languages.

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in the words "noch," "wohl," "noch" and "verloren" is powerful in this context (p. 206). They appear in the lines leading up to the assertion, "Nothing, nothing is lost" (Celan 2020, p. 239), which can be interpreted as double negative to say, "Nothing is lost, for the absence is marked allowing nothing to remain".

⁵³ Fioretos (1994), pp. 328-329.

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