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Celan and Language that Passes Through

In 1958, Paul Celan gave a short speech now known as the Bremen Lecture in which the Romanian poet casts his relationship with language in a particular non-proprietary light that this essay will reflect on with the help of Jacques Derrida.

Celan's speech, which was delivered upon the conferral of a literature prize hosted by the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, opens with an expression of thanks and follows the route of language, as it were, through "Denken" and "Danken" ("thinking and thanking in our language are words from one and the same source") to "[enter] the semantic field of 'recollect,' 'bear in mind,' 'remembrance,' 'devotion.'" ¹ It is in this spirit of reflecting on what one has received both past and present that Celan introduces himself to his host city as coming from an unfamiliar landscape formerly of the Hapsburg monarchy – a landscape that was already linked with Bremen, Celan reminds his audience, through language and writing: in one direction, Martin Buber's German translation of Hasidic tales, and in the other, publications such as those of the Bremen press through which "Bremen took shape for me."² However, for now the nearness of reading, writing and publishing serves to mediate a sense of "the unreachable" that Bremen still has "the ring of."³ Vienna, briefly meditated on next, is "reachable, if distant enough, what has to be reached,"⁴ but judging from Celan's encounters with post-Anschluss racial laws that prevented him from studying in Vienna and with the city's broken Jewish communities post-WWII, what is "too-attaining"⁵ can in reality betray the attachment of imagined identifications. As Celan puts it allusively in the speech: "You know how it went then, for years, with this reachability."⁶

What Celan proposes in the wake of relinquishing places of belonging is language as "this one thing" that is reachable and un-lost amidst all the losses. Famously, however,

But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through its frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, “enriched” by all this.⁷

The availability of language does not mean that it is claimed easily or that it is open to being claimed in any simple, possessive sense. Here, as in the rest of the speech, Celan does not name the Holocaust although the context would have been clear to his audiences. There is also no explicit naming of the German language—the language Celan chose to work in—but its implication is present in this image of a decidedly alienating experience of language felt as wordlessness or silence. Silence is not nothing, being a strained one that can turn murderous and loud as language (“Sprache”) suffers its own self-alienation in speech (“Rede”)⁸ and becomes a differentiating instrument of death and silencing rather than a condition for relationality. However, Celan also appears to evoke a mode of operation more inherent to language through the idea of wordless passage. His description—the way that “it passes through this happening,” which also recalls passage as migration and survival under Nazi persecution—imagines a language that *persists* in some form or shape through a period in which it is repressed and also unable to give an answer, a word. Celan specifies later that “a poem is not timeless,” blocking the interpretation that poetry remains because it transcends what words fail to convey; rather, its claim to infinity lies in “[seeking] to reach through time.”⁹ What is this reaching, or what is it that persists and passes through? But even before that question, this language “gave back no words.” To whom? To terrorizing speech that silences even in the act of demanding an answer? To a speaker to whom no words return (the “*her*” of “gab keine Worte *her*” to the “*hin*” of language’s “ging *hindurch*”; *hin und her* meaning back and forth as a phrase)?¹⁰ Or perhaps to an Other who may be waiting? Why is a word awaited? Why does it seem incomplete to consider passage as just a form of witnessing what cannot be shared?

This essay takes up the provocations that “giving back no words” provides for thinking about non-proprietary relations to language as something available or “reachable,” but is not appropriable. The survival of Celan’s language runs counter to the common expectation that language make available the means by which to “give back a word,” to make sense, make livable or lived, or make replies when addressed—in other words, to be in possession of names, stories, and more. If language failed in this respect during the Holocaust, Celan’s speech prompts a rethinking of what language is, what need for language led Celan to describe himself as one who “thus most uncannily in the open, goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality,”¹¹ and finally what kinds of poetic theory it allows us to imagine apart from the assertion of reality in the expressive voice of a subject or perhaps even the world-making of beings transcending themselves within

a larger unfolding. For instance, when Celan states that he writes poetry “to orient myself,” the emphasis falls not on establishing location but on sustaining a continual motion—a desire for certain possibilities—because writing is “event, movement, a being underway, it was an attempt to gain direction;” the meaning of this direction, he observes, “involves the question of the clockhand’s direction” and points poetry “[toward] something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality.”¹²

All this will come under a new light as we turn to Derrida for ways to think the urgency of writing for the sake of “an addressable reality.” The next section offers a reading mainly of two texts where Derrida discusses Celan’s work, extracting from them a view of language whose temporal passage enables a gathering of self and other, wherein we have to revalue proprietary relations to the idiom and make room instead for thinking forms of writing that mark difference and relation. The third and final section returns for a brief reconsideration of Celan’s Bremen Lecture. Celan holds an influential role in Derrida’s thinking and has himself theorized language in different forms of writing, but due to the limited scope allowed this essay, the two are juxtaposed not so much to identify definitely shared currents of thought as to explore what cross-pollinations this provokes for understanding the hospitality language can offer us and what we can offer through language.

Derrida on Celan: the Marking and Giving of Language

Derrida often describes the scene between Celan and language (German) as one where the poetic event is a strenuously executed marking of language. In an interview titled “Language Is Never Owned,” Derrida speaks of Celan’s work as

a singular signature that 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.¹³

Reaching and marking without appropriating or surrendering: this double “passing” that doubles as a (counter)signature is what Derrida sees Celan trying to accomplish. Relatedly, in a long essay titled “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” Derrida states that “[wherever] a signature has cut into an idiom, leaving in language the trace of an incision, the memory of an incision at once unique and iterable, cryptic and readable, there is date.”¹⁴ This section explores how the idea of Celan’s marking of language unfolds through such concepts as the date, the incision, and the signature.

Derrida argues in his essay that a date operates by inscribing the promise of a return in future iterations such as anniversaries and commemorations; this raises, however, the issue of the date's paradoxical readability wherein "it is necessary that [. . .] the unrepeatable divide itself in repeating itself, and in the same stroke encipher or encrypt itself."¹⁵ A date that puts a readable signature on an event risks effacing itself or the intact presence of meaning of the unrepeatable singularity it dates, although importantly, Derrida emphasizes that this "is not the simple effacement of the date in a generality, but its effacement in front of another date [. . .] which is strangely allied in the secret of an encounter, a chance secret, with the same date."¹⁶ It is possible therefore that what the passing mark or "the memory of an incision" registers is the memory of precisely this act of self-division in expropriating but also transcribing oneself forward into the company of wholly others to whom one speaks at the cost of alienation from oneself: "speaking to the other of the other," as it were.¹⁷ In this sense the expropriation may also have the potential to be reproduced in those who come upon the date since the date's self-division also turns, in a fundamental sense, into a condition of possibility for contact: cipher though it may have become the date is a mark of proffered alliance—Derrida calls it at one point "the traces of the other *as I*" (original italics)¹⁸—and it extends a peculiar space in which different times gather.

In fact, the non-appropriative date in Derrida's Celan can also figure as a border or a cut that marks a *difference in between* in such a manner that it hinges on the specificities of the bordering selves without attempting to own them or even encompass them in understanding. In "Shibboleth," Derrida arrives at this mark by contemplating the untranslatability of language that derives not so much from idiomatic content as from the singularity of gathered differences—by "the cut of a non-signifying difference in the body of the mark."¹⁹ This multiplicity within language exists among languages as well and Derrida's example is the cut between idioms that form arbitrary but specific borders, such as around "shibboleth," a word that also has a history, however, of functioning as a password that arbitrates access to entry, membership and even life on account of having different pronunciations in different tongues. Derrida warns that the cut *in the body* of such non-signifying difference can help essentialize the idioms that produce it and constitute "a discriminatory limit, the grillwork of policing, of normalization, and of methodical subjugation."²⁰ The requirement for the ability to inhabit an idiom, however, can reflect no particular singular identity to be inhabited. Instead, through the figure of the shibboleth, Derrida seems to envision an alternative space not for occupying but for gathering, a mode of language to which uniqueness more truly belongs and which indeed offers a lens to understand poetry; he writes, for instance, that "the uniqueness of the poem, in other words, yet another date and *shibboleth*, forges and seals, in a single idiom, *in eins*, the poetic event, a multiplicity of languages and of equally singular dates" (original italics).²¹ A shibboleth is both heterogeneous and yet singular; like the date, it recalls "this alliance between the date and itself *as*

other" (original italics)²² which Derrida associates with the imagery of rings in Celan's poetry. Constituted by differences in the same where difference is not subsumed or claimed, the unique mark therefore allows the apposition of selves and others for which it serves the oxymoronic role of a non-invasive border.

We can now better appreciate the self-division and self-expropriation of the date: it creates chance gatherings as it propels itself through time, making room for encountering other dates through a certain non-inhabitation of meaning. What the date or the shibboleth inscribes must remain other or non-signifying, but this negativity asks us to consider if the value of writing the mark lies in the singular event of the gathering itself, in the sealing-together of the many dates enabled by the non-identity in the date's self-relation. All of this is perhaps also a way of invoking Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other* to revisit its provocation that a language of the other is in a sense the only language available, and its value is decidedly not based on a relationship of belonging and ownership:

This appeal to come [*appel à venir*] gathers language together in advance. It welcomes it, collects it, not in its identity or its unity, not even in its ipseity, but in the uniqueness or singularity of a gathering together of its difference to itself [. . .]. It is not possible to speak outside this promise that gives *a* language, the uniqueness of the idiom, but only by promising to give it. (original italics)²³

While it has been implied already that language as such works as a self-transcribing date, a question that might nonetheless be carried forward from this train of thought is what a poetic language looks like that bears the mark of a date, an alienation, an incision that gathers. Perhaps a cryptic language in which "there is nothing but *shibboleth*" (original italics)²⁴—nothing but openings, thresholds and invitations? And what precisely happens to German, the language that Derrida calls Celan's language in the sense not of ownership but of a chosen "bodily struggle"²⁵ in which it is the aim of Celan's poetry to leave a mark on that particular idiom? The first question can be hard to answer concretely within the scope of this essay, but it might be possible to go further with Derrida's description of Celan's "signature" as something that reaches the idiom without appropriating or surrendering. The problem of idiomaticity is in a sense exemplary for thinking about the promise of a language in the disorderly gathering of difference as opposed to the presence of articulated meaning.

In the interview, Derrida observes that the task of poets is to teach a much needed political lesson in response to the contemporary dilemma of how to "be in favor of the greatest idiomaticity [. . .] while resisting nationalist ideology,"²⁶ what they teach, he declares, is the matter not "of cultivating a given idiom but of producing an idiom."²⁷ In the arguments traced in the essay "*Shibboleth*," to give an idiom involves a self-alienation that creates

openings for gatherings and encounters *in eins*; on the other hand, the idea of “cultivating” idiomaticity is misguided not only because language is multiple and migratory,²⁸ but also since any singularity it enjoys would be impure on account of being already constituted by alterity. Within this frame, Derrida’s particular representation of Celan’s “signature that would be a counter-signature to the German language”²⁹ – to which Celan is committed without assuming a possessive gesture – serves to illustrate the importance of idiomaticity both as an inherited specificity to be respected and as something of value created by a non-appropriative and even life-preserving unsettling of that specificity. Figuratively speaking, if a signature created in an idiom represents a claim or right of belonging, the concept of counter-signature would seem to signify a betrayal of that idiom – and the *latter’s* betrayal of proprietary or nationalist claims – precisely because in its commitment it repeats the unrepeatable. Derrida comments that Celan’s poetry “passes on the inheritance of the German language;”³⁰ this remark, however, should be read in the light of a later one suggesting that “the poet is someone permanently engaged with a dying language that he resuscitates, not by giving back to it a triumphant line, but by sometimes bringing it back, like a revenant or phantom.”³¹ Derrida’s invocation of revenants here recalls the way a date transcribes itself as a cipher toward other dates. Again, the date effaces itself not in a generality but for the sake of the wholly other. In rather abstract terms at least, the overall implication seems to be that Celan’s counter-signature does something similar for the German language, setting it in motion so that it is deracinated from nationalist ideology but resuscitated in its idiomaticity in a new sense. This motion is internal as well – an internal differentiation and non-identity – for Derrida also describes Celan as engaging in “a translating interpretation” within the German language itself.³²

From what Derrida tells us, Celan’s relationship with language thus consists in a giving of language that makes possible the encounter and gathering of selves and others in a single, marked and heterogenous space, which in this case is the space of poetry. Might this provide an angle for reading the Bremen Lecture too – for how language persists even when it “passes through” without giving back a word? Given that the giving of language entails an embrace of literature’s exemplary temporality of impure presence,³³ it would be worthy of further thinking to ask in what ways language might remain – might pass through – not despite but thanks to a certain state of negativity, a relation in which the structure of giving plays a central role. Much resonance can be found, for instance, in the aforementioned promise of a language that is given by promising to give, or an adjacent statement in *Monolingualism* where Derrida writes that “but there is not a language. Not a given one. It does not exist. [. . .] Like a charge [*enjoignante*], it remains to be given, it remains only on this condition: by still remaining to be given.”³⁴

On Not Giving Back Words

In "Shibboleth," Derrida brings up another scene of "passing" when he makes the appeal of "[letting] the word pass and [assign] us, if not to the one, at least to the same?"³⁵ In assigning self and other to the same if not the one, this word operates as a date, the marking Derrida sees "coming to pass" in Celan's German poetry. As a way of returning to the initial questions about the Bremen Lecture, we can ask how this "letting passing" relates to the "passing through" of Celan's language that is alienated and alienating and that persists as the only not-lost thing.

Derrida's "word" appears in the context of his consideration of Jewishness as the non-possession of essence, of circumcision, and of the Jew's "unpronounceable" proper name.³⁶ What this word is seems ambiguous ("shibboleth"? you? the word for God? an indefinite word to be filled in?), but its ambiguity is arguably attuned to the layered negativity that draws attention to it as something of a non-word. To begin with, a word can assume unpronounceability in order to guard and even to destroy when, inscribed/circumcised with a differentiating value, it is given out embodying the authority to include and exclude. For instance, a non-word can include those who do not speak its name because they participate in a shared covenant, while in another scenario, it can exclude those who fail its test of pronunciation, like the Ephraimites and the word "shibboleth." On another level, however, Derrida's concluding remarks evoke a different kind of unpronounceable inscription/circumcision that fends against such exclusionary and proprietary tendencies through an authoritative intercession or "a *writing of Nothing*" (original italics).³⁷ Here the act of inscription/circumcision remains necessary because it marks and prepares the word or signature that must be given or promised to the other so "that he may partake of it and enter, or leave, that he may pass through the doorway, across the line, the border, the threshold."³⁸ Because the writing is "nothing," however, authority becomes "objectless"³⁹ and is forced to negate its claims to knowledge and power; consequently, the scene itself changes: "one should not cut in, but on the contrary allow the word passage."⁴⁰

As a difference without a nameable, pronounceable and discriminatory difference, this "writing of nothing" can function as a radical variation on the singular mark that Derrida figures as "the cut of a non-signifying difference in the body of the mark."⁴¹ When afforded the ritual of authorial inscription/circumcision, Derrida's unpronounceable "word" can go out into the world and serve as a gathering place of multiplicities or ports of entries and crossings; but although the word is passing back and forth and participating in the multiplicity taken into itself, as an idiom it is not that which can be possessed, having no essence or name to be spoken. If "passage" refers to a word transcribing itself as an Other so that there continues to be

encounter and being-together, Derrida's elaborations on circumcision emphasize this passage's need for a process of the same order as the self-alienating date or cut, which is what makes possible specific non-proprietary forms of signature in writing.

This returns us to the Bremen Lecture where language "[passed] through and could come to light again, 'enriched' by all this."⁴² Perhaps the fact that this language "gave back no words for that which happened"⁴³ does not have to lead to a total image of absence where the only valuable writing or voicing is naming. Perhaps as language "reaches through time,"⁴⁴ "that which happened" is carried forward in the "enrichment" that, like a date, may on the one hand seem to forget—by not naming—its singularity, but on the other enable future gatherings in which the past is brought back as "a phantom or revenant,"⁴⁵ the other as the I. In a similar vein, language may also prove to encompass unexpected hospitalities beyond those promised but also gatekept by proprietors of language who bind presence and meaning to the borders of particular words.

- ¹ Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trs. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 395.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ "Origin," 16. "Too-attaining" is the translation for "what has to be reached" ("das zu Erreichende") in Robert Kelly's version of the Bremen Lecture.
- ⁶ Ibid., 395.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Original German.
- ⁹ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 396.
- ¹⁰ Original German.
- ¹¹ *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 396.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ "Language Is Never Owned," 99.
- ¹⁴ "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," 48.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 15.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 9.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 10.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 7.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 30.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 30. This essentializing differentiation brings to mind the "deathbringing speech" in Celan's Bremen Lecture.
- ²¹ Ibid., 29.
- ²² Ibid., 19.
- ²³ *Monolingualism*, 67-68.
- ²⁴ "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," 33.
- ²⁵ "Language Is Never Owned," 99.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 102.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 103.
- ²⁸ Derrida writes: "Multiplicity and migration of languages, certainly, and within language. Your country, it says, migrates all over, like language. The country itself migrates and transports its borders." ("Shibboleth," 27)

- ²⁹ “Language Is Never Owned,” 99.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 100.
- ³³ See Pheng Cheah’s *What is a World* p.184-186 for Cheah’s understanding of the Derridean temporality in which the “constitution of presence through the relation to a radical alterity” makes possible “the gift of time through which we are given any determinable reality.”
- ³⁴ *Monolingualism*, 67.
- ³⁵ “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” 51. The entire passage reads: “Witness to the universal as absolute singularity, as the other and in the name of the other, of the stranger, of you toward whom I must take a step that, without bringing me nearer to you, without exchanging me for you, without being assured a passage, lets the word pass and assigns us, if not to the one, at least to the same. We were already assigned to it, dwelling under the same tradewind. Let the word pass through the barbed-wire border, through, this time, the grid of language or thanks to it. The passage of the other, toward the other—respect of the same, of a same that respects the otherness of the other.”
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-62.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁴² *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 395.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 396.
- ⁴⁵ “Language Is Never Owned,” 106.