



Article

The Black Star: Lived Paradoxes in the Poetry of Paul Celan

Dorit Lemberger

Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 5290002, Israel; lemerberd@biu.ac.il

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Abstract: Celan's poetry is deemed universal and experimental, and its main characteristic is to "explore possibilities of sense-making". His poetry is also acknowledged to be the apex of Jewish post-Holocaust poetry, contending with existentialist questions such as the existence of God in the Holocaust and the possibility of restoring Jewish identity. In this paper I will examine how Celan uses paradoxes in his poetry to create atheistic and skeptical expressions. The technique of paradox expresses the concurrent existence of two contradictory possibilities; the article will present three types of paradox typical of Celan's poetry: (1) the affirmation and denial of the existence of God; (2) the mention of rituals from Jewish tradition, while voiding them of their conventional meaning; (3) the use of German, specifically, for the reconstitution of Jewish identity. My main argument is that paradox in Celan's work creates a unique voice of atheism and skepticism, since it preserves the ideas that it rejects as a source for fashioning meaning. In order to explore how Celan constructs paradox, I will use Wittgenstein's resolutions of the paradoxes that emerge from the use of language, and I will show how they illuminate Celan's use of this technique. The article will examine three Wittgensteinian methods of resolving the paradoxes that Celan employs in his oeuvre: highlighting, containing, and dissolving.

Keywords: Celan; Wittgenstein; paradox; atheism; skepticism

1. Preface: "Say, That Jerusalem Is"

Celan's poetry has an enigmatic element, which becomes progressively stronger in the later years, when the poems are even more succinct and encoded than in his earlier career. This element rests, in part, on his frequent use of paradoxes to produce skeptical and atheistic arguments, especially in two contexts: the relationship between God and human beings and the (in)ability of language to express the ineffable.¹ These two contexts are fashioned concomitantly on the aesthetic, formal, and the thematic-existential levels.² The poem that follows, one of Celan's later works, clearly expresses

¹ My use of "ineffable" is based on Wittgenstein's assertion that "there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical" (Wittgenstein 1961, §6.522). It was further developed by Suzanne Langer to explain how a literary work functions: Langer connected the pattern that cannot be verbalized with the expressing of feeling. She examined the action of the aesthetic pattern in a series of aesthetic practices such as poetry, dance, and theater (Langer 1953). An aesthetic work, for Langer, is a "symbol of sentience," and it thereby shows the ineffable: the sentiment or inner process from which the work issues: "The concept of significant form as an articulate expression of feeling, reflecting the verbally ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience (capable of feelings) *Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feelings*. [...] Not the invention of new original terms, not the adoption of novel themes, merits the word 'creative,' but the making of any work symbolic of feelings, even in the most canonical context and manner" (Langer, *Feeling and Form*, pp. 39–40 [emphasis added]).

² It should be emphasized that many scholars have discussed Celan's attitude towards God as expressing an unorthodox faith that can be considered as paradoxical but not atheistic. See for example Hawkis on "problematic faith" (Hawkins 2002), Mosès on "negative theology" (Mosès 1987) et al. Although one can state that most scholars interpret Celan poetry as containing expressions of faith, this article wishes to expose an atheistic aspect based on Wittgenstein's following claims: "Grammar is not accountable to any reality" (Wittgenstein 1974, p. 184), and "For a large class of cases of the employment of

both paradoxical domains: Simultaneously open and closed, the poem thereby embodies the paradox of trying to put meaning into words, as against the impossibility of doing so. A second paradox is created by the poet's strong bond to his Jewish origins, even though this identity is essentially devoid of content and incapable of endowing his life with contemporary meaning.

Poem-closed poem-open

here come the colors
toward a non-defended
freely headed
Jew.
Here the heaviest Levi—
tates.
Here am I.³

There are two paradoxes here. The poem is a text that is simultaneously open and closed, in which the heaviest is also light—it “levitates.” This paradoxical situation sheds light on the atheism of the speaker, who is a “non-defended/freely headed/Jew.” That is, the link to his Jewish origins does not derive from faith or the Jewish heritage, but is rather bound up with a destiny in which he feels himself a “non-defended Jew.”

The salience of Jewish identity, and the absence of any fulcrum, are the two main identity components of the paradoxical nature of Celan's poetry. On the one hand, the poems employ distinctively Jewish motifs and references; but in the very same poems we find metaphors and descriptions that undermine the very possibility of allotting them some stable meaning. How are we to understand the need to express a link to Jewish tradition and rituals if Celan deconstructs every aspect of meaning? How does this paradoxical movement of constructing and deconstructing meaning express the attempt for a reconstruction of self after Celan's identity crisis in the wake of the Holocaust? The unique contribution of Celan's poetry is that it constructs a complex position that is at the same time committed to Jewish tradition and the Jewish destiny.

Celan constructs Wittgensteinian paradoxes that tolerate contradictions and leave them unresolved⁴. The paradoxes illustrate the ability of poetic language to function in several ways that seem to be paradoxical but in fact express modes of action that are not necessarily subject to the rules of logic or syntax, but can serve various purposes. This notion is the main new contribution of the present article, which departs from earlier readings of paradox in Celan that saw them as logical or syntactic.⁵

the word ‘meaning’ [. . .] the meaning of a word is its use in language” (Wittgenstein 2009, para. 43). The autonomy of grammar allows us to say that language can act (also) unrelated to the reality. Grammar's freedom from the reality allows language to also embody contents that are not based in logical grammar, but rather are grounded in a consistency of another sort that at times is paradoxical. The meaning as use in this article's context means that Celan can use Biblical and Jewish symbols and ideas in an atheistic manner, while communication with God is not to be expected.

³ “GEDICHTZU, GEDICHTAUF:/Hier fahren die Farben/zum schutzfremden,/freistirnigen/Juden./Hier levitiert/der Schwerste./Hier bin ich” (Celan 2001, pp. 390–91).

⁴ There is no evidence for Celan's engagement with Wittgenstein's works. Two studies have explored similarities between Wittgenstein and Celan, but neither addresses the issue of paradoxes. Rochelle Tobias discussed the poetic language of nature (Tobias 2006). Christoph König analyzed the two men's work from the perspective of historical linguistics (König 2016).

⁵ Götz Wienold considers Celan's ambivalence about Hölderlin (Wienold 1968). Wienold shows how Celan revokes Hölderlin and yet confirms his influence on him. There is a link between Celan's dual attitude towards Hölderlin and his use of paradox in other contexts, but I cannot go into that topic now. The present article focuses on the Wittgensteinian paradoxes that reflect activity within the limits of language as well as beyond them (as Wittgenstein defines them). Celan's duality about Hölderlin remains with the limits of language.

Susan Suleiman proposed the term “preterition” as an alternative for paradox, in order to conceptualize cases in which the narrative utterance presents a “paradoxical figure of affirmation and denial, of saying and not saying, by its rhetorical name” (Suleiman 2006, p. 206). She cites the poem that Celan wrote after his unsuccessful meeting with Heidegger as an example of a paradoxically stance (ibid., p. 150). This too is a different sort of paradox than that proposed here, inspired

To enhance our understanding of these modes of action, let us consider the four types of paradox that Wittgenstein describes in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

2. One Can *Think* What Is Not the Case: Wittgenstein's Paradoxes

Wittgenstein's later work includes an investigation of paradoxes, aimed at clarifying failures in understanding how language works.⁶ A philosophical inquiry is required, according to Wittgenstein, when a problem arises with the actual use of language: for example, the difficulty in understanding how it is possible to understand what some person is thinking, using general language. The four paradoxes are produced by the study of this tension. In the first paradox, for example, Wittgenstein considers the grammatical use of the verb we employ to denote, express, and describe our intention. In daily use, we cannot pause while using the word, so its sense is fluid and evasive.

When we say, *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, then, with what we mean, we do not stop anywhere short of the fact, but mean: *such-and-such—is—thus-and-so*.—But this paradox (which indeed has the form of a truism) can also be expressed in this way: one can *think* what is not the case.⁷

The paradox is created by our inability to pause during the process of attaching meaning and trap it—even though we do refer to it by means of language. Wittgenstein's proposed resolution of this paradox is that we can think things that cannot be verified and then put them into language. Wittgenstein's method of resolving the paradox includes pointing it out, on the one hand, and demonstrating how it can be contained, on the other hand. This method explains how poetic language can address existential questions—including those that have no answer or, alternatively, have only a paradoxical answer.⁸

A second type of paradox noted by Wittgenstein stems from the impossibility of defining *any* word. Thus, practically speaking, it is impossible to achieve full comprehension or verification, even when it is a matter of understanding facts:

The criteria which we accept for 'fitting', 'being able to', 'understanding', are much more complicated than might appear at first sight. That is, the game with these words, their use in the linguistic intercourse that is carried on by their means, is more involved—the role of these words in our language is other than we are tempted to think. (This role is what we need to understand in order to resolve philosophical paradoxes. And that's why definitions usually aren't enough to resolve them; and even less so the statement that a word is 'indefinable'.)⁹

Here Wittgenstein asserts that there are words that function as criteria for assessing the correspondence between actions in the language-game and a specific definition. However, their function is paradoxical. On the one hand, expressions such as "fitting" and "being able to" look like a criterion; on the other hand, they do not make it possible to verify the correspondence between an action and a definition.

To resolve this paradox, Wittgenstein says that we need to understand the complex function of criterion words in our language, because some of their qualities cannot be narrowed down to a precise

by Wittgenstein. Suleiman states explicitly that the term she proposes refers to logical or syntactical contradictions, where Wittgenstein does not deal with those types. Suleiman also writes that "preterition is the rhetorical figure that corresponds to recognition/denial of traumatic childhood loss" (ibid., p. 210). Here, by contrast, I refer to paradoxical tensions in other contexts.

⁶ "Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language; the confusions which occupy us arise when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work." (Wittgenstein 2009, §109).

⁷ (Ibid., §95).

⁸ Langer noted the capacity of poetic language to produce paradoxes. On the philosophical plane there is a fundamental difficulty with grasping emotion in isolation from the person who expresses it. But a work of art can symbolize it in a different way, through sight, with no need for words, yielding incommensurable paradoxes (Langer 1953, pp. 22–23). Similarly, Cleanth Brooks made the sweeping claim that "paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry ... Apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox" (Brooks 1968, p. 1).

⁹ (Wittgenstein 2009, §182).

definition. This paradox is especially relevant to a discussion of Celan's poetry, which—as in the poems we have read so far—always reflects the gulf between the speaker's desire and what language actually permits.

A third type of paradox, which is the most important in Wittgenstein's investigations, has been the subject of countless debates and attempts at resolution. This is the famous "paradox of rules," which in essence casts doubt on the possibility of following the rules of the language-game. "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule."¹⁰

This paradox is especially relevant for the relationship between what Celan said about the nature of a poem (in the "Meridian" address) and how language functions for the reconstruction of the self (in the "Bremen Prize Speech"), on the one hand, and what the poems actually show, on the other. There is a tension between the objectives that Celan proposes for poetic language, as formulated in these public addresses, and the attempt to attain them, because of the paradoxical gap noted by Wittgenstein between the possibility of composing rules in a language and the impossibility of applying these rules to the language-game (even when the person composing the rules is the speaker himself).

The fourth type of paradox emerges when we are certain of our experience of inner emotional processes, but at the same time cannot express them in language in a way that highlights their private nature.¹¹ Because these processes can be transferred into general language only, one is liable to fall into the error that all speakers of the language feel pain or love in the same way. Wittgenstein announces this paradox only after he has solved it: "The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever."¹²

Accordingly, we must comprehend the tension of language that may operate in ways that neither correspond with nor contradict each other, or may contain internal contradictions.¹³

We have looked at Wittgenstein's four paradoxes. The first is when there is a contraction between the facts in the external world and what human beings think. The second is created when there is a contradiction between the impossibility of definition and our use of terms such as "correspondence" and "understanding," which seem to rest on the possibility of trapping meaning. The third paradox derives from the concept of "rules," which, at least superficially, dictate a particular usage. The fourth paradox emerges from the contradiction between our certainty about the existence of processes within ourselves and the impossibility of voicing their unique features in language. Wittgenstein proposes to simply accept the first two paradoxes, highlights the third, and shows how to dissolve the last one. To understand his different treatment of the four paradoxes, we can draw on the important distinctions drawn by Rupert Read:

A Wittgensteinian way with paradoxes . . . does not go away with all paradoxes—far from it. *There are paradoxes that are lived*; contradictions that matter in psychical or in civil life that are not dissolved by a Wittgensteinian treatment . . . More crucially: there are paradoxes that are good: methodologically and/or practically.¹⁴

In Celan's poetry, even philosophical paradoxes function as "lived paradoxes." Celan's work can cast light back on Wittgenstein's treatment of paradoxes as existentialist discourses.

¹⁰ (Wittgenstein 2009, §201).

¹¹ "And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don't want to deny them" (Wittgenstein 2009, §308).

¹² (Wittgenstein 2009, §304).

¹³ According to Langer, this is the central paradox of all poetry—although the present article tries to demonstrate that all the types of paradox are active in Celan's work.

¹⁴ (Read 2013, p. 157 [emphasis added]). Read refers indirectly to Wittgenstein's argument that "the philosopher treats a question; like an illness" (Wittgenstein 2009, §255) and suggests that lived paradoxes are exemptions from the illness.

3. Revealed and Concealed in Celan's Poetry

Celan has been described as the ultimate interpreter of his own poetry, because in his public addresses he dealt at length with the function of language, including in poetry, in the reconstruction of self after the Holocaust. Even though his remarks are important and significant, and can certainly be seen as a manifestation of self-knowledge, the special quality of his poetry lies also in how it operates in a way that cannot be put into words. The poems express and also create an uncanny feeling that derives from several kinds of doubt.¹⁵ Celan referred directly to this function of art and poetry, which takes place when the human is threatened and called into question. It is precisely when a gulf of understanding and distance gapes between the text and the reader, creating estrangement, that there is also liberation and release:

Perhaps poetry, like art, is going with a self-forgotten I toward the uncanny and the strange, and is again—but where? But in what place? But with what? But as what?—setting itself free? . . . Will we now perhaps find the place where the strangeness was, the place where a person was able to set himself free as an—estranged—I?¹⁶

Celan maintains that both art and poetry move towards the uncanny. But poetry also casts itself free of it, because the sense of strangeness produces the freedom that permits the reconstruction of the self. Wittgenstein, too, described the feeling of the uncanny as a paradox, but also as pathological.¹⁷ By contrast, Celan's innovation is to see the uncanny as an opportunity for a dialogue that is conducted at a distance. The encounter is what makes possible the existence of both the poem and the other. "The obscurity associated with poetry for the sake of an encounter, by a perhaps self-devised distance or strangeness."¹⁸ Thus the poem generates a paradoxical movement, of distancing and estrangement even as it feels an attraction to and need for the reader:

The poem holds on at the edge of itself; so as to exist, it ceaselessly calls and hauls itself from its Now-no-More back into its Ever-yet. But this Ever-yet could be only an act of speaking. Not simply language and probably not just verbal "correspondence" either . . . The poem is lonely. It is lonely and underway. Whoever writes one stays mated with it . . . The poem wants to reach an other, it needs this other, it needs an Over-against. It seeks it out, speaks toward it.¹⁹

Celan's Meridian address, from which this passage comes, sheds light on a conscious motive for the paradoxical nature of his poetry. The poems themselves embody and demonstrate this paradox but do not explain it.

"The Poles," one of Celan's later works, presents a paradoxical mental state that oscillates between two poles, corresponding to the binary structure of communication in which there is a speaker and a listener, but the gulf between them cannot be bridged.

The poles

are within us,
insurmountable

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, like Freud, defined as "uncanny" the difficulty in distinguishing between people who function as automata and those who function naturally: "But can't I imagine that people around me are automata, lack consciousness, even though they behave in the same way as usual?—If I imagine it now alone in my room—I see people with fixed looks (as in a trance) going about their business—the idea is perhaps a little uncanny. But just try to hang on to this idea in the midst of your ordinary intercourse with others—in the street, say!" (Wittgenstein 2009, §420).

¹⁶ (Celan 2001, pp. 406–7).

¹⁷ This interpretation of Wittgenstein's discussion of the uncanny was proposed by Rupert Read, who then applied it to a clinical case. (See Read 2013, pp. 190–91).

¹⁸ (Celan 2001, p. 407).

¹⁹ (Celan 2001, p. 409).

while we're awake,
 we sleep across, up to the Gate
 of Mercy,
 I lose you to you, that
 is my snow-comfort,
 say, that Jerusalem is,
 say it, as if I were this
 your whiteness,
 as if you were
 mine,
 as if without us we could be we,
 I leaf you open, for ever
 You pray, you lay
 us free.²⁰

Celan wrote this poem after his visit to Jerusalem in 1969.²¹ As John Felstiner recounts at length, the visit was packed with social and literary events, and Celan was smothered with warmth and adulation.²² The poem tries to distill this acceptance into the request he makes to the woman addressed, "say, that Jerusalem *is*." At the same time, however, the request expresses his doubt as to the very possibility of holding on to the agreeable sense of being he experienced in Jerusalem. Practically speaking, there is no key or foothold that will allow the speaker to recreate this feeling or even just preserve it inside himself.

After his return to Paris, Celan tried to revive the sense of exaltation in his letters to Ilana Shmueli: "Jerusalem lifted me up and strengthened me. Paris pushes me down and empties me out . . . If only my memory were not to be destroyed!"²³

It is interesting that when Felstiner translated the poem into English, he used the first line as the poem's title, whereas Shmueli took a later line, "say that Jerusalem is" as the title both of the poem and of her book about Celan (originally in Hebrew, the English translator has changed both). Both choices are important for our discussion, because the two poles of Felstiner's title represent the inherent paradoxical nature of Celan's poetic consciousness. The yearning for Jerusalem as a metaphor for life and hope embodies the paradoxical nature of the desire to depict the bond to Jewish tradition along with the sense that it no longer exists.

The poem expresses the paradox in several ways. The two poles within our soul are real and cannot be eliminated. They condemn both the poet and the addressee to stand before the Gate of Mercy (both the physical gate in the walls of Jerusalem and the metaphorical one) without being able to feel the mercy it represents. Latent here is Celan's atheism, which I will demonstrate more clearly in other poems. In this poem, a place that represents mercy is referred to the pole of the poet's soul that longs for this mercy. But the source of mercy, God, does not exist, and the poet must be content with addressing the woman. But she, too, cannot help him, because her soul, like his, was seared by the Holocaust.

On the intersubjective plane, too, the search for tranquility is presented as paradoxical. The poet loses the addressee despite his attempt to reach her. At the same time, however, he is comforted by this loss, because her independence allows her to tell him that Jerusalem "is" (if she can perceive it).

²⁰ (Celan 2001, p. 363).

²¹ This is one of the "Jerusalem poems," most of which were written as part of Celan's correspondence with his childhood friend, Ilana Shmueli, between October 1969 and April 1970, during and after his visit to Jerusalem and time he spent with her then. Shmueli published their correspondence, including the poems (see Shmueli 2010).

²² (Felstiner 1995, pp. 264–79).

²³ (Shmueli 2010, pp. 14–15).

He realizes that he cannot be “her whiteness” and that the world in which they exist for each other is illusory. The intersubjective paradox reaches its climax with, “as if without us we could be we.”

How can we explain the paradoxical bond that is alternately woven and unraveled here? How does such a connection nonetheless instill a sort of hope and expectation, and, especially, the ability to communicate with and be helped by the other? The paradoxical relationship between the speaker and the Other is explicitly analogous to his relationship with Jerusalem, a symbolic key to hope, and demonstrates the ability of poetic language to operate on parallel tracks that seem to be paradoxical but in fact express modes of action that are not subject to the rules of logic or syntax.

This form that “shows” but does not transcribe in words allows a poem to highlight the paradox without resolving it or facilitating its comprehension, as can be seen, for example, in the poem “Psalm”:

No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,
no one incants our dust.
No one.

Blessed art thou, No One.
In thy sight would
we bloom.
In thy
spite.

A Nothing
we were, are now, and ever
shall be, blooming:
the Nothing-, the
No-One's-Rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
our stamen heaven-waste,
our corona red
from the purpleword we sang
over, O over
the thorn.²⁴

As the title of this poem, Celan chose the most classic Jewish term for prayer to the Almighty: “psalm.” The recitation of a Psalm is a constant element in the Jewish liturgy and expresses the sublime and literary aspect of addressing God. The speaker in Celan’s poem turns one of the basic rituals of the Jewish religion into a statement by a through-and-through atheist. Each line in the first stanza begins with the anaphoric “No one,” with the reiteration driving home the assertion that there is No one who is responsible for our life or our death.

After this unambiguous stress on the nullity of God (again, the fact that the poem is designated a “psalm,” originally an expression of full confidence in God’s existence and readiness to listen to our entreaties, reinforces the sense of a void experienced by the reader), the speaker makes an abrupt turn. In the second stanza, he suddenly praises the same hidden agent that does not take responsibility for human life and death. He praises “No one,” but it is not clear on what account. The main point, though, is not the empty praise but the paradox: who is being addressed, if No one exists? The paradox is given grammatical form by the transformation of “no one” into a proper noun, demonstrated by the change from “no one” with a small *o* in the first stanza to “No One” with a capital *O* in the second (in the original German).

²⁴ (Celan 2001, p. 157).

In the second stanza, then, the paradox emerges (since in the first stanza the speaker is not addressing some other entity, someone, but only describing that being's non-existence). What is more, the paradox is highlighted when the speaker informs this No One that human beings bloom for him and towards him—which means, essentially, towards nothingness. Here atheism is transmuted into skepticism, and God metamorphoses to a vague entity in whose sight human beings exist and act. The speaker's words reflect the need to exist vis-à-vis something, even if that something's nature is unclear and even if there is no evidence of its existence, other than the human desire that it be there.

Here the poetics employ Wittgenstein's third and fourth paradoxes. The rule that a psalm is by definition addressed to a deity who listens is broken (the rules paradox); and the inner psychological process of the speaker who constructs his own essence as a survivor, in spite of the loss of faith, works in parallel to the poetic convention of the psalm and its connotation. Celan's use of the psalm convention exemplifies his entire conception of poetic language, which operates for him in the four ways listed by Wittgenstein.

This one thing: language. Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech. [. . .] In this language I have sought, during those years and the years since then, to write poems: so as to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was and where I was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.²⁵

In order to comprehend the inner necessity of Celan's poetry to cope with the paradoxes, we must understand the place that language in general and of poetry-writing occupied in his mind. His statement in the Bremen Prize speech reflects the fact that language was the only way Celan had to deal with the Holocaust and reconstruct himself. In a demolished world, this was the only axis that remained, the sole source of certainty for reconstituting a reason for living. Nevertheless, Celan's poetry expunged the existential questions and did not heal the wounds and loss. On the contrary, it made it possible to express the paradoxical nature of existence and live with it. Because the use of language is replete with paradoxes, as Wittgenstein taught us, it was the medium in which Celan could give voice to the paradoxical nature of existence.

Critics of Celan's poetry have given relatively little attention to his extensive use of paradox; when they do note it, they took it as an expression of ambivalence and not as a fixed existential decision.²⁶ But Celan's treatment of the self that was destroyed by the Holocaust created a living paradox, permanent and insoluble. The paradox is inherent in the fact that reconstructing the self means examining oneself and making an autonomous choice—but neither of these is possible after the speaker has been subjected to an imposed destiny. The paradox is exacerbated by the fact that the poems were written in German, the very same language in which the orders that ruptured the speaker's self were issued. The attempt to reconstruct the self in the language used to demolish it is paradoxical from the very start.

The poem that best expresses this paradox is "Speech-Grille" (*Sprachgitter* in German).

Speech-Grille

Eyes round between the bars.

Flittering lid

²⁵ (Celan 2001, pp. 395–96).

²⁶ See, for example, how Felstiner, in his important study, describes Celan's visit to Jerusalem in 1969 as the culmination of the paradox of the poet's bond to Judaism and Israel vis-à-vis the need to stay away from them, as well as his fluency in Hebrew and interest in Hebrew poetry against the repeated choice to write in German (Felstiner 1995, pp. 264–67).

paddles upward,
breaks a glance free.

Iris, the swimmer, dreamless and drab:
heaven, heartgray, must be near.

Aslant, in the iron socket,
a smoldering chip.
By sense of light
you hit on the soul.

(Where I like you. Where you like me.
Did we not stand
under one trade wind?
We are strangers.)

The flagstones. On them,
Close by each other, both
heartgray puddles:
two
mouthfuls of silence.²⁷

Over the years, the metaphor of the speech-grill on the window has been transformed from the title of a poem into a leitmotif for understanding the transition from Celan's earlier to later poetry.²⁸ The poem is a concise statement of his poetic sense at the beginning of his career, when he saw language in general and poetry in particular as an arena for the reconstruction of the self.²⁹ Nevertheless, it presents two paradoxes, one explicit and the other implicit.

The explicit paradox derives from the nature of language, as described by Wittgenstein. Language cannot snare and hold an object or experience; even though it accompanies emotional processes, it cannot put their true essence into words. Even when we observe something of whose existence we are certain, our scrutiny does create the observed content or even transmute it into words.³⁰ The fact that we nevertheless use language to refer to it creates the paradox, stated directly in this poem, of the language-grill. On the one hand, language makes it possible to give some expression to meaning; but it also blocks our access to the object itself. The poem also indirectly states a hidden paradox, on the plane of existence: the attempt to reconstruct the self is made in German, the language in which the murderous edicts were issued.

What then, can be achieved by poetic language? A poem creates an encounter in which the speaker pronounces a monologue that receives no reply. Even though his interlocutor was standing next to him in the same wind, they cannot find any common ground. The inexorable conclusion is, "We are strangers." Even though language cannot convert the experience of destruction into words and does not support dialogue, human estrangement does lead to metaphorical and lyrical language.

²⁷ (Celan 2001), p. 107.

²⁸ Ami Colin claimed that this link has not been seen by the critics, despite the many readings proposed of the poem: "Although Celan's 'Sprachgitter' became a focal point of diverse readings, scholars have not realized the crucial relationship between this poetic concept and Celan's early work. In the sense of 'linkage,' 'Sprachgitter' [and other poems] draw together elements from different literatures and cultural traditions. As a separation of motifs, 'Sprachgitter' further advances subversive tendencies. . . . Ultimately, Celan's 'Sprachgitter' enacts a characteristic of his cultural background, the simultaneity of receptivity to and the barriers between multilingual cultural traditions" (Colin 1991, p. 73).

²⁹ The idea that Celan's poetry, written in German, was meant to fashion "a tomb for the victims of violence and war" reflects a certain facet, important but not sufficiently representative, of the existential challenge it formulates (See Colin 1991, p. xiii).

³⁰ "If someone observes his own grief, which senses does he use to observe it? With a special sense—one that *feels* grief? Then does he feel it *differently* when he is observing it? And what is the grief that he is observing—one which is there only while being observed? '*Observing*' does not produce what is observed. (That is a conceptual statement.) Again: I do not 'observe' that which comes into being only through observation. The object of observation is something else" (Wittgenstein 2009) PPF, §67 [emphasis added].

The “heartgray puddles” symbolize the adjacent silences of the speaker and the addressee. The poetic language creates a platform for their shared silence, leading to the paradox with which the poem concludes: “two/mouthfuls of silence,” as the organ intended for speech falls mute. The poem does not verbalize the unique nature of the emotional processes the two characters experience, but does hint at their existence. The closing paradox is thus a lived paradox, something good in the sense proposed by Read, because it at least makes it possible for the poem’s characters to be silent in unison and thus to contain the paradox.

The skepticism about the ability of language to meet the challenge Celan posed in the Bremen Prize speech is amplified in our next poem, which is one of his fiercest statements of atheism, and perhaps the most extreme of all.

On the White Prayer-Thong

The Lord of this hour
was
a winter creature, for
his sake
happened what happened—
my climbing mouth bit and locked, once again,
looking for you, smoke trail
above me, you,
in the shape of a woman,
you on your way to my
fire thoughts in the black shingle
on the other side of dividing words, through
which I saw you walk, long-
legged and
your thick-lipped own
head
on my body
alive
by dint of my deadly
accurate hands.

Tell your fingers that
accompany you down into
chasms even, how
I knew you, how far
I pushed you into the deep, where
my most bitter dream
slept with you from the heart, in the bed
of my undetachable name.³¹

The title places the reader in the daily Jewish ritual of putting on phylacteries, but already in the first line we encounter skepticism: “Lord of this hour.” The phrase, which is usually attached to victory or success, is used ironically for the great “success” of God’s responsibility for the Holocaust. The speaker indicts God for his role in it—“For/his sake/happened what happened”—and for the fact that when he looked for the woman in the poem it was already too late. The image of the deity is paradoxical and elusive, defying definition, as in Wittgenstein’s first two paradoxes. On the one

³¹ (Celan 1972, p. 245).

hand, the speaker feels the need to assign responsibility to God, through the reference to a ritual that expresses belief in Him. On the other hand, God is described in human terms, not only as powerless but also as the one for whose sake the atrocities took place. Celan fashions a Gnostic deity, a demiurge, only to then blend him with the speaker's action until it is hard to tell them apart. This reflects a sort of what Wittgenstein calls a "private transition," from the rules that are normally used to describe an action to the speaker's own poetic choices.³²

This private transition includes the evocation of "My/fire thoughts in the black shingle/on the other side of dividing words." The disconnection from the dividing words allows the speaker to include the addressee in his thoughts, in his hands, and in his dreams. This is how Celan constructs a mode of action that parallels language, as Wittgenstein shows in Section 304, which I quoted earlier. The speaker cannot represent the woman in the speech of daily life, but his poetic diction makes it possible to testify to her ineffable presence in his mind.

The paradox reaches its culmination when the ritual of communion with God is transformed into a ritual of communion with the devastation and destruction, at the end of which the speaker and the women are sleeping "in the bed of my undetachable name." That is, the Jewish rite of putting on phylacteries turns into a requiem for the speaker's name, which can no longer be reconstructed.

4. The Paradoxical Attitude towards the Holocaust: "Red and Green in the Same Place"³³

What particularly stands out in "On the White Prayer-Thong" is the paradoxical contrast, found in other poems as well, between what is palpable and white, like the prayer thong, and the darkness of the smoke and the black shingle. The paradox of juxtaposing contrasting or even dissimilar colors is a corollary of the paradox of the rules.

The phrase, "red and green in the same place" states a violation of the laws of physics and thus an impossibility.³⁴ Wittgenstein proposes that when we encounter a phrase that expresses some paradoxical situation we look into why the paradox came about.³⁵ First of all, it is important to emphasize that grammar permits it. Second, it should be pointed out that this or a similar expression could refer to some empirical reality. Third, according to Wittgenstein, we must ask about the relationship between the phrase and our experience of the world. There are several possible answers to this, as a function of our own selves or of the experience of diverse individuals.³⁶ It may be that a particular experience is not possible in the real world, but only in language; or it may be possible as a mental process but impossible to state in public language; or it may be possible only in language but not as the representation of a real experience.

A conspicuous example of "dialogical polyphony" can be found in Wittgenstein's discussion of the distinction between different colors. It involves at least three different points of view: empiricist, phenomenological, and grammatical. The first rejects the possible of the simultaneous sensory

³² "I could not apply any rules to a *private* transition from what is seen to words. Here the rules really would hang in the air; for the institution of their application is lacking" (Wittgenstein 2009, §380).

³³ (Wittgenstein 2003, p. 397).

³⁴ "A point cannot be red and green at the same time: at first sight there seems no need for this to be a logical impossibility. But the very language of physics reduces it to a kinetic impossibility. We see that there is a difference of structure between red and green" (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 81).

³⁵ "There is a group of propositions which in recent times have caused the most curious confusion; these are propositions such as 'every color occupies a definite place' or 'red and green cannot be in the same place'. What is it about these propositions? Do they communicate experiential information? [...] The source of concepts says nothing at all about the character of the proposition in which they occur. So we now ask: What is the criterion for a proposition's dealing with experience? Surely that experience settles whether the proposition is true. Hence, before consulting reality, one does not know whether the proposition is true or false. Both are possible; i.e., both the proposition and its negation must be *meaningful* suppositions" (Wittgenstein 2003, pp. 399, 401).

³⁶ The possibility of seeing the differences between Wittgenstein's discussions of "red and green in the same place" as an expression of dialogism between different selves has been discussed by Antonia Soulez. She emphasizes that it is a matter of "multiple selves . . . and not multiple personalities! For we are not dealing here with an instance of dissociation, with a splitting of personality or self-invention" (Soulez 2005, p. 323).

perception of two different colors in the same place; the second rejects it only a priori, meaning that a private simultaneous experience of two colors is possible. The third refers only to the possibility of making such an assertion as a matter of grammar, with no thought to compatibility with the real world.³⁷ Celan's poem "The Tankards" exemplifies a physical paradox of the sort resolved by Wittgenstein in the ways just described.

The Tankards

At the banquet tables of time
 God's tankards are tipping.
 They drink till they empty the eyes of the seeing and the eyes of the blind,
 the hearts of the governing shadows,
 the hollow cheek of evening.
 It's they are the mightiest tipplers:
 they drink deep of emptiness just as of fullness
 and never brim over like you or like me.³⁸

This poem, one of Celan's best known and most translated, carries paradox to the ultimate. In a world that has no God, God's tankards assemble to party. Instead of serving to quench human thirst, the ale mugs drink themselves. The poem is replete with contraries such as "the seeing" and "the blind," "emptiness" and "fullness," and a "table," which is a tangible object, "of time," which is an abstract concept. But the overriding paradox is in the last line, where it appears as it were incidentally, without emphasis: the tankards of God are unlike the speaker and his audience, in that they "never brim over." The tankards engage in many activities typical of human beings—they sit, they drink, they tinkle, they but they never fulfill their own natural function. Of course this metaphor illuminates the material paradox: the speaker and his audience cannot live their own lives, but only overflow just as the tankards "brim over."

The nihilism of God's tankards makes God's nullity real. The speaker stresses the word "God" precisely in order to deny His existence. The paradox (citing God in order to reject His reality by means of the tankards' actions) seems to be of a physical order; at the same time, though, it exists on the existential plane as well. In a world where tankards drink up instead of allowing human beings to satisfy their thirst, in a world that is ruled by shadows, hollow evenings, and a confusion of full and empty, God too is hollow and meaningless. The last line, even though it intensifies the paradox (human beings behaving like drinking mugs), actually makes it possible to resolve it. In the world of the poem there remains an expression, even if low-key, of the antipathy of speaker and his audience to the way of the real world. The frothing speaker metaphorically embodies the ethical chaos of the universe.

In many of his poems, Celan has an addressee or counterparty who shares his experience, but only rarely does that other person exert an influence on the speaker. To conclude our discussion of paradoxes, I would like to briefly look at the address to the real "Other" as a rare type of solution to paradox.

5. Celan's Encounter with Derrida: "I Must Carry You"

In Celan's early work, poetic language is seen as the ultimate answer to the need to reconstruct the self that was demolished by the Holocaust. In his later work, by contrast, Celan is dubious about the power of language to fill the void and overcome his skepticism about God and human beings. This is why he turns to address the other. I want to show how this maneuver can handle the paradox and eventually resolve it, by means of the ethical turn.

³⁷ Soulez calls this "grammatical freedom" (ibid., p. 319).

³⁸ (Celan 2001, p. 41).

The zenith of this paradoxical commitment is found in his poem “Vast, Glowing Vault,” which Celan, shortly before his suicide, sent to Jacques Derrida, and with which we will conclude our discussion.³⁹ This poem begins with the paradox of the “black star” that seems to be an object of sense-perception, continues with a paradox that is both physical and existential, and ends with an existential paradox.

Vast, Glowing Vault

with the swarm of
black stars pushing them-
selves out and away:
On to ram’s silicified forehead.
I brand this image, between
The horns, in which,
In the song of the whorls, the
Marrow of melted
Heart-oceans swells.

In—
To what
Does he not charge?

The world is gone, I must carry you.⁴⁰

My first exposure to this poem was a riveting experience. It came during a lecture by Jacques Derrida in Jerusalem in 2003, shortly after he had learned that he had cancer and had only a year to live. He came to a conference at the Hebrew University and began his lecture as follows. “To my sorrow, I cannot tell you, ‘next year in the rebuilt Jerusalem,’ because it is almost certain that a year from now I will no longer be among the living.” After that, Derrida read Celan’s poem and drew an exciting parallel between the poem and his own condition. In both, the speaker, aware of his impending death, turns to his audience and lays on them an ethical charge. The paradoxes in the poem are a symbolic expression of the ineffable paradox that underlies them: the need to demand ethical behavior in a place where all the humanitarian and universal foundations for this demand have been utterly destroyed.

God is not in the poem, but the context is biblical: the ram that was sacrificed instead of Isaac alludes to God’s existence offstage. All the same, it assigns responsibility for what happens in the world to human beings; there is no divine injunction that tells them how to conduct themselves. The speaker weaves a threefold world. On the first plane is a world in which black stars swarm (a physical paradox). On the second plane, he resurrects the ram that was sacrificed instead of Isaac. The speaker intervenes in the biblical story and brands the ram’s forehead, between its horns, with a symbol of the Jewish people’s commitment to its survival, justified by the sacrifice of the ram. The situation contradicts the biblical account, because, in the poem, the ram survives as a symbol and the world is destroyed. On the third plane, the speaker proclaims an ethical imperative: “I must carry you.”

In his lecture, Derrida explained the paradox here. On the one hand, the speaker sees himself as the person who enabled the addressee of the poem to survive. On the other hand, Derrida described the poem as a direct manifestation of Celan’s demand that he, Derrida, perpetuate the Jewish heritage. The speaker is being called (to die) but demands that the poem’s recipient (Derrida) live and ensure Jewish continuity, through a refashioning of the biblical narrative. The poem adds another level to the skepticism and atheism we have seen thus far. Yes, the world has been destroyed; yes, God does not exist. But the Jewish cultural heritage remains and serves as the basis for the survival of the Jewish

³⁹ “Vast, Glowing Vault,” in (Celan 1972, p. 275).

⁴⁰ (Celan 1972, *ibid.* [emphasis added]).

people. Derrida spoke of the obligation that Celan laid upon him and asked to pass on the ethical imperative to us, his audience that day. Celan's poem served as an encounter not only between the poet and Derrida, but also between Derrida, preparing himself for death, and us.

The poem's title offers the key to comprehend poetry as a whole, in Celan's terms. The Meridian address is the chief statement of his *ars poetica*. The metaphor of the meridian (an imaginary line drawn on the globe from pole to pole) represents the mode in which poems function. A poem is an encounter that links the poles and reflects the living paradox of self-reconstruction after the Holocaust.

The absolute poem—no, that certainly doesn't exist, that can't exist! ... Poetry ... —: this speaking endlessly of mere mortality and uselessness! ... "Whoever is alone with the lamp/has only his hand to read from." ... It was ... myself encountered ... , I find something that comforts me a little at having taken, in your presence, this impossible path, this path of the impossible. I find something that binds and that leads to encounter, like a poem. I find something—like language immaterial yet earthly, terrestrial, something circular, returning upon itself by way of both poles ... I find ... a *meridian*.⁴¹

There is a similarity in what Celan and Wittgenstein say to the effect that language cannot express the absolute. This is why, for Celan, there can be no ultimate poem; and why, for Wittgenstein, there are no ultimate definitions or any possibility of grasping objects or processes in language. Nevertheless, a poem can be a means of self-construction, because it creates an encounter between a person and his self, joining the poles within him. This is why Wittgenstein proposed that philosophy should be written as a poem:

One should write philosophy only as one writes a poem. That, it seems to me, must reveal how far my thinking belongs to the present, the future, or the past. For I was acknowledging myself, with these words, to be someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.⁴²

6. Conclusions

Celan's poetry was informed by the four paradoxes formulated by Wittgenstein in his later work. These paradoxes express skepticism about the existence of God or any absolute values whatsoever, as well as the possibility of understanding the Holocaust. In addition, the paradoxes function on the one hand as expressions of atheism and on the other as manifestations of the possibility of living while dealing with the complexity of life after the Holocaust. Celan devises a poetic language that, in an uncompromising but also restrained and controlled manner, makes it possible for us, as readers, to come to grips with the various layers of the paradox of life in a world that has been destroyed.

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⁴¹ (Celan 2001, pp. 410–13).

⁴² (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 28).

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