

## Not to Naught be Brought:

### Paul Celan and the Necessary Failure of the Ever Coming Word

Let's begin with a few words. Poetry. Verse. Experience. Poetry from *poiein* meaning 'to make' or 'to create' but also, before this, 'to build' in the sense of 'to pile up'. And then verse from *vertere* meaning 'to turn' or 'to transform' but also, of course, relating to the act of ploughing. Already in poetry and in verse we have a double sense of connection to the material, a connection to stone, to earth. A connection to being in the world. In poetry we create, we fashion, we pile up but pile up what? In verse we turn, we transform, but, again, what? Material? That might be one answer. Experience, another. Experience from the Latin *ex*, meaning 'out of', and *periri*, meaning 'to go through'. Experience is that which you must go through and come out of. The thing *experienced* cannot, by definition, be understood as an experience until you have been through it and come out of it. The thing experienced cannot be experienced in and of itself. It can only be experienced, turned into an experience, can only come to be understood as an experience, once it has been left behind. You cannot occupy an experience. To be understood as an experience, the thing experienced, what we might call the material of experience, must be turned into an experience. Verse. What we can convey of experience, even to ourselves, is only ever a version of that which was experienced. What we go through is fashioned, is piled up, transformed and turned into ... into what? But words? Experience must then be inscribed.

As is well known, Adorno famously stated in 1949 that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1949: 34). Ripped from context, the statement can easily be taken as a generalized call for a prohibition of poetic expression in the aftermath of something as terrible, as inhuman, as unpoetic, as the holocaust. The statement, however, comes from a context and placed back into that context seems to be saying

something much more specific. Adorno is writing about culture, the debasement of what passes for the cultural and cultural critique as inadequate to the reality of what he characterizes as a post-ideological age. It is in this context that to write poetry would fall on the side of the barbaric, as opposed to the properly cultural. Auschwitz stands here as emblematic, even symptomatic, of a culture which has turned to the worst. To continue to speak in the name, in the language, in the metaphors, of such a cultural is - no matter the urge to critique, to oppose - is to offer oneself up to recuperation. As such, cultural production after Auschwitz is capable of being nothing but idle chatter. It is irrelevant and, worse, it is ignorant.

The fact that Adorno singles out poetry is perhaps unfortunate, or perhaps apposite. The poet most obviously connected with the holocaust in the cultural imagination is probably Paul Celan. Many have assumed that Adorno's statement was even a direct response to one of Celan's most famous works, *Todesfuge*. It is actually unlikely that Adorno was addressing Celan, given the poem had not, at the time Adorno was writing, been published in German. Moreover, in grasping both the context and specificity of both Adorno's statement and Celan's poem, it might seem more meaningful to read the poem as responding to the kind of sentiment with which Adorno is misinterpreted. How can we write poetry after Auschwitz? How could such a thing be possible? Celan, in and through *Todesfuge*, appears to not only say we can, but to show we can, and insist we must, while all the time remaining mindful of the utter impossibility of any such endeavor. Wrapped in impossibility, the poet cannot but write and cannot but fail.

The holocaust presents as an experience but of course then as an imprecise number of experiences. Each different. Each inexpressible. Reduced to the singular expression of an event experienced, the holocaust becomes something harrowingly personal, paradoxically and precisely unshareable in the process its sharing. If the experience is, by etymological definition, that which cannot be recounted but can only be shaped and represented as something other to itself through the processes, the preset mechanisms, of language, then the crafting of poetry after the experience

of the holocaust runs immediately into its own impossibility. And we might rightly wonder if Adorno wasn't right after all.

Celan manages this impossibility in two ways. Although interned in a camp or camps, Celan spent the war in Romania, as he liked to say, 'shovelling', digging, piling up ... *poiein*. The poem, *Todesfuge*, is not then a first hand account of his own experience. As John Felstiner puts it, it is a poem which 'drives far beyond personal anguish' (1995, 26). Celan's poem is a piling up, precisely in the sense of taking linguistic residue from around the fact of the camps, drawing on accounts, written and possibly oral, and from them building something which transcends the particular of something personally experienced. We understand *Todesfuge* to be built from Russian newspaper reports, a pamphlet presenting an account of the Lublin camp but also, running much deeper than this, it is built from the debris of a German culture confounded in its association with the acts of National Socialism and a Jewish culture which is, of course, in part a part of that German culture. Thus Celan articulates Goethe to Genesis, Bach and Wagner to the orchestras in the camps, Faust to Solomon, and Margareta to Shulamit, building his poem from other material and the material of others and, in so doing, creating a poetic singularity which refuses any unity.

### Todesfuge

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
we drink it and we drink it  
we dig a grave in the breeze there one lies unconfined  
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete  
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he whistles his pack  
out  
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave

he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown

we drink and we drink you

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes

he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete

your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breeze there one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play

he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue

jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown

we drink and we drink you

a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete

your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany

he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air

then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany

we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you

death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue

he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true

a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete

he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air

he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith

The poem speaks in voices, but the voices are unassigned. They jostle and impossibly overlap with the effect that the poem as a whole presents as resolutely non-subjective and certainly not exterior and yet refuses the containment of the subjective which would be proper to lyric poetry. This isn't a lyric. It is a stuttering epic, whose final words open up onto its own infinitude. The poem, in its form as much as in its imagery, posits an aporia. The milk, which is essentially white in colour, milk, which speaks of birth, of nurture, of love, of life, but also sleep, is here black and speaks of death. It is neither nor. It is both and. The graves are dug in the air, where graves are not dug, could not be dug, except that in reference to the camps, the chimneys, the smokes, the graves are precisely there. What is to be said cannot be said and the poem must be written nonetheless.

The poem must be written precisely because to refuse the poem, to deny the poem, is to submit to the fact of, the events of, the holocaust.

Revisiting his earlier statement some 12 years later, Adorno presented a somewhat amended perspective:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living — especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz;

this is the drastic guilt put on him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier. (1973: 362-3)

Ostensibly a retraction of the 1949 statement, the thoughts expressed in *Negative Dialectics* actually appear to function as an extension; a further thought, not another thought. Although here, Adorno appears to accept the obvious misinterpretation of his earlier statement – as saying after Auschwitz you can no longer write poems – what he goes on to say might be usefully read as a deliberation on the impossibility which is faced in emerging from the experience of the event of the holocaust. To have come to, to have brought oneself to, the point of having experienced the fact of the holocaust, is necessarily to have confronted something of that experience and dragged it into the realm of language. Without the process of inscription, the events remain unattainable. The real of the holocaust, unsymbolised, is something with which we cannot, could not live. To remain with the events, unreconfigured in language, is to refuse a subjective position in the face of those events. It is to accept a subjective death.

Where in the 1949 statement Adorno is questioning the possibility of a poetry which could transcend the complacency of contemporary culture, which could say anything worth saying in the face of what had been enacted in the name of that culture, his 1961 statement turns to the apparent alternative, the cold, bourgeois continuance. I say apparent alternative, because these are perhaps better understood as two facets of the same position. The poet of the 1949 piece writes ineffectual poetry, 'idle chatter'. The bourgeois subject of the 1961 piece says nothing at all. There is little between them. Outwardly at least. But Adorno now allows a glimpse of the private world of the survivor, the terrifying dreams, the devastating uncertainty of the dark hours, as he remains unconsciously tethered to a past from which he might have escaped. But only ever might have. And of course,

then, he hasn't.

What Adorno knew in 1944 is that culture recuperates. Already has recuperated. Late capitalist, rationalist culture – which, for Adorno, was already the culture without which Auschwitz would not have happened – this culture can and already has recuperated the response it provokes. There is no saying in the face of this. There is no saying here which would be adequate to what has taken place, what has been enacted, but the Adorno of 1961 knows that not saying is already a saying. Hence the impossibility.

It is important that we recall here that the functioning of poetry does not consist of a mere expression. The value of poetry does not consist in a mere laying down, of a one-way retrieval and moulding. *Todesfuge* is written but it is also, necessarily, in order to be poetry, read. Here we might understand that Celan attempts to convey something. If that which is experienced is only ever experienced through its being built into something expressible, then it only remains so by being digested. The manner in which the poem, or any other expressed content, is recuperated then functions to determine the manner in which it is consumed, what it comes to or can come to mean. The power of *Todesfuge* comes, at least in part, from its refusal of such recuperation. The aporetic images of the poem defy easy conscription and demand then an investment from the reader. The density and disunity of the allusions confound attempts to reduce the impact of the poem while, simultaneously, the sparsity of the language which is repetitious without the repetition ever reducing to a repetition of the same, creating a rhythm which is rhythmic without the rhythm ever holding fast to a centre, also refuses easy reduction to a simple sense.

At stake here is the translation of that which happened into a symbolized experienced. A symbolized experienced which can then be conveyed, successfully or not, to another. This 'successfully or not' is crucial. This is the struggle, for it is always necessarily unsuccessful and here, in the face of the Shoah, it cannot be

unsuccessful.

This struggle to convert experience to words, to build up something from the ever lost remnants of experience precisely in order to maintain something of this experience and from this experience, this is the work of the poet. Or at least a poet like Celan. This struggle is perhaps more evident in another of Celan's poems, a poem from much later which struggles with what is, on the surface at least, a more immediately personal or singular experience. Unlike *Todesfuge* which condenses and propels received experience, the cultural signifiers of a time gone and the pressingly contemporary signifiers of time only beginning to be grasped, this later poem, ostensibly, at least, presents a first hand account of an experience which was Celan's alone. An experience which was his own but which is not necessarily any the more readily digestible for this.

Celan, as is well known, was drawn to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Given Heidegger's infamous entanglement with the Nazis, Celan, like many others, was left deeply troubled by his relationship with or experience of Heidegger. He had read Heidegger, embraced elements of his thought. And so too had Heidegger read and attended readings by Celan. The mutuality of the appreciation between Celan and Heidegger aside, Celan's trouble with the disgraced philosopher is not uncommon. Heidegger is undoubtedly one of the great thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in lending support to the Nazi's, it has proved difficult for many to expunge this dimension of his thought from the rest of his legacy. Unlike many others, Celan had the opportunity to visit Heidegger in his mountain home and address this question directly. How directly he actually addressed it, we cannot know. What we do have of or in place of the meeting, what we have from what Celan went through with Heidegger, in the presence of Heidegger, what Celan turns that experience into, is the poem *Todtnauberg*, named from the village where the meeting took place.

### Todtnauberg



Arnica, eyebright, the  
draft from the well with the  
star-crowned die above it,

in the  
hut,

the line  
- whose name did the book  
register before mine? -  
the line inscribed  
in that book about  
a hope, today,  
of a thinking man's  
coming  
word  
in the heart,

Woodland sward, unlevelled,  
orchid and orchid, single,

coarse stuff, later, clear  
in passing,

he who drives us, the man,  
who listens in,

the half-  
trodden fascine  
walks over the high moors,

dampness,  
much.

Even more than *Todesfuge*, *Todtnauberg* is remarkable in its starkness, its minimalism. And yet, we are led to believe – we have no reason to doubt – it emerges from or in response to – it is a turning over, a turning into ‘experienced’ of – an actual encounter; an actual encounter which is not only fraught with emotion, which not only echoes of an intellectual and a political struggle, but which conjoins the most painful loss to the highest thought. The apocryphal story is that Celan sought some sort of answer from Heidegger.

Arnica, the opening word of the poem, is a healing plant. Eyebright, another flower, also heals, specifically, as its name would suggest, healing the eyes. Eyebright, to see better, to unblind. Or to understand. The poem, we might say, begins with hope and the hope *for*, the hope for something, some sign, a word which will make sense, which will explain. The poem however, descends from mountain flowers and hope to half-trodden pathways, a dead-end, to dampness. Much dampness.

A sixty-eight word sentence, which does manage to evoke much of the material of the encounter; the well, the starred die, the flowers, the fascine pathway, the hut, the visitors’ book. But it conveys much less of the nature of the hope – the word Celan might have expected – the thinking man’s coming word. It presumably never came and having been unsaid remains unsayable. For who would know what it might have been.

From experience, Celan crafts his poem, turns his verse and gives us words. For what? There is perhaps something affecting in Celan’s words. This is often what we come to expect from at least a certain type of poetry. But there is much more at stake here. There is a confrontation with an aporia of impossibility; the impossibility

of responding and the impossibility of not responding. As Adorno has already hinted, in the face of the real of the events of the Holocaust, to speak, to write, to create, to respond, is always to risk aligning oneself with the culture which facilitated those events. How does one speak without speaking in the words, with the metaphors, in the framework of the very culture one would need to refuse. How does one speak in a language which is not already contaminated, recuperated? How does one say something which holds out the possibility of exceeding the worst? How does one say something when what needs to be spoken exceeds what can be spoken, when what needs to be brought into language already exceeds the language which would seek to contain it? Language fails.

So we say nothing. But as Adorno so effectively conveys, the option of saying nothing is not actually an option at all. To say nothing is to have already accepted a second death, a death before death, an abdication of subjectivity. How, then, does one carry on?

In another context, another Paris, another great reducer of language traces the logic at work here. In his late novella, *Worstward Ho*, Samuel Beckett plots precisely this path, this impossible passage between impossibilities; the inadequacy of language and the absence of any possibility outside of language. What we might term the failing failure, the ongoing failing failure in the face of which one must respond, in the face of which one must decide. For a decision is, as Adorno knew, what is ultimately at stake here.

Against an unnamed interlocutor who apparently lambasted Beckett, saying if he had been in the camps he would have taken a more positive turn, Adorno points to the more complex relationship Beckett holds with negation, a more complex relationship which builds in its intensifying reduction through Beckett's work arguably finding its clearest expression some twenty years after Adorno himself is writing. 'The only dawning hope', says Adorno, 'is that there will be nothing any more.' But, he crucially continues, Beckett rejects even this hope in negation. 'From

the fissure of inconsistency that comes about in this fashion, the image world of nothingness as something emerges to stabilize his poetry' (Adorno, 1973: 380-381). The very impossibility of impossibility produces the narrowest gap which maintains the necessity, not of possibility, but of saying. And this saying is necessary one which implicates the subject. This saying requires a decision to say.

A true decision, *décaedêre*, is always a cut. An absolute break with the past, with the pre-existing, with what can already be symbolised. The problem of such a cut, welcome as it might appear to be, is that it is unoccupiable. We might understand there to be two decisions at work here, at least conceptually. There is the decision to say and then there is the decision in saying. Deliberation, however intense, is incapable of response. The moment of saying, of response, in order to be a true responding rather than a reverberation, must be of the nature of a decision and thus must challenge to the core the position or, we might say, subjective status of the one implicated. In responding to the events of the Holocaust, then, in a sense, the choice, the choice to respond, is already made. But it is made in a manner or from a position which exceeds any stable sense of a me who would make it. It is in this sense that Derrida talks of 'the other [in me] who decides and rends' (1997: 68).

The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, another event, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me. Absolutely singular in principle, according to its most traditional concept, the decision is not only always exceptional, *it makes an exception for/of me*. In me. I decide, I make up my mind in all sovereignty – this would mean: the other than myself, the me as other and other than myself, *he makes or I make* an exception of the same. This normal exception, the supposed norm of all decision, exonerates from no responsibility. Responsible for myself before the other, I am first of all and also *responsible for the other before the other*.

What Derrida brings to the forefront here is the fact that the very possibility of responding with responsibility - a possibility which is always already entangled in impossibility – this possibility of responding with responsibility necessarily implies the assumption of a position but this assumption can only be made on the basis of a notion of subjectivity which is riven. That is, a notion of the subject as irrecoverable to any sense of self-identity, a notion of the subject which renounces the atomism of the ego, a notion of the subject as inadequate to itself. The decision understood as emerging from a self-sufficient subject in an already accommodating world would not be a decision at all. It would be a mere extension, ‘an accident which leaves the subject unchanged and indifferent’ (Ibid.: 68). It is in contrast to this that the notion of the other’s decision in me figures as the impossibility of self-identity, the rupture in the one who responds, a moment which can neither be contained nor recuperated. It is precisely in and from such a notion that we find the possibility of responsibility.

Responsibility cannot remain responsibility when it is immersed in the pre-given. It is only in response to the other, to ‘the other in me’, that responsibility becomes a possibility precisely because such a response cannot be contained within a pre-given culture. Derrida talks here of knowledge, the knowledge which would be the basis and the currency of a culture. Like Adorno before him, Derrida understands that to contain the response in the terms of the culture which precedes it is to reduce the response to that culture without remainder. One must know, and one can only know in the terms of the prevailing culture. One must forge ideas, to work to make sense of, and the only stuff available from which to make this sense, is the language, the knowledge, of the culture of before. ‘[K]nowledge is necessary if one is to assume responsibility,’ Derrida tells us, ‘but the decisive or deciding moment of responsibility supposes a leap by which an act takes off, ceasing in that instant to follow the consequence of what is ... and thereby *frees itself* ... In sum,’ he concludes,

the '*decision is unconscious*' (1997: 69). The decision is unconscious but the response cannot be simply so.

For a decision to be a decision it must exist in relation to the knowledge, the culture, which precedes it. But the decision cannot itself be reduced to that knowledge or culture without this rendering it 'less' than decisive, rendering it, that is, in Derrida's terms, in the realm of pure calculation. On the other hand, without the culture and without the language of that culture, which would always be the language of before, there remains no possibility of responding in any meaningful way, insofar as any response would entail a context, a conception of that to which one would be responding. The response to the real of the events can only thus figure and can only thus arise between the failing language, culture and knowledge which precedes it, a language and conceptual framework which is already, necessarily and obviously, inadequate. It can only figure and arise between this and a 'meaninglessness' which would be beyond any saying at all, a meaningless of resignation, of death, even if it is a living death. Especially if it is a living death. Without exceeding the before, the response is simply of before and if it is simply of before, then it is not a response as such. It is only insofar as the response emerges against the before that a properly subjective position can be understood to have been assumed. Or, to keep with Adorno's terms, it is only insofar as the response emerges against the before, in a manner irrecuperable to the before, that one can be said to be alive.

I have mentioned Beckett and *Worstward Ho* and it is tempting to recourse to the comfortable non-reading of that book and the famous quotation which is often all that remains of the already short text: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (1984: 1). The sense often gleaned from these words is that of, *chin up, carry on*, or perhaps slightly stronger, *we appreciate how hard this is and that while failure is inevitable, at least initially, with the requisite effort, we, you, I, can get there. Wherever 'there' might be*. But Beckett's concern here is not resilience. And Celan's concern too was clearly not resilience. Celan, like Adorno, knew all too well that resilience was less than inadequate. Resilience is on the side of the cold

bourgeois, the already dead non-respondent. Beckett's concern is not resilience. It is, much like Celan's, with language and the failure of language in the face of what has been experienced. The failure of language but, at the same time, the inescapability of this same failing language.

What Beckett allows us to appreciate is not merely the sense of language faltering, failing to grasp something that would be otherwise graspable. What Beckett is conveying is a confrontation with language in all its inescapable alienness. Even without comprehension - and here all is without comprehension - the words still insist. We encounter language, speech, but we cannot know what it is the words say. Substituting 'secretes' for 'say', Beckett continues, 'Say better worse secretes. What it is the words it secretes say. What the so-said void. The so-said dim. The so-said shades. The so-said seat and germ of all. Enough to know no knowing. No knowing what it is the words it secretes say. No saying. No saying what it is they somehow say' (1983: 29-30).

If Beckett's concern is the function of language, then he is pointing to a core problematic in terms of what language does, of what language is now capable of. To say the said, to say what it is "the words it secretes says" would be to conceal as much as to reveal, would be always to missay. Already in the second paragraph of the novel, we have 'Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid.' (1983: 7) For what follows, for the rest of the book, we should then understand that 'say' will cover the sense of 'said' and 'missaid'. Time is taken out of the matter, for all saying is saying what is being said. This much we already know. Everything must be read retroactively. What Beckett is adding here is the fact that there never is any saying of what was said which somehow adequates. There is no saying of the said which would be adequate to the said. In this sense - structurally, logically - all saying is always already failure. All saying is already missaid. But in acknowledging the necessity of saying already being missaid, we are taking the first steps towards endorsing the creative, the poetic, potential in saying. In this sense the direction of

the worst seems not only inevitable, but also something we might want to endorse or even celebrate.

But importantly the worst itself is not offered here as a possibility. Worst is the direction but so long as there remains saying, the worst is not attained. A diminishing, perhaps, but an attainment, no. Words, for Beckett “leasteen”, say less, missay more, missay less, mismissay less.

Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leasteening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse (31-32).

If saying can never be adequate to the said, it does not free us from saying. This would simply be a renunciation. An impossibility. The choice to not say could only be iterated in saying or vanquished in the denial of a second death. It is thus that leasteening words still inscribe. To say or to not say still requires saying. The failure of language is itself failing. The ever coming word is ever coming.

In an earlier draft of *Todtnauberg*, Celan, in reference to the words he had inscribed in Heidegger’s guestbook, had written ‘about / a hope, today, / for a thinker’s / (undelayed coming) / word / in the heart’. When the poem was subsequently published, the ‘undelayed’ was removed. The word is ever coming. The failure is ongoing, but then so too is the demand, the task of not being brought to naught.

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