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The Lyric, History, and the Avant-Garde: Theorizing Paul Celan

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Abstract Discussions of lyric tend to bifurcate into, on the one hand, theoretical reflection, in which lyric is defined as a self-referring language artifact, and on the other hand, historical reference, which tends to ignore formal considerations. This article argues against such an opposition between theory and history and argues for a lyric theory that sees poetic language as representing historical experience within the very formal elements and self-consciousness of language that are lyric poetry's distinctive features. Paul Celan offers a paradigmatic illustration of such synthesis.

Interpretations of lyric poetry often bisect in ways that suggest two halves of a brain unable to communicate with one another. On one side are formal analysis and theoretical reflection. On the other is historical reference, where the poem risks being reduced to illustration or footnote for external concerns or perhaps becomes an instance within a history of aesthetic movements. In either case history and formal analysis oppose each other, while the theoretical status of the text remains that of a freestanding, independent object, revelatory of its own constitution rather than connected to exterior worlds.

This tendency of lyric theory to withdraw the text from history has a certain generic force. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1982: 27–28) observes, poetry resists the sorts of historical penetration that other genres seem to

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admit: “While orthodox literary sociology can at least enter halfway into the heart of a novel or play by way of the *pons asinorum* of its plot, poetry excludes such an approach from the outset.”¹ But the resistance to history, whether as sociological context or political commitment, as events and their narrative reflections, or as the movement of temporality as such in its contingent and conditional impetus, is itself, as Enzensberger warns, a historical phenomenon that occurs in historical contexts. If, as he writes, “the political aspect of poetry must be immanent in poetry itself and cannot be derived from outside it,” then the apparent elevation of poetry as beyond history is no less historically impelled:

Such obtuseness plays into the hands of the bourgeois esthetic that would like to deny poetry any social aspect. . . . They advise poetry to stick to such models as they have devised for it, in other words, to high aspirations and eternal values. The promised reward for this continence is timeless validity. . . . [But] a political quarantine placed on poetry in the name of eternal values itself serves political ends. Poetry is to be made surreptitiously serviceable to those ends precisely where its social relevance is denied, as decoration, as window dressing, as a stage set representing eternity. (Ibid.)

The lyric is a timeless, formal purity, or it is subordinated to history, with each approach appropriating lyric to a particular ideological service. Avant-garde aesthetics specifically target this divided condition. The avant-garde pledged itself both to self-conscious formal experimentation and to social commitment, even intervention: what Raymond Williams (1989: 67) calls the avant-garde’s “broad programme toward the overthrow and remaking of existing society.” The specific urgency of a theory of the avant-garde then is to reassociate these divided impulses, formal self-consciousness with historical engagement.

Formal radicalism remains in many ways the visible signpost of avant-gardism, marking and launching the plunge into process, mutation, militant advance, which the very term *avant-garde* announces.² Renato Poggioli

1. Barret Watten (1997: 4) similarly observes that even new historicism “has not been kind to poetry, positioning it as handmaid to a representation of culture that seems often to take place as if cultures existed apart from the makers (if not the interpreters) of them.” One notable area in which historical investigation has flourished is feminist criticism, in which formal and theoretical analysis appears alongside and often in cross-reference to historical study and ideological argument. For an overview of feminist criticism see Showalter 1994.

2. I here elide the widely differing treatments of *avant-garde*, especially regarding periodization and the distribution of distinct movements and moments in the development of lyric through aestheticism and modernism, into twentieth-century avant-garde. In this I follow, among others, Theodor Adorno and Renato Poggioli. Adorno’s bracketing of modernist and avant-gardist aesthetics is evident throughout his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), as can be seen even in the index, where modernism and avant-garde are cross-referenced. This conflation is one

(1962: 131–32, 145, 213), identifying the “experimental factor” as basic in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, duly warns that, like any given stylistic feature, experimentalism does not necessarily have “the same motivation, the same purpose, an always unique and equal meaning.” But most discussions of formal radicalism assume it projects a nonrepresentational art whose effect is self-enclosure. Formal experiment is characteristically regarded as breaking representational conventions, throwing the artwork back on itself in reflexive self-reference. This tends to be the case on both sides of the critical divide, the historicist as well as the formalist. It persists into apparent revolts against symbolist formalism such as occur in certain modes of deconstruction, notably Paul de Man’s.

The roots of such self-reflexive ideology go back to symbolist theorists, particularly Stéphane Mallarmé, although it also finds articulation among art historians of experimental painting. Thus E. H. Gombrich (1959: 238) describes cubist painting as presenting the artwork as a “man-made construction, a coloured canvas. . . . If illusion is due to the interaction of clues and the absence of contradictory evidence, the only way to fight its transforming influence is to make the clues contradict each other and to prevent a coherent image of reality from destroying the pattern in the plane.” These aesthetic claims are elaborated by, for example, Rosalind Krauss, who sees avant-garde art as a radicalization of antireferential tendencies. She thus interprets the grid, which she identifies as a central form among many avant-garde painters, as a relentless assertion of “the autonomy of the realm of art,” a realm she sees as “anti-natural, antimimetic, unreal” (1991: 9). The grid, she concedes, does in some sense point outward to compel “our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame,” but it does so in an ambivalent and even schizophrenic manner, ultimately “introject[ing] the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work . . . the content of which is the conventional nature of art itself” (ibid.: 19–20). The grid thus remains “antidevelopmental, antinarrative, antihistorical” (31). She similarly sees the collage as poised against an aesthetic of reference despite “the presence of the actual objects” it incorporates. Collage becomes a “meta-language of the visual” whose “referent is an absent meaning, meaningful only in its absence” (37–39).

of Peter Bürger’s (1984: 115) complaints about Adorno: “By Modernism, Adorno means art since Baudelaire. The concept thus takes in what directly preceded the avant-garde movements, those movements themselves, and the neo-avant-garde.” Bürger also takes technical innovation as a central identifying feature of the avant-garde, although he then subordinates it to questions of the social status of art (e.g., 20, 32). Even here, however, at least some of the criteria Bürger educes in his attempt to distinguish a true avant-garde from, for example, modernism also apply to T. S. Eliot, as when he defines the avant-garde as an “attack on the status of bourgeois art” (49).

Theories of the lyric tend to pursue this antirepresentational understanding. Sharon Cameron (1979: 196), in *Lyric Time*, generalizes an atemporal and ahistorical impulse as a condition of lyric as such, claiming that “language in the lyric dispenses with the time that threatens to destroy it.” Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) does treat history but mainly in terms of changing social functions of art as an institution and as a development toward increasing self-reference. Avant-garde art is thus defined as the “ever-increasing concentration the makers of art bring to the medium itself,” which, even if it exposes and critiques, still “assents to the aesthetist’s rejection of the world” (ibid.: 27, 49). Even efforts toward bringing formal and historical analysis of the avant-garde to bear on each other often illustrate the challenges involved in doing so. Thus, although Williams (1982: 148) is committed to extending historical reflection to formal considerations, he devotes his fullest excursus into concrete analysis of how “certain forms of social relationship are deeply embodied in certain forms of art” to drama rather than lyric.³

Marjorie Perloff (1985: 181) perhaps goes farthest toward accommodating both experimental and historicist impulses in her discussions of avant-garde lyric, which she sees as “a new poetry that wants to open the field so as to make contact with the world as well as the word.”⁴ Lyric experiment with collage “incorporates directly into the work an actual fragment of the referent, thus forcing the reader or viewer to consider the interplay between preexisting message or material and the new artistic composition that results from the graft.” This she opposes to a “modernism that was to turn increasingly elitist and formalist in its concern for self-sufficient structures and aesthetic distance” (1986: xviii). Yet her core notion of a poetics of indeterminacy as itself an “irreducible ambiguity” remains ambivalently poised between such historicist incorporation and the artwork’s “attempt to block the construction of meaning” (1983: 34; cf. 49). As she writes of collage in *The Futurist Moment* (1986): “Each element . . . has a dual function: it refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentiality it seems to assert” (49).

In this ambivalence between history and theory, reference and self-consciousness, the case of Paul Celan emerges as pivotal exactly because

3. Specific discussion of the avant-garde, as in *The Sociology of Culture* (1982), calls for a sociology exploring its situation within metropolitan and immigrant culture (1982: 83–85). In *The Politics of Modernism* (1989), Williams emphasizes the “diversity of actually antecedent writing practices and theories of language” as against a reductionist interpretation that stresses “a common rejection of the representational character of language and thence of writing” (66).

4. Compare *The Futurist Moment* (1986), which describes futurism as a “poetry whose windows are wide open to the boulevards—here is a program that points the way to our own urge to break down the boundaries between ‘world’ and ‘text’” (xvii).

his poetry is extreme and is so in both apparently opposed directions. For history-minded critics Celan is above all a Holocaust poet. But for lyric theorists his texts are par excellence autonomous, self-referential language structures, abnegating a relation to any world outside them. This tendency appears in grotesque form in once-existing classroom instructions to teachers to prevent discussion of Celan's most famous poem, "*Todesfuge*" [Deathfuge], from digressing from formal considerations into discussions of concentration camps (Demetz 1972: 81). But it persists in various ways through much writing on Celan. Adorno serves here as both paradigm and source. Adorno (1974: 58, 61) gives aesthetic autonomy a paradoxical turn by making poetry's self-constitution "according to its own particular laws" exactly its mode of historicity, that is, making aesthetic resistance into a negative reflection of the world. In his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno specifically makes Celan an epitome of such anti- or negative-historicist historicism. Citing Celan as "the greatest exponent of hermetic poetry in present-day Germany," Adorno immediately complicates his notion of the hermetic. It is a "total isolation of the work of art from empirical reality," which yet requires "one . . . to hypothesize a connection between it and society." The "connection," however, is a negative one, in which "art maintains its integrity only by refusing to go along with communication." This results finally in "windowless creations," which, in the case of Celan, issue in the negativity of silence. Recognizing that "art is unable either to experience or to sublimate suffering, Celan's poems," writes Adorno, "articulate unspeakable horror by being silent, thus turning their truth content into a negative quality" (443–44). (Adorno's famous remark calling poetry after Auschwitz barbaric in fact made special reference to Celan, who responded that in poetry "we know at last where to seek the barbarians" [Glenn 1973: 73]).⁵ Adorno's stance generally reconfirms the tension between a theorized textual status as against "empirical reality" and "society," as he puts it, such that even their rapprochement remains paradoxically oppositional. And even this paradoxical (anti-) reference dissolves in the theorizing of Paul de Man. For de Man (1979: 48), Celan's poems are "constellations of figures that are inaccessible to meaning and to the senses, located far beyond any concern for life or for death in the hollow space of an unreal sky." Inaccessible to meaning, empty of sense, beyond concern for life or death, the poem takes place in an unreal space defined only by itself.

In de Man, I would argue, formalism fulfills itself in nihilism: the absolute text becomes a "hollow" negative space without relation to anything

5. Adorno's remark appears in *Prisms* (1982: 34). Celan's response to it is discussed in Glenn 1973: 35 and Wolosky 1994: 162. See Wolosky 1994: 149–50 for a fuller discussion of Adorno's aesthetic analysis of Celan.

outside it. In Celan studies this split between theoretized text and exterior worlds is severe. Celan studies are either historical or formalist-theoretical. But Celan's work directly contests just such divisions. In so doing Celan shifts the implications of experimental self-consciousness and its relationship to historical factors. Celan's work projects a theory of the lyric that is profoundly historicized and temporal in confrontation, response, and responsibility to historical challenge and not least within the lyric's own formal realization. What I wish to explore specifically is the penetration of history into the very linguistic conduct of the lyric, into the aesthetic-formal procedures so often separated off from history, to see these forms as integrally if also variously temporalized and historical instead.

History in fact can enter into lyric discourse in a variety of ways. It may serve as a source of references for imagery and other poetic features registered as events directly cited in a poem. Events may have inspired the artwork as a direct response to them, served as occasion for them, or posed a target the artist wishes to address. The artist certainly labors in specific historical circumstances with specific and changing audiences and relationships to them, even to the point of aiming for direct or political effects. The artwork may also be part of a history of aesthetic movements that it helps to track or shape, consciously or not. But it has as well a historical dimension or representation within the constitutive features of lyric that theoretical treatments of the lyric (as opposed to historical discussions of it) characteristically interpret in terms of self-reflexivity, self-enclosure, and atemporality.

To explore this historicized formalism, I take as my text a poem from *Atemwende*.

Keine Sandkunst mehr, kein Sandbuch, keine Meister.

Nichts erwürfelt. Wieviel

Stimme?

Siebenzehn.

Deine Frage—deine Antwort.

Dein Gesang, was weiss er?

Tiefimschnee,

Iefimnee,

I—i—e.

[No sand-art more, no sand-book, no master.

Nothing throws the dice. How much

speechlessness?

Seventeen.

Your question—your answer.
 Your song, what does it know?
 Deepinsnow,
 eepinow,
 ee—i—o.]
 (Celan 1983, 2:39; my translation)⁶

This poem is so ruptured as to suggest pieces of a lost Greek lyric verse. Indeed rupture, discontinuity, and fragmentation are central subjects of the poem on every level of its conduct. The opening image of “sand-art” (*Sandkunst*) inaugurates the text as a kind of (anti-) *ars poetica*, a reflection on art and, through a course of many images, a reflection on language: art, book, master, silence, question, answer, song. Yet it would be quite incorrect to parse the poem as foremostly or essentially self-reflective language, where language as subject would enclose the artwork and disjoin it from historical forces. Likewise the fragmentation in no way configures into spatialized simultaneity as co-presence within an independent compositional whole.

“No sand-art more” exactly contests such spatializing claims for art. Approaching oxymoron or perhaps polemic, Celan yokes the term *art*, with all its traditional claim to monumental immortality (Celan translated a number of Shakespeare’s sonnets devoted to this topic), to the antithesis of such immortal anchorage, the substance of impermanence and insecurity: sand. Perhaps some Shelleyan “Ozymandias” lurks in the background, where monument is chastised by desert sands. What looked monumental is revealed as unstable: art as sand. Yet is sand indeed antithetical to art? Is its shifting, entropic, deformative motion contrary to art or art’s condition? The poem warns against the idealization of art as permanent incorporation, as an absolute composition that binds its parts into totalized structure while itself standing as an emblem for some idealized, totalized experience—ideal experience as totalized. Art in this monumental sense recalls the unity and immutability of ideal Platonic realms, which point, as Nietzsche decried, beyond this world of temporal materiality as its negation. In this sense the artwork verges to a metaphysical space, static and finalized. But Celan contests this idea(l) of art. Instead, he shows the artwork to register, reflect, inscribe, situate, underscore, affirm, and risk the mutability and conditionality of contingent experience.

“No sand-art more, no sand-book, no master.” Here is a radical sense of

6. Translating Celan is a topic unto itself, which I have discussed in “On (Mis-)Translating Paul Celan” (Wolosky 1999). Here I translate the German I—i—e as an English ee—i—o since each is a reduction of the final word in the poem, *Tiefinschnee* and *Deepinsnow* respectively.

rupture, loss, even assault. But the lyric text offers not an antidote but a register and witness to such rupture. The artwork does not transcend but reflects the conditions out of which it arises, bringing them to greater consciousness and vividness. In its negations the poem attests to the sequences and antecedents that engender, situate, and make possible art—its institutions and transmission, its organization into books (a momentous term for Celan as both poet and Jew), its apprenticeships that lead to artistic mastery, and also the historical conditions that disturb artistic transmission and realization. The poem insists on its own emergence out of chains of initiation and inheritance but also insists on its disrupted relation to them. The historical threat to such transmission also threatens art. In “Todesfuge” Celan (1983, 1:41) famously calls Death a Master from Germany, “*Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland.*” Twentieth-century history ran a course that threatens history itself, destroying traditions of initiation toward mastery. The avant-garde’s assault on traditional forms takes a particular turn in Celan. He need not assault past forms as a radical aesthetic project; in his post-Holocaust world, this has been accomplished by history itself. But the poem does ask: What exactly are the claims of mastery, what may be their relation to destruction and death? In Celan mastery also implicates artistic mastery when conceived as totalizing composition displacing all contingency. Here he seems close to Walter Benjamin, both in his critique of the “conception of the total artwork” that “abstract[s] from the social existence of man” (1978: 158) and in his warning against confusions between the realms of politics and of aesthetics (1969: 241).

The text of this poem is marked by history in direct ways. “*Wieviel Stumme?*” is surely (also) a specific historical question. *Stumme* (silence) looms in Celan. In his Bremen speech he calls it “answerlessness” (*Antwortlosigkeit*) in the face of historical horror, the “thousand darknesses of deadly speech” (*die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede*) that his language had to pass through to be made into poems at all. Linguistic effort does not transcend but rather passes into and through destructive history: “*hindurchgehen durch furchtbares Verstummen,*” into and through fearful speechlessness, going through and yielding “no words for what had happened, but went through these events, went through and was allowed to come to light again” (1983, 3:186). Celan indeed is, as he is often claimed to be, a Holocaust poet.

But history is not only a particular reference and context for Celan’s texts; nor is it only a threat. It is the fundamental condition, as well as material, for lyric expression. The composition of the lyric, the lyric as composition, the words that make it up, and the shapes these words take, are shot through with historicity. “*Nichts erwürfelt.*” This untranslatable phrase might become in English something like nothing dices, nothing throws

dice-cubes. A strange neologism—*erwürfelt*, *Würfel* (cube, dice); *würfeln* (to throw, to have a throw, to play at dice, to dice, to cut into cubes)—it projects neologistic form as fundamental in Celan. Neologism realizes the essential mutability of all language and of all experience. Human discourse is a constant dissolution and recreation as words make their way through historical practices, deformed and reformed by and through events and usage. As Celan (*ibid.*: 157) writes of Edgar Jene: “Man not only languished in the chains of external reality but was also gagged and could not speak—and when I refer to speech I refer to the entire sphere of human communication and expression—because his words (gestures and motions) groaned under the burden of a thousand years of false and distorted sincerity—what was less sincere than the assertion that words somehow or other had basically remained unchanged!” The neologism of throwing dice is especially potent for it acts as an image of neologism itself: neologism as norm, as intimate tension between change and continuity, chance and direction, the random and the designed. Celan’s poetry is peculiarly premeditated even as it strongly suggests words thrown together on a page. Connection and dispersion, entropy and direction govern this language at each moment and as textual experience.

It is then part of the poem’s project to recall, deform, and recreate other linguistic events, both intertextual and extratextual. Celan, for example, clearly echoes Stéphane Mallarmé’s 1945 title “*Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*” [A throw of the dice will never abolish chance]. Celan himself called his poetic project Mallarméan, a way of “thinking through the consequences of Mallarmé to their end” (1983, 3:194). But he carefully distinguished his own position from what he called the “French,” saying that his poetry “doesn’t glorify, doesn’t poeticize, but names and places, attempts to measure the realm of the given and of the possible” (*ibid.*: 167). If Mallarmé’s (1982: 80) dictum that “all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book” intends a closed, glued, self-referring textual realm, then Celan indeed points in other directions.⁷ He projects an open, even wild, unpredictable, and constantly deforming course of language.

This penetrates his practice of intertextuality itself. In Celanian language theory, words carry with them prior usages, inevitably and constitutively, from within texts as also from outside texts. Intertextuality thus does not imagine a synchronicity of interreference whose transpositions can be charted structurally, as is the case, for example, in Michael Riffaterre.

7. Mallarmé’s own art may, however, be more pledged to chance and the momentary, as event, than is generally thought. Mallarmé also speaks of the poem as “a vibratory disappearance with the play of the word” (1982: 75), “an immaculate grouping of universal relationships come together for some miraculous and glittering occasion” (*ibid.*: 80).

Celan rather shifts inter- and extratextuality away from system. He does not assume what Julia Kristeva (1980: 37) describes (in introducing the term) as a “totality (the text),” in which a “transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another” is seen to absorb it (along with “the text of society and history”) into a “field of transpositions of various signifying systems.”⁸ Rather than forming any determinate structure, Celan’s multiplying references appear through entropic interactivity as collision, explosion, transformation, and disappearance. In Celan, as in Mikhael Bakhtin’s dialogics, are interchange, permeability, warding, and contest in a wildness of volatile exchanges through the whole panoply of linguistic intercourses, with literature, culture, and event colliding and recombining without closure or finalization. Celan enacts in lyric the multiplicity of contending discourses that Bakhtin describes as penetrating and shaping the novel. Lyric words are invested as mutable and volatile, permeable to surrounding and contesting boundaries, within literature and without literature, never settling into system but always, as in the throw of dice, unpredictable, hurtling in open-ended courses.⁹

Celan’s senses of the word open his texts beyond the literary into various fields of experience. As in the earlier, futurist avant-garde, Celan’s work crosses borders between disciplines and discourses in the arts and sciences.¹⁰ The entropic energies of this poem’s unpredictable and energetic collisions and propulsions, registered in the throw of dice as itself a figure of unpredictable and propulsive courses, may recall, as Meir Sternberg has suggested, Einstein’s remark, “God does not play dice with the world” (Clark 1971: 69). This was in response to questions of randomness, meaning, process, predictability as emerging in contemporary theories of statistical chance and

8. Kristeva (1980: 37) introduced the term *intertextuality* in reference to the novel, writing, “The ideologue of a text is the focus where knowing rationality grasps the transformation of utterances into a totality (the text) as well as the insertions of this totality into the historical and social text.”

9. Bakhtin’s theories of dialogical language of course were developed mainly with the novel in mind. Yet they have important applications for poetry, despite Bakhtin’s own hesitation to make this application in, for example, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981): “In genres that are poetic in the narrow sense, the natural dialogization of the word is not put to artistic use, the word is sufficient unto itself and does not presume alien utterances beyond its own boundaries. Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse” (285).

10. Perloff’s *Futurist Moment* (1986) emphasizes this crossing of boundaries, seeing avant-garde art as working “to meet the challenge of the new science [via] a radical questioning of existing modes of representation” (75) and like “the contemporary dissolution of the boundaries between art and science, between literature and theory, between the separate genres and media” (195). Max Kozloff (1973: 110) similarly sees the avant-garde as bringing art into the “wave of invention, scientific discovery, critical thought, and philosophy everywhere transforming men’s consciousness of the physical world, its structure, energies, and dimensions.”

uncertainty in quantum physics. Or again: Celan's *Nichts*, poised between assertion and negation, personification and blind force, inserts into the text and inserts the text into a long history of negative theologies. Celan's own reinscriptions of Kabbalistic tradition situate this *Nichts* in the ruptures of history as at once actor and denial, initiating agent and penetrating distribution, blasphemy and faith.¹¹ Chance is both impelling and canceled, order is at once projected and effaced, and outcomes are unpredictable but cursive, unforeseen but charted. The elements of the poem thus become strewn on language paths in which ongoing arguments about the configurations of time and world intercross scientific with theological discourses, and the text becomes a force field of language, a frail and yet impelling project of shape and mutability, direction and disorder.

"*Wieviel Stumme? Siebenzehn.*" [How much speechlessness? Seventeen.] The juxtaposition of *speechlessness* with a number oddly deforms the senses of both, perforating the text with silences that defy calculation and are at once historical and textual, while translating mathematical exactness into enigma and rune. Number is posed as riddle, oddly retracting numeration's promise of specificity. The puzzle of *Seventeen* must in fact be respected rather than dispelled, even while it impels the reader to conjectural interpretation. One possibility: *Seventeen* may mark a moment of intersection between personal biography and public history. Celan was seventeen years old when, traveling to France to continue his studies, he passed through Berlin just at the moment of *Kristallnacht* (Felstiner 1995: 10). Crystalline structure in fact frames this poem from the opening image of sand to the ending image of snow. Or: *Seventeen* may fall short of the number eighteen, which in Hebrew numerology—where letters also have numerical values that serve as interpretive bases—also spells *life* (*Chai*), left incomplete here. Eighteen, life, is a number cut off, a total missed. A multiple play of languages, another mode of Celanian cross- and open-ended discourse, comes almost invisibly into the poem's texture in this possible interface between an asserted German *seventeen* and an effaced Hebrew *eighteen*, as does the numerological potency of the alphabet, where letters and their numerical values mysteriously, and in Celan almost indecipherably, spell the universe. Hermetic textual play unravels or is propelled into biographical and historical interruption: the truncation of "life" explodes into the incalculable destruction of the Second World War. The very materiality of language becomes enmeshed in the fabric of world making, its orders implicating the orders and disorders that invent and unfold our world.

Celan inscribes number as indecipherable. Yet he goes on into the con-

11. I have explored Celan's use of *Nichts* in Wolosky 1994.

tinued language of the poem and specifically into the mode of dialogue that is, with fragmentation itself, perhaps his most distinguishing poetic marker. “*Deine Frage—deine Antwort*” [Your question—your answer.] No question and certainly no answer are specified in this text other than the problem of incompleteness and fragmentation that the poem enacts. Yet the phrases take the form of address. They are directed from a speaker to an auditor, which with “*Dein Gesang*” [your song] makes a threefold repetition of *Dein* that exactly matches or answers in number and rhyme the opening threefold negation *kein*. This marks, indeed insists on, another rupture of textual hermeticism. The poem is, radically so in Celan, address and act: “The poem can, as a manifestation of language and consequently in its essence dialogical, the poem can be a message in a bottle. . . . Poems are on the way also in this manner, they move toward something. Toward what? Toward something that stands open, something that can be occupied, toward a responsive ‘you’ perhaps, toward a responsive reality” (1983, 3:186). Dialogical address launches a line of language in motion, incomplete yet pointing. Neither the address nor the poem constitutes knowledge: “*Dein Gesang, was weiss er?*” [Your song, what does it know?] Dialogue does not constitute itself fully or finally in closure as traditional ideas of knowledge might imply. It rather proposes address as launched in a questioning that risks incompleteness or indeed erasure.

It is into erasure that this poem pursues its course. The last lines enact a disappearance that recurs through Celan’s later work. The figure of snow intensifies the erasure it registers through its own distribution and deformation within Celan’s work, where it is often associated, as in this text, with speechlessness, silence, dumbness (*Stumme*).¹² There is one poem that seems particularly close to “Keine Sandkunst.” In “Underneath” [*Unten*], snow takes shape as crystal in association with dice:

Led home, syllable by syllable, divided
among the day-blind dice

. . .

heaped up around the small
crystal in the garb of your silence

[Heimgeführt Silbe um Silbe, verteilt
auf die tagblinden Würfel

. . .

12. See, for example, “With Changing Key” and its image of *Schnee des Verschwiegenen* [the snow of the silenced] (Celan 1983, 1: 112) and “Homecoming” [*Heimkehr*], where a “snowfall, denser and denser” [*Schneefall, dichter und dichter*] threatens to bury *ein ins Stumme englittenes Ich* [an I slipping into dumbness] (ibid.: 156).

angelagert dem kleinen
 Kristall in der Tracht deines Schweigens]
 (ibid., 1: 157).

Snow emerges in imagery of chance, memory, dissolution, and recovery. In this it is closely associated with language. Yet snow is not therefore an exemplum of Celanian “language about language” in a purely self-reflexive sense (Weinrich 1970: 214–15). Rather, it images language as the fundamental dimension in which the effort to make or find meaning takes place within a fragile world—the configurations and disjunctions, significations and disintegrations of relationships within the sequences and disjunctions of experience.

Snow is a substance even more shifting and ephemeral than sand. In the poem “Keine Sandkunst Mehr,” snow takes shape as an image of the most radical linguistic disappearance: *deepinsnow* vanishing into *ee—i—o*. The earlier challenge to know (“*was weiss er?*”) dissolves into this whiteness (*weiss*). The text comes to focus on the fragility of linguistic process, itself in turn an image of fragile experience and fragile efforts to negotiate experience. The text may in fact finally trace a defeat of language, linguistic sequence as loss and engulfment by process, radicalized in a destructive history. Yet even as defeat Celan’s venture seems heroic. Celan would make his meaning-way not detached from but through events, by way of a language that, far from autonomous, is vulnerable to challenge and to assault at every moment.

Celan’s texts register then the severe experimentalism and dislocation conjoined with historical engagement that mark avant-garde writing. They do so in ways that clarify the theoretical implications of the avant-garde, especially for lyric theory. As with avant-garde lyric, Celan’s work challenges notions of unity of composition, of wholeness and self-enclosure of the artwork, driving instead to “obliterate the distinction,” as Perloff (1986: 77, 228) puts it, “between the pictorial field and the ‘real’ world outside the frame,” undermining notions of “aesthetic domain” as “uncontaminated by the ‘practical,’ [such] that the ‘order’ of art is no longer opposed to the ‘disorder’ of life.” But this means retheorizing the fundamental implications of formal radicalism. Even avant-garde theorizing tends to continue to see fragmentation, contradiction, discontinuity, and process through a problematic of referentiality. Techniques that throw attention onto the construction and materials, the medium and mediation of language are characteristically construed as suspending and displacing reference, as when Bürger (1984: 78) describes avant-garde as an art whose components “are no longer signs pointing to reality, they are reality.” Yet Celan’s art belie-

Peter Szondi's (1978: 169, 178) aestheticist-symbolist interpretation of it as "writing in the wake of the later Mallarmé," thus making the poem into "its own subject matter," such that "language does not speak about something but 'speaks' itself." Indeed an odd confluence runs through many differing discussions, interpreting lyric as self-reflexive language that is essentially, qua lyric, nonreferential and antimimetic. But it is this very opposition between mimetic and nonmimetic, compositional and referential, a "galaxy of signifiers" against a "structure of signifieds," as Roland Barthes (1974: 5) puts it, that Celan's art contests.¹³

Celan's is indeed a highly self-reflexive art, dramatizing its own constructional procedures. But this does not make it the self-enclosed "poetry of constancy" that Szondi (1978: 178), for example, claims it to be.¹⁴ Celan, rather than opposing reference to formal procedures, reconfigures, or rather clarifies, their relationship. Rather than detaching words from referential, historical structures to withdraw them into a self-referring art object, Celan insists on the historicity, temporality, and in a specific sense the representational power of the lyric. He does so in several senses. His historicized lyric handles words as fragile, permeable, and vulnerable instead of fixing it in an absolute compositional place within a composed whole. His lyric handles words as deformed and reconfigured through historical usages and contexts, intertextual and extratextual, whose varying senses and implications ricochet in the text, across discourses and unfinalized, situating author and reader inside particular historical moments as necessarily framing and conditioning aesthetic experience, including the inscription of personal biography in terms of public events. His central structure of lyric as address dramatizes the intensity of encounter within the immediate moment, with the text an open negotiation within changing contexts of audience.

But lyric language represents historicity not only through these intersections with events, accumulations of usage, and discourse crossings in changing environments of interchange and address. Lyric language also serves as a figure for historicity as such, as the dimension of temporal change

13. This continuity of interpretation across theoretical stances and aesthetic topics is striking. Thus Hugo Friedrich sees a fundamental continuity between symbolists and the apparent "variants" of twentieth-century poetics (1976: 191) in the way they all concentrate poetic energy exclusively on composition, so "modern poetry evades recognition of an objective reality in the world in a voluntary diminution of the importance of signifieds" (ibid.: 202). Peter Brooker's "Introduction" to *Modernism/Postmodernism* (1992) similarly groups modernism as "formal innovation" dedicated to "artistic autonomy" (27) with the avant-garde as a "critique of realism" and what he calls a "postmodern detachment of image from reference" (15). His footnotes show how widespread and consistent these claims are.

14. Szondi (1978: 178) concludes his essay "The Poetry of Constancy" with this image: Celan "thus produced a poem . . . whose language is sheltered in that very place that it assigns to its subject matter, which is none other than itself: it is sheltered 'in constancy.'"

and material relationship, transformations and deformations, erasures and constructions. It does so in its compositional structure, displaying how aesthetic representation is enacted and only takes place in terms of the materials and relationships of its constitutive signifiers. In this sense Celan does negate a “signified” but *not* as a collapse of meaning or as a loss of reference. Rather, Celan’s work demonstrates and highlights how signification is an act of negotiation and configuration within and among the components and conditions of time, materiality, and history, which language represents not only referentially but also figurally. Meaning emerges as configurations and distributions and their interreactivity, generation, displacement, direction, and disorder. The text represents and figures the conditions, promises, and risks of experience in history in all of its collisions, conjunctions, defeats, and unpredicatability, its challenge to design, and its impetus toward meaning.

Celanian aesthetic in these ways both exposes and challenges what might be called a metaphysics of art. The aestheticist-formalist tradition remains, as Poggioli (1962: 197) asserts, structured by an attempt to “transcend the world of the senses, to attain a superreality which is at once a sublimation and a negation of human and terrestrial reality,” evident in its desire “to divorce the idea and the figure, to annul in the last-mentioned any reference to a reality other than its own self.”¹⁵ But this metaphysical aesthetic is one that Celan repudiates. His formal radicalism is not intended to constitute an autonomous linguistic world but rather to retheorize language’s status and role in the construction of meaning within and in terms of concrete and temporal experience. Thus his signifying project, however self-conscious, does not plunge the work into an absence of meaning through the loss of the “signified,” in the de Manian sense. De Man’s reading of Celan, as of lyric generally, remains within a formalist aesthetic of the text as a cancellation of representational meaning—what de Man (1983: 185) describes as a language that seems to offer a representational “understanding only to discover that the understanding it reaches is necessarily in error.” Here, as generally, de Man’s is a despair of the signified, a nostalgia for the signified as the only structure of meaning, whose loss, therefore, leaves nothing. This, I would claim, is, in de Man, a metaphysical despair.

But Celan’s is not a nostalgic loss of the signified as a reference or meaning nihilistically dissolved into signifying process. The loss of the signified does not defeat meaning. Meaning is traced instead through the signifying courses of language through the poem. Significance emerges within the

15. See Poggioli’s sections “Metaphysics of the Metaphor” and “The Mystique of Purity” (1962: 196–206). Compare Williams (1989: 77), who speaks of an “intransigent idealism, . . . at best a finding of new terms for the ‘ineffable.’”

generation, impetus, propulsion, and constellation of the signifying components themselves. Historical and temporal contingency, registration, propulsion, and resistance are the realms and procedures of signification, their promise and their risk, and lyric represents and negotiates this. Celan's self-consciousness as to how language constructs meaning indeed proposes language as a self-reflexive field. But in pointing to itself the language of the text points to the conditions under which we live in the world and attempt to trace its meanings and to the role of language in this effort. Language points to its own historical resonances; to historical experience as transforming and marking language, even as language transforms and marks historical experience; to the mutability of our efforts; and to the fragile and linear tracings of our courses.

Celan's writing embraces history—its events and its conditions—as the sphere of, and also the challenge to, meaning. That Celan's attempt is fragile, that the historical sign—the sign as marked by history—may indeed be fractured to the point of disintegration, also are deeply dramatized in Celan's work. But this is not to withdraw from history into the artwork as its own pure self-reference in negation of reality. It is, rather, to confront history and to reflect its conditions, even if this results in being defeated by it.

“*Wieviel Stumme?*” The poem radically rests upon speechlessness, which like nothingness (*Nichts*) penetrates, indeed grounds, its linguistic project. This speechlessness is not a transcendence of language into realms beyond it and is not a lyric theory that, as Friedrich (1976: 17) proposes of lyric generally, seeks a “transcendence which no longer refers to anything.” It rather asserts the particular historical trauma of Celan's own writing and our continued reading of it and also suggests our fundamental condition, as we pursue our courses into uncertainty and risk, through words that remain both fragile and compelling.

In this, Celan remains true to the avant-garde project, conceived, as Bürger puts it, as an “intent to reintegrate art in the praxis of life” such that “not only does reality in its concrete variety penetrate the work of art, but the work no longer seals itself off from it.” Yet Bürger proposes a concomitant but contradictory move toward the “autonomy of the aesthetic,” a contradiction Celan's work helps to overcome (1984: 62, 66, 86, 90). In Celan, reflection on constitutive elements of art reflects on experience: as reference, as contextual base, as conceptual frame, as circumstance of production and reception; it also radically represents these as the conditions we operate under and through. History as circumstance, contingency, mutability, accident, desire, and disaster is our condition for signification, and signification is nothing other than the interreactive trajectories within

these conditions.¹⁶ These trajectories—what Celan calls *Atemwende* (Breathways), the title of the volume in which “Keine Sandkunst Mehr” appears—take shape in language, radically underscored yet open and unfinalized. “*Deine Frage—deine Antwort. / Dein Gesang, was weiss er?*” The poem’s questions remain in many ways its most radical imaging. Their address and their impetus are the threads of possible signification. As Celan (1983: 3, 186) concludes in his Bremen speech, the poem is “underway: it makes for something. . . . The poem is not timeless . . . [but] seeks to grasp in and through time—that is: in and through it, not over and above it.” It is addressed to history as the condition of our utterance and our responsibility.

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16. Pertinent here is Charles Altieri’s (1989: 362–64) argument for an art that “will provide a cogent case for taking artworks as exemplary testimonial structures that can affect the manner in which the agents within the culture represent themselves . . . [showing] how processes of exemplification engage us in assessing and applying new models of agency.”

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