Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany

Boos, Sonja

Published by Cornell University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36907
In Germany the preacher alone knew what a syllable weighs, or a word, and how a sentence strikes, leaps, plunges, runs, runs out; he alone had a conscience in his ears.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

On September 13, 1960, Martin Buber and Paul Celan, two central—if fundamentally dissimilar—intellectual figures of the German-speaking Jewish diaspora, had a brief, dissonant encounter (this was the only time they met).¹ Their dispute revolved around the possibility and legitimacy of engaging in a dialogue with Germans.² Having accompanied Celan to the meeting, which took place in the lobby of a Paris hotel, Jean Bollack recalls how deeply disappointed his friend was by

¹. As an Austrian Jew who had grown up in Lemberg and Vienna and later lived in Berlin and Heppenheim, Martin Buber left Germany in 1938 to settle in Jerusalem, Palestine, where he continued his scholarly and educational work as a cultural Zionist. Paul Celan (born Antschel) lived in Bukovina when it was occupied by the Soviets and subsequently, in 1941, invaded by the Germans. Celan’s parents were deported and killed, and he was placed in a labor camp. After the end of World War II Celan lived in Bucharest until he immigrated to Paris in 1948.

². See the report by Jean Bollack, who was present during the meeting, in Jean Bollack, Paul Celan: Poetik der Fremdheit, trans. Werner Wögerbauer (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1999), 133. See also John Felstiner, Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 161.
the much-revered scholar-philosopher Buber, whose viewpoints struck Celan as injudicious, even naive: “Did Buber grasp the tragic nature of the stories he was divulging in Germany? Did he grasp that his contradictory and (to Celan’s mind) theological work implied that he repudiated everything, even his own language? Celan addressed Buber’s contradictions by speaking of his own. His solidarity and his questions transformed into accusations.”

Ignorance, denial, self-contradiction—Celan’s impetuous language suggests the extent to which the subject under discussion was loaded for him. The poet objected strongly to Buber’s confidence in the peacemaking power of dialogue and his amicable engagement with Germany’s public sphere. Buber at first refused to return to Germany, to be sure, but when he finally went in 1953 to accept the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, he promoted his unflagging faith in a possible future of German-Jewish relations. A pioneer of reconciliation, Buber gave his Peace Prize address the telling title Über das echte Gespräch und die Möglichkeit des Friedens (Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace), even though his appearance in Germany occurred at a time when the 1951–52 retribution debate had only barely receded from public view: at that time not a few Israelis were opposed to the idea of accepting monetary retribution from the federal government, insisting that this would bestow an undeserved sense of redemption on West Germany. In the eyes of his Israeli critics, Buber’s candor with regard to current political issues, and, more concretely, his readiness to accept two major awards from public institutions in Germany, amounted to perfidy.
Both Buber and Celan repeatedly visited Germany during the 1950s and 1960s, yet Celan went with a greater degree of reluctance; he had experienced his first visit in 1952, which was occasioned by an invitation from the Gruppe 47, as a personal failure. According to Celan’s account, the audience had sneered at his poem Todesfuge (Death Fugue, 1949), and one group member had commented to him that his pathos-filled inflection reminded him of Josef Goebbels’s. Although the group members’ criticism was directed against the chant-like style of Celan’s prosody—his markedly unironic performance seemed sibylline, almost enraptured—they certainly were equally perplexed by the formal features of Celan’s poetry, the broken syntax and radical minimalism of which proposed that signification and meaning had collapsed in the post-Holocaust world. Where the Gruppe 47 sought realistic storytelling that would help society “cope with” the Nazi past, Celan’s poetry abjured narrative cogency. And while the former vowed to modernize the German language to arrive at a new, simpler, and more direct way of telling history, the latter carefully examined each and every word, especially those tainted by the euphemistic vocabulary of National Socialism, mulling over its incommensurability and negativity and finally substituting German terms with enigmatic synonyms and neologisms that would each communicate its unique history of violence and suffering while at the same time refusing to perpetuate the language of the perpetrators. Constantly reflecting on the question of what it meant to write poetry after Auschwitz, Celan’s poetry always raises the possibility of poetic failure because it is imbued with the trauma inscribed in the German language.

Despite their exile, both Buber and Celan wrote in German and hence for a German-language readership. Yet while Buber’s writings are marked by the expressionist diction emblematic of the first decades of the twentieth century and a truly imposing, pathos-filled rhetoric, Celan’s poetry is self-reflexive and hermetic, always bordering on, indeed performing, what Celan once tagged “a terrifying silence” in the face of “what happened” in National Socialist Germany.
who had been deported to a labor camp by a rather willing Romanian government in 1942, was a deeply skeptical thinker who displayed what Arendt once characterized as the émigré’s “fundamental distrust of everything merely given.”\textsuperscript{11} In Celan’s case this includes not only “all laws and prescriptions, moral and social” but also “the sources of authority of law [and] the ultimate goals of political organizations and communities”—most notably the discursive hegemony of National Socialism.\textsuperscript{12} The meeting with Buber, unsatisfactory as it seemed, pushed Celan to revisit his own stance on the question of what it meant for a Jewish exile to address an audience of a variety of Germans—made up of former bystanders, victims, and perpetrators, of members of the first and second generations, of individuals, too, who downplayed the significance of the Cologne synagogue desecration in 1959, and of others who came to Celan’s defense against Claire Goll’s plagiarism charges.\textsuperscript{13} In a letter to Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann had expressed her concern that “having entered a room full of people one has not chosen oneself, whether one is still prepared to read for those who do want to listen, and are ashamed of the others.”\textsuperscript{14} There was no easy answer to this dilemma. But in his Büchner Prize address, titled \textit{Der Meridian} (The Meridian), which Celan gave only a few weeks after his encounter with Buber, on October 22, 1960, in Darmstadt, Celan clearly demonstrates that he found Buber’s reconciliatory position toward the Germans untenable.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Celan decided to deliver his Büchner Prize address in Germany and accept this German award, his accusations against Buber are inscribed in his speech, if in an inconspicuous and oft-overlooked manner. One of the passages that most resonates with Buber’s thought, a paragraph that defines the poem as dialogue, dates from the final writing stage; Celan added it after his meeting with Buber and just days before he delivered the final version of the speech.\textsuperscript{16} In addition

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism} (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 435.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} In the early 1960s and roughly coinciding with Celan’s nomination and acceptance of the Büchner award, accusations by Claire Goll, who indicted Celan of plagiarizing the poetry of her late husband, Yvan Goll, cast a shadow over Celan’s public persona. For a detailed description of this affair, see Barbara Wiedemann, \textit{Paul Celan—Die Goll-Affäre: Dokumente zu einer “Infamie”} (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000).
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Celan had already taken up several of Buber’s motives in his prose piece \textit{Gespräch im Gebirg}, a text that features two mysterious companions, named “Gross” and “Klein,” who communicate in a language that does not converse but simply addresses: “Do you hear me, he says—I know, cousin, I know . . . Do you hear me, he says, I’m here. I am here, I’ve come.” P. Celan, “Conversation in the Mountains” (1959), in Celan, \textit{Collected Prose}, 17–22, here 20. The text ends, much like \textit{The Meridian}, with the breakdown of dialogue.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} See his note “M. Buber, in conversation” followed by the revised draft titled “Encounter.” Paul Celan, \textit{Der Meridian: Endfassung, Vorstufen, Materialien}, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 131–48. Thus instead of viewing Celan’s Büchner Prize address exclusively in light of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, the present study contextualizes the speech with Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. For a canonical Heideggerian reading of Celan, see Lacoue-Labarthe’s
\end{itemize}
to redirecting some of his aesthetic questions concerning the ontological possibility of poetry and language as well as the dichotomy between art and reality into the realm of ethics, Celan here articulates an unfavorable response to Buber, even if this response is never made explicit. Charged with Buber’s idiosyncratic vocabulary, Celan’s Büchner Prize address carefully gauges and examines the philosopher’s prodigal stance but ultimately rejects it, along with Buber’s optimistic pledge to renew a long-lost German-Jewish tradition. Contrary to Buber’s Peace Prize address, then, which optimistically embodies a “genuinely dialogical” and politically committed commencement, The Meridian is punctuated by interjections that fail to address any potential listeners. Evoking a series of textually self-referential signs, the speech is ultimately a self-recursive monologue reaffirming the historical caesura implied by the cipher of “Auschwitz.” Bachmann, the third speaker to be considered in the first part of this book, shares Buber’s deliberate and strategic use of the relational space between speaker and audience, yet while Buber employs it in the affirmative sense of promoting a German-Jewish dialogue, Bachmann uses it to challenge the psychological status quo that has been reached in Germany. Her 1964 Georg Büchner Prize address, Deutsche Zufälle (German Contigencies), not only considers the psychosocial health of the Germans—it revolves around the theme of “insanity” in Büchner’s prose fragment Lenz—but also constitutes a deliberate response to Celan’s reflections on Büchner. For Bachmann both eludes and self-reflectively reinscribes her role as an unstable dialogic partner in her Darmstadt address. By thus mirroring Celan’s resistance to any form of public dialogue in a German context, she demonstrates her solidarity with the Jewish poet, who had been publicly defamed around the time he gave his Büchner address.

Based on an understanding of the “public sphere” as a social site where meaning is negotiated through dialogic exchange, this chapter inquires into the qualitative dimension of public speech as a distinctive form of dialogue that can create oppositional, subaltern spheres of influence within the dominant sphere of public life. Despite their great differences in details of form and intent, the discursive interactions between Buber, Celan, and Bachmann and their respective audiences generate a counterpublic that challenges the dominant mode of reality within West Germany’s public sphere. Of course this kind of contact comes at a great sacrifice. Reflecting on the challenge of articulating subjective experience in a public

dialogue, the speakers sometimes unwittingly reproduce the structures that they confront. This is especially the case with Celan and Bachmann, who, by critically revisiting Buber’s notion of dialogic relations, exert a modicum of pressure on themselves and/or their interlocutors.

**Speech as Dialogue**

“I do not philosophize more than I must,” Buber once stated in response to critics who disapproved of his unconventionally “optimistic” and “concrete” approach to philosophy.\(^{18}\) Although he was a scholar, and as such was confronted with the rules and conventions of academic discourse, Buber was opposed to logical elaboration in its detached, erudite form. His teachings, so he insisted, needed to be “transmittable”; contrary to scientific treatises, they had to be persuasive and universally engaging: “My philosophy serves, yes, it serves, but it does not serve a series of revealed propositions. It serves an experienced, a perceived attitude that it has been established to make communicable.”\(^{19}\) With this statement, Buber not only recapitulates his discontent with respect to what he saw as the self-absorbed logicizing practiced in the academy, but he also sums up his own philosophical mission, namely, his continuing effort to reach out to a general public—in Buber’s language, the Gemeinschaft (community)—rather than addressing university professors or other independent scholars like himself. Buber was a constructive thinker who took his sociopolitical role as a public intellectual and teacher extremely seriously; he was not only the foremost advocate but also an eminent practitioner of communication: “I am not teaching a lesson,” Buber thus informed his interlocutors, “but I carry on a conversation.”\(^{20}\)

Buber habitually used public speech as a means to promulgate his dialogical philosophy.\(^{21}\) It allowed him to convey and clarify speculative lines of argument for his often nonacademic audiences. But more importantly, Buber favored the genre of public speech because of its compatibility with the very essence of his philosophy, as this form of spoken communication provided him with the adequate means to demonstrate, indeed perform, the most fundamental principle of his philosophical thought: that human existence is inherently dialogical in nature. Privileging

---


19. Ibid., 690–91.

20. Ibid., 693.

21. Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson have examined the relation between Buber’s conception of genuine dialogue and his own, practical attempts at realizing dialogue in his public appearances. Contrary to the present study, however, these commentators focus on actual dialogues—that is, face-to-face encounters between two individuals, as, for instance, academic panel discussions or television interviews—rather than Buber’s public speeches. Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson, *Moments of Meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 2.
intersubjective relations between the self and the other over all other kinds of relationalities (i.e., between the self and the world or the absolute, respectively), Buber's philosophy is deeply concerned with the anthropological and ontological dimension of spoken language. Buber indeed considered the primary form of language its concrete spokenness and not its capability to signify.\textsuperscript{22} Opposed to conventional theories of language that define words as containers of logos—that is, meaning, cosmic reason, a divine plan—Buber conceived of words as empty shells whose primary function was not to transmit ideas, but to function as a medium. Words, when spoken out loud for the sake of genuine dialogue, could engender intersubjective encounters regardless of what they said. Hence in Buber’s view truth resided not in the words or communicative content of such dialogues but in the process—in the event—of language itself: “[Dialogue] is completed outside contents, even the most personal, which are or can be communicated. Moreover it is completed not in some ‘mystical’ event, but in one that is in the precise sense factual, thoroughly dovetailed into the common human world and the concrete time-sequence.”\textsuperscript{23}

In the treatise \textit{Das Wort, das gesprochen wird} (The Word That Is Spoken), first published in 1960, Buber defined this dialogical event as \textit{aktuelles Begebenis} (actual occurrence), referring to the spokenness of language in the event of spontaneous communication.\textsuperscript{24} Contrary to other, less genuine modalities of language—namely, \textit{präsender Bestand} (present continuance), which includes all that which is sayable at a given point in time, and \textit{potentialer Besitz} (potential possession), which comprises all that which has ever been said insofar as it can still be recuperated—\textit{aktuelles Begebenis} denotes language that is realized in the form of spoken, interpersonal dialogue—its real occurrence in human life. As Buber elaborates, “Existence and possession, presuppose an historical acquisition, but here nothing else is to be presupposed than man’s will to communicate as a will capable of being realized. This will originates in men’s turning to one another; it wins gesture, vocal sign, the word in the growing fruitfulness of this basic attitude.”\textsuperscript{25} This latter form of language is, like public speech, context bound, ephemeral, and, most importantly, dialogical. As Buber declares, “Language never existed before address.”\textsuperscript{26} Language, which is first and foremost a dialogical event, brings forth, and from its first instance effectively constitutes, response. It follows that, as Emmanuel Levinas contends, “truth is not a content” for Buber, and “words do not contain it.”\textsuperscript{27} In saying “I” Buber’s subject does not put words to his use, nor does he grasp a thing; rather, his words become


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 111.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 115.

a container for a different, averbal kind of dialogue that arises between the “I” and the subject and thing that this “I” encounters. Dialogical encounters are thus diametrically opposed to information exchange, persuasion, and intentionality, and involve presenting oneself in such a way that one is open to hearing the other’s “otherness.” As Levinas writes, for Buber

the word is not true because the thought it states corresponds to the thing, or reveals being. It is true when it proceeds from the I-Thou relation, which is the ontological process itself. . . . The static notion of truth, which is to be that which reappears as long as the truth can be said, is destroyed in this conception. . . . Buber describes a being no narration could grasp, because that being is living dialogue between things who do not relate to one another as contents: one being has nothing to say about the other. The acuity of the I-Thou relation is in the total formalism of that relation.  

Paradoxically, it is precisely this “total formalism” that for Buber makes actual, genuine dialogue possible. As a thinker who always strived to transform his writings into speech and speech into genuine dialogue, Buber believed that the latter could be realized, but only through the nonsubstantive character—the emptiness—of the I-Thou relation.  

But how was Buber able to carry out his mission as a public lecturer and prophet of genuine dialogue over into a period when ethical life—and God—was, in his own words, “eclipsed” by the historical reality of the Holocaust? In a world devoid of divine signs, how could Buber maintain his faith in the absolute? In the absence of God, how could he hope to make him present through genuine dialogue? Finally,

---

28. Ibid., 27.
29. In I and Thou, Buber juxtaposes two primary relations—defined as the word pairs Ich-Du (I-Thou) and Ich-Es (I-It), respectively—which are also based on two different conceptions of alterity. In the Ich-Du encounter, the “I” does not conceptualize or cognize the other’s identity: “Whoever says You,” Buber writes, “does not have something for his object.” Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 55; hereafter abbreviated as IT. The Ich-Du can involve persons, animals, or even a stone, since it rises above the technicalities of human language: “We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer—creating, thinking, acting: with our being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouths” (I and Thou, 57) The second word-couple, Ich-Es, describes a nonessential relation of alterity. Here, the “I” encounters the Other by way of cognition and experience: “Man goes over to the surface of things and experiences them. He brings back from them some knowledge of their condition—an experience. He experiences what there is to things” (55). According to Buber, this relation is inferior, since the Thou to which the I refers is not a particular person but an intrinsic plurality: “For what they [the experiences] bring to him is only a world that consists of It and It and It, of He and He and She and She and It” (55). The “It” denotes a multiplicity of potential participants who are insubstantial and substitutable. As Buber notes, the Es is but a lacuna: “Every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others” (55). Buber’s two-pronged investigation of an essential, nonconceptual and a mediated, cognitive relation of alterity, respectively, goes back to his predialogical period. See Paul Mendes-Flohr and in particular the chapter “Buber’s Epistemology,” in Mendes-Flohr, From Mysticism to Dialogue (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 72–75.
in the aftermath of a crime against humanity, how precisely did Buber envision man’s return to humanity and to human goodness, especially as this concerned the German perpetrator nation?

There is no better place to explore these questions than Buber’s 1953 Peace Prize address, since Buber here evokes, indeed attempts to ontically realize, an event of dialogical saying in the face of a German audience who for him epitomized the full range of “otherness” of the dialogic “other.” This is not to deny that the speech also signifies, persuades, and deliberates. In fact, the present chapter seeks to demonstrate that the speech is in fact both: an act of “saying” that actualizes the kind of genuinely dialogical encounter Buber prescribes in his philosophy (most notably in his magnum opus, *Ich und Du* [I and Thou], written in 1923), as well as a classical deliberative speech.31 As a matter of fact, for Buber these two modalities of (public) speaking do not preclude one another, since men are always at once exposed (to the ontic existence of the other) and functionally bound (to a historical hour). Buber’s conflation of speech and saying thereby speaks to a central insight of classical rhetoric—namely, that the political import of deliberative rhetoric is inseparably bound up with the spokenness of public speaking.32

Buber’s Peace Prize address has many of the qualities of a political intervention. But its true significance lies in the implications of a public speech that was conceived as an ontic event and as such lays emphasis on its unique and unpredictable quality. In the language of French linguist Émile Benveniste, Buber’s speech is *discours* (discourse) that goes beyond a mere didactic, constative purpose; it is “language put into action . . . between partners,” and as such it alters the pragmatic speech situation itself.33 It is thus a speech riven with contradiction. Founded on spiritual claims that run counter to the secular premises of postwar European culture and thought, Buber’s Peace Price address nevertheless participates in the latter. It resonates with and in fact becomes legible through Benveniste’s notion of “discourse” and J. L. Austin’s definition of “performative” speech acts precisely through its difference from such pragmatic concepts. The speech indeed gains critical purchase by rejecting some and underpinning other foundational principles of the pragmatic linguistics from the 1950s. By examining Buber’s dialogical philosophy in the context of a real event of public speaking that is subject to its own

semantic and hermeneutic vicissitudes, the relevance and accuracy of these contemporaneous theoretical approaches to the problems of “speech” and “dialogue” will thus be put to a practical test.

**The Orator**

There is a way in which the figure of Buber contradicts the premise of this study, which is concerned with the fallacies of public speech in the historical context of postwar Germany, as well as the failures experienced by a set of public speakers who sought to challenge the prevailing silence about the Holocaust in Germany. Contrary to Arendt, Johnson, and Celan (and ultimately also Bachmann and Szondi), whose public interventions through the medium of speech betrayed their skeptical attitude toward political engagement, Buber was a confident and commanding public speaker. He was well aware of how to make use of rhetoric, and the genre of speech was indeed his preferred form of writing.

Buber began his practice as a public speaker in 1909 in Prague with the delivery of his historic *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Three Speeches on Judaism)—which would be followed by many other speeches—advocating a spiritual revival of Judaism.\(^{34}\) Apparently these speeches hit the nerve of contemporary culture. As one commentator observes, “Buber was only 31 years old at the time, but he appeared to his listeners as a great, wise man.”\(^{35}\) During the Weimar Republic, Buber taught at Franz Rosenzweig’s Freies jüdisches Lehrhaus (Free Jewish School) and later directed the Mittelstelle für jüdische Erwachsenenbildung (Center for Jewish Adult Education), an institution founded to reeducate Jewish teachers who had been driven out of the general school system by the Nazis.\(^{36}\) Even under the desolate conditions imposed by National Socialism, Buber continued to lecture there, and his talks were attended not only by the Jewish community but also by non-Jewish intellectuals.\(^{37}\) During this period, Buber was also active as an itinerant lecturer, traveling the country to revive the word of the Bible. Driven by the conviction that the Bible had to be transformed from a book to concrete, indeed *spoken*, teaching, Buber insisted on its apostrophic

---

34. Rivka Horwitz notes that Buber sometimes tested his ideas in an oral setting before committing them to a final, printed form. See Rivka Horwitz, *Buber’s “Way to I and Thou”: The Development of Martin Buber’s Thought and His “Religion as Presence” Lectures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publications Society, 1988), 7. Horwitz also emphasizes “the impact of the audience on Buber: At times it helped him formulate his thinking in difficult matters” (11).


quality: “The biblical word is inseparable from the situation of its spokenness, without which it loses its concreteness, its corporality. A command is not a sentence but an address.”

Buber’s intellectual endeavor combines theological inquiry with social and political responsibility—his teachings represent a form of peaceful, communal, and at the same time religious activism that promotes faith and passive resistance. In his 1933 inaugural speech at the Free Jewish School, Buber thus defined his project as one that was inherently pedagogical. Determined to unite and educate the Jewish people, his teachings were to meet three criteria: teach wisely, impart the Jewish tradition, and admonish in the manner of the prophets. As a public speaker, Buber thrived on all three: he deciphered biblical psalms with impassioned scholarly insight and endowed his audience with a wealth of folkloric Hasidic tales, but beyond teaching, he also embodied the figure of the prophet. Although Buber was not a rabbi, he spoke exaltingly to stir his constituents’ conscience and urged them to turn to God. Buber’s chanting orations were indeed filled with verbal and aural expressivity. Not only was his voice penetrating; his physiognomy was also rather prophet-like. And of course his personality served as a valid petition for this public speaker. For as Aristotle maintained, a major conditioning factor for a speaker’s authority is his ethos, his moral character. Surely Buber’s success in Germany resulted as much from his commanding, incorruptible presence as from the argumentative value of his teachings. A rabbi through example, Buber stood by and for his words; he was a living example of the values he was preaching.

While Buber’s rhetorical style can seem antiquated, even pompous, to present-day readers, for the German witnesses to the delivery of his Peace Prize address in 1953, Buber’s pathos-laden rhetoric and the distinctive cadences of an Eastern European Jew may have added urgency and weight to his statements. Buber did not shy away from such grandiose terms as Heilsmächte (powers of salvation), Herzenswandlung (change of heart), and Wiedergeburt (rebirth), thus providing the German public with the kind of hope-inspiring and redemptive rhetoric it surely

---

39. As Buber puts it, “This work, done under great difficulty, was intended to give the Jews, and especially the youth, unwavering stability in face of Hitler’s will to grind them down.” Martin Buber, Reden über Erziehung (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1953), 8–9.
42. On the notion of ethos, see Aristotle, On Rhetoric, 37 and 120.
yearned for during this period of gloom and dejection. Buber’s language no doubt differed from the rhetoric that dominated the political culture of West Germany, a plain and unadorned rhetoric that expressed the greatest possible distance from the emotional amalgam of Nazi mass propaganda with its ideologically inflated, triumphalist pathos. In this historical context, Buber’s Peace Prize address stands out as a wisely and cautiously deliberative speech in the garb of conventional epideictic rhetoric. Buber, while using the expected polite formulas to express his thanks for the honor of receiving the Peace Prize, does not waste much time on preliminaries but quickly issues a vigorous criticism of the Cold War. He refrains, however, from submitting a concrete political analysis or polemicizing against specific individuals or governments. Yet in a move that is uncharacteristically up-front and bold even for him, Buber submits that the current political culture is corrupt not because of particular individuals or policies, but because of the way politics are communicated: “The debates between statesmen which the radio conveys to us no longer have anything in common with human conversation: the diplomats do not address one another but the faceless public. Even the congresses and conferences which convene in the name of mutual understanding lack the substance which alone can elevate the deliberations to genuine talk: candour and directness in address and answer” (GD, 237).

In this passage, Buber draws a distinction between the insubstantial debates and negotiations of statesmen, which he aligns with self-interest and ideology, and unbiased, genuine dialogue, which he believes to transpire among pious individuals. Producing a comparison that foreshadows Kluge and Negt’s distinction between a dominant and a subaltern sphere of discursive interaction, Buber suggests that the debates between statesmen have no constructive political purpose, as statesmen neither speak to one another nor do they properly address the Öffentlichkeit. Rather they talk at a faceless, anonymous public. Their speeches never actually enter the modality of genuine face-to-face dialogue but instead rebound from those to whom such dialogue is ostensibly directed. They are only a pretense of address.

In Buber’s view, even the success of political debates between statesmen is tied more to specific formal attributes than to the substantive content of the debates. These debates lack significance because of how rather than what they communicate: they provoke no answers, and thus fail to stimulate deliberation and pluralist debate. Diametrically opposed to genuine dialogue, such discourse is fossilized speech. For Buber, the inability to speak in a genuine, dialogical manner is not, however, restricted to modern statesmen and rulers. It is a problem that pertains to all people and peoples: “That peoples can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time; it is also that which most urgently makes a demand of us” (GD, 238). The battle cries of war have drowned out genuine human dialogue, particularly the dialogue between Germans and Jews.
Often taken to be the chief contribution of his Peace Prize address, Buber’s reflections on the Cold War barely conceal what is truly at stake for him when giving his acceptance speech. Far more interesting and revealing than these reflections is that Buber mentions the words “Auschwitz” and “Treblinka.” Indeed he was the first recipient of the Peace Prize ever to do so and thereby break the taboo of silence.44 Buber came to speak the unspeakable, and yet not to attack. For he welcomed the occasion to deliver a speech in Germany, believing it would open up a way to overcome what he perceived as “a faceless public” (GD, 237). This is yet another sign of his unflinching determination to advance German-Jewish reconciliation. He would not be defeated by the challenge of facing the German public even if it meant encountering those who had, “under the indirect command of the German government and the direct command of its representatives, killed millions of my people in a systematically prepared and executed procedure whose organized cruelty cannot be compared with any previous historical event” (GD, 232). But neither was he going to pretend that they had not. Buber’s opening remarks are unique and groundbreaking in their directness and simplicity, not only for Buber but for postwar German discursivity in general. For Buber openly and plainly stakes out the conditions of a German-Jewish encounter and concludes with a powerful imperative to reinstate a genuine dialogue: “Let us not allow this satanic element in men to hinder us from realizing man! Let us release speech from its ban! Let us dare, despite all, to trust!” (GD, 239). Convinced that noncommunication is a curable disease, Buber hopes to bring about a change of heart in a critical mass of German individuals—to be achieved through the example of a single leader: “Can such an illness be cured? I believe it can be. And it is out of this, my belief, that I speak to you. I have no proof for this belief. No belief can be proved; otherwise it would not be what it is, a great venture. Instead of offering proof, I appeal to that potential belief of each of my hearers which enables him to believe” (GD, 238). Buber hereby avows his aim to actualize a German-Jewish dialogue, as daring as it is necessary, by way of his Peace Prize address: ironically referring to himself as a “surviving arch-Jew,” he addresses the German public and thereby initiates a process that most of his contemporaries deem undesirable or unfeasible (GD, 234). Explicitly stating that he is calling out to them, even in a sense invoking them, his rhetoric produces a movement of force that performs rather than simply “constates” an action. It thus corresponds to Austin’s definition of a “performative” utterance: “To utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am going it: it is to do it.”45 The use of two verba diciendi—“I speak to you” and

44. See Lothar Müller, “Der abgesperrten Weltluft den deutschen Raum weit öffnen,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, July 1, 1999, 44.
45. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, 6.
“I appeal to you”—indicates that Buber moves beyond the paradigm of persuasive rhetoric and, accordingly, the expectation that a speech, when properly argued, will induce people to act in a desired manner. Buber’s speech is more ambitious, its effect more immediate. For it affects the present state of affairs in that he is speaking to his audience, so that with his speech, and in particular with the above-cited opening invocation, this essential dialogue would indeed transpire.

Uttered in the first-person singular, present tense, indicative active, Buber’s sentence is an illocutionary utterance that performs an action rather than describing it. Given that the action achieved through this utterance is itself that of speaking, Buber would be indulging a tautology by telling this to his audience. Instead, Buber’s utterance takes place in—and affects—the here and now. Because of its performative nature, it is inseparable from the social relations and purposes in which it is uttered, just as the speech in which it is embedded affects (and is affected by) the historical event of its public delivery. It follows that once this moment has passed and his statement is no longer contained in the respective speech event, it inevitably becomes meaningless and at least to some degree unintelligible. As Jacques Derrida elaborates, “The performative does not have its referent (but here that word is certainly no longer appropriate, and this precisely is the interest of the discovery) outside of itself or, in any event, before and in front of itself. It does not describe something that exists outside of language and prior to it. It produces or transforms a situation, it effects; [this productivity] constitutes its internal structure, its manifest function or destination.”

Does Buber’s speech act have such a desired effect and produce the reality stated? According to Austin, speech acts must meet certain “felicity conditions” to succeed, such as the “executive condition,” which determines whether “the procedure is executed by all participants both correctly and completely.” By calling on the potential faith of his listeners, Buber anticipates the possibility that some or all listeners might not answer his call and therefore render his speech act of “speaking to them” pointless and incomplete—after all, for Buber a conversation has to be dialogical in order to be genuine. And so he does not address “them” directly but instead calls on their faith, a faith that is itself not a given but, as he states explicitly, merely a potentiality. And yet it is worthwhile, not only because their faith, even as a potentiality, supersedes their intellectual or even moral contribution (since faith is superior to reason), but also because his philosophy is based on the premise that faith is performatively produced (through dialogue).

---

47. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, 15.
Buber’s friend and collaborator Rosenzweig maintained, the faith of the Jew is, like language for Buber, content-less and “more than words.”  

It is not based on the knowledge (of, for instance, the coming of Christ for the Christian), but rather it is the perpetual Erzeugnis einer Zeugung (product of begetting) of something.  

For Buber, the presence of faith is an effect of genuine engendered dialogue, itself proof of the powerful immediacy of the faith of the Jewish people.

Hence the faith to which Buber appeals is not a secular faith—a kind of faith in our cognitive powers. What is at issue is, instead, the spiritual faith of his audience. Buber is convinced that even if some or all of his Christian German listeners lack the religious fervor to participate in his performative dialogue, he can still address their spiritual, human core and therefore create the space for a unique encounter. This is not because he is such a gifted orator (which he surely was), but because any encounter between men intrinsically and permanently holds the possibility of divine revelation. Thus the functional and hermeneutic specificity of Buber’s concept of “genuine dialogue” gestures toward an entirely new, unmediated register of reality that would exist independently of the pragmatic and mundane aspects of communication.

The Single One

Then how could such a dialogical event occur during a public address where only one individual rises to speak? Can interpersonal dialogue arise from a ceremonial speech, can a conversation be a public, collective affair? And to what degree can Buber involve the addressees as his genuine dialogic other? Crucially, for Buber, delivering public speeches and engaging in dialogue are by no means conflicting modes, since as a public speaker he does not address a crowd but a variety of discrete faces. As he once explained, the only way in which he found himself capable of delivering a public address was by envisioning it as a direct contact with worthy individuals: “The indispensable presupposition for my speaking publicly: being able to regard every face that I turn toward as my legitimate counterpart.”

Of course public speech involves more than an effort of imagination. In his treatise Die Frage an den Einzelnen (The Question to the Single One, 1936), Buber asserted that a public speaker must be able to accept and acknowledge each audience member individually: “Even if he has to speak to the crowd he seeks the person, for a people can find and find again in truth only through persons.”

As a public speaker, Buber

---


50. Ibid.


52. Martin Buber, “The Question to the Single One” (1936), in Buber, Between Man and Man, 40–82, here 64–65.
sought to engage in a plurality of genuine dialogues, and he did so by attempting to speak to an audience of many, as if he were addressing one participant at a time. In each distinct encounter, Buber explained, he singles one person out from the crowd, making him or her the “partner” in a unique—if only temporary—exchange. That is to say, in his ideal scenario the speaker converts a crowd into a multiplicity of separate participants who are, however, not conceived as stable, clearly defined human individuals but rather as distinct, indivisible “things”—no longer faceless but not yet individualized.

For there is but one ethically responsible way to connect with the other without instrumentalizing his alterity. First, one must resist the urge to emphatically identify with the other, since this would crush his concrete individuality and reduce him to a mere reservoir of otherness. Second, one has to ignore those calls that are, as one commentator puts it, merely “pragmatic—to define situations, to resolve problems, to achieve specific goals.” For genuine dialogue amounts to an existential, world-disclosing bearing that has nothing to say. It arises whenever someone responds to an address by acknowledging the other in light of his or her own experienced truth, independently of what is said and whether or not the addressee responds verbally. What is more, genuine dialogue rests upon religious fervor and a sacred stance, since it constitutes the response to a spiritual call and thereby effectively molds a space for divinity. As Buber explains, “When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. . . . Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light” (*IT*, 59). As a practitioner of speech and theoretician of dialogue, Buber conceived of the medium of public speech as a potentially “genuine” form of dialogue. This is remarkable, given that the latter stands at a remove from content and meaning and has such strong religious underpinnings. Yet it is precisely public speech, and his Peace Prize address in particular, that Buber employs to reconcile the sociopolitical and spiritual realms of society. It is quite obvious that Buber constantly shifts registers, making a critical point about the crisis of present-day human social relations, but also commanding his audience to lead a religious life and to resist the forces of Satan. Hence for Buber both registers are related:

Therefore, the fact that it is so difficult for present-day man to pray (note well: not to hold it to be true that there is a God, but to address Him) and the fact that it is so difficult for him to carry on a genuine talk with his fellow-men are elements of a single set of facts. This lack of trust in Being, this incapacity for unreserved intercourse with the other, points to an innermost sickness in the sense of existence. One symptom of

53. Ibid., 63–65.
this sickness, and the most acute of all, is the one from which I have begun: that a genuine word cannot arise from the camps. (*GD*, 238)

Thus, rather than “instilling” religious faith in his audience, Buber strives to generate genuine dialogues that would become the site of God’s actualization. For Buber believes that God inserts himself into truly dialogical—reciprocal and ontic—encounters between human individuals, encounters that defy cognition and rest on grace. Rejecting the idea of a mystical union with God, Buber instead believes that dialogical encounters transpire in the physical reality of the everyday. Buber’s point then is not to lift his Frankfurt audience out of their quotidian lives and thus deny their existence in reality, but to intuit their ontological dimension, which would in turn transcend the individual and collective social identities of all participants. The ensuing dialogue would revive their human essence and allow for a glimpse of the absolute. As Buber explains to his Frankfurt audience,

Harkening to the human voice, where it speaks forth unfalsified, and replying to it, this above all is needed today. The busy noise of the hour must no longer drown out the *vox humana*, the essence of the human which has become a voice. This voice must not only be listened to, it must be answered and led out of the lonely monologue into the awakening dialogue of the peoples. Peoples must engage in talk with one another through their truly human men if the great peace is to appear and the devastated face of the earth to renew itself. (*GD*, 235)

Buber suggests that despite the moral decay of humanity, genuine dialogue could appear in flashes, for fleeting, serendipitous moments—even in a public speech, and even in Germany. In this way, Buber’s speech is consistent with his lifelong endeavor to counter the perpetually regressive motion of history. Buber envisioned the world on a simultaneously upward and downward spiral that would culminate in messianic redemption. As Buber writes in *I and Thou*, “History is a mysterious approach to closeness. Every spiral of its path leads us into deeper corruption and at the same time into more fundamental return” (168). The final stage of the world’s “corruption” will be the end of history, a point at which humankind’s turn to God will coincide with a divine response: “The God-side of the event whose world-side is called return is called redemption” (168). Seen in the light of his prophetic messianism, Buber’s Peace Prize address reveals itself as a project complicit with Jewish eschatology: it prepares the world for the impending Day of Atonement.

---

55. As Buber notes with regard to his earlier mystical experiences, “Since then I have given up the ‘religious’ which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken.” Buber, “Dialogue,” 14.

Such confidence in the power of genuine dialogue marks Buber as a member of an older generation that has its intellectual roots in the decades preceding World War I. Spanning the period from his formative years at the turn of the century to the end of the postwar era, Buber’s work is contained in a time capsule, preserving precisely that kind of historical (and moral) continuity that thinkers like Arendt and Adorno believed to be irretrievably lost. Accordingly, Buber is more concerned with what he vaguely describes as “the suffocation of the living word of human dialogue” than with real and specific human catastrophes, signal among them the Shoah. This is not to suggest that Buber’s attitude was marked by historical indifference. According to his own account, the Holocaust deeply shook the foundations of his beliefs.\(^{57}\) What it means is that instead of focusing on the uniqueness of that concrete event in recent history, Buber presents it as one among many symptoms of the much older and steadily expanding “disease” of secularization and modernity, a diagnosis that is as valid to him in 1953 as it had been fifty years in the past. This then is the context of Buber’s invitation to return to a more immediate, primordial voice: “Harkening to the human voice, where it speaks forth unfalsified, and replying to it, this above all is needed today” (\textit{GD}, 234). Countering a contemporary disease with a discourse that he had begun to develop in the second decade of the twentieth century, Buber proposes that the answer to the current crisis of human life, as it is laid out in his Peace Prize address, can be found in his dialogical thought.

**Presence and Absence**

In his Peace Prize address, Buber maintains a tension between the theorization of dialogue’s demise and the claim to retrieve a certain ideal of it. This is typical of the prophet as a mediating figure. As a “prophet of religious secularism,” Buber naturally calls on heaven and earth to listen and experience how his discourse, as much vision as hypothesis, generates genuine dialogue.\(^{58}\) Drawing on the prophetic tradition of the efficacious sign, his speech acts on the addressees and does what it signifies: it inaugurates a dialogue and hence takes a first step toward the process of reconciliation. In other words, the Peace Prize address comes to function in the here and now as it unfolds within the precarious setting of Buber’s historical visit to Germany. By putting his trust in the spontaneous force of the present moment—namely, the sociopolitical and historical context of his public speech—Buber thus endows the latter with considerable agency. Hence the success of his public speech is determined less by the content of his script alone than by the unfolding of a specific performance: it depends on the significance of the occasion, the composition of


his audience, and their reaction, as well as the professional and psychological circumstances by which he (the speaker) may in turn be affected. In other words, as an activity that is inseparable from the peculiar social relations in which it finds itself placed, Buber’s public speech lives off the specific communicative situation in which it is uttered without thereby being brought to completion. And while this holds true for any public speech, Buber’s speech is a particularly pointed example, since for him this situation is just the beginning, a departure that will be magnified indefinitely by the process Buber has set in motion.

And yet all begins here, not just with his performative utterance but with what Benveniste calls the “special circumstances” in which it was made: “The performative utterance . . . cannot be produced except in special circumstances, at one and only one time, at a definite date and place. . . . This is why it is often accompanied by indications of date, of place, of names of people, witnesses, etc. In short it is an event because it creates the event.”\(^{59}\) For both Buber and Benveniste, there is an unavoidable alliance between an utterance and its contextual setting, which together produce an excess of meaning. Speech then emerges as an inherently polysemic and unpredictable activity. The meaning of an utterance, of what Benveniste terms an “instance of discourse,” is dependent on the reality to which it refers. Situated within the semantic dimension of speech, enunciations are diametrically opposed to linguistic signs, which belong to the semiotic dimension of language. They occur as a speaker appropriates—and in the act of appropriation actualizes—language, which thus, for an instant, ceases to be a virtual system of signs to constitute a unique and unpredictable event. According to Benveniste such an event is in turn the actual utilization—the very enactment—of language, even though it effaces itself as soon as it is spoken. In addition to being transitory, dialogue is inherently intersubjective. According to Benveniste, this is less the case because it is bound to a subject (for as such it might still be “enclosed in solipsistic subjectivity”) than because it consists of allocutions, which naturally postulate an addressee: “I posits another person the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to ‘me,’ becomes my echo to whom I say you and who says you to me.”\(^{60}\) Discourse depends on the presence of a communicative partner whose participation must be active and deliberate. It is oriented toward the other, and thus it is constitutionally, structurally dialogic. As Benveniste writes, “This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition of language, of which the process of communication, in which we share, is only a mere pragmatic consequence.”\(^{61}\)

In a compelling article unraveling Benveniste’s “linguistics of dialogue,” Stéphane Mosès has made a case for Benveniste’s extreme sensibility to the philosophical

---

60. Ibid., 225.
61. Ibid.
dimension of language. Despite his being a linguist in “the most technical sense of the word,” Benveniste was, according to Mosès, highly aware of the problem of subjectivity, specifically as it emerged in the discursive act.62 This becomes apparent if his work is compared to that of Buber’s longtime collaborator Rosenzweig, who in his Der Stern der Erlösung (The Star of Redemption, 1921) developed a philosophy of language that centered on the irreducible presence and singular reality contained in the first- and second-person pronouns “I” and “Thou.” As Mosès notes, the structural similarities between Benveniste and Rosenzweig’s thought cannot, however, be an effect of a direct engagement of the French linguist with the German-Jewish philosopher. In France, Rosenzweig’s work was not discovered until the 1980s.63 How, then, can we account for the equally strong affinities between Benveniste’s linguistics and Buber’s philosophy of dialogue? Buber’s I and Thou had been translated into French by 1938; however, Benveniste never cites or even mentions Buber. And yet both depart from a split foundation that is based on the distinction between deixis and anaphora, presence and absence, actuality and property. Where Benveniste differentiates between two kinds of intersubjective relations (“Every man taken as an individual sets himself as me in relation to you and him”), Buber distinguishes between two relationalities: Ich-Du (I-Thou) and Ich-Es (I-it).64 As Buber writes, “The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude” (IT, 53). Buber’s I-Thou is marked by presence and wholeness, while the Ich-Es embodies absence and void: “The basic word ‘I-Thou’ can only be spoken with one’s whole being. The basic word ‘I-It’ can never be spoken with one’s whole being” (IT, 54). Similarly, Benveniste differentiates between an I-he relation, denoting an encounter that never really takes place, because neither participant is present or an actual person, and an I-you relation, describing a direct, physical encounter during which the I and the you are present and attest to their presence in every single one of their utterances.65 Like the I-Thou of Buber’s system, Benveniste’s I-you thus denotes a primary, truly interpersonal relation:

As soon as the pronoun I appears in a statement it evokes, explicitly or implicitly, the pronoun you and the two together evoke and confront he. In this moment a human experience is relieved, revealing the linguistic instrument on which it is founded. . . . The pronoun I is transformed from an element of a paradigm into a unique designation which produces a new person each time. This process is the actualization of a basic experience for which no language can conceivably fail to provide the instrument.66

63. Ibid.
65. As Benveniste states, “The ‘third person’ is not a ‘person’, it is really a verbal form whose function is to express the non-person.” Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics, 198.
Yet these similarities also mark a sharp distance between Benveniste’s and Buber’s respective conceptions of the speech event. Benveniste’s analysis, specifically his distinction between two kinds of speaking relations (and two kinds of speaking subjects), is an inquiry into how language constructs subjectivity through the indexical trace of participant deixis (I-you). The agent or subject of a given discourse embodies the shifter I in any given moment of speaking. Buber’s analysis of speech, by contrast, rather than being premised on the construction of subjectivity—be it as a linguistic or philosophical category—explores how the act of speaking shifts the intersubjective relations between the respective participants to ultimately annul their individuality. So rather than constituting them as subjects, the act of speaking here voids the significance of the participants. For Buber relegates their agency to a third, transcendental term—God—whose all-encompassing presence renders obsolete the creaturely distinction between Ich and Du or Es.

Yet much is at stake for Buber in the difference between Du and Es, a difference that has real ramifications for his encounter with a live German audience. Again, this difference is not a problem of linguistic meaning or philosophical exactitude but one of the pragmatic effect of this particular speech event, which is in turn coupled with its spiritual, eschatological impetus. Buber carefully stakes out the limits of his dialogical address by dividing his audience into worthy and unworthy addressees: the latter group, while not coterminous with the Ich-Es relationality, is equally considered—indeed, treated—as absent and void, whereas the former group supplies the potential partners for an Ich-Du relation:

When I think of the German people of the days of Auschwitz and Treblinka, I behold, first of all, the great many who knew that the monstrous event was taking place and did not oppose it. But my heart, which is acquainted with the weakness of men, refuses to condemn my neighbor for not prevailing upon himself to become a martyr. Next there emerges before me the mass of those who remained ignorant of what was withheld from the German public, and who did not try to discover what reality lay behind the rumours which were circulating. When I have these men in mind, I am gripped by the thought of the anxiety, likewise well known to me, of the human creature before a truth which he fears he cannot face. But finally there appears before me, from reliable reports, some who have become as familiar to me by sight, action, and voice as if they were friends, those who refused to carry out the orders and suffered death or put themselves to death, and those who learned what was taking place and opposed it and were put to death, or those who learned what was taking place and because they could do nothing to stop it killed themselves. (GD, 233)

Buber distinguishes between several groups of Germans, which are structured according to their knowledge of and participation in the Holocaust. These different groups represent various strata of society and their corresponding degrees of guilt and responsibility—but more than that, they symbolize entirely different
dimensions of human existence. As Buber states, he considers those who “carried out orders” monstrous and subhuman, and thus he cannot speak to them: “I, who am one of those who remained alive, have only in a formal sense a common humanity with those who took part in this action. They have so radically removed themselves from the human sphere, so transposed themselves into a sphere of monstrous inhumanity inaccessible to my conception, that not even hatred, much less an overcoming of hatred, was able to arise in me” (GD, 232). To Buber the murderers and collaborators are situated in an extrahuman realm. Even though “alive”—and it is not unlikely that some of them were scattered among the audience assembled at Frankfurt’s Paulskirche—they have compromised their status as human beings and are thus no longer present to him. On the other hand, those heroic individuals who refused to obey orders and paid with their lives to uphold their superior principles are miraculously present as if they had been capable of surviving persecution: “I see these men very near before me in that especial intimacy which binds us at times to the dead and to them alone. Reverence and love for these Germans now fills my heart” (GD, 233).

By claiming to share a common realm with the deceased martyrs of Nazi Germany while excluding living individuals from his address, Buber reverses the poles of absence and presence, which are so central for both his own and Benveniste’s conceptions of speech and their respective definitions of alterity and subjectivity. Buber thereby sets the stage for a legitimate Ich-Du encounter: he announces that it is not their material presence, as Benveniste claims, that determines who does or does not function as a dialogic partner in the act of speech. Rather it is a kind of spiritual kinship between him and a select group of German individuals, some of who are admittedly no longer alive. Hence genuine dialogue, albeit requiring the undivided presence of each involved individual, does not hinge on their actual, physical presence. The human world converges on a transcendental realm; genuine dialogue reunites the dead with the living.

Das Zwischen

There is a common trope, philosophical, social, and literary, that describes dialogue as a means of continuing conversation between two equal partners. But even if one partner is the speaker and the other, one (or more) interlocutor(s), as in Buber’s Peace Prize address, dialogue can occur in an atmosphere of egalitarian give-and-take. Buber’s conception of dialogue is more complex, however, since he implements a third term, which he dubbed das Zwischen (the sphere of the between), that would infuse this dialogue with sacredness.67 In Buber’s system, the Zwischen represents the temporal and spatial enabler of genuine dialogue but simultaneously

causes its infinitely elusive character, for it does not engender a common, collective realm or a shared, mundane reality. While the Zwischen gives shape to an instance of dialogue, this dialogue is deeply interiorized by way of a reversal of consciousness itself: it begins as a quasi-intuitive, nonintentional, and almost arbitrary encounter, but immediately collapses into itself and thereby throws the participants back upon their individual consciousnesses. The very moment the participants become aware of their alterity, their dialogue breaks off abruptly. Consequently, the Zwischen can never engender a permanent and cohesive form of communality. And yet it is easy to imagine how, in its fluidity and almost filmic character of interconnected moments, it could instantiate a counter-public sphere in which these individual “snapshots” could loosely adhere. The capacity to collapse—and, more specifically, the prerequisite formal distinction between two qualitatively different realms coupled with the impossibility of a dialectical correction despite their repeated convergence—represents a common ground between Buber’s dialogical philosophy and Celan’s poetology. The Zwischen in particular, as a category that makes the paradox of a “momentary immersion” in the redemptive act possible, is structurally analogous to what was to become the central motif in Celan’s Büchner Prize address: the figure of the “meridian.”

Buber’s Zwischen is a truly groundbreaking philosophical category. It involves all essential relationalities immanent to reality, enabling the Ich to enter into relations with the “other,” the world, and God. Buber indeed conceives of the Zwischen as a sphere where all these categories naturally converge: “It is rooted in one being turning to another as another, as this particular other being, in order to communicate with it a sphere which is common to them but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each.” As this citation suggests, the Zwischen is a sphere that is common to the Ich and the Du, thus allowing them to meet and enter in dialogue. Without such a common site, the actualization of their relation would never occur. Buber further proposes that the concrete reality of the Zwischen bridges the gap between the subject and the natural world. And more than that, although it has the character of an almost tangible, existent location in human reality, it is also the “site” that links humanity to a transcendental beyond. For in the Zwischen, the human being encounters God in the form of “a presence as strength” (IT, 158). As Buber writes, “I am there as whoever I am there. That which reveals is that which reveals. That which has being is there, nothing more. The eternal source of strength flows, the eternal touch is waiting, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more ” (IT, 160). The Zwischen represents the “narrow ridge” between the “I,” the world, and the absolute; it is, in Buber’s words, a “third” that draws the circle around the dialogic happening: “In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth ‘deep calls unto deep,’ it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the

68. Ibid.
individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of ‘between’.”

The Zwischen regulates the coexistence of human beings in society and at the same time functions as a site of theophany. As Buber explains, “It is not man’s own power that is at work here, neither is it merely God passing through; it is a mixture of the divine and the human” (IT, 166). In other words, the reality of men’s relation with God as an exclusive relation includes and encompasses the possibility of relation with all otherness. At the same time, the Zwischen subverts received notions of mediacy. Undermining teleological and dialectical models of philosophy, Buber’s third term fails to mediate the Ich-Du relation, as it simultaneously relates and separates the “I” and the “Thou,” which, given their irreducible antinomy, remain suspended in an in-between.

Buber further complicates his ontological inquiry by stating that each word pair possesses its own peculiar temporality. The Ich-Es relation is a permanent plane that corresponds to the continuity of human time and space. It is essentially the common realm of shared reality that enables us to interact with and exist within the complex and diverse environment of the world. It corresponds to the public sphere insofar as it is a space bound by individual agency and the networks of communication among its participants. By contrast, the Ich-Du relation, which embodies the spontaneous encounters between an “I” and a “Thou,” disrupts the permanence of the Ich-Es relation. As Buber writes, “In this firm and wholesome chronicle the You-moments appear as queer lyric-dramatic episodes” (IT, 84). It is important to note that the Ich-Du relation, albeit epitomized by the personal and indeed intimate meeting of “I” and “Thou,” is by no means restricted to the private sphere between two individuals. Even if the Ich-Du relation communicates no content, it is a practice that concerns everyone within the public realm. As Buber’s notion of reciprocity exceeds the position of two interlocutors in the act of speaking, the whole community will benefit.

Providing momentary access to a parallel realm that exists beyond time and space, the Ich-Du “does not hang together in space and time” (IT, 84). For this reason, Buber calls these Ich-Du instances Beziehungseereignisse (events of relation), a term that, much like aktuelles Begebenis, emphasizes the inherently event-like structure of the encounter. A Beziehungseereignis is characterized by the fact that two partners each encounter the “other’s” alterity: “The only thing that matters is that for each of the two men the other happens as the particular other, that each becomes aware of the other and is thus related to him in such a way that he does not regard and use him as his object, but as his partner in a living event.”

69. Ibid., 204.
mutual Beziehungseignis, albeit a fleeting instance in mortal time, touches on infinity. However, it cannot last, for as soon as the “I” realizes the “other’s” alterity, it recognizes itself as a subject and reflects on its own identity. It will then inevitably also cognize and perhaps even address—seek to communicate with—the “other,” and by that disrupt the Beziehungseignis. For human language transforms the Ich-Du into an Ich-Es relation; the fact that human beings speak and articulate, that they conceive words in their brains, then move their tongues and actually produce sounds in their throats, is what makes their expulsion from the realm of the infinite inevitable. If it were not for this linguistic—literally, lingual—speaking faculty of humankind, the Ich-Du relation might never end. We would simply and eternally stand in language, a mystical, preverbal, and spiritual language that is not yet and will never be contained in logos. As Buber notes, “In truth language does not reside in man but man stands in language and speaks out of it” (IT, 89).

Yet in Buber’s view, it is not the verbal response that actualizes a dialogical address, but the moment prior to it: namely, the reception of a prelinguistic call. Men enter into essential Ich-Du relations because they are spiritual beings. It is in the nature of these essential relations that they issue forth a prelinguistic call, or, to be precise, this call is the Ich-Du relation. This call cannot remain unanswered, yet any answer to it is incommensurate with its magnitude and significance. For as the “I” responds to the call of the “Thou,” he binds the latter by and into a different, verbal, and conceptual language, so that in this precise moment the nonverbal Ich-Du relation gives way to the conceptual and cognitive continuum of the Ich-Es. In Buber’s words, “All response binds the You into the It-world” (IT, 89). One can respond to the call of the “Thou” only qua language, but to thus respond is to alter the “Thou” and to equalize his or her alterity, since language cognizes, identifies, and reflects. At that point, the “Thou” is no longer the “other”: “In a genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he stands in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms, and confirms his opponent as an existing other. Only so can conflict certainly not be eliminated from the world, but be humanly arbitrated and led towards its overcoming” (GD, 238).

What then does Buber hope to achieve with his Peace Prize address? Conceived as a spiritual call that would instill the German people with religiosity, it also inevitably binds his dialogic other and thus destroys his essential relation with him or her. For as soon as Buber addresses the “Thou,” the Ich-Du is converted into an Ich-Es relation and carried over into the temporal continuum of the social. As Buber writes, “The individual You must become an It when the event of relation has run its course” (IT, 84). But perhaps this “experience” will teach his audience to continue a different, more mundane, but equally important dialogue: “Those who build the great unknown front across mankind shall make it known by speaking unreservedly with one another, not overlooking what divides them but determined to bear this division in common” (GD, 238). What is more, the spiritual relation that terminates with the collapse of the Ich-Du dialogue comes to an end only in the
realm of human reality. It will continue to persist outside the coordinates of space and time, where it has existed all along. For even if the Ich-Du relation appears to us as unstable and elusive, it is always there already, and thus it will not disappear. As Buber writes, “In the beginning is the relation—as the category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul; the a priori of relation; the innate You” (IT, 78). Unlike a relation between two preexisting entities, the Ich-Du relation preceded the thinking of “I” and “Thou.” As partners who constitute one another by way of their dialogue, the “I” and “Thou” are derivative of their relation. By thus dissolving the authority of its elements, Buber’s system replaces the Ich-Du with the relation itself.

Buber believes that the Ich-Du and Ich-Es planes cannot be translated into one another but remain strictly separate. And yet he refrains from privileging one over the other, insisting that both represent essential aspects of human existence. As Buber states, “One cannot live in the pure present: it would consume us” (IT, 85). Some of his critics have found the twofold character of Buber’s primary word pairs to result in another polarization or, as Walter Kaufmann contends, a Manichaean dualism “that is unworthy of Buber.” But even though his philosophy is based on a structural dualism, Buber’s word pairs are not meant as extreme poles of good and evil, but rather as ideal types between which human life oscillates. For Buber it is not a matter of choosing the just one but of balancing their dialectic tension without dissolving it.

The two word pairs should not be seen as antitheses. Rather they constitute a regulative concept that negotiates the possibility of contact between the social and religious realms of human life. Essentially, for Buber, society and metaphysics depend on one another in a complex but often inscrutable way. Religiosity, for instance, is not simply a function of social life, but rather a metaphysical fact that bears major significance for both the political and the private life of the community. (This is why his Peace Prize address can rightly be considered both a sermon and a deliberative speech.) Also, while Buber promotes the Ich-Du because it makes theophany possible, he maintains that the continuum of the Es-world is not inherently immoral: “The basic word I-It [only] comes from evil. . . . When man lets it have its way, [then] the relentlessly growing It-world grows over him like weeds” (IT, 95–96). As Buber goes on to emphasize, it is indeed indispensable: “Man’s communal life cannot dispense any more than he himself with the It-world” (IT, 97). Hence Buber replaces the unifying principle of sublation with the disruptive power of alterity: a genuine dialogue does not mediate the encounter of the self and the “other” but instead separates them. As a result, they are never subsumed under a

72. On the relationship between the social and religious aspects of I and Thou, see Horwitz, Buber’s Way to “I and Thou,” 11–12. See also Paul Mendes-Flohr on Buber’s use of the term religiosity; Mendes-Flohr, From Mysticism to Dialogue, 79.
higher principle, an all-encompassing Hegelian *Weltvernunft* (reason of the world). Buber’s model of human existence is thus not susceptible to historical transformation. In fact, the philosopher remained critical of Hegel’s attempt to once and for all overcome human solitude. Buber’s *Zwischen* provides but temporary reprieve from solitude and individuation; it is not a step in a predestined teleology but a process without end or beginning. To be precise, it is a process that is punctuated by so many ends and beginnings that it can hardly be considered a “process” in the conventional sense. Contrary to the Paulinian notion of *Heilsgeschichte*—the interpretation of history stressing God’s saving grace—which Buber criticizes for ignoring the possibility of an inner transformation of man that would precede the apocalypse, Buber’s prophetic messianism submits that history does not follow a set course of events but is free and open to alternatives. As Buber writes, “The future is not fixed, for God wants man to come to Him with full freedom, to return to Him even out of a plight of extreme hopelessness and then to be really with Him.”

Despite its theological character, which clearly contradicts the secular basis of Kluge and Negt’s social theory, there is a way in which Buber’s philosophy of dialogue provides an instructive model of how isolated discursive interactions can generate a counter-public sphere that is inclusive but not comprehensive, and alternative without making itself obsolete. Mapping out a form of dialogue associated with an inherently pluralist, nonhegemonic stance, Buber’s approach takes a prophetic view that is by definition opposed to the dominant sphere, which is invested in reason and dogma at the expense of progress and faith. Buber’s idea of social transformation rests on an alternative vision: however fragmented and incomplete the universe, every single dialogic encounter has the potential to effect improvement and portend a radical change in human destiny.