Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany

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Paul Celan

The literature prizes I was given shouldn’t fool you: they are, finally, only the alibi of those who, in the shadow of such alibis, continue with other, more contemporary means, what they had started, and continued, under Hitler.

—Paul Celan, letter to Erich Einhorn, August 10, 1962

Paul Celan’s Büchner Prize address is saturated with the terminology of Martin Buber’s I and Thou, a work Celan had extensively studied and reread around the time of his meeting with Buber. This is evident in Celan’s use of terms such as Atemwende (turn of breath) and Atempause (pause for breath), which strongly resonate with Buber’s notion of Atemholen (drawing a deep breath) and Atemhalten (holding one’s breath) (ME, 7, 8; IT 65, 168). Also, where Buber writes, “Whoever says You . . . stands in relation,” Celan responds, “The poem . . . stand[s] in the encounter” (IT, 55; ME, 9). And where the philosopher declares, “Experience is remoteness from You,” the poet states, “Art creates I-distance” (IT, 59; ME, 6). Finally, the “meridian” metaphor itself echoes similes Buber borrowed from the vocabulary of geography and astronomy, such as Weltachsendrehung (the rotation of the world’s axis) and Koordinatensystem (system of coordinates), to name but a few (IT 81, 145).

Given the manifold references and allusions to Buber’s I and Thou, which add extra dimensions to Buber’s thought while also revealing Celan’s underlying
ambivalence, it is imperative to recognize Celan’s deep unity with the mind of the older thinker without, however, neglecting the considerable differences in his own approach to the problem of public speaking. This chapter will read The Meridian as a metatext to Buber’s I and Thou, but as one that tells a very critical story. Seen through Celan’s pessimistic lens, the conceptual premise of Buber’s dialogical philosophy is simply not tenable, and neither is there a pragmatic basis for what Buber terms a “genuine dialogue.” Specifically, Celan’s direct confrontation with the German public in the context of an award ceremony conveys that the possibility of his engaging with them in a German dialogue is contingent on a non-euphemistic, hyperliteral language that might reach the inconceivable reality of the concentration camps. Until that particular dialogue, in that exact language, can be had, no other dialogue can be real and viable. Thus if Buber’s positively and optimistically constructive speech enacts a genuine dialogue between himself and members of West Germany’s public sphere, Celan’s negative response performs the sheer impossibility of reaching that audience. It is not that Celan would intentionally counteract Buber’s ambition. Rather he arrives at a similar position (on the question of a counter-public sphere in which the experience of survivorship could be recognized in its collective dimension) by taking the reverse path, substituting reticence (for pathos) and hypothesis (for faith). Even though it is predicated on silence and the failure to communicate, Celan’s speech nevertheless postulates an alternative, relational sphere of individual lived experience: Erfahrung. The latter is qualitatively distinct from the immediate but isolated experience that thinkers like Benjamin and Adorno had linked to the proliferation of Erlebnis under the conditions of modernity. As Miriam Hansen writes, “Erfahrung crucially came to entail the capacity of memory—individual and collective, involuntary as well as cognitive—and the ability to imagine a different future.”¹ Celan’s distinction between art and poetry, as conveyed in the following pages, is founded on this very idea.

Subtle as it is, the weight of Celan’s rhetorical rejection of Buber’s notion of dialogue is only fully perceptible by hearing the speech out loud. More than any other example of public speaking considered here, The Meridian must be read, indeed listened to, as a speech, for it is only when one hears Celan’s voice enunciating his difficult prose that the full extent of its opacity becomes apparent. As the original transcript of the speech shows, Celan had painstakingly underlined the words he planned to emphasize, and he articulated his text in a meticulous and acoustically lucid manner.² And yet the expressiveness of his enunciation only underscores the transcript’s semantic obscurity. Celan’s language abounds with cryptic references, paradoxical metaphors, and metonymic shifts that generate infinite regress

². See the facsimile of typescript “L” in Celan, The Meridian, 281.
or circularity, delineating the circumlocutious quality that generates the speech’s evocative title: the speech is itself a “meridian.” Concerned with the limits to what could and what could not be said after Auschwitz—with what Celan refers to as “the borders language draws” (*ME*, 9)—poetic language for Celan can only ever represent (and only hypothetically so) a sphere of linguistic artifice. Contrary to Buber’s genuine dialogue, then, which dispenses with the semantic function of language, Celan’s relies on language in its semantically most elaborate form. And yet, despite their differences, both speeches are equally premised on the futility of making a meaningful *statement* all the while pinning their hope on the transformative power of performative *speech*.

It is hard to conceive that Celan wrote *The Meridian* as a public address to be delivered to a general audience at the Büchner Prize ceremony. There is no precedent for Celan’s speaking for over half an hour in highly abstract and often disjointed sentences replete with cryptic messages that even the quickest thinker might capture only upon reading and rereading the text. It is a strange way of positioning himself as a poet laureate, for the less he explains the less he divulges. What further complicates matters is that Celan at one point self-reflexively contemplates the opaque quality of his speech in a language that is, however, equally cryptic. In a passage that comments on a familiar criticism leveled at contemporary poetry—that it is deliberately unintelligible—Celan likewise withholds his mite of meaning. The passage begins with an *unvermittelt* (immediate) allusion to the sudden appearance of a mysterious *etwas* (something). And then, quoting Pascal in a foreign language (French) and via the less-canonical, lesser-known intermediary Lev Schestov (an antisystematic philosopher whose often paradoxical thought, instead of solving problems, emphasizes life’s enigmatic qualities), Celan provides a definition of this “something” that explains nothing. The passage is worth quoting in full: “Ne nous reprochez pas le manque de clarté puisque nous en faisons profession!”—This is, I believe, if not the congenital darkness, then however the darkness attributed to poetry for the sake of an encounter from a—perhaps self-created—distance or strangeness” (*ME*, 7). Instead of clarifying, Celan here validates poetry’s “darkness” as something that is congenital and yet, paradoxically, has been “attributed to” it, rightfully allocated from a “perhaps self-created,” and thus maybe imaginary, maybe nonexistent “distance or strangeness.” All for the sake of some unexplained “encounter” that may or may not transpire within (or result from?) the realm of poetry. So at least Celan “believes.”

As a public speaker, Celan is diametrically opposed to Buber, whose every sentence expresses with utmost clarity, *is*, what it is saying. In contrast to Buber’s Peace Prize address, then, Celan’s *Meridian* seems almost impenetrable. Situated in the realm of the hypothetical, its winding, circuitous rhetoric often alludes to a particular meaning, which it then fails to convey. While Buber practices a seemingly effortless form of public speech that purports to instantiate dialogue by way of genuine “saying,” Celan ultimately founders on the generic constraints of public
speech. Like his poetry, *The Meridian* tests the semantic range of his native language and as it were performs the boundaries of the unsayable through a language that borders on hermeticism. However, as Celan delivers a public speech in Germany, the problem of verbal representation gains in dimension and implication. For lack of the ability to state explicitly the knowledge he has about the Holocaust and for want of an ideal, sympathetic listener who would be able (and willing) to hear it, he is painfully aware of the sheer impossibility of living up to the task of confronting a German audience and speaking to them. And yet Celan produces fragment upon fragment, even if these fragments are provisional and lacking in rhetorical confidence. His speech, albeit premised on Buber’s philosophical system and the concept of genuine dialogue, approaches the philosopher’s questions from the opposite end of the spectrum. Imposing rhetorical constraint where Buber removes himself from the precepts of what is considered sayable, Celan gives an infinitely more provisional, indeed apprehensive, public address.

But what specific aspects of Buber’s philosophy of dialogue does Celan adopt? With endless variety, a rhetorical and highly artificial language is set up against one that is spoken, intersubjective, and unpredictable. This pervasive theme reiterates Buber’s dichotomy between inauthentic, fossilized speech and unmediated, genuinely dialogical “saying.” Revisiting the romantic trope of poetry as dialogue, Celan equates the latter, dialogical form of speech with poetry: “The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route,*” Celan notes in *The Meridian;* and then adds: “The poem wants to head toward some other, it needs this other, it needs an opposite. It seeks it out, it bespeaks itself to it” (*ME*, 9). Buber had likewise drawn an analogy between poetry and dialogue in his lecture *The Word That Is Spoken,* delivered in July 1960 in Munich (note again the temporal proximity to Celan’s Büchner Prize address). Yet contrary to Celan, who maintains that the poem’s quest for a dialogical other must inevitably fail, Buber suspects such interlocutors to *wesen* (be) virtually anywhere. As Buber’s archaism, which incidentally predates Heidegger’s use of the word, suggests, they are permanent, abundant, and readily available: “For the poem is spokenness, spokenness to the Thou, wherever this partner may be.” 3 The poem is dialogue and thus positively connoted. Conversely, *Kunst* (art) is negative, as it binds and cognizes, indeed reconstructs. Buber writes: “All response binds the You into the It-world. That is the melancholy of man, and that is his greatness. For thus knowledge, thus works, thus image and example come into being among the living. . . . Art too: as he beholds what confronts him, the form discloses itself to the artist. He conjures it into an image” (*IT*, 89–91). Arising when “a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him,” artworks result from creative acts that mold *Gestalt* (form) into a *Gebilde* (image) (*IT*, 60, 91). Whereas for Buber poetry seeks out genuine dialogue, art is based on the artist’s individual,

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Indeed individuated, experience—Erlebnis. Understood as the fragmented, alienated, and hence inferior form of experience, Erlebnis disturbs the smooth flow of what Buber referred to as “cosmic reality.”

Celan presents a similarly critical, if more drastic, version of Buber’s rationale against the process of representation and mimesis when quoting a prominent passage from Büchner’s prose fragment Lenz (1835):

Yesterday as I was walking along the valley, I saw two girls sitting on a rock: one was putting up her hair, the other helping her; and the golden hair was hanging free, and a pale, solemn face, and yet so young, and the black peasant dress, and the other one so absorbed in her task. The finest, most heartfelt paintings of the Old German School scarcely convey an inkling of this. At times one wishes one were a Medusa’s head in order to turn a group like this into stone, and call everybody over to have a look. (ME, 5)

According to Celan’s reading of the passage, Büchner’s protagonist, who is based on the historical playwright J. M. Reinhold Lenz, rejects the kind of artistic process embodied by the Medusa’s head because it transforms and effectively freezes nature into its other—namely inauthenticity, automation, and artifice: “This is a stepping beyond what is human, a stepping into an uncanny realm turned toward the human—the realm where the monkey, the automatons and with them . . . oh, art too, seems to be at home” (ME, 5). Art is, for Büchner as for Celan, the equivalent of a reified form of experience. It is also, like Buber’s realm of the Ich-Es, both ubiquitous and uncanny.

In his Meridian speech, Celan aligns art not only with mimesis and artifice but also with rhetoric, while poetry stands for authentic saying (ME, 3). In Celan’s own terms, art is the equivalent of monological Sprechen (speaking), and poetry corresponds to genuine Reden (saying). This is a clear reference less to Heidegger’s phenomenological project than to Buber’s dialogical philosophy. As Celan writes in his prose narrative Gespräch im Gebirge (Dialogue in the Mountains, 1959), itself a text that strongly resonates with Buber’s thought, “[The stone] does not talk, he speaks, and whoever speaks, sibling child, talks to nobody, he speaks, because nobody hears him, nobody and Nobody.” In contrast to Reden, which calls for response and thus

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5. See Lacoue-Labarthe, Poetry as Experience, 48–49.
6. Against the dominant approach that interprets Celan’s Büchner Prize address as an effect of his engagement with Heidegger’s philosophy, the present study emphasizes the influence of Buber on Celan’s canonical text.
actively involves the addressee, *Sprechen* rejects and ultimately rebounds from the other because here the *I* is not open to encounter the other’s alterity. Like Buber, Celan believes that the latter, self-absorbed, and antidualogical form of speaking dominates human dialogue.

In the *Meridian* speech, ubiquitous *sprechen*, which is exemplified by what Celan defines as Camille and Danton’s “artful words,” is the force that propels Celan’s speech away from genuine dialogue (*ME*, 3). For Celan makes inflated use of rhetorical tropes and shuns the idiosyncratic vocabulary of verbal communication, thus impeding the dialogical encounter that might otherwise result. We have then two prose texts about dialogue that are poles apart. On the one hand, there is *Conversation in the Mountains*, a written narrative that lays claim to an oral tradition by recounting a dialogue (that was originally spoken in Yiddish)—or so the conceit goes. On the other hand, there is *The Meridian*, a speech that refutes its status as an actual oral event by emphasizing its scriptive, rhetorical economy. In what emerges as another layer of irony, Celan’s oft repeated invocation “Ladies and gentlemen” in *The Meridian* bespeaks the habit of Jews from Eastern Europe to fill awkward conversational silences with courtesy phrases. Used as a quintessentially Yiddish idiom, uttered by a Jew from Czernowitz who spoke German, not Yiddish, and who did not identify with Eastern European Jewry, the phrase subverts the audience’s preconceived notions concerning Jews, by effectively invoking and provoking their own hidden anti-Semitic tendencies.

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*Gespräch in den Bergen,* to which I [Lyon] had called attention. But he went on to confirm that there were other parallels, among them the dialogical underpinnings of their works.” Lyon, Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger, 227 n. 21.

8. The *Meridian* includes, but is certainly not limited to, the following rhetorical figures: anamnesis (“Art, you will remember” [2]); climax (“Art . . . is . . . a problem . . . a mutable, tough and long-lived, I want to say, an eternal problem” [2]); anadiplosis (“The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route*” [9]); anaphora (“It is the counterword, it is the word that cuts the ‘string.’ . . . It is an act of freedom. It is a step” [3]); litotes (“that I don’t let this go unsaid” [4]); epanalepsis (“probably is in the air—the air we have to breathe today” and “I search for Lenz himself, I search for him . . . I search for his shape” [5 and 6]); parenthesis (“ Doesn’t Büchner— I now must ask— doesn’t George Büchner” [5]); paradox (“A calling-into-question to which all of today’s poetry has to return, if it wants to question further” [5]); oxymoron (“go with art into your innermost narrows. And set yourself free” [11]); synonym (“I have anticipated, reached beyond” [5]); refrain (“Long live the king” [3]); apostrophe (“But the poem does speak!” [8]); correction (“it speaks always only on its own, on its own behalf” [8]); conduplicatio (“permit me . . . permit me” [8, 9]); annomination (“But not just language as such, nor, presumably, just verbal ‘analogy’ either” [9]); parallelism (“And the human being? And the creature?” [10]); metaphor (“I find . . . a meridian” [12]); anticipation (“I have anticipated, reached beyond” [5]); citation (“permit me to quote here a phrase by Malebranche” [9]); and finally in a citation from Lenz an elision (“And so he lived on . . .” [6]).


The phrase is interesting, too, because it is simultaneously a remnant of a vernacular tradition and a standard rhetorical trope. And in that latter function, as part of the disembodied rhetoric of written tradition, it further destabilizes the oral status of Celan’s speech. In a paradoxical inversion of speaking and writing, which The Meridian itself fails to fully grasp, the speech leaves its actual oral provenance in question by mobilizing the artificiality and scripted character of rhetorical eloquence, whereas Celan’s Conversation in the Mountains is presented as the transcript of a fictional conversation that is itself a rumination on the possibility of an impending dialogue. By continually drawing attention to its own rhetoricity, Celan’s self-consciously rhetorical speech performs the ubiquity of art’s artificiality and at the same time gradually consumes its other—poetry and dialogical saying.

It has been noted that Celan stages several attempts to break away from rhetorical redundancy. Speaking about the so-called Kunstgespräch (dialogue about art) in Büchner’s play Dantons Tod (Danton’s Death), he suggests that it is so empty and formulaic that it could be continued ad infinitum if it were not to be interrupted: “if nothing interfered” (ME, 2). As if testing whether rhetorical artifice could give way to poetic saying or an event of genuine dialogue, Celan suggests that it ultimately can: “Something does interfere” (ME, 2). But while in Büchner’s play, Danton is called out and the conversation comes to a halt, there is no such disruption in Celan’s speech. Here the potential break, the breaking in of essence and genuine dialogue, never takes place, and Celan instead resumes, indeed resigns himself to, his futile, art-bound soliloquy, noting laconically, “Art returns” (ME, 2). The Meridian speech is itself a Kunstgespräch, self-consciously aware that, at least in Buber’s terms, a Gespräch about Kunst is an oxymoronic construction. As if incapable of changing the discursive register of his speech, Celan alludes to but in the same breath rejects the possibility of a radical departure from art and rhetoric. Although the latent possibility of Dichtung resurfaces time and again (most notably in his discussion of Lucile’s exclamation “Long live the king” and in the allusion to Lenz’s “falling silent,” both examples of speech acts that eschew signification), such precious, liberating, and quintessentially human instances of poetry appear highly improbable (ME, 3, 7).

This is not to deny that Celan gestures toward the possibility that a shared emotional experience may arise from his public address. At one point he even asserts suggestively, “It takes away his—and our—breath and words” (ME, 7).

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11. See, most recently, Schäfer and Wergin, Die Zeitlichkeit des Ethos, 125 and 134.
14. Paul Celan reads Lucile’s Gegenwort “Long live the king” as a word that actualizes itself outside of the referential or semantic function of language. Articulating a truth that “stands outside all relation to an expressible What” (Buber, “The Word That Is Spoken,” 118), her statement is pure communication in which words embody rather than signify truth. In that way, it could be defined as an instance of genuine dialogue, “a saying without a said.” Levinas, Proper Names, 40.
Yet Celan’s measured and not in the least breathless enunciation of this very statement refutes the validity of the projected stance. Hence the phrase must be understood as a trope and not as an emotive move. It speaks to Celan’s reticent elocution, which is so introverted that it even suppresses identification and empathy, be it with Büchner’s characters or with the speaker himself. Mobilizing the trope of reading as a solitary labor, Celan’s speech leaves no room for a dialogical *uns* (us). In contrast to Buber, who sought to provoke a dialogue with his Paulskirche addressees through his reconciliatory rhetoric and hope-inspiring imagery, Celan never breaks through to his audience. Projecting the end of a German-Jewish dialogue (if one ever did exist), *The Meridian* implies a trajectory that foreshadows and ultimately leads to Celan’s withdrawal from Germany’s public sphere, which in his view perpetually replayed the historical violence of National Socialism.

Dialogue’s recession deep into a hypothetical sphere significantly lowers the stakes of Celan’s public speech in Germany. As he wrote in a letter to Otto Pöggeler on August 30, 1961, his goal in Darmstadt was simply to bring dialogue *back to memory*: “It seemed to me a matter of—among other things—evoking the memory of dialogue as the (perhaps sole) possibility of the towardness of men (and only then the poets).”15 A threefold concession to the improbability of a German-Jewish dialogue: access is not immediate, but rather through “memory”; likewise, it is a “possibility” rather than an actuality; furthermore, even this tentative access is not guaranteed, but may only “perhaps” occur. Maybe a more forceful trigger for memory recall would be requisite than the one Celan opted for in his speech. The persistent inscription (the use of the word here is deliberate) of the apostrophe “Ladies and gentlemen” hardly suggests authentic, anthropomorphically based dialogical exchange, but seems rather to be founded on a rhetorical conceit reflective of unrealized intent. Indeed, it rings out almost like the call of a carnival barker.

**The Meridian**

In 1959, the year before Celan received the Büchner award, poet laureate Günther Eich concluded his Büchner Prize address with a conventional expression of gratitude: “Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention.”16 The next year a surreptitiously mocking Celan countered the conventions of the Büchner Prize—and epideictic rhetoric sui generis—by thanking his audience for their *Anwesenheit* (attendance): “Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your presence” (*ME*, 13). By substituting *Anwesenheit* (attendance) for *Aufmerksamkeit* (attentiveness), Celan intimates

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that they may not have listened properly and that while they were surely physically “present,” they may have been mentally elsewhere. As will become obvious later, this suggestion is perfectly in line with Celan’s critique of technology, whereby mass media (including the radio broadcasting technology used to transmit his speech) are detrimental to forging relationships and meaningful connections across disparate discursive spaces.

When Celan casts into doubt his audience’s concentration and attentiveness, this is not a light accusation, given that \textit{Aufmerksamkeit} is a conceptual cornerstone of \textit{The Meridian}. A superior mental state of undistracted concentration on both sensory impressions and historical facts, attentiveness is for Celan the source and precondition of poetry: “The attention the poem tries to pay to everything it encounters, its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of the ‘tremors’ and ‘hints,’ all this is not, I believe, the achievement of an eye competing with (or emulating) ever more precise instruments, but is rather a concentration that remains mindful of all our dates” (\textit{ME}, 9).

There is, in what Celan describes as \textit{Aufmerksamkeit}, a close link to the primary relation, the \textit{Beziehung}, which forms the foundation of Buber’s dialogical philosophy. Situated outside of the permanence of the everyday, the \textit{Beziehung} is, according to Buber, always already there; it is a timeless relation that reaches into the infinite, yet it can be actualized as a \textit{Beziehungserlebnis}, an instance or \textit{event} of genuine saying. Celan likewise conceives of a permanent, primal, and, at the same time, elusive state of being that precedes dialogue—and by extension, poetry. Defined as the complete openness toward the otherness of the other, this heightened state of “attentiveness” antedates experience and cognition. But while Celan’s notion of \textit{Aufmerksamkeit} is likely inspired by Buber’s \textit{Beziehung}, it is stripped of its theological implications and redemptive sentiment. For contrary to Buber’s spiritual, indeed sacred, notion of \textit{Beziehung}, Celan’s \textit{Aufmerksamkeit} is a secular concept that is grounded in human consciousness, emphasizing the creaturely and the abject. Thus where Buber’s \textit{Beziehung} gives way to an instance of divine grace, Celan’s \textit{Aufmerksamkeit} conjures the radical forces of (human) nature. Quoting Malebranche—again via an intermediary, Walter Benjamin—Celan refers to it as the “natural prayer of the soul” (\textit{ME}, 9).

Another pointed difference relates to how Buber and Celan respectively define and construe the domain of art. While both situate art in the realm of artifice, only Celan deems it uncanny. In Buber’s view, the work of art, albeit a representation and thus a derivative of the original (as mentioned earlier), bears the potential to restore its essence and thus renew the instance of dialogue or poetry that has inspired it: “All response binds the You into the It-world. . . . But whatever has thus been changed into It and frozen into a thing among things is still endowed with the meaning and the destiny to change back ever again” (\textit{IT}, 89–90). Celan, who defines poetry as a radical and harmful—but not irrevocable—intervention, likewise submits that the boundaries separating art and poetry are flexible: art
results from instances of—and thus contains as its unrealized potential—poetry, just as poetry is always already transformed into art. As Celan notes, “The poem stands fast at the edge of itself; it calls and brings itself, in order to be able to exist, ceaselessly back from its already-no-longer into its always-still” (ME, 8). Identifying poetry as another instance of art, as both its origin and potential, Celan contends that art and poetry interrelate and replace one another in a sort of two-pronged exchange. Art is the teleological endpoint in which poetry culminates: “Art would be the route poetry has to cover” (ME, 6). And poetry in turn follows in the footsteps (read: complies with the conventions) of art: “poetry which does have to tread the route of art” (ME, 6). Yet in direct opposition to Buber, Celan associates both poetry and art/rhetoric with das Unheimliche (the uncanny) and suggests that neither one provides relief or escape. In a passage of The Meridian, Celan indeed collapses the very difference between the two by conflating them at once constatively and performatively: like Lucile’s “Long live the king” in Lenz, art is “a terrifying falling silent. . . . Poetry . . . the abyss and the Medusa’s head, the abyss and the automatons, seem to lie in one direction” (ME, 7).

Is this the language of poetry, or is it rhetorical virtuosity? By sheer generic convention, Celan’s Büchner Prize address, an epideictic speech written for the purpose of accepting a literary award, is located on the margins between poetry and rhetoric, but it defines itself negatively in relation to both domains. Not only is poetry unattainable and the rhetorical regressive, they are both conflated and thereby reduced to a condition of indistinction. This at least is what the above quote performs as a communicative act: the conjunction und, emphasized in the text with italics (“Poetry . . . the abyss and the Medusa’s head”), thrusts the speaker away from poetry and into the negative space of ellipsis. Beyond its often overrated concern with poetology, The Meridian is thus less a speech about poetry than a speech taking recourse to—or rather gesturing toward—the language of poetry to deflect the incommensurability of public speaking. Specifically, it is a speech about the conditions of possibility of public speech in the face of a German post-Fascist audience. In self-reflexively referring to itself, The Meridian exposes the genre of public speech as a medium unsuitable for approaching the task of accepting the dubitable honor of a German literary award. Accordingly, it ends with a foregone conclusion: “I find . . . a meridian” (ME, 12). In what Stanley Corngold has defined as a “medial intrusion,” the speech here self-consciously refers back to “the archive”—the transcript from which it emerges—and thereby denies any importance to the enunciative event that has actualized it. In the end, there is no instance of poetry that could momentarily breach the artifice of representation through mystical

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openness and totality. There is only its scriptive counterpart: a text that has been scripted already, *The Meridian*. Consequently, the speech concludes in a recursive loop of self-reference by which it collapses into itself and thereby annihilates whatever modicum of meaning it may have produced along the way. And yet this final phrase may offer a unique truth about Celan’s rhetorical sensibility: it reveals his resistance to the production of definite meaning.

After all, *The Meridian* is not only the title of Celan’s script (and later published speech) but also its central metaphor. A geographical term denoting an imaginary circle on the earth’s surface that passes through the North and South geographic poles, the meridian functions as an allegory of self-recursiveness, for it denotes an axis that has two poles but no definite beginning or end. In a deeper sense, it describes a precise and unique geographical denomination that in itself consists of an infinite number of points that despite having a meaningful reference in reality are, mathematically speaking, identical. That at least is how the meridian metaphor applies to Celan’s speech. Like a meridian, the speech has no internal signification, nor even narrative directionality, for the order of the paragraphs could be inverted without doing violence to their textual (il)logic. Inverting the sense of reading the speech would be inconsequential, as this inversion would produce neither return nor closure but instead result in the same state of alienation and absurdity that otherwise occurs. But neither is there a referential context outside of the reality of the speech. In *The Meridian* (and the same is true for Celan’s poetry), signifiers thus seem to emerge with an entirely new sense and relation to reality. They are, in Celan’s own words, *aktualisierte Sprache* (language actualized), which is to say that their meaning is not an inherent property but a pragmatic function of the literary text (*ME*, 9). Dependent on the specific context in which it is being uttered, the *Meridian* speech is an event of saying, the meaning of which emerges not from the text itself but from its presentation and reception in Germany’s public sphere. Peter Szondi’s quote regarding Celan’s poetry is equally applicable to his *Meridian* speech: “Celan’s language does not speak about something, but ‘speaks’ itself.”

Stripped of revelatory power and continually pushing communicative boundaries, *The Meridian* fails to provide a dialectical correction of the world, a world that has been turned upside down—historically, spiritually, and ethically. Contrary to Buber, then, who in his Peace Prize address explored the potential this occasion had in store for him, Celan did not consider the Büchner award ceremony a propitious hour for conjuring change and redemption. Just the opposite is true: his speech protracts the experience of chaos and negativity. As Celan puts it pithily (and in reference to the madness that has befallen the protagonist of Büchner’s novella *Lenz*):

“He who walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen—he who walks on his head, has the sky beneath himself as an abyss” (*ME*, 7).

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If there is a point of connection it lies elsewhere. There certainly is a vague form of dialogue emerging from his cryptic, almost solipsistic, speech, yet it involves the speaker and his alter ego rather than an extratextual listener. Not surprising, given that Celan knew that no one who had not been there would be able to grasp the reality of the camps. Celan’s persistent use of the apostrophe “Ladies and gentlemen,” a poetic figure of exclamatory address, suggests that Celan expected his testimony to bounce back from his audience. For each instance of apostrophe signals that the speaker momentarily turns away from some other interlocutor to address his audience—the Damen und Herren—as if he were, or suddenly became, aware of them. The speech thereby suggests that the speaker is not in active pursuit of a dialogue with them, but rather addresses someone else. But who is this other interlocutor if not the poet himself? Like many of Celan’s poems, the speech is conceived as a dialogue that “speaks on behalf . . . of a totally other” (in eines Anderen Sache zu sprechen, ME, 8). Yet this other is, paradoxically as it may seem, Celan’s proper persona. That is, not his biographical person per se, but some vacillating version of the speaker: Celan’s self-projection as a lyrisches Ich (lyrical self). In that way, Celan’s Meridian speech is less of a departure from his poetry than has been suggested elsewhere. Like those poems in which Celan posits a Du to inaugurate a dialogue with a person who habitually no longer exists, the Meridian speech addresses someone who is merely a hypothetical entity, a lyrical more than real interlocutor, a construction rather than an actual person. This extremely fragile and arguably virtual Du is ultimately a placeholder for the speaker’s Ich.

In his notes for the Meridian speech, Celan makes this relation explicit: “The poem . . . is solidary; it stands with you, as soon as you, reflecting on yourself, turn toward it” (ME, 201). And in another preliminary draft, Celan suggests that it is through poetry that he constitutes himself: “The poem as the I becoming a person” (ME, 191). Dialogue, by contrast, is the counterpart of poetry, since it is associated with the perception of otherness (“awareness of the other and the stranger,” ME, 191). As in his poems, Celan makes extensive use of the second-person pronoun Du in the Meridian speech without actually interacting or communicating with anyone outside the text. For Celan repeatedly breaks off to emphatically address his

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20. Irene Kacandes defines apostrophe as a figure that “involves the act of an orator turning away from his normal audience” to address someone else, who could, according to Kacandes, be a dead person, since “the ancients did not distinguish among types of apostrophe based on the ontological status of the apostrophized.” Irene Kacandes, Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 146.

21. Szondi first made this point in his essay “Reading ‘Engführung’ “: “And so the opening lines of ‘Engführung’ give us to understand that . . . it is not true that the poet is addressing the reader directly (as is the case in a great many poems), nor even that the words have anything to do with him.” Peter Szondi, “Reading ‘Engführung’ “ (1971), in Szondi, Celan Studies, 27–82, here 29. See also Bollack, Paul Celan, 16–17.

22. Bollack emphasizes how crucial this process was for Celan, who sought to secure his biographical continuity through these alter egos. Bollack, Paul Celan, 16.
audience yet at each occasion fails to break through to them. Celan thus admonishes these “ladies and gentlemen” as inadequate listeners: “someone who hears and listens and looks . . . and then doesn’t know what the talk was all about” (ME, 3).

A reluctant public speaker, Celan insinuates that the “ladies and gentlemen” attending his speech have but a faint idea of the self-exploratory process they have come to witness, a process during which he seeks, but ultimately fails, to reclaim his biography. A series of tentative steps and rhetorical questions that gradually replace the speaker’s biographical self with a fictitious persona, Celan’s Büchner Prize address embodies what Celan terms “a sending oneself ahead toward oneself” (ME, 11). Projecting the poet’s lived and suffered reality into the realm of rhetoric, the speech illustrates the poet’s experience of individuation: “I had . . . encountered myself” (ME, 11). As the ellipsis severing the “I” from the “myself” suggests, the self-encounter failed to afford him an experience of self-identity, but resulted instead in Celan’s awareness of his incommunicable alienation and alterity.

The latter is again symbolized by the figure of the meridian: “Ladies and gentlemen, I find something that consoles me a little for having in your presence taken this impossible route, this route of the impossible. I find what connects and leads, like the poem, to an encounter. I find something—like language—inmaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while—cheerfully—even crossing the tropics: I find . . . a meridian” (ME, 12). The significance of the meridian metaphor goes further. Its use here echoes a very different use of the metaphor, which Celan had encountered in a letter from Nelly Sachs: “Dear Paul Celan . . . Between Paris and Stockholm runs the meridian of grief and of comfort.”

As a semicircle that stretches from Celan’s home in Paris to Sachs’s own home in Stockholm, Sachs’s meridian symbolizes a self-regulating movement between two major poles of emotional experience, consolation and suffering. Sachs accords it the power to provide mediation and emotional equilibrium. Celan, by contrast, envisions the meridian as a loop that not only stretches from one pole to the other but extends through both poles to come full circle again (“something circular that returns to itself across both poles” ME, 12). Both eternally extending and infinitely recurring, Celan’s meridian is not a pendulum but a circle, a tractionless spinning wheel. It is evidently a figure that refutes any prospects of mediation.

Celan’s use of the meridian metaphor not only differs from Sachs’s; it is also diametrically opposed to Buber’s notion of a Himmelsbahn (celestial orbit), which

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25. As Schestag points out, Celan eliminated the notion of consolation when he cited the metaphor in a response to Nelly Sachs. Schestag, Buk, 7.
represents the natural course of human history: “The path is not a circle. It is the way” (IT, 168). A perpetually dwindling spiral that never touches the same point twice, Buber’s Himmelsbahn invokes a progressive motion that suggests closure and ultimately promises deliverance. Conversely, Celan’s meridian touches and perpetually overshoots the poles of consolation and suffering. That it to say, it symbolizes life after it has culminated in an endpoint of history—the complete blockage of experience. Celan’s meridian figures both as the impossibility of transcendence and as the existential void experienced by a subject standing in the catastrophe’s aftermath. Hence it embodies the fate of the Ich who is ontically suspended and can therefore neither converge with his biography nor encounter—let alone engage in a dialogue with—the other. Deprived of what Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt have defined as a Lebenszusammenhang—the capacity to recognize and construct relationality in an increasingly fragmented world—Celan cannot insert himself into a preexisting community, or a politically constructed nation-state such as the Federal Republic of Germany. As a substitute he posits the existence of a conspiratorial counter-public sphere that arises among (and in the memory of) those exceptional revolutionary individuals who fought against (and fell victim to) right-wing nationalist and National Socialist ideologies.

Automation

There is another tragic biography buried in The Meridian. Early on in the text, Celan reminisces about the anarchist and Socialist leader Gustav Landauer, a friend and colleague to Buber who was beaten to death in 1919 by paramilitary Reichswehr and Freikorps troops controlled by the forces of reaction. Landauer, one of whose “most tragic and childish mistakes” it was, according to Celan, to believe that “his Germanness and Judaism do each other no harm and much good,” continued to be a victim of right-wing Nationalist violence even beyond his death.26 After the Nazis seized power in Germany, they destroyed his grave and sent his remains, together with a bill for relocation costs, to the Jewish congregation in Munich. It was only in 1954 that Landauer’s remains were put to final rest in Munich’s Neuer Israelitischer Friedhof (New Israeli Cemetery). Celan, faced with an analogous case of homelessness, was also deprived of a Herzland (“shoreline of the heart”), a concrete terrain and intimate place that would be the geographical focus of his identity.27 Yet in contrast to Landauer’s, Celan’s loss of a home marks a traumatic turning point in his childhood rather than the culminating point of his death. In 1941 his native Bucovina, a northern province of Romania, was invaded

26. Quoted in Felstiner, Paul Celan, 262.
by the Nazis, who subsequently began to ghettoize and deport all Jewish people. In 1947, the Paris Peace Treaty forced Romania to formally cede the northern part of Bukovina to the USSR. Celan’s homeland ceased to exist.

There is yet another way in which Landauer and Celan’s fates were to become intertwined. They also share the destiny of being *totgeschwiegen* (silenced to death)—of being muted by forces of verbal abuse. As Celan writes in a letter to Erich von Kahler: “Maybe you remember that back in the day in Darmstadt I mentioned Gustav Landauer—which not only the press but even, right then and there—be astonished, don’t be astonished—, the microphones of the highly perfected loudspeaker system silenced to death (I am tempted to say: to life).”

Celan thus suggests that during his speech in Darmstadt the audio technology failed to properly amplify a passage in which he mentioned Landauer’s name precisely because of said mention. A technological failure with consequences that are evident even today: paragraphs 1 to 9 of Celan’s speech were neither transmitted on the radio nor recorded for prosperity.

Was this odd moment of technological “censorship” caused by an innocuous technological glitch, or was it the result of a reactionary plot against two Jews, one a former anarchist and Socialist leader, the other a foreign “rhymester,” as Celan seems to imply? Conversely, is Celan’s above-quoted comment a strike at his critics, or his paranoid projection, based perhaps on the fact that he was under heavy attack during the time of the Büchner address? Whatever his reasons, the result is that the audience misses Landauer’s story, and with it the story of Celan, who resembles Landauer in the sense of being himself reminiscent of the one he remembers.

Then what does Celan mean by “silenced to life”? The comment can surely be read as an allusion to Claire Goll’s defamation campaign. Having received vast amounts of negative publicity, Celan may be suggesting that silence surrounding his name is precisely the opposite of death: it secures his survival in West Germany’s cultural establishment and literary sphere. But the comment also implies that one’s proper name is structurally related to death. As Derrida has argued, the proper name speaks the singularity of death, since it holds the possibility that the one who bears the name will be absent from it. God calls by name, but so did the deportation lists. Did Celan hope to secure his survival by renouncing his name? Did “Celan” hope to keep “Antschel” alive by preventing others from naming him thus? Is language literally the sphere that disembodies?

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This is certainly the case when it is transmitted through a “highly perfected speaker system” such as the one Celan came upon as he delivered his Darmstadt address. Celan, like many of his contemporaries, was alarmed by the prospect of a cybernetic age and the related horror of technological encroachment, subjugating humankind to its own fabrications. Did he perhaps find himself unwilling to speak into a microphone that was hooked up to speakers and a recording device? The irony that he was to elaborate on the theme of uncanny automatons through a piece of technical equipment that was linked both psychologically and phenomenologically to this effect could not have escaped this profound and serious thinker. With his voice transmitted to the receivers and radio stations, and thus effectively multiplied (and fragmented) as if he were himself hooked up to one of the automatons he critiques in his speech, is Celan not unwittingly complicit with this unnatural and alienating form of communication?

Seen in this light, one as yet underexplored question raised by Celan’s Meridian speech thus concerns the metareflexive dimension of his critique of technology as it pertains to the abuses of mass media power offered by public service broadcasting. For Celan not only speaks explicitly about his contempt for automatons and “thinking machines,” which allowed no connections to authentic existence, but also rhetorically and performatively enacts the impossibility of making such connections and mediating dialogic exchange. In that way, Celan’s speech points to the large-scale dangers and indeed the systemic failure of radio broadcasting. His Büchner Prize address prefigures a critique of television and radio that Kluge and Negt were to articulate a decade later when they contended that mass media were but a unidirectional, noninteractive mode of communication that offered nothing but “regulatory forms of communication that do not entail response.” Celan knows that from their inception, television and radio were not conceived as forms of communication between free individuals. Instead they were characterized by the fact that “a large heterogeneous audience more or less simultaneously exposes itself to utterances transmitted via media by an institution, whereby the audience is unknown to the station.”

As someone who felt himself completely and helplessly exposed to Goll’s well-orchestrated, slanderous media campaign, Celan was surely sensitive to the political implications of mass media and communication technologies. Celan’s speech, rather than opening up possibilities of communication and debate within the public sphere, foists itself on its recipients without invoking or responding to the demands of his interlocutors. But this is not because Celan would not have been invested

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31. See Lyon, Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger, 125.
32. Kluge and Negt, Public Sphere and Experience, 101.
in being understood and appreciated by the German public. It is only that he was more invested in positing the paradox of broadcasting media, which created an illusion of immediate and authentic experience but effectively failed to correspond to any actual level of social cooperation. As Kluge and Negt were to put it in 1972, at a time when a depersonalizing technological shift had fully materialized, “To grasp how unnatural this state of affairs is, just imagine that one could use the telephone only if one were prepared to employ prefabricated phrases.”

In a way, this is exactly what Celan does in his Büchner Prize address: by retrieving stock phrases and rhetorical expressions and presenting them without mediation or commentary, he comments on the absurdity of anyone expecting purposeful and authentic discourse from a public speech or the radio.

The speaker system is an automaton that amplifies and multiplies the power of a voice but at the same time severs it from human corporeality, thereby exemplifying what Sigmund Freud, in his seminal essay Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny, 1919), had described as the uncanny effect of an inanimate object coming to life: “When we proceed to review the things, persons, impressions, events and situations which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in a particularly forcible and definite form, the first requirement is obviously to select a suitable example to start on. Jentsch has taken as a very good instance ‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate.’”

The speaker and recording equipment used for Celan’s speech allowed for a multiplicity of auditors to tune in and thereby promoted virtually unlimited proximity, immediacy, and synchronicity. All of the German-speaking world could partake in the event, and Celan would truly “go public.” Yet as the medium breaks down, and the illusion of immediacy is disrupted, the unbridgeable distance between the speaker and his addressees—and the unfeasibility of their encounter—becomes painfully obvious. After all, the audio technology used to amplify and record Celan’s Büchner Prize address operates on the margins of distance and proximity, presence and death. It simultaneously enables and undercuts communication, for it is designed to strengthen and multiply the speaker’s voice in the public sphere, but it nevertheless makes him speechless simply by ceasing to function. In that way, the incident with the malfunctioning loudspeaker system magnifies both the challenges and the promises of public speech, particularly as it is transmitted via radio. The Meridian was broadcast and widely heard on public radio, the medium that had emerged from the war as the best-preserved and most broadly available means of mass communication. Given that in the early 1960s,

34. Kluge and Negt, Public Sphere and Experience, 102.
85 percent of German households owned a radio transmitter, Celan’s speech surely reached a larger public than his books of poetry. Celan did not, however, take his exposure to the mass audience of radio broadcasting casually. For he knew that the more accessible and consumable a voice is made, the more potentially devastating the effects of its successful transmission.

A fundamental aporia, then, of Celan’s speech is that its dissemination depends on the very medium that suddenly interferes with it, along with the fact that a medium is involved at all. In this chilling, dystopian tale of technology, a voice by itself is apparently no longer enough. But what if is there is no voice beyond the audio system, no speech without a medium, and no language beyond automation? Then humankind has reached the point where the possibility of commencing a genuine human dialogue has been annihilated by the actuality of another truly murderous technology—the one used to carry out the “final solution.”