Lyric Orientations
Eldridge, Hannah Vandegrift

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Lyric Orientations: Hölderlin, Rilke, and the Poetics of Community. 

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I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where things were going, to sketch for myself a reality.

—Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen”

This book is an investigation of the powers of lyric poetry with regard to problems peculiar to human subjects in a broadly defined modernity. In exploring these powers, I turn to the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), both of whom—despite the inevitable differences of style and epoch—take poetry to be capable of creating communities of speaking subjects within the context of modern alienation. This alienation appears in different ways in each poet (to put it another way, each has his own modernity story), and thus the proposed communities called together through lyric language likewise look different. But Hölderlin and Rilke share the conviction that modern alienation cannot be overcome, nor communities created, once and for all in any universal event. And both argue that to deny the uncertainty created by the absence of any such event (or to deny the alienation itself) is likewise to deny the particularly human condition of uncertainty and mortality—that is, our finitude.

To show how it is that lyric language can undertake the task of calling communities together, I look outside the German context to the work of the American philosopher Stanley Cavell (b. 1926). In drawing on Cavell, I challenge the idea—perhaps most prevalent in poststructuralist scholarship, but not exclusive thereto—that the uncertainty of any relation between language and world necessarily means that language fails to engage the world. I use Cavell’s interlocking
discussions of language and subjectivity to investigate how language in and through its formal aspects enables us to engage meaningfully with the world and the other subjects in it. This account of the orienting and engaging capabilities of language likewise helps to explain the extraordinarily ambitious claims Hölderlin and Rilke make for poetry: that it can create political communities, recast human relations to death, or unite the sensual and intellectual components of human subjectivity. I follow out these claims in close readings of Hölderlin and Rilke to show how each, in historically and individually specific ways, takes up the problems of orienting finite, mortal subjects within an uncertain and sometimes hostile world. The vision of language I derive from Cavell (himself greatly influenced by Wittgenstein) shows how the lyric, not despite but because of its unusual, individual, difficult, and sometimes fragmentary language, is ideally suited to undertake this orienting work.

Orientation and Finitude

I use the term “orientation” to describe multiple relations between human subjects and communities, the external world, and other minds as distinguishable but related attempts of those subjects to reach outside or beyond their own finitude. Baldly put, human subjectivity is inevitably confronted by the problem of its own finitude along any of a number of lines: people die and do not know what happens thereafter; they (we) are both part of an external physical world and internally self-consciously aware of our separateness from that world; we cannot ensure that our perceptions and expressions correspond absolutely to anything outside our individual minds; conversely, we cannot be certain that any individual thought derives solely from our own understanding and is not in some way put there by language or culture; moreover, this same uncertainty and finitude governs our relations to other subjects, who may prove to be either not enough or too much like us. In everyday contexts, these remarks are banal—of course subjects are influenced by the contexts in which they find themselves (although how much and how deeply is not so easy to say), and of course we can be quite spectacularly wrong in our assessments of the external world and especially of other minds. But once any of these questions have been raised—whether through abstract or philosophical consideration or in any of the practical, moral, or political situations in which they may arise—they do not seem to be so easy to put to rest.

As my emphasis on finitude and error should make clear, when I use the word “subject” or “human subject” in this project, I refer not to the transcendental, transhistorical rational subject of modern philosophy from Descartes on, but

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1. As I explain in detail in chapter 1, these attempts necessarily fail—finitude is something that cannot be overcome but must be inhabited—even as the attempts themselves are constitutive of the subjective inhabitation of that finitude.
rather to a self-divided, self-opaque, and historically constituted entity struggling to make sense of its own experience. I am arguing, then, for a picture of subjectivity defined by impossible attempts to exceed its own finitude. Of course, not everyone feels the need for or difficulty of such attempts at every moment, and this is probably a good thing; immersion and absorption in our pursuits remain possible. But we are all liable to moments of rupture and breakdown of conviction in both projects and relationships, even if for some of us such moments do not occur often or with intensity. The inevitability of rupture or self-diremption is the commonality between the portrayals of subjectivity offered by Kant, Nietzsche, and Freud, and continued by their descendants (one might name Adorno, Blanchot, Butler, Deleuze, de Man, Derrida, Guattari, Heidegger, Lacan, or Wittgenstein, to say nothing of—even older—literary presentations of fallenness from assurance and unity). And when such moments of rupture or interruption occur, perhaps the paradigmatic response is to intellectualize our situation and to overreach for a solution that consists in knowing something—how to live, how to respond, what to do—for sure.

The central claim of this book is that lyric poetry offers a mode of response to finitude that neither demands an impossible certainty nor gives up altogether on the drive toward certainty that defines human subjects. I use Cavell’s depictions of language and subjectivity to show how it might be that lyric poetry is a vital place where the powers of language in our forms of life are interrogated as possible modes of subject and world orientation. I look to Hölderlin and Rilke to show how orientations in poetic form(s) can shape or even create orientations to the world and to others that do not exceed or reject but inhabit finitude. My term “lyric orientation(s)” describes the kind of commitments and relations to the world that emerge aesthetically and tentatively out of language use in lyric poetry. The terms “orientation” and “lyric orientation” also emphasize that the relations to the world in and with language created by lyric poetry are processual rather than referential, communal rather than universal, and responsive rather than imposed successfully or unsuccessfully on an external object-world. Such orientation is, to anticipate the Cavellian terms I take up in detail in chapter 1, a matter of acknowledgment, rather than knowledge, a form (among other things) of self-understanding (of one’s commitments, responsibilities, temptations, and finitude) that is not like knowledge of an object, in that it involves taking a stand on oneself and one’s relations with others in communities of language.

2. This response, I argue in chapter 1, leads to an all-or-nothing of knowledge or sheer relativism that I work to undo using lyric poetry. Furthermore, the terms of this binary will be different at different times, as I show in reading problems of finitude in historically specific appearances preparatory to my discussions of Hölderlin and Rilke and as I discuss very briefly apropos the poetology of Paul Celan.
Superficially, the idea that language and world are mutually influential is straightforward, and is represented by the idiomatic tendency to say things about the world by saying things about language, such as “You can’t even mention Werther and Twilight in the same sentence!” But taking the relation between language and world seriously reveals a vision is “as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying,” because that relation is grounded by nothing more and nothing less than the very agreement in language it seems to require. Cavell arrives at this “vision” through extensive engagement with the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. For Cavell, the relation between language and world runs along the lines of what Wittgenstein calls “grammar.” Thus, when Wittgenstein remarks that “a meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it. For it is what we learn when the word is incorporated into our language,” he is emphasizing practical, even material habits and uses—as in the verb “to incorporate” (einverleiben in the original German also includes the word for “body,” der Leib)—over dictionary definitions or names that refer to objects. Wittgenstein draws a further distinction between practice and existence, remarking that “children do not learn that books

3. Linguist Geoffrey Pullum describes this phenomenon (disapprovingly) as “linguification,” where “to linguify a claim about things in the world is to take that claim and construct from it an entirely different claim that makes reference to the words or other linguistic items used to talk about those things, and then use the latter claim in a context where the former would be appropriate.” Geoffrey Pullum, “Linguifying,” Language Log (blog), July 3, 2006, http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003312.html.


exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc.,—they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc.”

In a theory of language based on the referential function of names, in particular, the thought is that books and armchairs are part of a world that is just out there, learned separately, to which language may or may not successfully correspond.

For Cavell, however, drawing on Wittgenstein, language and world cannot be absolutely and ultimately separated into names or signs and their referents. Like Wittgenstein, he attends to the learning of language (and thus, it emerges, of the world) to demonstrate this inseparability:

Imagine that you are in your armchair reading a book of reminiscences and come across the word “umiak.” You reach for your dictionary and look it up. Now what did you do? Find out what “umiak” means, or find out what an umiak is? But how could we have discovered something about the world by hunting in the dictionary? If this seems surprising, perhaps it is because we forget that we learn language and learn the world together, that they become elaborated and distorted together, and in the same places. We may also be forgetting how elaborate a process the learning is. We tend to take what a native speaker does when he looks up a noun in a dictionary as the characteristic process of learning language. . . . But it is merely the end point in the process of learning the word. When we turned to the dictionary for “umiak” we already knew everything about the word, as it were, but its combination: we knew what a noun is and how to name an object and how to look up a word and what boats are and what an Eskimo is. We were all prepared for that umiak. What seemed like finding the world in a dictionary was really a case of bringing the world to the dictionary. We had the world with us all the time, in that armchair; but we felt the weight of it only when we felt a lack in it. Sometimes we will need to bring the dictionary to the world. That will happen when (say) we run across a small boat in Alaska of a sort we have never seen and wonder—what? What it is, or what it is called? In either case, the learning is a question of aligning language and the world.

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7. Ibid., 62. See also Marcia Cavell, Becoming a Subject: Reflections in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 64–71, for an account of the ways in which this view corresponds to recent work in developmental psychology. In general, my emphasis on the emotional lives of human subjects and use of the term “anxiety” merit some explanation of the differences between my agenda and the field of psychology. In the first place, views of literature that emphasize the therapeutic possibilities of texts tend to produce rather one-sided characterizations of literature as redemptive: “When the recuperative and instructive powers of literature are emphasized, then both its powers to disrupt and its failures to arrive at conclusive doctrinal closure are underplayed.” R. Eldridge, Literature, Life, and Modernity, 5. Psychology may—Marcia Cavell has argued that it does—aim at precisely the uncovering rather than erasing of signifying stresses of our lives in and with language, but it may also, perhaps especially in the twenty-first century’s rush toward pharmacological solutions rather than talking cures, become “the guarantee[r] of the bourgeois dream,” serving as a stabilizing force for conditions we should not want to continue. This criticism is leveled by, of all people, Jacques Lacan. Lacan, “The Moral Goals of Psychoanalysis,” chap. 23 in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, bk. 7 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 303.

8. For more on this view and its consequences in literary studies, see the section “Language, Grammar, and Forms of Life” in chapter 1.

9. Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?,” in Must We Mean What We Say? 19–20; my emphasis.
I take Cavell’s questions (“Now what did you do? Find out what ‘umiak’ means, or what an umiak is?”) to emphasize that finding out what an umiak is, in this case, precisely a matter of finding out what it means—how the word is used, what it refers to, who uses it. And that is information about the world; it tells us what an umiak is. The act of “bringing the world to the dictionary” or “bringing the dictionary to the world” in the umiak story describes the testing of the links between language and world in a form of life.

The idea that language aligns with the world is what allows me to propose lyric poetry as a paradigmatic place for sustained, original, and creative testing and contesting of those alignments, which may be called into question or radically disrupted at any time. The wager of this project—made through close readings of Hölderlin and Rilke—is that such testing and contesting offer and explore possible world orientations that neither force a coercive conformity to mere convention nor give up entirely on the possibility of shared attunement in those orientations. It should be apparent from this description of language use that nothing in this project will be construed as offering certain, unequivocal proofs; indeed the fundamental indeterminacy, ambiguity, and sensory complexity of poetry foreclose such proofs, and in doing so make study of the lyric ideally suited to model the kind of language use I describe as world-orienting.

I have selected Hölderlin and Rilke as the poets in whom to seek these orientations because while both poets share at least some of the historically specific forms of problems of finitude with contemporaneous figures and literary or other discourses, they are neither programmatically nor poetically subsumable to any of those discourses or literary movements. Hölderlin and Rilke are among a relatively small group of poets who take up the problems addressed in dominant discourses of their epochs but then write against those discourses rather than adopting or following the solutions commonly provided by them. Thus Hölderlin writes between German idealism and romanticism, while Rilke investigates the problems raised by empiricism, aestheticism, and modernism without adhering to any of

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10 Both also have a pedigree as “philosophical” poets, deriving in part from their interest in philosophers (in Hölderlin’s case Kant, Plato, Spinoza, and the circle around Fichte in Jena; in Rilke’s case Emerson and Nietzsche) but perhaps more from the “philosophical” treatments of their work by Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Käthe Hamburger, Beda Allemann, Karl Jaspers, Theodor Adorno, and others. While these interpreters vary in the degree to which they take poetry as accomplishing something distinctive as opposed to taking it as an example of philosophical positions, their interest at least makes it plausible to look at Hölderlin and Rilke for poetic treatments of problems typically conceived of as philosophical—problems about which I will contend that much of lyric poetry has something to say by virtue of its language use and not by virtue, necessarily or exclusively, of its content. This unusually tight interweaving of philosophical and poetic traditions is one reason for turning to German poets in particular; the other is simply the contingent fact of my training as a Germanist, although I certainly hope that the view of language I use Cavell to develop here is not helpful only for reading German poetry.
them. Where Hölderlin and Rilke are unusual (if not unique), then, is that they are not simply illustrating ideas already formed elsewhere, nor are they appealing to communities already in existence to vouchsafe the orientations their poems strive for. Rather, both seek to orient reader-subjects in language in order to create communities in which poetry has a central share in embodying what it means to be language-possessing subjects.

Since both Hölderlin and Rilke wrote in genres other than the lyric, and given my insistence on the (extraordinary) language of the lyric as paradigmatic, a brief reflection on generic specificity seems in order. The probing intra- and intersubjective elements of language I show to be orienting do not appear only in poetry—surely novels, plays, dialogues, and even (sometimes) everyday conversations have moments of such testing and contesting; I hope so. But the lyric, by virtue of its brevity, its material qualities, and its generically sanctioned divergence from conventional speech, may do so more frequently, more directly, and more visibly than other types of language. Considering his own work, the poet Charles Bernstein addresses the seeming distance of poetry precisely from the kind of social and even political engagement I will draw out in Hölderlin and Rilke, and nonetheless insists on its possibilities: “I know it’s almost a joke to speak of poetry and national affairs. Yet in *The Social Contract* Rousseau writes that since our conventions are provisional, the public may choose to reconvene in order to withdraw authority from those conventions that no longer serve our purposes. Poetry is one of the few areas where the right of reconvening is exercised.”

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11. For more detailed connections between each poet and the discourses in which the interlocking problems of subjectivity, language, and finitude were taken up in their eras, see the section “Hölderlin’s Context and His Cultural Critique” in chapter 2, and the section “Rilke’s Epoch and Influences: Problems of Finitude around 1900” in chapter 4.

12. Particularly given that Wittgenstein, the initiator of the view of language I advance here, very seldom mentions literary works and does not take direct interest in questions that have shaped debates on philosophy and literature (Huemer, “Introduction,” 3). This is one reason I turn to Cavell, who follows the problems of subjective orientation into a wide range of literary and cultural projects, rather than using Wittgenstein’s view of language alone; the second reason is that, as the example of Richard Rorty will show in chapter 1, Wittgenstein’s reading of language and skepticism has frequently been misunderstood as appealing to already existing conformist conventionality and as refuting skeptical questioning. Even within Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, however, the distinction in which “ordinary” language takes part is not that between ordinary and literary, but between ordinary and philosophical language. Cavell makes this point apropos Austin as well when he rejects the literary/ordinary distinction that occasionally appears in literary studies treatments of Austin and opposes it to the philosophical/ordinary distinction: “If in literary studies people have fastened onto the rubric ‘ordinary language’ as something they take as opposed to literary language, that may or may not be unfortunate depending on what distinction they have in mind; but it must certainly be unfortunate to add to their problems by supposing this distinction either to be enforced or debarred by Austin’s work” (Stanley Cavell, “Politics as Opposed to What?,” *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 [1982]: 164). Instead, Austin differentiates ordinary and philosophical, not to show them as “two modes or realms of discourse” (164) but rather to claim “that the philosophical is not a special mode of discourse at all; it has no interests of its own (as, say, science or religion or sports or trades have), or it ought not to have. So its departures from the ordinary are not into specialties but, let me say, into emptiness” (165).

The “reconvening” I show taking place in lyric orientations is not always directly or visibly social or communal, but understanding the view of language in which language and the world are learned together means that changing a reader’s view of language likewise changes her views of and position in the world. I want to emphasize that this is not a weakly therapeutic process of making the reader somehow “feel better” after reading a poem—indeed, many of the poems I treat may have the opposite effect. A poem may show us for the first (or next or thousandth) time just how far amiss our forms of life have gone; it may show us just how inattentive to language we have been; it may remind us of just how much we fall short in our efforts to form free communities with others.

The Pain of Articulation in Paul Celan

In order to demonstrate the paradigmatically lyrical qualities I claim are orienting, and in order to show that lyric poetry addresses the ways our orientations can go awry en route to a reorientation, I turn to a reading of Paul Celan’s poem “Die Silbe Schmerz” (The Syllable Pain). In doing so, I demonstrate the ways in which the formal-material as well as semantic structures of the lyric move beyond the binary of failed or successful links between language and world. Instead, Celan’s language seeks to reshape those links or relations and thus also to change its readers. Including a discussion of this poem at the outset also anticipates that the problems I will read in Hölderlin and Rilke—while I take pains to register their historically specific forms—are not unique to 1800 or 1900; they can and do go on through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century in and through poetic form. Conversely, giving a detailed reading of Celan’s poem shows the ways in which problems of the fit between language, mind, and world interact at a historically specific point, one in which all of language, subjectivity, and community—precisely the points of orientation toward which finitude strives—are called radically into question by the violence of history.

Die Silbe Schmerz

Es gab sich Dir in die Hand:
ein Du, todlos,
an dem alles Ich zu sich kam. Es fuhren
wortfreie Stimmen rings, Leerformen, alles
ging in sie ein, gemischt

[5]

14. Nor is Celan the only poet in whom these issues are continued; other candidates would be Bertolt Brecht (for all the pathos of Hölderlin and Rilke is anathema to him), Ingeborg Bachmann, and Durs Grünbein.
und entmischt
und wieder
gemischt.

Und Zahlen waren
mitverwoben in das
Unzählbare. Eins und Tausend und was
davor und dahinter
großer war als es selbst, kleiner, aus-
gereift und
rück- und fort-
verwandelt in
keimendes Niemals.

Vergessenes griff
nach Zu-Vergessendem, Erdteile, Herzteile
schwammen,
sanken und schwammen. Kolumbus,
die Zeit-
lose im Aug, die Mutter-
Blume,
mandete Masten und Segel. Alles fuhr aus,
frei,
entdeckerisch,
blühte die Windrose ab, blätterte
ab, ein Weltmeer
blühte zuhauf und zutag, im Schwarzlicht
der Wildsteuerstriche. In Särgen,
Urnen, Kanopen
erwachten die Kindlein
Jaspis, Achat, Amethyst—Völker,
Stämme und Sippen, ein blindes

Es sei

knüpfte sich in
die schlangenköpfigen Frei-
Taue—: ein
Knoten
(und Wider- und Gegen- und Aber- und Zwillings- und Tau-
sendknoten), an dem
die fastnachtsäugige Brut
der Mardersterne im Abgrund
buch-, buch-, buch-
stabierte, stabierte.

The Syllable Pain

It gave itself into Your hand:
a You, deathless,
at which all of I came to itself. Wordfree
voices drove around, empty forms, everything
entered them, mixed
and unmixed
and mixed
again.

And numbers too
were woven into the
[innumerable]. One and a thousand and what
before and after
was larger than itself, smaller, ripe-
ed and
back- and out-
transformed into
germinating Never.

[Forgotten things
grapsed at things to be forgotten], continents, heartinents,
swam,
sank and swam. Columbus,
fall
crocus in his sight, the mother-
flower,
murdered masts and sails. Everything left port
free,
[exploratory],
the windrose flowerd and faded [shed
its leaves], and [an ocean]
bloomed a-heap and a-day, in the blacklight

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of wild-lubber lines. In coffins, urns, canopic jars the little children awoke: Jasper, Agate, Amethyst—peoples, tribes and clans, a blind

\[35\] Let there be knotted itself in- to the serpentineheaded free-ropes—: a knot (and counter- and contra- and yet- and twin- and thousandknot), which the [carnival-eyed] brood of martenstars in the abyss spell-, spell-, spelled out, out.

\[40\]

In the face of Paul Celan’s fragmented language, the claim that lyric poetry performs projects of orientation seems almost perverse: the poem is disorienting. But I argue that this disorientation offers itself as a mode of response to the inscription of history in language and language in history in the wake of the traumas of the twenty-first century, a response that, moreover, foregrounds language both in its content and as a formal-material event. In doing so, it offers a point of entry into Celan’s engagement with problems of finitude. After Auschwitz, the problem of the relations between language, mind, and world are radicalized to the problem of how—given what has happened—it is possible to speak at all. In particular, poetry after Auschwitz raises the problem of how a poet can seek—as Celan does—any cohesion of self, any communication with an other, and any universal appeal for poetry without embarking on precisely the totalizing paths that led to the Shoah.\[17\] That is, how can poetry be poetry and remain honest to the traumas of individual and historical experience?\[18\]

Crucially, this problem is a dual-directional one: first, the danger emerges that language is unable to hold up under the strain of representing the violence of history. This danger is all too visible in the poem, as it threatens to fall apart into a progression

\[17\] I work out Celan’s poetological response to this problem in my conclusion; to anticipate very briefly what I discuss there, Celan develops a poetics of individual particularity that, precisely by way of its inscription in history and its fragility, is free to seek a free communicative space with an addressee or “you.”

\[18\] Of course, the discovery that the world is a hostile or potentially unfit place occurs in both Hölderlin and Rilke as well, along with the problem of how to speak as a finite, particular subject. The greatest historical difference between the three poets is the treatment of language itself in response to these problems.
of stuttering or stammering sounds and letters (or syllables), empty of sense. But the poem also uses the theme of navigation (in the figure of Christopher Columbus) to warn against the concealment of rupture and trauma in smooth narrative trajectories: by calling (directed, controlled, continuous) navigation into question (both formally and thematically), the poem offers an orientation in and to language that builds up its own fragile coherence and remains vulnerable to—even invites—fragmentation and dissolution. “Die Silbe Schmerz” thus not only describes or depicts but undergoes the fragility of language and world after Auschwitz. Because we, as readers, are obliged to undergo the same process of searching for sense in a poetic world of fragmentation and disorientation, our orientation to the world is, I argue, changed by the realization that language can do just this, and the concomitant recognition of what our history has done such that this kind of language becomes necessary.

The title “Die Silbe Schmerz” foregrounds both the semantic and the material components of its own language: Schmerz (pain) is a word with a meaning, but it is also a (single) syllable, a unit of sound that need not have any semantic content. And the fragmentations and combinations performed by syllabification form several of the central events of the poem. Celan uses single root words with changing prefixes, often with opposite meanings (e.g., *gemischt / und entmischt / und wieder / gemischt*, 5–8; *rück- und fort-/ verwandelt*,” 15–16; and, most strikingly, *Wider- und Gegen- und Aber- und Zwillings- und Tau- / sendknoten*, 41–42). Similarly, he deploys single verbs with different prepositions, some idiomatic in German and others unfamiliar: thus *abblühen* (to fade or to finish blooming) becomes *blühte zuhauf* and *zutag* (30), translated by Joris as “a-heap and a-day”; *zuhauf* means “in great numbers” or even “galore”; *zutage bringen* is “to bring something to light or unearth it.” Celan also emphasizes individual syllables by interrupting a string of two-syllable words (*Wider-, Gegen-, Aber-, Zwillings-*/ “counter-,” “contra-,” “yet-,” “twin-,” 41–42) with a further two-syllable word, *Tausend* (thousand), broken after its first syllable. By blurring the distinction between word and syllable, morpheme and phoneme, Celan foregrounds their potential dislocation in what will turn out to be an investigation of the possibilities or impossibilities of language in history, after this particular history.

“Die Silbe Schmerz” foregrounds the material character of its language in several other ways, among them frequent transformations of one part of speech into another. Verbs used as participial adjectives are common in standard German, but several instances of adjectives or adverbs used as nouns are more unusual (although still grammatically correct) and locate the agents of the poem in abstractions that contrast sharply with the concrete treatment of syllables described above (e.g., *das / Unzählbare*, “the innumerable,” 10–11; *keimendes Niemals*, “germinating Never,” 17; *Vergessenes* and *Zu-Vergessendem*, “forgotten things” and “things to be forgotten,” 18–19). Moreover, the final sentence of the poem has a quotation as its subject:
The line *Es sei* is set off by an empty line above and below and is in spaced letters (*Sperdruck*), marking it as a quotation that recalls the biblical word of creation,\(^{19}\) a resigned “So be it,” an imploring “Let it be so that . . .” or “May it be . . .,” or even a tentative “Unless . . .” (*Es sei denn . . .*). This quotation (creation, command, admission, or condition) knots itself into ropes (*knüpfte sich, 37*), which are then described (or perhaps the action is redescribed) as the proliferation of knots discussed above. Finally, these words (or ropes or knots) are, in a continuation of the poem’s syllabification techniques, “spelled / out” (45–46) by a (fictional) constellation, *die Mardersterne* (the martenstars), completing the poem’s progress from amorphous *wortfreie Stimmen* (word-free voices, 4) to articulated letters, whose fragmentation into letters or book/staves (*buch-, buch-, buch- / stabierte, stabierte, 45–46\(^{20}\)) emphasizes their material writteness.\(^{21}\) The poem’s attention to language, then, both threatens its communicative coherence and precludes any totalizing sense-making by displaying its own fragility and constructedness on the way to articulation.

The poem thus insists on the telling of history in language: it insists on words as a written or even spelled-out (*buch- / stabierte, 45–46*) formula for what is, what has been, or what will be; this insistence is underscored by the wide-spaced print format, since it emphasizes individual letters. The violence of this inscription appears most directly in a specific world-historical figure, Christopher Columbus, whose feats of navigation initiated centuries of genocide.\(^ {22}\) The navigation theme

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19. Both Joris and Popov and McHugh translate the quotation as “Let there be,” but the German formula from Genesis 1 is *Es werde*, not *Es sei*.

20. Joris translates the lines as “spell-, spell-, spelled / out, out” (45–46). Unfortunately, the words for “letter” and “to spell” are entirely different in English (in contrast to the German *Buchstabe* and *buchstabieren*), and neither has the resonance of “book” (*Buch*).

21. In a reading of the poem as taking part in the legacy of poetic treatments of Columbus, Cecile Cazort Zorach and Charlotte Melin describe this progress toward articulated language as follows: “Celan’s poem opens with images of language in a state of primordial fluidity, then advances through a delimiting process of creation to culminate in the stammering articulation of syllables in the penultimate line” (Cecile Cazort Zorach and Charlotte Melin, “The Columbian Legacy in Postwar German Poetry,” *German Quarterly* 65, no. 3/4 [1992]: 286).

22. Zorach and Melin read Columbus in “Die Silbe Schmerz” as a figure of “the death-bringing impulses of modern history, for which Columbus (implicitly linked to the diaspora by the events of the Inquisition that coincided with his first voyage) becomes the central icon ” (Zorach and Melin, “Columbian Legacy,” 288). They highlight that Columbus’s departure, in addition to the violence it initiated in the Americas, was concurrent with the expulsion of Spain’s Jews (287).
occurs most directly in the images and descriptions surrounding Columbus (from the third strophe on). But it appears subtly from the poem’s outset, particularly in the numerous prepositions and prefixes of direction or location: in (in, 1, 5, 10, 30, 31, 37), zu (to, 3), davor und dahinter (before and behind, 12), rück- und fort- (back-and forth-, 15), nach (after, 19), aus (out of, 25), ab (from or away, 28, 29, as in “to fade away”), Gegen- (against or contra, 41), and an (on, 42). Furthermore, the poem’s most prominent verbs, including fahren (to drive, travel, or go, 4, 35), kommen (to come, 3), gehen (to go, 5), schwimmen (to swim, 21, 22), and sinken (to sink, 21), refer to travel, motion, and exploration, whether failed or successful. The figure of Columbus is ambivalent at best: in addition to being the initiator of the European colonial genocide in the Western Hemisphere, he was in fact incorrect in his navigation; many of the prefixes and prepositions point in two directions, rendering unequivocal orientation impossible; masts and sails are murdered by Columbus himself (21–25); the compass rose falls to pieces (28–29); the helmsman or navigator appears to operate at random, producing Wildsteuerstriche (wild-lubber-lines, 31); the ropes knot themselves into snakes; the stars are not in the sky but in the abyss (44), suggesting that the journey undertaken here is distorted, everted, out of joint.

This ambivalence returns to the calling into question of the quest to exceed finitude that I read as Celan’s temporally and historically specific form of engagement with problems of orientation within that finitude. I have argued that the poem itself offers a fragmentary and vulnerable but nonetheless communicative language in which it registers the wounds and lacks of individual as well as historical experience and memory. In the epilogue, I show that this process of language—first calling attention to its disorienting qualities and then using them to reorient the reader—can be understood with reference to several central elements of Celan’s poetology. Here, I offer the reciprocal indexing of language and experience as itself a mode of orientation between mind and world, individual and others; that is, as a preliminary example of what I am calling orientation in, with, and to language and the world as paradigmatically played out in lyric poetry.

In the first chapter, I argue for skepticism as an appropriate point of entry into the general anthropological problems of finitude I read as paradigmatically treated by lyric poetry. The second and fourth chapters locate Hölderlin and Rilke in the respective discourses engaged with the struggle over finitude in their eras, thus framing those problems in temporally specific ways, before showing how both poets write against the solutions proposed by those discourses, giving individually specific responses to the problems of finitude identified by their contemporaries. The third and fifth chapters then draw on the projects and goals for poetry delineated

23. “‘The ‘Freitaue’ . . . appear ‘schlangenköpfig,’ a term that echoes the serpentine image of evil and victimization from Celan’s ‘Todesfuge’ ” (Zorach and Melin, “Columbian Legacy,” 289).
in response to the problems of finitude to show how such projects and the struggles they express are taken up in poetic form. The volume concludes by returning to Celan, to sketch the difficulties Celan identifies for poetic production and to explain how those difficulties may be read as further instantiations of the problems of orientation within finitude in a new historical horizon, demonstrating that efforts at acknowledgment and the inhabitation of finite subjectivity can and do go on through the twentieth century.