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## Paul Celan's Linguistic Mysticism

### Abstract

Paul Celan's works often seem to grant to language an autonomy that isolates poetic from extra-poetic concerns, including religious ones. The status of language in Celan, however, should be assessed in the context of its status within Judaic mysticism. While the importance of mysticism for Celan has been recognized, the degree to which Judaic mysticism differs from other mystical traditions has been less so. This is especially true with regard to the place given to language in the Kabbalah, and the structures and assumptions that its conception of language implies. Of importance to Celan, for example, is the Kabbalistic notion that language is the very substance constituting creation. By examining such Judaic mystical motifs in several Celan poems, this essay attempts to show that Celan's preoccupation with language does not entail a withdrawal into a self-enclosed linguistic world, and that ultimately his religious concerns are intimately involved with his aesthetic ones.

### Keywords

Paul Celan, German Literature, religious, religion, Judaic mystics, Kabbalah, creation, language, poetry, linguistics, aesthetics

## PAUL CELAN'S LINGUISTIC MYSTICISM

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Paul Celan is an example. Critics of culture cite him as an extreme instance of our period's hermetic, self-referential art. To T. W. Adorno, Celan is the foremost representative of a poet whose expressed program is "the sealing of the artwork against empirical reality";<sup>1</sup> to George Steiner, he is the epitome of the "deepening privacy," "hermeticism," and "autism" of poetry in which "language is focused on language as in a circle of mirrors."<sup>2</sup> Celan's work in some sense appears as the fulfillment of the movement initiated by Mallarmé of making the world into a book—as Celan himself describes it, "to think through the consequences of Mallarmé to their end."<sup>3</sup>

Celan scholars, however, have come to question this identification of Celan's project with that of Mallarmé. According to Gerhard Neumann, for Mallarmé "language is first 'real,' is first concrete, if it has been released from the world of things"; whereas for Celan, "the isolation of language, its non-attainment of reality carries in itself the secret of an encounter with this reality."<sup>4</sup> Beda Allemann's discussions of Celan's work reflect a similar duality. Allemann insists both upon the "motive of seeking reality" in Celan's poetry, and upon linguistic autonomy, in which "through a lyrical reflection on language . . . the seeking for reality becomes transferred into a linguistic realm."<sup>5</sup> As he writes elsewhere, in Celan "language in an unmediated way itself comes to seem real and not a system of carriers of meaning meant to confront extra-linguistic reality."<sup>6</sup>

The problem posed by these discussions, which represent an attempt to reconcile Celan's own claim to write poetry "to orient myself, . . . to outline reality for myself" (*GW*, III, 186) with his self-reflexive poetic practice, extends into the question of the religious dimension of Celan's work. As Joachim Schulze points out, this is often seen as extra-poetic, and therefore as distinct from the poetry, which remains bounded by auto-reference.<sup>7</sup> Schulze assaults this

position, arguing against a notion of self-reflexive language that would eliminate all reference, and denying an a priori exclusion of the aesthetic by the religious (pp. 81-83). Centering his discussion especially around the role of Nothingness in Celan's work, Schulze rejects the assertion that the Nothing "refers to the poem itself and its execution in language," rejects the identification of Celan's Nothing with Mallarmé's, and instead refers it, through citation and allusion, to the mystical Nothing found in Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Jakob Boehme, as well as in the writings of Gershom Scholem (pp. 75, 79-80, 82-83).

Schulze thus persuasively urges the importance of a mystical context for reading Celan's work. In doing so, however, he overlooks what may be the most vital link between Celan's aesthetic and religious interests, a link which cannot, moreover, be referred to mystical tradition in general, but rather to one particular tradition of mysticism. For, while many mystical terms, such as the Nothing, may occur in diverse traditions, such terms may not retain the same significance from context to context. By conflating the writings of Gershom Scholem with those of such Christian mystics as Meister Eckhart, Schulze fails to distinguish among traditions which are in fact in many ways distinct.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when Schulze speaks of the mystical experience in which "man surrenders himself completely and divests himself of his ego" in order to "die . . . away in God," or when he invokes "the *sancta indifferentia* of the mystical tradition, [which] expresses one's death from worldly things in order to concentrate on more essential matters" (pp. 71, 79), Schulze assumes that all mystical traditions involve such experiences of self-surrender and indifference. But while different traditions may invoke a Nothing, not all relations to it idealize a loss of self and world. Indeed, the very function of Nothing shifts in accordance with its place within a complex system and alongside other mystical terms and notions. Such distinctions are essential to explicating Celan's work. The Judaic mysticism (as explicated by Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber)<sup>9</sup> which, above all, serves as Celan's context, differs significantly from the Christian mystical tradition. Moreover, how it does so has particular relevance to the status of religious experience within Celan's poetic; for the most distinctive and determining element in the Kabbalah and in Chassidism is language, which is granted a special role and status within Judaic mysticism. It is this privileged role of language that will define other distinctive features of Judaic mysticism, and of Celan's use of mystical tradition.

The following poem suggests both the importance of the Judaic mystical tradition to Celan's work and the status of language and other features which distinguish it:

Ich kann dich noch sehn: ein Echo,  
ertastbar mit Fühl-  
wörtern, am Abschieds-  
grat.

Dein Gesicht scheut leise,  
wenn es auf einmal  
lampenhaft hell wird  
in mir, an der Stelle  
wo man am schmerzlichsten Nie sagt. (*GW*, II, 275)

I can see you still: an echo  
palpable with feel-  
words, at the parting-  
ridge.

Your face shies gently, when all at once  
it becomes, lamplike, bright  
in me, at the place  
where one says the most painful never.<sup>10</sup>

As occurs so often in Celan, this poem takes the form of a dialogue. Nor must the "thou" of this poem be divine. In Celan, the person addressed varies, and is of less structural significance than the fact of address, than the situation of dialogue as such.<sup>11</sup> The situation of dialogue, however, is founded upon assumptions regarding the stance of the two interlocutors, their positions relative to each other; and the ultimate model for this stance, the basic pattern of this relation, is constituted by an address in which the auditor is divine—in a sense, one aspect of his divinity is this ultimacy as model and founding pattern. "The extended lines of relations meet in the eternal thou," writes Martin Buber. "Every particular thou is a glimpse through to the eternal thou."<sup>12</sup> This poem sustains a delicate ambiguity between any thou and the thou as divine.

Yet divinity as such is suggested, especially in the image of the face which "shies gently"—an image which may seem implausible for the divine, but which exactly registers the Judaic sense of the divine as

irrevocably separate, while at the same time accessible. Just as here the face is open, but hidden; withdrawn, but in a manner which invites; just as here it can still be seen, but as across a distance, at a parting-ridge; so too Judaism conceives of the relation between the divine and the human as one which retains the absolute distinction between the two, while nevertheless asserting them to be bound together. There is, as in the Celan poem, at once distance and proximity. "In Judaism, God is wholly raised above man, he is beyond the grasp of man, and yet he is present in an immediate relationship with these human beings who are absolutely incommensurable with him, and he faces them," writes Buber.<sup>13</sup> And elsewhere he writes: "Although God is definitely distinct from the world he is not in any way withdrawn from it," adding, in an image with importance for "Ich kann dich noch sehn," that God is both "distinct and radiating."<sup>14</sup> In the poem, then, it is at the parting ridge, when the face "shies gently" that "all at once it became, lamplike, bright in me."

This illumination takes place, moreover, in a space of negativity, of silence, "where one says the most painful never." Exactly where such an experience was thought to be impossible it comes to take place. The image affirms that Celan doubts its possibility, that for him dialogue remains tenuous, with the thou—and especially the divine thou—much less certain than it is for Buber;<sup>15</sup> indeed, in this poem, the sense of shying away, of never-saying, might seem to call dialogue as such into question. At the same time, however, the image affirms Celan's hopes, ultimately reiterating the balance of revelation and concealment implicit in the face's gesture. For, within the configuration established by this poem, as well as that established by the uses of negation throughout Celan's work, the "never" acquires a particular position and force. That light flares from it evokes in Celan the whole realm of the Nothing which is, in the Kabbalah, the center of all revelation. The "never" is painful in accordance with Celan's own uncertain relation to the God that he designates by negation but who here, as in the Kabbalah, is at last felt. There the idea of the imageless and formless God familiar to all Judaism, who is never fully disclosed although his will is expressed, is called the *Ein-Sof*, the mystical Nothing. Of this Nothing, Scholem writes:

Only to us does it present no attributes because it is beyond the reach of intellectual knowledge. . . . It signifies the Divine itself in its most impenetrable guise. And, in fact, creation out of

nothing means to many mystics just creation out of God. Creation out of nothing thus becomes a symbol of emanation.<sup>16</sup>

In Celan's poem, too, out of the "never" comes light. And yet it is not only light that has come forth. "The process which the Kabbalists described as the emanation of divine energy and divine light," writes Scholem, "was also characterized as the unfolding of divine language."<sup>17</sup> Here, too, it is as word that the light appears. Celan can "see" the "thou"; but he does so as "an echo," with "feel-words." The linguistic imagery is integral to the whole movement of the poem and of the relation inscribed within it. Language above all represents what Buber calls a "double stance" of "distance and relation." As he explains, "Man alone speaks, for only he can address the other just as the other being standing at a distance over against him; but in addressing it, he enters into relationship" (*Way of Response*, p. 104).

This relationship with God, which is not interpenetration, constitutes dialogue. Emmanuel Lévinas, himself concerned with Celan and with the whole movement of thought of which Celan is a part, makes this a central premise as well. To him language constitutes a relation in which each interlocutor remains separate, distinct, and to some degree concealed. "The relationship of language," he writes, "implies transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors, the revelation of the other to me."<sup>18</sup> Revelation is itself a term of counterpoint, to be distinguished from full disclosure, or from representation. Instead, it implies expression, expression as language (rather than as full presence, image) which "precisely maintains the other to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon or invokes" (p. 73). The face, as Lévinas calls this revelation-which-is-not-disclosure, does not fully show itself. Instead, it announces itself: "The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse . . . presence more direct than visible manifestation, and at the same time a remote presence—that of the other" (p. 73). Thus, in Celan's poem, the face "shies gently," as an "echo."

Just how this vision differs from that of other mysticisms can be glimpsed when it is compared, for example, with the famous mystical vision recounted by St. Augustine in the ninth book of his *Confessions*:

And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and

straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then, with a sigh, leaving our spiritual harvest bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending—far, far different from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself for ever, yet never grows old and gives new life to all things.<sup>19</sup>

St. Augustine here, as often in his writings, employs linguistic imagery in order to describe an encounter with the divine realm; how he does so reflects structures implicit in his conception of the Godhead's relation to man. For, what he presents as the ultimate religious experience—to reach out and touch the eternal Wisdom—assumes a proximity with transcendence before which Celan stops short, and against which Judaic tradition guards. As one commentary on the verse “And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai” (Ex. 19:20) warns: “One might think that the Glory actually descended from heaven and was transferred to Mount Sinai, but . . . neither Moses nor Elijah ever went up to heaven, nor did the Glory ever come down to earth.”<sup>20</sup> According to Gershom Scholem, even within mystical circles,

it is only in extremely rare cases that ecstasy signifies actual union with God, in which the human individuality abandons itself to the rapture of complete submersion in the divine stream. Even in the ecstatic frame of mind, the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and His creature. . . . Many writers deliberately place [their notion of communion] above any form of ecstasy which seeks the extinction of the world and the self in the union with God.<sup>21</sup>

But the distinction upon which Judaic tradition insists is exactly that which Christian mysticism strives to overcome. Meister Eckhart, for example, whose works Celan directly cites,<sup>22</sup> repeatedly emphasizes how “Jesus is united with [the soul] and it with him and it shines and glistens with him as a single One and as a pure clear light in the heart of the Father.” And in one of his numberless references to St. Augustine, he discusses how even with the senses, which provide man with likenesses, “the soul is completely united with God in image and likeness, if it touches upon him in right knowledge.”<sup>23</sup>

This union is, moreover, inexpressible—“[what] no one can



really grasp in words"; "[what] is free from all names and stripped of all forms, completely and utterly free," as Meister Eckhart describes it.<sup>24</sup> Or, in the terms provided by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, "the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending" contrasts against the experience of union with "your word, our Lord, who abides in himself for ever" (Bk. 11, p. 259). Language inevitably unfolds in time, is "speech in which each part comes to an end when it has been spoken, giving place to the next" (Bk. 11, p. 259). But in the divine Word "all is uttered at one and the same time, yet eternally" (Bk. 11, p. 259); "the eternal word remains in itself. . . . It is equally in God, and it is nothing but a single moment, . . . a true eternity."<sup>25</sup> The ultimate representation of union with the eternal, i.e. what would represent its status as beyond representation, would not be language, but silence. What Margaret Ferguson writes of St. Augustine applies no less to Meister Eckhart, and indeed to Christian mysticism in general:

For Augustine, no sequence of words can adequately represent an atemporal and holistic significance. . . . Language is essentially inadequate . . . because its structural dissimilarity from its eternal referent is manifested by its inability to reveal except by a temporal process, not by an instantaneous unveiling.<sup>26</sup>

The Christian mystic's goal of union with a divinity defined as atemporal totality thus relegates language to an inferior metaphysical position. Language, caught within the temporal realm which the mystic wishes to transcend, can never represent this transcendence. At most, it can serve as a trope for what is beyond language, for an ultimacy which excludes it and, indeed, compared with which it remains fallen.

In contrast, in Judaic tradition and mysticism as well, it is language which is granted an elevated status. The tales of the Chassidim which Martin Buber, as Celan remarks, "has retold to all of us in German" (*GW*, III, 185), makes this point repeatedly. In response to a disciple who wishes to avoid the "vanity of speech" in favor of exclusive prayer, one Rabbi warns that then "not a word of your own reaches the world of truth." Another tale records the ecstasy of a Rabbi over the introductory phrases "And God Said," or "And God spoke."<sup>27</sup> As Buber explains, while "silence is held in honor . . . silence is not the ultimate. 'Learn to keep silent, in order that you may

know how to speak,' says a zaddik."<sup>28</sup> Gershom Scholem in turn underscores that the Kabbalists accept a "superabundantly positive delineation of language as the 'mystery revealed' of all things that exist," and as the medium "in which the spiritual life of man is accomplished, or consummated."<sup>29</sup> Rather than being excluded from the relation to the divine, language is the medium in which that relation takes place. And this is exactly because language is external and temporal; for man, too, is distinct from God and is a temporal being—conditions which he cannot overcome and does not seek to do so. Language respects and represents that absolute distinctness, while equally asserting a relation across and in terms of it.

Jewish mysticism further develops this status of language as the mode and the paradigm of relation between the human and the divine. And its linguistic mysticism helps to situate its mystical Nothing as well. Meister Eckhart asserts, as do many mystics, that "God is not Being . . . [that] he works in Non-beings." But whatever he means by this—that God contains rather than is contained by being; that God, as he suggests, is not being because he is beyond the earthly—Meister Eckhart still concludes: "The man who wishes to come to the highest goal, who wishes to be forever in God's presence, forever truly near to him, . . . must lift himself above all earthly things."<sup>30</sup> Jewish mysticism, however, insists on situating man exactly among earthly things—as Buber records in one Chassidic tale, "I do not want the rungs of the spirit without the garment of flesh" (*Tales*, II, 179)—while the God who remains beyond and remote can be called the Nothing. And what links the two to each other is, again, exactly language. In this structure, language unfolds from a divine speaker who remains hidden and other in transcendence, but who expresses himself in his utterance. And that utterance is ultimately the world itself. In "I can see you still," the "echo" is called "ertastbar," palpable. Language is reified, granted an ontological status, while the other remains beyond the categories of ontology.

Such reification of language is persistent through Celan's work, and indeed, is implicit in his whole linguistic model. This reification is, as well, one of the earliest and most pervasive structures of Jewish mysticism. Writes Scholem:

All creation—and this is an important point for most Kabbalists—is, from the point of view of God, nothing but an

expression of His hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation. All that lives is an expression of God's language. (*Major Trends*, p. 17)

And Buber, writing of Chassidism, declares:

God in all concreteness as speaker, the creation as speech: God's call into nothing and the answer of things through their coming into existence, the speech of creation enduring in the life of all creation, the life of each creature as dialogue, the world as word—to proclaim this Israel existed. (*Origins*, p. 91)

The reification of language expressed here has far-reaching implications. It suggests that man, in experiencing the world as significant and signifying, encounters the world linguistically; and in such linguistic encounter, he also encounters God. The world as divine utterance is the world as revelation. Creation becomes an expression of God, linked to him as the letters of his name. But God himself remains beyond, in himself—in one sense as negation, while negation becomes a center out of which creation emerges, as we see in another Celan poem:

Fahlstimmig, aus  
der Tiefe geschunden:  
kein wort, kein Ding, und beider einziger Name,

fallgerecht in dir,  
fluggerecht in dir,

wunder Gewinn  
einer Welt. (*GW*, II, 307)

Palevoiced, torn  
out of the depths:  
no word, no thing  
and both the unique name,

fall-fair in you,  
flight-fair in you,

wounded winnings  
of the world.

The Nothing, here, is not even cited. It is only referred to as “depths” of “no word, no thing.” Nothing can be predicated of this nothing. God, in his unknowable, absolute aspect is not, as Lévinas explains, an “intelligible essence.” He is instead an Other who “is not under a category. . . . He has only a reference to himself; he has no quiddity” (*Totality*, pp. 297, 69). Buber, too, refers to an Other, and insists that God as Other is not a “quintessence” but an “absoluteness.” “God is not spirit,” he writes. “But what we call spirit and what we call nature hail equally from the God who is beyond and equally unconditioned by both.”<sup>31</sup> The Kabbalah names this transcendence a mystical Nothing, which is not, as Scholem states, a “true subject.” It precedes being, but is the “Origin of Being, the Beginning of which the first word of the Bible speaks” (*Major Trends*, pp. 221, 218).

How this Nothing became something is the process that “Fahlstimmig” traces, presenting a movement which, in its similarity, must call to mind the Kabbalistic equation of creation from nothing with creation from God. Celan, commencing from the “no word, no thing” which precedes being, arrives at “wounded winnings/of a world.” The Godhead itself, the Nothing, cannot be known or seen. He remains an Other, forever beyond. He is the ultimate transcendence. But the winnings of a world which proceed from him stand in relation to him: “fall-fair in you,/flight-fair in you.” Everything flows in a double movement toward and from the source out of which all words and things come. The movement is both descent and ascent, falling and flight. For the path which comes from the source opens a path back toward it as well. And the movement is linguistic. The negation becomes “the unique name,” a “name” torn from the depths in a distant and dimly perceived verbal motion: “palevoiced.” Even the violence of the image of tearing with which the poem begins, and of wounding with which it ends, recalls the disturbances envisioned in many Kabbalistic creation myths. But the name then constitutes creation, and is finally experienced as the world itself, a winning, though hardly won.

The significance of Celan’s linguistic imagery emerges here. By conceiving of the divine in terms of the Nothing, the divine in itself is removed from human knowledge. Instead, the divine as it unfolds in—as it relates to—the world of human experience becomes the focus of

attention. "The real communion of man with God not only has its place in the world, but also its subject" (*Origin*, p. 94), Buber writes. And Buber emphasizes that this is so exactly because the divine itself remains beyond: "That He reveals Himself and that He hides Himself belong indivisibly together: but for His concealment His revelation would not be real and temporal."<sup>32</sup> This revelation which is real and temporal is described and implied above all in linguistic terms. In the imagery of the Kabbalah, revelation as language expresses the divine nature precisely as it "pertained to creation and insofar as it was able to manifest itself through creation" (*Kabbalah*, p. 170).

Not negativity, then, not silence and the ineffable, but language determines the space of this poem and of Celan's poetic. Negativity and silence are in Judaic, as in other, mysticisms, in some sense ultimate, designating transcendence and the divine. But it is this very transcendence which, in another sense, excludes the poet from its sphere—both actually and as an ideal or goal. The poet's realm is, instead, exactly that of linguistic activity—a focus and insistence that ultimately distinguishes Celan's from other mysticisms. For, in Celan's context a concern with the ineffable is balanced by the sacredness and power of utterance, which at once represents the distinction between the beyond and the world and asserts the presence of the former in the latter.

That presence is finally felt in terms of the order, the coherence, with which the world as utterance unfolds. To say that language is reified as world is to experience the world as ordered language, as language ordered because it is spoken by the divine, in the order that the divine established within creation. The Kabbalists expressed this idea in terms of the Sefirot, the ten Names of God through which the world was created:

Things were created in a specific order, since creation was intentional, not accidental. This order, which determines all the processes of creation and of generation and decay, is known as Sefirot, "the active power of each existing thing numerically defineable." Since all created things come into being through the agency of the Sefirot, the latter contain the root of all change, although they all emanate from the one principle, Ein-Sof, "outside of which there is nothing." (Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 100)

In Celan, this question of linguistic/world order is most crucial. At stake is not only the reality of the divine, but that reality as it governs, gives meaning, and makes coherent the life of man. For the world to hold together, language must bind it. For the world to be comprehensible, language must articulate it, thing by thing. The problem of order is implied in the whole conception of the world as letters, and in the many Celan poems governed by this conception:

WAS NÄHT  
an dieser Stimme? Woran  
näht diese  
Stimme  
diesseits, jenseits?

Die Abgründe sind  
eingeschworen auf Weiss, ihnen  
entstieg  
die Schneenadel,

schluck sie,

du ordnest die Welt,  
das zählt  
soviel wie neun Namen,  
auf Knien genannt,

Tumuli, Tumili,  
du  
hügelst hinweg, lebendig,  
komm  
in den Kuss,

ein Flossenschlag,  
stet,  
lichtet die Buchten,  
du gehst  
vor Ander, dein Schatten  
streift dich ab im Gebüsch,

Ankunft,  
Abkunft,

ein Käfer erkennt dich,  
ihr steht euch  
befor,  
Raupen  
spinnen euch ein,

die Grosse  
Kugel  
gewährt euch den Durchzug,

bald  
knüpft das Blatt seine Ader an deine,  
Funken  
müssen hindurch,  
eine Atemnot lang,

es steht dir ein Baum zu, ein Tag,  
er entziffert die Zahl,  
ein Wort, mit all seinem Grün,  
geht in sich, verpflanzt sich,

folg ihm (Complete German text.) (*GW*, II, 340)

What sews  
this voice? What does  
the voice  
sew,  
here, beyond?

The abysses are  
sworn in white, out of them  
emerges  
the snow-needle,  
  
swallow it,

you order the world,  
that counts  
as many as nine names  
named kneeling. . . .

The opening of this poem emphasises how “you order the world.” Order is presented as an image of a voice sewing, both “here” and “beyond.” Out of the abysses emerges a snow-needle, which is also, as in “Fahlstimmig,” a voice. But here it is specifically active as an ordering principle, stitching the world together. The voice creates a world “that counts as many as nine names, names kneeling”—counts the Names whose letters form the world. That Celan only cites nine names, rather than the full Sephirothic ten, suggests an interruption. One of the names has been separated. It has failed to be integrated into the order.

This sense of separation is augmented in the next stanza:

Tumuli, Tumuli,  
you  
hill that way, living,  
come in the kiss. . . .

The meaning of this passage is obscure. But within the context of other poems, “Tumuli,” funeral mounds, inevitably suggest the war dead. The war is an incursion into the sequence which an ordered world should have, a disruption of divine power. “Der Herr dieser Stunde war ein Wintergeschöpf, ihm zulieb geschah, was geschah” (“The lord of this hour was a winter creature, what happened happened for his sake”), Celan writes in “Am Weissen Gebetreimen” (*GW*, II, 44). There he also speaks of “Spaltworte,” (“split words”) just as he speaks in “What sews” of only nine names. With the terrible interruption of war, the whole fabric of creation threatens to tear apart, the whole linguistic sequence to become garbled.

Celan’s opus threads its way between the possibility of such a shattering and an attempt to resist it. In “What sews” however, the positive impulse toward sustaining the order has ascendancy. Even through the “Tumuli” the poet affirms “you hill that way, living,” and bids the “thou,” “come in the kiss.” The center of the poem then asserts the continued power and presence of the *du* throughout creation:



a flowingbeat,  
 constant,  
 lights the bays,  
 you go  
 from the anchor, your shadow  
 brushes you off in the bushes,

advent,  
 descent,

a beetle recognizes you,  
 it stands before  
 you,  
 the caterpillar  
 enwebs you,

The large  
 globe  
 allows you a passage. . . .

This is, like Psalm 104, a roster of divine power and glory. God is the lord of light, of water, of growing plants, of small creeping things. His is a power "flowingbeat, constant" ever present. "Living creatures both small and great, . . . all of them wait for Thee," says the Psalmist. And Celan writes: "a beetle recognizes you, . . . the caterpillar enwebs you." The whole world, "The large globe," continually sustains the Lord's "passage."

But at the poem's end, Celan reintroduces the problem of incompleteness. He recognized that the world's order has been displaced, by calling for a further process by which every part will again be restored to an encompassing harmony:

soon  
 the leaf joins its vein to yours,  
 sparks  
 must go through,  
 one panting breath long

a tree is your right, one day  
 it deciphers the number

one word, with all its greenness,  
goes into itself, transplants itself,

follow it

Three central Kabbalistic images are invoked in this conclusion: the tree, light, and language. Each describes the relation between God's unfolding and the Godhead transcendent to this unfolding. These images are already well-developed in the *Zohar*. They acquire, however, a particular urgency in the Lurianic Kabbalah which arose after the expulsion from Spain. In the face of that catastrophe, special attention was given to the problem of evil and redemption. Clearly the world was in disorder, and the Kabbalists became preoccupied with the means by which it could be restored. This was conceived in cosmic terms: the disruption of order occurred in the process of creation itself, which, since that time, has been a harmony disturbed. The whole world-process is directed towards restoring the original order. Restoration is Celan's concern, as well, in the conclusion of "What sews." The first image, "soon the leaf joins its vein to yours," points toward a reestablished tie between the leaf and the root which, through the "vein," nourishes it—as the branches of the Tree of God all have a common root in the *Ein-Sof* (Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 214). The next image, "Sparks must go through, one panting breath long," is specifically Lurianic. The cosmic trauma which shattered the order of creation Luria describes as a dispersion of divine sparks, which must be regathered if the order is to be reinstated. Here, they endure their dispersion "one panting breath long," an image which combines the light of sparks to language as breath. Celan then introduces an image of language itself, in terms of the numerical value of each letter, finally deciphered—"it deciphers the number"—and in conjunction with the image of the tree—"one word, with all its greenness goes into itself, transplants itself." The word, green as a leaf, transplanted as a tree, moves towards restoration as well. Such linguistic restoration is another powerful Lurianic image: "The Tikkun (restoration) restores the unity of God's name which was destroyed by the original defect—Luria speaks of the letters JH as being torn away from WH in the name JHWH (Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 275). "What sews" traces the path by which all the different divine manifestations reunite, and by which these manifestations achieve once more their harmony, restoring and redeeming the

world. It is a path which the poet points himself towards. Of the transplanted, re-blossoming "Word," Celan writes, "follow it."

Celan here is reaching towards a conceptual structure which would allow the meaning that transcendence bestows to be experienced in terms of the present world. As language, the world would remain grounded in the transcendent as the source of order. But meaning itself would be felt within the order of concrete and temporal reality. The above and below would remain distinct. The world would not be transcended. Instead, in language the value established by transcendence would be drawn into the imminent world. Value does not so much reside in a transcendent realm as proceed from transcendence into the world of phenomena, where it functions as the order of concrete things, in and, so to speak, as linguistic utterance. This order continues to have a transcendent source, but is defined and felt within the temporal world—that is, exactly within the world as and of language. The priority of silence as participation in an absolute and ineffable meaning transforms into a definition of meaning as articulation through time, and in phenomena as language—that is, as standing in relation to an absolute which remains absolutely distinct from it, but which expresses itself as articulate order.

Celan's poetry thus does not attempt to displace speech for an absolute language, as Peter Horst Neumann, for instance, claims: "Celan's poetry strives after the language of the absolute, the language of a 'wholly Other,' and thus adopts the difficulties of every mystical discussion, in which speech withdraws itself in order to give way to the absolute speech."<sup>33</sup> Neumann is citing Celan's assertion in his "Meridan Speech" that:

it has always belonged to the expectations of the poem, in precisely this manner to speak in the cause of the strange—no, I can no longer use this word—in precisely this manner to speak in the cause of the Other—who knows, perhaps in the cause of a wholly Other. (*GW*, III, 196)

But Celan here declares that the poem speaks "in the cause of the Other," not that it displaces itself in order to represent the Other directly. Rather than attempting an absolute speech, it speaks only "in precisely this manner," a manner which Celan specifies earlier as "remaining mindful of its dates," of speaking only in its own particular case" (*GW*, III, 196). The dates and the particularity of concrete

temporal phenomena are the very medium in which the poem takes place and in which it takes its stance regarding the other. The other—whether individual or absolute Other—can be faced only through “careful attention in everything it encounters,” through a “finer sense of detail,” that is, “Wahnehmenden” and “Erscheinenden,” perceptions and appearances (*GW*, III, 198). And Celan insists:

Not, then, the abstract concept of speech, but language become reality, language set free under the sign of an individuation which is radical, yet at the same time remains mindful of the boundaries established for it by language, of the possibilities laid open for it by language. (*GW*, III, 198)

Celan's, then, is a poetic which cannot be identified with an attempt to represent the ineffable. While silence and negation may designate the Other as beyond speech, as Other, it is language that remains the mode of relation to it—whether through the words of the poem or, as for the Kabbalists, as literally the phenomenal world itself. In this sense as well Celan's ultimately is not a poetic of self-reference, a “speaking as detour, through which the poem tries to attain itself, to win itself,” as Gerhard Buhr, for example claims.<sup>34</sup> As Joachim Schulze, quoting Celan's remarks for the *Librairie Flinker*, insists, Celan considers his own lyricism as taking a different direction from Mallarmé's concept of the “oeuvre pure,” that in it “it is never language itself that is operative, but always an ‘I’ which speaks from a special vantage point of its existence (“Celan,” p. 77). Celan's linguistic interest is never simply directed towards itself, towards a self-enclosed poetic realization; rather, as Celan declares, “The poem wants towards the other, it needs this other, it searches for him, it addresses itself to him” (*GW*, III, 198). But neither this dialogical structure, nor the poetry's linguistic self-consciousness, can finally be separated from the religious context. Indeed, the concern with language, in the context of kabbalistic linguistic mysticism, is exactly a concern with reality, is exactly, as Celan describes his verse, “Wirklichkeit suchend,” reality seeking (*GW*, III, 186). There is no question here of the aesthetic as against the religious. Language has a religious status within Judaism; and, within the Kabbalah, language itself, in a sense, constitutes reality, the letters of the alphabet comprising the world and also the divine Names, thus linking the two together.

That relation can become disrupted. The linguistic order which Celan in his poetry seeks can elude him, bringing his verse to the verge of silence. Yet against such silence his verse no less strains. In its stead, it attempts, not the ineffable, but to assert a relation to an Other absolute and beyond it, but nevertheless in relation to it. And the concrete, the particular, the temporal—the immanent world of human activity—all these are insisted upon as the sphere of language and the mode of creative endeavor. “Abstract, yet earthly, terrestrial” Celan calls this language, insisting, in a passage which Emmanuel Lévinas in his own essay on Celan no less insists upon, that “the absolute poem—it does not exist, it cannot exist.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, the poem is “underway” towards an Other in a linguistic movement which the Other stands beyond, but through which it also brings its otherness along into the present. The Other, both distant and proximate, other and accessible, is, through language, a “not entirely remote, a quite near Other” (*GW*, III, 197).

## NOTES

1. Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), p. 475.
2. George Steiner, *Extraterritorial* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 164.
3. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* (Allemann-Reichert, 1983), III, 193. Hereafter cited as *GW* followed by volume and page number. All translations of Celan's prose result from consultations with Jerry Glenn's translations in *Paul Celan: Prose Writings and Selected Poems* (Victoria, Australia: The Paper Castle, 1977).
4. Gerhard Neumann, “Die ‘absolut’ Metapher. Ein Abgrenzungsversuch am Beispiel Stephane Mallarmé's und Paul Celan's,” *Poetica*, 3 (1970), 199, 209.
5. Beda Allemann, “Das Gedicht und Seine Wirklichkeit,” *Etudes Germaniques*, No. 3 (Juillet-Sept. 1970), pp. 266, 270.
6. Beda Allemann, “Zu Paul Celans neuem Gedichtband *Atemwende*,” in *Über Paul Celan*, ed. Dietland Meinecke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), p. 196.
7. Joachim Schulze, “Celan and the ‘Stumbling Block’ of Mysticism,” *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 8, No. 1 (Fall, 1983).
8. This tendency to conflate divergent religious and mystical traditions in discussions

of Celan can be seen as well in Wilhem Höck, "Von welchem Gott ist die Rede?" in *Über Paul Celan*.

9. Besides the rich internal evidence that Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber constitute Celan's most important sources in Judaica, there is the assertion by Scholem himself, when I posed this question to him, that "in order to understand Celan's Judaic background, read Scholem and Buber as Celan did."

10. English translations of Celan's verse presented here result from consultations with translations by Michael Hamburger, and above all reflect the generous help of Amy Colin.

11. For the frequency of the dialogue form in Celan's work, see James K. Lyon, "Paul Celan and Martin Buber: Poetry as Dialogue," *PMLA*, 86, No. 1 (1971), 115. Lyon also argues that dialogue is more important to Celan as a structural principle than in terms of the particular objects it addresses, which can vary.

12. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 75.

13. Martin Buber, *The Way of Response* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 183.

14. Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 6.

15. Lyon carefully draws such distinctions between Buber's and Celan's uses of dialogue in his article on "Paul Celan and Martin Buber," p. 113.

16. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1974), p. 89.

17. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 35.

18. Emmanuel Lévinas *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 73.

19. St. Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), BK. 9, p. 197.

20. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. J. Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), II, 224.

21. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 123.

22. Werner Weber, "Zum Gedicht 'Du sei wie du,'" in *Über Paul Celan*, p. 279.

23. Meister Eckhart, "Von der Empfängnis Gottes in der Seele," *Predigten und Schriften*, ed. F. Heer (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei, 1956), pp. 200, 205. The texts in German read: "Jesus ist mit [die Seele] vereint und sie mit ihm, und sie leuchtet und glänzt mit ihm wie ein einziges Eins und wie ein lauterer klares Licht in dem Herzen des Vaters"; "die Seele ganz mit Gott vereint in bild und in Gleichnis, wenn sie ihn anrührt in rechter Erkenntnis."

24. Meister Eckhart, pp. 200, 202: "[was] niemand sie ganz in Worte fassen kann";

"[was] ist won allen Namen frei und von allen Formen bloss, ledig und ganz und gar frei."

25. Meister Eckhart, "Vernunft zieht gott die Hülle seiner Güte ab und nimmt ihn bloss," p. 190: "das ewige Wort in sich selbst verbleibt"; "Empfängnis Gottes," p. 201: Die sind gleich in Gott, und es ist nichts als ein einziges Nu, . . . eine gleiche Esigkeit."

26. Margaret W. Ferguson, "Saint Augustine's Region of Unlikeness: the Crossing of Exile and Language," *The Georgia Review*, 29 (1975), 844.

27. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), II, 228; I, 236.

28. Martin Buber, *Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), p. 230.

29. Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes*, 79/80, (1972), 62, 60.

30. Meister Eckhart, "Vernunft," pp. 186-89: "Gott sei kein Sein, . . . [das] er wirkt im Nichtsein"; "Der Mensch, der zum höchsten Ziele Kommen will, der soll . . . immer in Gottes Gegenwart, immer bei ihm und ihm gleich nahe, erhaben über all irdischen Dinge . . . sein."

31. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1952), p. 90; *Way of Response*, p. 28.

32. Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 130.

33. Peter Horst Neumann, *Zur Lyrik Paul Celans* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), p. 78.

34. Gerhard Buhr, *Celans Poetik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), p. 87.

35. Emmanuel Lévinas, "Being and the Other: On Paul Celan," *The Chicago Review*, 29, No. 3. (Winter 1978), 21.