

## “FOR YOU, ALONE”: CELAN, LEVINAS AND THE POETICS OF PROXIMITY

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*The world is gone, I must carry you.*

-- Paul Celan, “Vast, Glowing Vault”

Considered to be monumental poetic manifestos of the twentieth century, Paul Celan’s “Meridian” (1960) and “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the First Hanseatic City of Bremen” (1958) reflect on the historicity and significance of poetry following the age of “terrifying silence” by evoking the memory of the Nazi pogroms. While Celan’s statements elucidate the nexus of memory, consciousness, mortality and language, they equally render “what must be said about poetry after Heidegger,” namely Celan’s claim that the latter’s philosophical reflections are inadequate in fully understanding the essence of language after Nazi despotism.<sup>i</sup> Heidegger’s failure to rethink language was sharply intensified by Adorno’s famed proscription: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is *barbaric*.”<sup>ii</sup> For Adorno, the unspeakable nature of Nazi atrocities marked the incorrigible collapse of signification and exposed the limits of representation. In response, Celan discerned that poetry had the important task of excavating a relational language from the symbolic debris of post-Nazi Europe; that is, rather than turning inward to the self, it was imperative that language enter “a sphere directed toward the human [...that] which concerns another; someone entirely Other.”<sup>iii</sup> Seen from this perspective, critic Pierre Joris declares that “Celan turned Adorno’s remarks concerning Auschwitz and poetry in such a manner as to suggest that *only* poetry is possible after Auschwitz.”<sup>iv</sup>

Celan’s prose statements thus retreat from clumsy philosophical efforts to understand the role language plays in the post-Shoah world to assert that language is precisely what is needed after human loss, and that modern catastrophe should not immobilize humans with aphasia, or speechlessness, but mark an emphatic movement toward language and, by extension, the ‘call’ of the other’s suffering. Celan is not so naïve as to understand the poetic task as a kind of transhistorical remedy for “rebuilding human relations” as they existed prior to catastrophe, or that poetry can simply fill the lacunae of traumatic memory and testimony.<sup>v</sup> But the effort can, in the words of critic Christopher Fynsk, “bring a mute language into speech (but in its muteness), to work in its *proximity*, and to bring forth from this proximity (which is also a distance) what language still offers of relation, what remains.”<sup>vi</sup> To illustrate this latter observation, Celan writes in his “Meridian” speech:

Only one thing remained close and reachable amid all losses: language.

Yes, language. In spite of everything it remained unlost [*sic*]. But it had to

go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through and gave no words for what happened; but it went through this event. It went through and could resurface, “enriched” by it all.<sup>vii</sup>

Celan’s curious use of the word “enriched” articulates the way language is imbricated and shaped by the historical events from which it has emerged. Enriched, Fynsk clarifies, does not suggest that language has been imbued or enhanced with deeper meaning, but through its passage within the dark annals of terrifying silence “it is given anew (it gives itself) in its temporal essence *as the possibility and necessity* of poetry in [. . .] time of radical loss-- that is, as the sole ground of relation.”<sup>viii</sup> In other words, this enriched language, charged with the anguish of remembrance, is always reenacting its survival as it empowers the possibility of encounter in linguistic space wherein beings can emerge in their alterity.

The “murderous speech” of Nazi condemnation, says Celan, obliterates human relation, language and encounter. He points out that language “*goes through*” one thousand darkneses, it is nevertheless sustained through its “*nearness*,” its “*going through*,” and emerging as a surviving presence “enriched” by the events of the Shoah. Significantly, Celan understands the survival of language “to be marked by a mode of temporality” - that is, by “going through” darkness and silence, it undergoes its own kind of “death” as it realizes its finite place within *time*.<sup>ix</sup> Relation, for Celan, is a “reaching” through time, a purely temporal movement toward the other. Fynsk is attuned to the various ways poetic relation takes shape in Celan’s writing:

The notion of *relation* has undergone a change for Celan, and with it the nature of the poetic task. Whereas the region of his origins constituted a kind of narrative space [...], and whereas it was possible for the aspiring writer to construct a topographical distribution of “literary” names marking *distance and proximity* (the reachable and unreachable), the destruction of this essentially linguistic region and the accompanying experience of language in which this destruction issues lead Celan to conceive of an entirely different structure of relation, one that is fundamentally temporal in nature.<sup>x</sup>

I quote the passage in its entirety because Fynsk clearly articulates how Celan imagines poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century: one that is grounded, he argues, on temporality and the radical restraints of time. “Even in the here and now of the poem,” writes Celan, “even in this immediacy and nearness, the poem lets the other speak with what is most proper to it: its time.”<sup>xi</sup> As he expresses in the Bremen address, Celan understands poetry as an intimate engagement with language - that is, the essence, or mystique of language is one that enables relation to the other. Indeed, the urgency captured in Celan’s verse -- the call, the cry of (for) the other -- is grounded on its temporal essence and the specific historical moment in which it is uttered.

Celan thus asserts “the task of the poet as one of seeking paths in the direction of what language gives of an opening to the other” and, as such, understands language as the bedrock of human relation.<sup>xii</sup> In the aftermath of Nazi despotism, Celan rethinks the fundamental role language plays in society, describing poetry as reaching through time toward an addressable “You”: “the poem intends the other, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, addresses it.”<sup>xiii</sup> To recapitulate his Bremen remarks, Celan offers a simple metaphor for the

complex role poetry plays in time of widespread radical loss: “A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the -- surely not always strong -- hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart.”<sup>xiv</sup> Celan’s metaphor lends itself to the sphere of ethics wherein questions of responsibility and survival arise: conjuring images of not only castaway and marooned human life, the metaphor alludes to human life banished from homeland or nation-state, displacement and forced, or self-imposed exile that voices need and suffering. In such cases, while poetry utters the other’s despair and the hope that another will listen and respond to that call, it equally underscores the cruel realities at stake in the call for the other. After all, the bottle may not reach its intended destination, or it may arrive on the shoreline of an unresponsive heart, which would obviate the “unfolding of poetic relation.”<sup>xv</sup>

This latter possibility raises crucial questions of Celan’s poetry at the intersection of human receptivity, answerability and injurability. In light of Fynsk’s valuable contributions to thinking about the notion of relation in the aftermath of modern catastrophe, this essay moves Celan’s writing into the territory of French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. In his seminal texts, “Peace and Proximity” and “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other,” Levinas provokes lively debate concerning how human subjects are ethically implicated in the lives of others, and examines the dynamics of human vulnerability and encounter as mutually reinforcing components of social life.

At the intersection of human encounter and language lies an implicit ethical quarrel that evokes Celan’s metaphor of the bottled message; that is, the act of reaching across time, through language, to the other in suffering, empowers a kind of ethical responsiveness. To clarify this view, the point of departure for Levinas’ thinking is the crucial moment at which Celan’s bottled message (the other’s call/response) is cast out to be read, or heard. In light of the quandary of the call, Levinas interrogates the possibilities and limits of responsiveness when we are confronted with the decision to act upon hearing the other’s utterance. Bringing Celan and Levinas together is a shared ethical logic, or awareness of how a post-Shoah ethics of encounter plays as role in Jewish survival. This essay, then, examines Celan’s writings through the lens of Levinas’ ethic of *proximity*, which, in turn, produces critical reflection on human suffering and responsibility at the juncture of radical loss.<sup>xvi</sup>

#### **Relation after “Murderous Speech”: Poetry and Proximity**

To fully understand the iterations of proximity in Celan’s poetry, this section of the essay will briefly trace the philosophical trajectory of the ethics of encounter, specifically as it is elaborated and revised in the thinking of Hegel and, most importantly, Levinas. The question of a relational ethics of encounter asks: how might subjects practice encounter without exercising control over the other? Furthermore, how might subjects encounter the other in a way that values difference, thus binding subjects morally to the other? Broadly speaking, philosophical notions of human encounter were critically interrogated following Nazi atrocities, since dominant articulations of humanism lacked the expository power to address widespread human suffering.

Thus, a nascent post-Shoah ethics sharply focused on human encounter as its point of departure. “Despite the innocence of its [post-Shoah ethics] intentions,” writes Levinas, philosophy addresses “[. . .] [t]he risk of occupying [. . .] the place of an other and thus, on the concrete level, of exiling him, of condemning him to a miserable condition in some ‘third’ or ‘fourth’ world, of bringing him death.”<sup>xvii</sup> Since Auschwitz, thinkers and writers alike grappled

with the modern crisis of human encounter and its significance for Jewish survival. Aside from writers, such as Celan, who were deeply invested in the aesthetics of “neighborly” relation (i.e. poetry), Jacques Derrida applauds the valuable labors of philosophy: “No one, however, has gone further than Levinas in dismantling the structure of pre-Auschwitz thought to articulate such a ‘new categorical imperative,’ and to restate the ethical a priori,” or what Derrida has aptly termed, “the Ethics of Ethics.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Derrida alludes to the archaic Kantian morality that Levinas supplants with his “new categorical imperative,” one in which valorizes encounter with the other. Levinas says:

It is . . . attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties) can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle -- the only one it is impossible to question.<sup>xix</sup>

Interestingly, Levinas uses an inclusive rhetoric (“human subjectivity,” “the other”) so as to suggest that the events of the Holocaust are not an exclusively Jewish quandary, but a broader human problem that calls for a re-conceptualized ethics of community. Likewise, Celan’s “Meridian” speech locates poetry at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics: “For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading [. . . the poem] turns, faces [the Other . . .] carries and sustains [. . .] responsibility for the neighbor, *for the other*.”<sup>xx</sup> For Celan, the poem possesses agency that moves it to act on behalf of the other, thus elevating it beyond mere passive and creative word play.<sup>xxi</sup>

Before parsing Levinas’ ethics it must be acknowledged that philosophical discussions concerning encounter stem from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, whose main principles are embedded in discourses of rational humanism.<sup>xxii</sup> For Hegel, when two subjects come together seeking recognition their encounter inevitably effects an aggressive negation; that is, the “I” (master) and “You” (slave) clash in a kind of primordial rivalry, for the self’s desire to vanquish the other serves as the necessary means to asserting its very own sovereignty. Critic Gisela Brinker-Gabler observes that Hegel’s dialectical relation has produced “socio-historical practices of exclusion. Any articulation of identity is always understood in terms of exclusion and estrangement and otherness [. . .]”<sup>xxiii</sup> In this way, Hegel’s principle of encounter perpetrates a kind of ethical violence as the struggle for recognition results in the triumph of the subject and the subordination of the other.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In light of Nazi genocide, Celan’s prize speeches express a departure from the master-slave encounter in favor of a notion of recognition that welcomes the other’s difference. According to Levinas, Celan’s poetry articulates a “pre-syntactic” and “pre-logical” notion of human encounter that weaves alterity into the fabric of not negative, but affirmative recognition.<sup>xxv</sup> This latter thought is best expressed in a statement from the “Meridian.” Describing poetry as the movement towards “something standing open, inhabitable,” Celan says the poem is at the center of “*the mystery of encounter*”: the “poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes towards, bespeaks it.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Seen from this perspective, dialectical confrontation ruptures this movement toward the other and thus the other’s freedom to articulate identity.

That Celan’s poetry depicts human encounter that departs from the Hegelian self/other struggle is striking considering his circumstances as a Jewish poet living in post-war Europe.

With the arrival of Nazi soldiers in Cernăuți, Romania in 1941, Celan was deported to a ghetto where he was forced into labor cleaning up the rubble of razed buildings and destroying Russian books. A year later his parents were deported to an internment camp in Transnistria where they perished. Distraught, lonely and orphaned, Celan relocated to Paris in 1948 where he continued writing poetry. Until his suicide in 1970, he often expressed the agony of writing poetry in the German language, the “mother” tongue of his oppressors. Indeed, a notion of recognition grounded on exclusion would be understandable considering the hardships Celan and countless other Jews experienced. On the contrary, Celan’s poetry reveals that social life after Auschwitz cannot be framed within Hegelian encounter; rather, social survival requires affirmative recognition and sustained dialogue.

Celan underpins this structure of recognition in his poem, “I am You,” a laconic, but powerful reflection echoing his earlier statement regarding the poem’s participation “in the mystery of encounter.” He writes:

I am you, when  
I am I.  
To stand for-no-one-and-nothing.  
Unrecognized, for you  
alone.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Stripped of the recognizable markers of human identity, Celan’s subjects stand as opaque figures on the stage of encounter. In this poem, the “I” opens itself, as it were, to the otherness of the “You.” Crucially, human encounter marks the origins of social life as the shaping of the subject’s consciousness is constituted in relation to the other’s external articulation of difference. Experiencing the other’s exteriority compels the “I” to establish its identity from that which is radically different from itself. Indeed, in the “Meridian” address Celan describes proximity as “two kinds of strangeness next to each other.” Because the “I” remains “unrecognized, for You” it does not signal a strangeness, or unfamiliarity that forestalls relation to this other, but a relational difference that allows the “I” to remain implicated in the life of the “You.” The encounter performed in Celan’s poem reinforces his words in the “Meridian”: the poem “allow[s] the ‘I’ to separate from itself [. . .] Discover a place in which the person, in grasping himself as a stranger [other] to himself, emerges.”<sup>xxviii</sup> To be sure, the poem demonstrates a post-Shoah ethic that morally binds the “I” to the “You” in an essence of mutual interdependency.

Bearing this in mind, Levinas, too, circumvents Hegel’s dyadic confrontation in favor of an ethics that hinges on “face-to-face” (*rappont de face à face*) encounter. This notion is first delineated in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) wherein Levinas asserts that an ethics “after Auschwitz” must separate ontology from metaphysics. The significance of this separation, says Levinas, develops an ethics inscribed not in historical or religious Law, but rather in the concrete alterity, or difference of the other.<sup>xxix</sup> This allows Levinas to establish a link between metaphysics and ethics that, in effect, grounds a new social ontology that cultivates in the Self a sense of responsibility for the Other.

For the purpose of this essay, it is beneficial to read Levinas’ “Peace and Proximity” (1984) in conjunction with his earlier commentary entitled, “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other” (1975). Written almost a decade before conceptualizing his notion of “proximity,” Levinas’ essay traces an ethical language of encounter throughout Celan’s writing, particularly the recurring rhetoric of ‘closeness,’ or relation between the nameless “I” and “You.” Celan’s

poetry, writes Levinas, is situated in relation to “proximity for proximity’s sake [. . . Poetry] is the moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing - which is, perhaps, a way of giving, right up to and including the hand that gives.”<sup>xxx</sup> Celan’s poetry, then, serves as the axis of Levinas’ ethics outlined in “Peace and Proximity” in which he writes: “The proximity of the neighbor -- the peace of proximity -- is the responsibility of the ego for an other.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Levinas clarifies this notion of “proximity” as follows:

[. . .] the proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself -- insofar as I am -- responsible for him. It is a structure that in no wise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object -- to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the other is known to me.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Simply stated, the ethical notion of proximity emphasizes the subject’s heightened sensitivity to the mortality and vulnerability of the other. Like the self/other encounter depicted in Celan’s poem, “I am You,” proximity does not necessarily concern the spatial dimensions of nearness, or that-which-is-close, but rather questions of interiority and exteriority; that is, proximity interrogates how the self understands and lives alongside otherness, and, the interrelation between difference and the role of encounter in subject formation. As such, Celan and Levinas arrive at a notion of proximity that is rendered both ethically and aesthetically, philosophically and poetically.

#### **“Sticks and Stones”: The Crisis of Response**

After tracing the various contours of ethical recognition throughout pre/post-Shoah thinking, this essay shifts focus to Celan’s writing that reflects on how dialogue mediates the scene of human encounter. It does so by contextualizing encounter with Celan’s peculiar representations of dialogue, particularly in “Radix, Matrix” and his prose piece entitled, “Conversation in the Mountains” (1960).<sup>xxxiii</sup> In these texts, Celan imagines desolate landscapes of rocky terrains wherein a human figure -- the anonymous “I” -- roams an empty land. This disembodied voice has “taken off into / the terrain” where it addresses and struggles to exact a response from inorganic forms, which are typically stones anthropomorphized by the nameless “You.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> In her seminal study, *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry of Paul Celan*, Rochelle Tobias traces the significance of similar geological motifs in Celan’s writing:

Geology is of significance for Celan’s poems inasmuch as it is the science of sediment, that is, the science of ash, dust, and sand, which is what remains of the victims of the Holocaust [. . .] these remains are buried in textual graves that are organized like a geological site with layers corresponding to different ages.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Celan’s poetry, says Tobias, presents a textual necropolis, a burial ground suspended in space and time. If we are to understand his poetry this way, Celan presents a haunting conceit of the palimpsest as the reader endlessly sifts through layers of dust to find traces of human life. In the process of doing so, Celan invents geological neologisms, such as “breathcrystal” (“Atemkristall”), “stonewritten shadows” (“Stein geschriebenen / Schatten”), “stonebreath” (“Steinatem”) and “winterhard syllables” (“winterhart-kalten / Silben”), which evoke surreal images of language, script or utterance that are enfolded in dense rock and ice. In this way,

Celan's readers are presented with a confounding problem of how one might extract "breath" from "crystal" or utterance from "winterhard" material or, most importantly, whether dialogue can be chiseled out after its passage "through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech."  
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Perhaps Celan's most compelling reflection on language and encounter appears in "Conversation in the Mountains," a brief prose narrative detailing Jew Gross' hike on a mountain trail while ruminating on the loss of dialogue and Jewish identity.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Leaving his cottage, Jew Gross begins his journey by rapping his walking stick against a stone, exclaiming: "[. . .] do you hear me, you hear me, I'm the one, I, I and the one that you hear, that you think you hear, I and the other one -- so he walked." Continuing, Jew Gross' rural peregrinations are interrupted when he recognizes his cousin, Jew Klein, "his kin [. . .] older by a quarter of a Jew's lifetime." The estranged relatives cannot break the awkward silence of their meeting: "The babblers!" sneers the narrator, "they've got, even now, with their tongues bumping dumbly against their teeth and their lips going slack [. . .]" Approaching his cousin, Gross notes that Klein "bade his stick be silent in front of Jew Gross's stick" and that "the stone was silent, too, and it was quiet in the mountains where they walked." In the midst of their silence, Klein also observes that: "[. . .] no word's going mute and no phrase, it's merely a pause, it's a word gap, it's a vacant space, you see the syllables all standing around; tongue is what they are and mouth, these two, like before [. . .]"

Significantly, this scene of encounter occasions a reflection on language, or, more specifically, what may be salvaged of language following the "catastrophe" of the Holocaust. Gross breaks the silence: "[. . .] a language not for you and not for me [. . .] I'm saying, and not for me --, well then, a language with no I and no Thou, pure He, pure It, d'you see, pure They, and nothing but that." Gross and Klein's schizophrenic speech bemoans the loss of dialogic language and its power to communicate lived experience. Gross' interesting play on the word "pure" hinges on two meanings. A language "purely" defined by the "He," "It" "They" indicates a tongue devoid of the I/Thou relation. Another possible meaning hints to the avowed "purity" of Aryan Nazism and its political actions that recreated space deemed *judenrein* ("clean of Jews"). As such, Gross' interesting word choice reflects a language that has been designated *judenrein*, systematically purged of "I/Thou" relation and therefore unable to articulate difference outside the normative "They." Pushed beyond the limits of national language, Jew Gross and Klein are wandering survivors cast out from a language that knows no other, no "You."

Gross inquires why Klein, too, feels compelled to wander the mountain path. Klein replies: "[. . .] Because maybe I had to talk, to myself or to you, had to talk with my mouth and my tongue and not just with my stick. Because who does it talk to, the stick? It talks to the stone, and the stone -- who does *it* talk to?" With this in mind, how are we to understand the travelers' bewildering discourse on sticks and stones? For the two Jews, the walking stick wields a power in that when it strikes a rock, it produces a peal of echoes throughout the mountains. In this way, the percussion of stick and stone replicates the call and response of dialogue, which, in effect, forcefully underscores the absence of authentic human discourse that both Jews yearn to recover. Like a petrified tongue, the stone transmits a voiceless language of rippling sounds: "the stone," laments Gross, "does not engage in discourse, it speaks, and whoever speaks, cousin, engages in discourse with no one; that one speaks, because no one hears it [. . .]" Levinas comments on Gross and Klein's peculiar language of sticks and stones:

Above and beyond this silence and meaninglessness of a folding of earth called mountain, and in order to interrupt the sound of the staff striking against the stones and the reverberation of the noise against the cliffs, what is needed -- as opposed to “the language in use here” -- is a true speech.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In the Levinasian sense, much is at stake here as the percussion of these objects marks the limits of ethical responsiveness. Still clutching his stick, Jew Klein reflects on the consequences of this mute language: “[. . .] I’m standing here, here on this road I don’t belong on, today, now [. . .] I hear with my shadow, my own and alien, I -- I, I. . .” The frantic and repetitive stuttering of Jew Klein’s utterances casts doubt on whether the men will ever transcend the reverberations of their sticks and stones and finally grasp the “true speech” of human interdependency. Surely, their encounter points to the harsh realities of solitary life and its frustrated search for a relational dialogue that would welcome survivors of Nazi crimes back into community. Celan’s narrative resonates with a remark from the “Meridian” in which he describes the poem as a “path” where the reader encounters language. Celan asks, “[. . .] does one walk paths with poems?” In light of their conversation, it is Jew Gross and Klein’s encounter on the trail that may open other “paths on which language gets a voice, [. . .] paths of a voice to a perceiving Thou” -- a path leading where suffering finds its voice not in the echoes of the stoney voids, but dialogic language.

Indeed, Celan’s short narrative provokes a sustained meditation on the difficulty of listening and responding to the other. Critic Werner Hamacher surmises that ““Gespräch im Gebirg” (Dialogue in the Mountains) [. . .] may have originated contemporaneously with “Radix, Matrix [. . .]”<sup>xxxix</sup> While the rock in “Conversation in the Mountains” functions as an inorganic substitute for dialogue, the rock in “Radix, Matrix” engages a ghostly encounter between Celan and his deceased mother (the “You”) and his frustrations with the limits of language in mourning his loss. In the context of Levinas, this is an interesting poem because proximity engages spectrality, an encounter with not a concrete, living presence, but a ghostly Other. In his well-known text, *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida asserts “everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other.”<sup>xl</sup> Recalling Tobias’ notion of the poem as “textual grave,” Derrida’s text urges readers to live with ghosts and defines the ghost as “neither substance, nor presence, nor existence, [it] is never present as such.”<sup>xli</sup> The etymology of the poem’s title cannot be overlooked. Eric Kligerman points out that the Latin word *Radix* refers to the “roots of a plant” and *Matrix* translates to “womb.”<sup>xlii</sup> With this Latin title, comments Kligerman, “[. . .] her [Celan’s mother] death becomes the matrix, or womb, from which his poems originate.”<sup>xliii</sup> In effect, Celan directs readers to the haunted nature of the poem as he mourns his deceased mother at the extreme limits of language.

The poem begins with a sharp juxtaposition which likens speaking to a stone with the impossibility of communicating with his dead mother: “As one speaks to a stone, like / you, / from the chasm.” As the addressee of Celan’s opening words, the stone reminds us of Jew Gross and Klein’s use of the rock as a symbol of impaired speech. In the first stanza, Celan addresses the impenetrable rock in order to find his mother’s voice: “hurled / towards me, you, / you that long ago, / in the nothingness of a night, / you in the multi-night [. . .]” In the following line, Celan hyphenates ‘encounter’ to “en- / countered” to underscore the restraints of their engagement as the living and breathing “I” is alienated from the deceased “You.” This fractured

encounter, continues Celan, splinters the memory of his mother into “you / multi-you-,” a specter that is everywhere but nowhere in the “nothingness of a night.”

Cut off from the deathly void of “nothingness,” Celan imagines what his mother may have been like before his birth: “At that time, when I was not there, / at that time when you / paced the ploughed [*sic*] field, alone [. . .]” Treading the fertile ground, Celan describes his mother as a restless subject “pacing” alone in the fields without the company of an other. Again, Celan imagines an empty landscape where the lonely subject remains unreachable and apart from the limits of language. The geological motif of the stone in the penultimate stanza reiterates the muteness that paralyzes the dialogue needed for the poem’s subjects to come to terms with loss: “Yes, / as one speaks to stone, as / you / with my hands grope into there, / and into nothing, such / is what is here.” As Celan’s hands “groped [. . .] into nothing,” he cannot find an adequate language that expresses his loss and the poem’s dark ending leaves only a semblance of speech that continues to collapse into elliptical “nothingness.” In the hopeful words of Levinas, Celan’s “groping” for “true speech” is not a futile search, but the beginning of a journey on the path “to a perceiving Thou.”

In conclusion, Celan’s writings open a space for critical reflection on the connection between listening and alterity. In the poems and prose this essay has used to illustrate its main arguments, it is clear Celan laments the destruction of relational encounter and language. Undergirded by Levinas’ post-Shoah ethics, his writings call for a language of community that practices a sensitivity to and interdependency with the other. Returning to Celan’s reflection on poetry in the “Meridian,” he writes that the poetic word speaks “on behalf of an *altogether* [. . .] *other*.” Above all, the writings of Levinas and Celan exhort readers to continue producing art with interrogative agency that finds new ways to explore questions of difference and human encounter.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Christopher Fynsk, “The Realities at Stake in a Poem: Celan’s Bremen and Darmstadt Addresses,” from *Word Traces* Ed. Aris Floretos, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 159-184.
- <sup>ii</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1981), 34.
- <sup>iii</sup> See Chapter 4, “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other,” of Levinas’ *Proper Names*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1975), 40-46.
- <sup>iv</sup> Fynsk 164.
- <sup>v</sup> 163.
- <sup>vi</sup> 164.
- <sup>vii</sup> All references from Celan’s “Meridian” speech can be found in Rosemarie Waldrop’s *Paul Celan: Collected Prose* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 37-55.
- <sup>viii</sup> Fynsk, 164.
- <sup>ix</sup> 163.
- <sup>x</sup> Fynsk, 163 my emphasis.
- <sup>xi</sup> 173.
- <sup>xii</sup> 164.
- <sup>xiii</sup> 165.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Fynsk, 163.
- <sup>xv</sup> 175.

- <sup>xvi</sup> Levinas is the source of much of my thinking, and has had a significant impact on the development of my interests in subjectivity and ethics. I sincerely hope that my references to him are an adequate indication of my indebtedness to this source.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Levinas quoted in Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (Columbia UP, 2011), 46.
- <sup>xviii</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” from *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978 Trans. Alan Bass), 111.
- <sup>xix</sup> Levinas quoted in Derrida 94.
- <sup>xx</sup> Levinas 46.
- <sup>xxi</sup> See Leslie Hill, “‘Distrust of Poetry’: Levinas, Blanchot, Celan,” (*MLN*: Dec, 2005. 120.5), 986-1008.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Celan’s use of poetry in rethinking dominant articulations of Western humanism may have been influenced by Heidegger’s noted “Letter to Humanism” (1947). Heidegger elucidates the instabilities of humanism, pointing out that “it is time to break the habit of overestimating philosophy, and of thereby asking too much of it. What is needed in the present world crises is less philosophy, but more attentiveness in thinking. . .” In doing so, Heidegger asserts the essence of humanity could be recovered in relation to his notion of *Dasein*.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Gisela Brinker-Gabler’s Introduction to *Encountering the Other(s): Studies in Literature, History, and Culture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1-15.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 27.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Levinas, *Proper Names* 41.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Celan, Waldrop “Meridian” 49.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Pierre Joris, *Paul Celan: Selections* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 43.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Levinas, “Paul Celan,” *Proper Names* 43.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, trans. R.A. Cohen, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).
- <sup>xxx</sup> Levinas, “Paul Celan,” 41.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> See Levinas’s “Peace and Proximity” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*. (Eds. Adrian Peperzak, et. al. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996). 167.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> 97.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> All translations by Michael Hamburger, unless otherwise noted, in *Poems of Paul Celan*, (New York: Persea Books, 2002).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Outside the current discussion of ethical responsiveness, Celan’s trope of the anthropomorphized stone may be inspired by the *Golem* (גולם,) an anthropomorphic being from Jewish folklore made from inanimate matter.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> See Chapter 3, “Earth Science,” of Rochelle Tobias’s *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry on Paul Celan*, (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 14-41.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> See John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 96. It is widely documented that Celan’s penchant for reference guides on geology, mineralogy and crystallography provided the sophisticated vocabulary that animates his poetry.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> All references to Celan’s “Conversation in the Mountains” can be found in Rosemarie Waldrop’s edited volume, *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 17-22.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Celan, “Paul Celan” 46.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Werner Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” in *Word Traces* Ed. Aris Floretos, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 219-263.
- <sup>xl</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 139.
- <sup>xli</sup> 18.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Eric Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2007), 247.
- <sup>xliii</sup> 247.