

Trauma and its Traces in the Poetry of Paul Celan

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Paul Celan (1920-1970) was one of the most eminent European poets of the second half of the twentieth century. But my paper aims at not merely locating Celan as a German-language poet of the post-Second World War period, but also as a Jew, and a survivor of the Holocaust—the Nazi genocidal machinery which claimed millions of lives during the Second World War (1939-1945). Celan's "encounter" with the Holocaust left an indelible mark on his memory, and the trauma which continued to haunt him till the very end of his life—a life which ended in suicide—is indeed palpable in his literary artifacts. Through a close analysis of selected works of Celan, which I find noteworthy from both historical and literary perspectives, my paper tries to explore the traces of trauma as they pervade the poetic corpus of Paul Celan.

Traumatic experience is often regarded as begotten by "events that – whether because of their devastating nature or because the psyche is unprepared or immature to deal with them – cannot be integrated into the onward movement" of the individual's life (Jacobus 3). The Holocaust proved to be one such event for Paul Celan which he survived in body, but not in spirit.

The Holocaust was a systematic, state-sponsored, bureaucratic persecution and annihilation of European Jews in the hands of the Nazi German authorities and their collaborators during the Second World War. Between 1941 and 1944, the Nazis deported millions of Jews from its occupied territories and from those of its allies to ghettos, forced-labour camps, transit camps, and finally to the extermination camps, notorious for their gas chambers, where the Jews were gassed to death.

Celan was born Paul Antschel in a German-speaking Jewish family in 1920 in Czernowitz, Bukovina in the northern part of Romania. As his biographers insist, the event that forever punctuates his poetry is what Celan witnessed between June 27 and 28, 1942. By this time Romania had joined the Axis forces and Bukovina's Romanian governor had begun deporting Jews to Nazi concentration camps. Fearing a Gestapo raid at their house, Celan had decided to take refuge at a friend's place for the night of 27th June. But he was unable to persuade his parents to accompany him – his mother was especially convinced that it was futile to try to avoid her "fate" (Felstiner 4). It was to be Celan's last arguments with his parents; the next morning he returned home to find his front door sealed and his parents "gone". He himself was interned to a forced-labour camp in Southern Moldavia till December 1943. Celan later came to know that both his parents had died in the internment camp in Transnistria, where they had been deported – his father succumbed to typhus, while his mother, too weak to work, was shot dead by the Nazis, possibly by the Bug River (Felstiner 15-16).

The demise of his parents dealt a severe blow to the mind of young Celan. He was shattered emotionally and the trauma of such an inexpressible loss would forever be entailed by an obsessive guilt of survival in Celan's mind. Trauma theorist, Mary Jacobus opines that: "Trauma may plunge the survivor into never complete mourning or replace an ordinary guilt with

an irresolvable one". Celan's "survivor guilt", unlike those of other Holocaust- writers like Primo Levi who had reportedly experienced it, did not only involve the guilt of surviving when the other Jewish members of his community were being ruthlessly murdered, but also his personal guilt of failing to save his parents from falling prey to the Nazi genocide. This private agony seeks expression in Celan's early poems like "Nearness of Graves" (*Sand from the Urn* 1948) and "Aspen Tree" (*Poppy and Memory* 1952). Celan's poem "Nearness to Graves" begin directly with an autobiographical reference – the incident of his mother being shot dead near the bank of River Bug:

Still do the southerly Bug waters know,
Mother the wave whose blows wounded you so?

In "Aspen Tree" Celan invokes the various elements of nature – the "Aspen Tree", the "dandelion", the "rain cloud" – as he tries to grapple with the memories of his "gentle", "yellow-haired mother" and in the poem "Nearness of graves" the agony-ridden poet tries to establish a virtual conversation with his lost mother and trace her presence among the surrounding "aspens", "willows", "field", and "hills". But the most poignant lines of the poem emerge as:

And can you bear, Mother, as once on a time,
The gentle, the German, the pain-laden rhyme?

These lines befittingly articulate the dilemma Celan had to face when he resorted to writing in German after his encounter with the Holocaust. Believing that it was only possible for him to express his own unique experiences in his mother tongue, Celan, inspite of being a polyglot voluntarily embraced the German language for his poetic pursuits. But with this decision of composing his literary artifacts in German, Celan encountered an insoluble paradox-- it meant writing in his mother tongue, literally the language of his lost mother, as well as subjugating before the language of his mother's assassins – the Nazis, who had tainted the language by infusing it with Nazi sensibility and making the language an accomplice to Nazi propaganda, slogans and slurs.

Celan wanted to re-appropriate his mother tongue and purge the German language of the "darkness" of Nazism. Thus, according to Celan's most eminent biographer and translator John Felstiner, Paul Celan attempted a renewal of the language and sought to infuse his mother tongue with the elements from the "holy tongue" or Hebrew – Hebraism, whose very existence and history, the Nazis tried to obliterate. It is thus with the aid of this formulated language that Celan tried to articulate through his poem his unique truth – his agonies, trauma, and sufferings both as an individual and a Jew – and give testimony to the horrors of the Holocaust that he was exposed to. Just as a victim of traumatic experience repeatedly tends to relive those experiences later, Celan in his poems seems to be reliving his horrifying past and in trying to articulate, is struggling to come to terms with it.

As commented by Robert Lay Lifton in his well-noted work on Holocaust survivors, trauma is not a drama of a past, but primarily a drama of survival. "The survivor is", Lifton writes, "one who has encountered death but has remained alive", and it is this remaining alive that leads to the "psychological themes" that gets associated with his survival: the inability to move beyond the indelible images of death, guilt about having survived while others died, a lack of trust in the world and the struggle for meaning. Lifton points out that all these themes can have positive or negative consequences for the individual: guilt can be paralyzing or else a "powerful impetus for responsibility", while recurrent images of death can be paralyzing as well as source of creative

energy (119). The latter was the case with Celan. Celan ventured to “speak” the “unspeakable” through his poetry, struggling to give expression to the limit-experiences that the Holocaust had exposed him to. It is precisely this struggle to articulate that makes the articulation all the more poignant.

Besides trying to come to terms with his personal loss, through his poems Celan tried to give testimony to the deplorable condition that the Holocaust reduced the Jews to. Under the pretext of “ethnic cleansing” the Nazis perpetrated inhuman tortures on the Jews – they were persecuted, dealt with extreme brutality and finally exposed to a terrible death. Much like the Holocaust-survivor and writer, Primo Levi, Celan felt himself ethically obliged to give voice to and memorialize those millions of Jews whom the Holocaust had silenced for eternity. Through his poems, Celan tried to create for them what their murders denied them – an existence, a reality.

The poetic credo finds a befitting embodiment in Celan’s highly acclaimed poem “Fugue of Death” (*Poppy and Memory*, 1952) — one of his most haunting renditions of Holocaust memory. The iconic poem which has come to represent the very symbol of Jewish sufferings during the Holocaust appeared first in 1948 in Romanian, under the title “Tango of Death”. It depicts the notorious practice engaged in by the SS guards who made groups of Jewish inmates come up with musical performances to accompany the execution of their fellow inmates. Founded on the power of juxtaposition and paradox, the poem becomes a masterful evocation of the death-haunted atmosphere of a concentration camp, where the Nazi guard, the “man” is seen to inflict barbaric atrocities on the Jewish inmates, the dehumanized slaves have no option but to “drink” the endless torture and “dig” and “dance” and “play” at the master’s whims. The Nazi guard, with the “blue eyes” is the perfect embodiment of the Nazi racial ideal, who “whistles his Jews out” as easily as he “whistles his dogs up”. This undoubtedly depicts the degree of degradation the Jews had to face in the hands of the so-called racially “superior” Germans. But the most poignant image – that of the archetypal German maiden “Magarate” with her symbolic blond hair, juxtaposed with that of “Shulamith”, the emblem of Jewish feminine beauty, whose hair has been burnt to ashes in the Nazi oven – render the reality of the Nazi camps transparently clear.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the poem lies in the contrast between its extremely gory content and its pristine form – the poem, describing the scenario of a Nazi concentration camp, is written in the form resembling the musical genre of fugue, the mark of High German culture. A typically baroque form, the fugue consists essentially of a main subject melody called the “theme” that opens the piece and is repeated several times in a recognizable but slightly altered fashion. “Fugue of Death” begins with the statement of the “theme” – built on the oxymoronic metaphor of “black milk” – symbolic of the inhuman torture and brutality that the Jews are found to be subjected to throughout the poem. And like a fugue, the “theme” is repeated with subtle variations throughout the poem. The dynamics of the fugue as explored and exploited by Celan in his poem can be said to fit the workings of trauma itself (Nadal and Calvo183). The contrapuntal design of Celan’s composition and its recurrent repetitions – seem to reflect the way in which a subject caught in the grip of trauma “unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments” (Laub169).

Though Celan turned against “Fugue of Death” in later years, refusing permission to have it reprinted in more anthologies, it was because he had refused his art in the meantime to a point where the poem seemed too direct. Yet the anguish, the darkness, the shadow of death, that the poem tries to depict, all return to haunt his later poems.

The theme of endless torture, labour, dehumanization recurs again in “There was Earth” (*No-one’s Rose* 1963). The poem begins with the negation of the humanity of the Jewish inmates:

There was earth inside them and
they dug.

The repetition of “they dug” marks a clear indication the limitless labour the Jews were subjected to all day and night. Such was the repetitive nature of their job that the Jews seemed to forget all their basic human instincts:

They dug and heard nothing more;
they did not grow wise, invented song,
thought up for themselves no language.
They dug.

The constant digging not only emphasizes the tremendous labour the Jews were coerced to, but also marks the nature of their debasement, and dehumanization that they suffered in the hands of Nazis:

I dig, you dig, and the worn digs too.

Posited against those dehumanized Other, are the Nazi guards, whose presence is tacitly palpable in the line:

and that singing out there says: They dig.

The subjection to such inhuman treatment proved corrosive to their soul – their faith in God seemed to have worn away:

And they did not praise
God
who, so they heard, wanted all this,
who, so they heard, knew all this.

Such was the insidious nature of the Nazi propaganda that the Jews were made to harbor the delusion that their prosecution and execution by the Nazis were actually warranted. This belief in the Nazi-propagated “truth” of Jewish sub-humanity compelled them to remain silent and go on reeling under the burden of pain and humiliation inflicted on them, without any sign of protest. If not yet physically annihilated, they were completely stripped of their subjectivity, reduced to no one and nothing. Stripped of their subjectivity even before they were annihilated, the Jewish inmates could not but be addressed by:

O one, o none, o no one, o you:

The endless exposure to brutality and oppression, seem to have shorn the Jews of their known ways of communication; now they were only capable of “digging” mechanically. But even then, through this act of manual labour they tried to interact and share their sentiments with each other – and thus give vent to whatever human qualities that was still left in them:

O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you,
and on our finger the ring awakes.

Although the poem tries to articulate the deplorable plight of the Jews in the Nazi labour camp, it also seems to contain autobiographical elements from Celan’s own life – his traumatic experience

of being interned to a forced-labour camp in Southern Moldavia for eighteen months, where he had to go on shoveling debris all day long. Like Celan's "Fugue of Death", this poem written almost a decade later, is also replete with repetitions. The repetitions in both the poems seem to represent the maddening re-enactments that characterize all traumatic experience – thus pointing to repetition as an appropriate vehicle for conveying through literature the oppressive feeling of entrapment that trauma generates.

Celan was writing through a period in which the conceptions of human subjects were dramatically altered. The holocaust made him witness how bodies were systematically starved and beaten and worked to skeletons, and then incinerated and used as fertilizers. The Nazis annihilated the Jews with such efficiency that no trace of their lives were supposed to remain – after their murder, they were hauled into the crematorium ovens and finally "deported" through smoke to the sky that became their final destination for "burial". Such horrifying scenes of mass extermination of the Jews, which remained etched in Celan's traumatized memory find recurrent emergence in his poems like "Largo" and "Alchemical" (*No-one's Rose*, 1963).

"Largo" attempts to reveal the tremendous horror of the Jewish inmates of an extermination camp of witnessing helplessly the annihilation of their fellow inmates and their subsequent dissolution into smoke:

our whitely drifting
Companions up there....

The tone of helpless resignation that pervades the poem is also echoed in the poem "Alchemical", which depicts the way in which the Holocaust reduced the Jews to anonymity and ensured their mass obliteration:

All the names, all those
names
burnt with the rest. So much
ash to be blessed. So much
land won
above the light, so light
rings
of souls.

These masses of incinerated Jews, lightly escalating to the sky as "rings of souls" seems to have been ironically endowed with the knowledge of alchemy – with their annihilation they seem to produce a "silence" precious "like gold" to the Nazis as it can never reveal the atrocities that the Holocaust perpetrated on the Jews.

Critics of Paul Celan are unanimous in their opinion that Celan's poetry confronts the readers with paradox and difficulty. In certain poems Celan tries to grapple with his private loss -- poems which betray the desperate urge of a "ward" to get back to his "lost" parents through the power of the "word" – while in his other poems he tries to discharge his ethical responsibility as a survivor to testify for the millions of Jews, victimized by Nazi genocidal machinery. Celan's poetry does not describe facts; rather it creates a landscape of death into which the reader must enter with him.

Celan believed that every poem is marked by its decisive dates – and the date which evidently marks Celan’s own poetry, as he specified in both his “Meridian” speech and notes, is “January 20” – alluding to the date of the Wannsee Conference (January 20, 1942) which was convened to formulate the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” and which marked the beginning of the planned annihilation of the European Jews (Eshel 64). Celan’s insistence that the poem remains mindful of its decisive dates points to the inscription of memory and history in his poems (Eshel 64-65). The poem does not try to depict the “realities” or events resulting from “January 20”; rather it becomes the textual space where the marked date in its multivalency is evoked. Celan thus claimed that in the poem “something happens something takes place” (quoted in Eshel 65). Derrida in his influential discussion on the significance of dates in Celan’s poetry argues that the “date” marks the poem as an “idiomatic event” (Derrida 49) – the poem itself becomes a witness to a single, unrepeatable event. For Celan, as his biographers often note, poetry became the only vehicle of testimony – instead of trying to come up with the factual details of Holocaust, it became the means through which Celan attempted to express his own traumatic experiences with perfect fidelity which renders his poems with a testimonial charge. As Shoshana Felman argues –

“As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of memory that have been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance...what testimony does not offer is however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events”.

For a psyche like Celan’s, shattered by the horrors of the Holocaust, writing proved to be cathartic and it became the means of survival in a present that was perpetually invaded by the traumatic encounters of the past.

“Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man to scream” (Adorno 362) and the articulation of such agony demands a much more raw and unfinished mode of expression. Thus Celan’s poetry seems to defy the conventional literary forms in its lack of ordinary syntax and common semantics, as it tries to evince the struggle of the survivor-poet groping for linguistic signs that help him to express the degree of trauma, which itself lies beyond the realm of signification. The broken syntax, the rhyme scheme and the paratactic structure of the verses of his poems – all seem to depict the spasm of a poetic consciousness that has been reeling under the burden of a traumatic past. In spite of the cryptic nature of his poems, Celan insisted that his poetry was designed to establish a communication with an addressable “other”, the listener to his testimony:

“The poem being a manifestation of language, and therefore essentially a dialogue, can be a message inside a bottle, sent out in the not always secure belief that it could be washed ashore somewhere, sometimes, perhaps on the land of heart.”(qtd. in “Stanley Kunitz on Paul Celan and the Poetry of the Holocaust”)

Paul Celan wrote from a position paradigmatic of much twentieth century experience: exile, dislocation, permanent mourning. Left spiritually crippled by the Holocaust, he tried to seek respite in the testimonial power of poetry and against the depression, paranoia and breakdown, which grew more acute with age, maintained a belief in the necessity to write and indeed to write in German. He claimed: “There is nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German.” (qtd. in “Stanley Kunitz on Paul Celan and the Poetry of the Holocaust”)

But poetry could not save Celan – tormented by an unassailable loss, ruined by desolating sadness, he drowned himself in the Seine at the age of forty-nine – and went on to join the dead whom he spoke to and spoke for in his poetry. This finds a perfect echo in the poet's own words in *A Turn of Breath* (1967):

With the persecuted in late
but unconcealed
and radiant
alliance.

Thus it can be concluded that, as the literary artifacts of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, Paul Celan's poetry not only marks itself as the vehicle of testimony for a traumatized soul, but also emerges as the textual space where Celan's ethics and poetics come into an organic whole.

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