

## **A View of Tragedy: The Mythological Image in the Poetry of Paul Celan**

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**Abstract:** *Studies of Paul Celan's work usually devote substantial sections to his and his family's experience of concentration camps during World War II and thus questions might be raised whether these are the issues of his poetry, whether these are anecdotal and of general interest or whether they are the things that comprise his poetry. This study is based on the view that language behaves quite differently in poetry than in the execution of its other functions including historical documentation. Representation is the language function here and the output is an artwork. Condemnation to extermination, 'collective Jewish martyrdom', as Bekker puts it, on the basis of one's ethnic origin, the dire and dehumanizing experiences and the sense of the irrecoverable loss involved are undoubtedly at work in Paul Celan's poetry, but the poems are nevertheless extraordinary works of art. The paper explores the relationship.*

**Keywords:** *art, artistic image, experience, history, holocaust, myth, poetry, tragedy.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Paul Celan's poetry has special value, as someone who came close to death in World War II German concentration camps and labour camps, but survived to become one of the greatest of the European poets in whose work the Holocaust is a starting point. George (1997) calls him simply 'a Holocaust poet', which is remarkable since Theodor Ardon had been moved by this event to remark that 'after the holocaust the very possibility of poetry must be in doubt' (Clark 2002: 131). According to George, the Holocaust experience is 'a recurrent concern from first to last, and it helps determine not only Celan's imagery, but also his engagement with language and with the question of poetic being'. Thus the unspeakable traumas suffered in the course of the war are often discussed in criticism of his work in tones that totally ignore his claim in 'The Meridian' that the poem 'speaks only on its own, its very own behalf'. The presumptive link of the poet, the poem's speech act, and the Holocaust as the content of the speech in some cases, like in Bekker's book, *Paul Celan: Studies in His Early Poetry*, leads to minute exegetical analysis of the poems in search of certain facts and meanings. Lyon, however, is exercised by an 'improbable relationship over almost two decades' between Celan the Holocaust survivor and Heidegger 'an arch-German nationalist', and tracks the marks of that relationship in the poet's work. In this paper, I shall pay attention to the lack of rage in his personae and search for its grounds in art's 'native soil of mythical thinking' (Cassirer 1946: 98), in order to see what this may contribute in the reading of the poems. This lack of rage is unproblematic to Lyon, who says that Celan 'tried desperately to obtain ... acceptance' from a post-War German establishment dominated by former Nazis 'in order to gain recognition of his poetry' (Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger 1). However, Paul Celan strikes me as a man deeply committed to the art and didn't need to try to gain recognition for his work. I see his genuineness also in his Georg Büchner Prize speech 'The Meridian', which I bring into my discussion because it sounds to me like his poetic manifesto.

### **Tragedy and the Structure of Existence**

The personae we meet in Celan's poems are often burdened with experience of inhuman situations of violence and subjection to an absolute 'will to power' (Nietzsche), but they carry these memories without resentment and without rage. All the same, their view of the present of the poems is based on consciousness of these experiences. Tragedy isn't only in what they have experienced and apparently survived; for them existence itself is tragic. By their lack of rage, one may in fact think of them in the Yeatsian metaphor as 'gay', for example in 'a sad and a gay face' ('The Host of the Air'), and as in 'A Faery Song', where we read:

We who are old, old and gay,  
O so old!  
Thousands of years, thousands of years,  
If all were told.

The time here is not just succession of years: the accent is on what has made these thousands of years a burden, what has given a human lifetime the content of 'thousands of years'; hence the gaiety of the old is unexpected. The old in 'A Faery

Song' are the bearers of history; in them all of history is articulated. In the common view, tragedy is associated with immediacy. But we note also Aristotle's account of tragedy as oriented towards the yielding of 'tragic pleasure' (tragoidias hedone) as an outcome of catharsis. His focus is of course on the audience of tragic drama, but in Celan the persona may be both the experiencer and the audience. Even when we are dealing with a recent memory, the character's moral distance from the experiences is such that their emotional effect is barely remarked. In 'Shibboleth', we read:

Together with my stones  
grown big with weeping  
behind the bars,

they dragged me out into  
the middle of the market,  
that place  
where the flag unfurls to which  
I swore no kind of allegiance.

The subject is not the one 'weeping / behind the bars'; it is his 'stones'. In addition to his stone 'weeping / behind the bars' and growing big as a result, there is also a political circus at his expense. The scene evokes the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, where there are sympathetic observers with shifting identities. Here the observers are aspects of the subject himself:

Set your flag at half-mast,  
memory.  
At half-mast  
today and for ever,

Heart:  
Here too reveal what you are,  
here, in the midst of the market.  
Call the shibboleth, call it out  
Into your alien homeland.

What these two have witnessed, Heart and Memory, is unforgettable, but what they are invited to do is to memorialize this grim history with a catchword and official (impersonal) mourning. The Speaker not only survives his ordeal, but also continues his existence at a higher plane than those who had dragged him 'out into / the middle of the market', before the alien flag. There is no resentment, no bitterness.

The Speaker, however, is the one who gives validity to these remembrances and who will take the witnesses, who are also to some extent externalized, beyond the immediacy of their remembrances and pain:

Unicorn:  
you know about the stones,  
you know about the water;  
come,  
I shall lead you away  
to the voices  
of Estremadura.

Lyon notes that until the end of Celan's life 'he was wracked by guilt at having survived the Holocaust while his parents and extended family did not' (2006: 1). Accordingly, the awful unnamed memory in 'Shibboleth' which recurs in Celan's poetry is usually referenced to the Holocaust. In this case, the subject who is 'dragged ... out into / the middle of the market' is indeed more than a personal subject. The 'collective Jewish martyrdom' (Bekker 146), is implicated. It comes out in its plural form in a poem like 'Psalm', where we read:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Michael Hamburger's translation here by using 'moulds' instead of 'kneads us anew' like Paul Coates's, strongly echoes the creation narrative in Genesis, which therefore figures as ground in the poem. But the suggestion of the Holocaust remains in 'conjures our dust'.

I am proposing in this study a reading of the recurring awful history not just as references to a chapter in which an entire ethnic group was herded into martyrdom, but in terms of the tragic insight captured by Cassirer in these words:

"the process begun in the Greek epic finds its conclusion and completion in the drama. The Greek tragedy also grows out of a primordial stratum of the mythical-religious consciousness and never breaks wholly away from this substratum.... But it does not remain confined within the orgiastic, Dionysiac mood in which it is rooted; in opposition to this mood there arises, in the course of its development, an entirely new figure of man, an entirely new feeling of the I and the self. Like all great vegetation cults, that of Dionysus feels the I only as a violent rending away from the primal source of life, and what it strives for is a return to that source, the 'ecstasy' by which the soul bursts the fetters of the body and of individuality, to become united once more with universal life. Here all that is apprehended of individuality is the one factor, the factor of tragic isolation, as directly represented in the myth of Dionysus-Zagreus, who is torn to pieces and devoured by the Titans. The artistic view, however, sees in individual existence not so much isolation as separation-concentration into a self-contained personage" (197).

The tragic myth such as the tearing to pieces of Dionysus-Zagreus and their devouring by the Titans is an ancient figure in which can be assimilated and expressed experiences which no narration could ever hope to do justice. Thus Balkin speaks of 'Cultural software [which] allows human beings to articulate and concretize ... to put flesh on the bones of their ... inchoate realities' (17). This solution of the inchoate enables the subject to be individual as well as collective, since his experience has become part of a history which embraces all of humanity. This is another kind of tragedy than that defined by Simmel:

"we define a tragic fate in contradistinction to one which is pitiable or comes as destruction from external causes as one in which the destroying forces are not only directed against a being but originate in the deepest recesses of this very being; it is a fate in which a destiny is completed in a self-destruction which is latent and, so to speak, the logical development of the very structure by means of which that being has attained its positive existence" (quoted in Cassirer 1961: 187).

Tragedy is 'cultural software' insofar as it pre-exists historical experience, and is purely an output of mythic ideation; hence it can be used in various ways, including interpretation of historical experience and understanding of meanings, such as what Simmel in the above calls *destroying forces*. As a factor of ideational analysis the 'destroying forces' carries with it recognition that 'no one is to blame' and that 'Such is the way of this evil world' (Leśmian, *The Girl*). That 'no one is to blame' is something Dostoevsky's Underground Man refuses to accept, because in that case 'there is only the same outlet left again—that is, to beat the wall as hard as you can' (Notes from the Underground 14). Accepting this order of things has a different consequence. It produces the tragic attitude, which enables the old in Yeats and others like Hamlet and Lear to be gay. The Underground Man by contrast has not attained the tragic attitude because he presupposes that it must be possible to put this matter (the world, in fact) right.

In Celan, tragedy has its sources from the outside; and yet there is something indeterminate about it. The outside is not a decidable other but implicated in the history of existence itself. The subject cannot free himself from this history, but he can stand aside from an experience that may have the capacity to overwhelm and utterly crush an individual consciousness for the purpose of constructing an artistic image of it. Freud's account of the pleasure principle, explains such processes in terms of,

"The triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world" (The Complete Works 4542)

Tragedy in Celan is part and parcel of being in the world: to be in the world is to be exposed to its provocations and menaced by its traumas – and yet 'life [is] / our only refuge' ('I Hear that the Axe Has Flowered').

In a poem like 'In Prague', the traumas surrounding existence seem localized, as if something that characterizes the place during a specific time:

That half-death,  
suckled big with our life,  
lay around us, true as an ashen image.

'Half-death' is probably a product of abstract thought, but it begins to take imaginative form in 'suckled big' and 'an ashen image'. And with 'lay around us', it has become spatialized. But the initial demonstrative that announces its ubiquity; it is with the Speaker wherever he is and the reference to it here is by requirement of discourse, to bring back to discursive attention this common enemy known also to the interlocutor. What may be

distinctive about the place of its present occurrence is the unfolding of awareness on the part of the one speaking for the many that one is not only a victim and surrounded, but is also the unwitting source of sustenance for the violence menacing oneself.

The view of the external world as traumatizing was famously formulated by Hegel in his philosophy of history. According to Cassirer, Hegel teaches that:

“world history is not the dwelling place of good fortune, that peaceful and happy periods are empty pages in the book of history. For him, this in no way contradicted his basic conviction that ‘everything in history takes place in accordance with reason’; instead, he regarded it as confirmation and sanction for that basic conviction” (The Logic of the Humanities 182).

Existence in Celan’s poetry is being immersed in this history where ‘peaceful and happy periods are empty pages in the book’, and there is no way of existing to be spared the ‘traumas of the external world’. However, to say that history is where tragedy is the expected order of things, where it has always been at work is to speak of history as interpreted. We read in ‘The Straitening’:

Gales.

Gales, from the beginning of time,  
whirl of particles.

But what is even more striking in Celan is that there appears to be no way of existing to avoid being part of the workings of these traumas of existence. One may be ‘Driven into the / terrain / with the unmistakable track’ as in ‘The Straitening’, where ‘the night / needs no stars’, or one may be drawn in through the exercise of sympathy. In the following parenthetical poem, the Speaker’s sympathies are unquestionably with the discursive other. But what does this sympathy mean?

(I know you: you are the one bowed deeply,  
I am the pierced one, subject to you.  
Where does a word flare out as both our witness?  
You – quite, quite real. And I – mad through and through.)

According to Bellm (2012), the form of this poem ‘manages to suggest harmony, completeness, and rest, even though the poem leaves us with anything but these’. The questions it raises are many; and so it has been tackled by many translators trying to make sense of it.

In the context of the ‘history’ we have been discussing, is the ‘one bowed deeply’ the piercer of the Speaker who is related to that other in a subject position? Is that other therefore bowed deeply from shame or guilt? There is of course the possibility of being bowed with the burden of knowledge, as in many modernist works like Rilke’s ‘Cast out on the Heart’s Mountains’ or Leśmian’s ‘Evening’, or by reason of being burdened by history but lacking gaiety. However, one and the same word may yet be found to serve as both their witness. May language therefore reduce them to things of the same kind? persons of the same sort? Does not the escape here from ‘individuality’ and ‘tragic isolation’ bring one to the tragedy of the collective?

In ‘You, Poured out of Lost Things’ sympathy and sharing may even have a deadly purpose:

You, poured out of lost things,  
as just as a mask, to be near to you  
with my eyelid folded  
along your eyelid,  
to bestrew this and that trace with grey,  
finally, in deadly fashion.

The one ‘poured out of lost things’ attracts sympathy, but the one who is moved with sympathy and fellow feeling is also the one re-distributing the ashes of death. No longer is the strange other the source of fear: he is defenceless in this poem and with everything to fear from the subject himself.

The play of tragedy in the relationship with the human other can take far other forms. In ‘Tenebrae’, the first movement is consistent with the onset of darkness (tenebrae). But the Passion of Christ is implicated, and there is no clear distinction between the inflicter of violence and the sufferer of random violence. Guilt is already shared in virtue of ‘living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence’ (Frye 41). The Passion in ‘Tenebrae’ involves a melee:

We are near, Lord,  
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,  
clawed and clawing as though  
the body of each of us were  
your body, Lord.

What is lacking is the exercise of volition. The Speaker is aware of action that is taking place or has already taken place, although he is involved in it. But lack of foreknowledge does not seem to affect the nature of the action as a human act. Thus the (Eucharistic) sharing in the body and blood of the Lord is not without associations of guilt:

Wind-awry we went there ...  
To be watered we went there, Lord.  
It was blood, it was  
What you shed, Lord.  
It gleamed.  
It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.  
Our eyes and our mouths are open and empty, Lord.  
We have drunk, Lord.  
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

The tone is confessional and there is horror in cogitating the act that has been done, even though there is no sense of wilfully choosing to do it. No more could it have been avoided. The exercise of will ends with our going there 'to be watered'. The shedding of the blood is by the Lord in the active voice. The gleaming and the casting of the Lord's 'image into our eyes' are performed by the blood also in the active voice; and without intentionality the 'eyes and mouths are open and empty'. There is horror in having drunk 'the blood and the image that was in the blood'; for in doing so one becomes part of a guilty society, which is a tragic motif (Frye 41).

### **Mythic Power of Insight**

There is personal suffering for the subject both for being a member of a guilty society and as a direct victim. Ash/ashen as in 'In Prague' is a colour motif reflecting the situation of the Persona exposed to the ravages of existence, which are always threatening:

Came a word, came,  
came through the night,  
wanted to shine,  
wanted to shine.

Ash.  
Ash, ash.  
Night.  
Night-and-night.

The word that has come with a will to shine and overpower darkness can unveil nothing but ash and swallowed up by night. As a colour, ash is often structurally equivalent to grey which occurs in 'You, Poured out of Lost Things' and other poems and both have a ring of deadness about them. They are seen together in 'Alchemical', where ash has attained the greater substantiality of remains following the encounter:

Great, grey  
sisterly shape  
near like all that is lost:

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.  
Great, grey one. Cinder-  
less.

The 'grey one' is burnt out remains; utterly dead, with nothing in it that could sustain a fire or resume burning.

More strongly than often the case, the Holocaust is recalled in 'All the names, all those / names / burnt with the rest. So much / ash to be blessed'. It is much clearer still in 'Death Fugue', which as it were 'states the speaker's dilemma unequivocally' (Bekker143). In this poem,

death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue  
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true.

He 'whistles his dogs up /he whistles his Jews out' and commands the digging of graves, relentlessly enjoining effort at the task. He is utterly a master and accounts to no one, an absolute exerciser of the will to power:

he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air  
He plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from  
Germany.

The history of dying here must needs be a background formation in 'Psalm', with its surviving remnant resolving the horrid work of Death, the 'master from Germany', into an astonishing song of praise:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.  
For your sake  
we shall flower.  
Towards  
you,

A nothing  
we were, are, shall  
remain, flowering:  
the nothing-, the  
no one's rose.

The terrible irony is the raising of 'no one' to a divine form who may be rendered the tribute of a song of praise. The logic of production of fullness of being out of nothing, no one is an 'undiscoverable rationality' (Ricoeur 1974: 354), and based purely on 'the mythic power of insight' breaking forth 'in its full intensity and objectifying power' (Cassirer 1946: 99). In Celan, the business of art is not to re-present nature or history or a personal experience: it rather aims to be far from all that, and from subjectivity itself. He writes in 'The Meridian', 'Art makes for distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road. And poetry? Poetry which, of course, must go the way of art?.. art is the distance poetry must cover, no less and no more' (44-45).

Poetry's meditation on a horrid personal experience, according to Celan, is distantiation of the I from that experience, and: 'along with the I, estranged and freed here, in this manner, some other thing is also set free' (47). One can hardly avoid writing 'from and toward some' specific date or event: 'What else could we claim as our origin?' (47)

But also in the light of what we have seen in Hegel and others, this movement of writing from the 'origin' recalls and feeds into a history known also to Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach':

The eternal note of sadness....  
Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery.

The thinking of unspeakable experiences in poetry is in Celan by thinking them in the context of human experience as a totality. But it would appear that poetry has not been able finally to reduce the events that have provoked this meditation: the human spirit does not get used to it, despite that it makes up what Hegel writes as history. And so 'Eyes' reflects:

If there came,  
if there came a man,  
if there came a man, to the world, today, with  
the patriarch's  
beard of light: he could only,  
were he to speak of this  
time, he  
could only  
babble and babble  
con-, con-  
tinually, -ally.

(*'Pallaksch, Pallaksch.'*)

The nihilism of 'Psalm' seems to stand as a kind of last word in Celan's poetry, but it is perhaps inevitable because of the nearness of the poetic image to history. As Nietzsche has shown, historiography necessarily has nihilistic consequences (*The Will to Power* 8). Arnold's 'Dover Beach' attains the same nihilism also by looking exclusively towards history, but the poem unaccountably lights on love and the beloved for all comfort. In Celan much seems to hang upon poetry, not only to enable the thinking of things but also for comfort, as is probably suggested in 'Landscape':

They eat:  
the madhouse-inmate truffle, a piece  
of disinterred poetry,  
encountered tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

There may be 'no help for pain' ('Dover Beach'), in poetry. To the personae of Celan's poems, however, it stands as witness, 'incontestable witness' (*Cauterized*), of knowledge of 'the inconsolable grounds of infinite crying' (Rilke, 'The Great Night'), and witness at the same time of knowledge of the pointlessness of crying, which must be what causes the tear to roll back into its eye.

In 'Dover Beach', the Speaker is in possession of a private insight about the true nature of the world and hands down the following:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Celan's personae have memories of the world's mindless violence and cruelty. But such events are not the object of poetry: they may be the starting point of a poetry destined to put a distance between them and itself. On these grounds, poetry, always listening, 'not without fear, for something beyond itself' ('The Meridian' 54), seems in Celan to have gained a higher insight, which is called in 'Crocus' a 'shared truth':

Crocus, glimpsed from the  
hospitable table:  
sign-feeling

tiny exile  
of a shared  
truth,  
you need  
every blade.

Undoubtedly, a 'flash of instantaneous comprehension' (Frye), is implicated in the word glimpsed. The poem is listening, 'not without fear'; hence it cannot speak with the certitude of Arnold's persona. It is also watchful and has not missed the momentous coming together of puzzling facts in the *Crocus*: 'sign-feeling', 'tiny exile', 'a shared truth'. Henceforth *Crocus* is 'more than itself', as Rilke would say: it has become a bearer of meaning, and 'symbolic'. It takes form, according to Baudelaire, 'In certain, almost supernatural, spiritual states, [when] the profundity of life is revealed in all its fullness in the thing, however banal, which one is looking at. It becomes the symbol of that profundity' (see Clive Scott 211). The poem manages in its eighteen words to draw attention or bear witness to the profundity of life, its peaceful moments, perhaps, with its traumas: 'you need / every blade'. There is undeniable absurdity in *Crocus* bearing the 'profundity of life'. For Celan, however, the poetry is precisely in the absurdity; for it is, 'the majesty of the absurd which bespeaks the presence of human beings. This ... has no definitive name, but I believe that this is ... poetry' ('The Meridian' 40).

## II. Conclusion

The tragic air hovers over most of Celan's work, including some like 'Crocus', despite that this poem speaks of 'a hospitable table' and apparently shared feelings. It has travelled a great distance from its starting point, but not from a vision of existence and history we may call Hegelian, although it also runs in Yeats and derives ultimately from the mythic power of insight. 'Crocus' contrasts with a poem like 'Death Fugue' or 'Alchemical', with their harrowing evocations. These have obviously not travelled far; hence the pain the poetic images memorialize is raw and sharp, and place before the reader a history, as Isaiah would say, to make men screen their faces. Bekker's argument that this dreadful history 'can be found in other poems, in which it is less obvious perhaps, but for all that more poignant' (143), is as if representation of it ought to be the object of the poetry, but it is an unpleasant subject the poem is at pains to avoid. Poetry is not another way of documenting history. It already marks its difference from history in being 'the artistic re-creation of images that had not been artistic before' (Freidenberg 2006: 24). The artistic image is what accounts for the power of a poem like 'Death Fugue' and it deserves all the attention it gets. 'Psalm' and 'Crocus' are examples of poems going farther on the impulse of this 'mythological image'. 'Psalm' is plunged by it along the nihilistic path as it is unable fundamentally to free itself from the mythological image, while 'Crocus' appears to have achieved this freedom and moving towards meaning and away from tragic isolation.

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