

- Bloom, Harold. 1982. *Towards a Theory of Revisionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1991. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991).
- Cohen, Jonathan. 1990a. "The Role of Interpretation in the Psychoanalytic Therapy of Traumatized Patients." Paper prepared for the Sixth Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, New Orleans.
- . 1990b. "The Trauma Paradigm in Psychoanalysis." Paper prepared for the Sixth Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, New Orleans.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1939. *Moses and Monotheism*. Trans. Katherine Jones. New York: Vintage.
- . 1920 (1955). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 18. Translated under the editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alex Strachey and Alan Tyson. 24 vols. (1953-74). London: Hogarth.
- Gay, Peter. 1988. *Freud: A Life for Our Time*. New York: Norton.
- Hersey, John. 1985. *Hiroshima*. New York: Bantam.
- Kinsler, Florabel. 1990. "The Dynamics of Brief Group Therapy in Homogeneous Populations: Child Survivors of the Holocaust." Paper prepared for the Sixth Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, New Orleans.
- Laplanche, Jean. 1970. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Laub, Dori. 1991. "No One Bears Witness to the Witness." In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. New York: Routledge.
- Masson, Jeffrey. 1984. *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. New York: Penguin.
- Terr, Lenore. 1988. "Remembered Images and Trauma: A Psychology of the Supernatural." *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- van der Kolk, Bessel A., ed. 1984. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological and Biological Sequelae*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press.

## EDUCATION AND CRISIS, OR THE VICISSITUDES OF TEACHING

SHOSHANA FELMAN

### I

#### TRAUMA AND PEDAGOGY

Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education? To put the question even more audaciously and sharply: Is there a relation between trauma and pedagogy? In a post-traumatic century, a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education, that we did not know before? Can trauma *instruct* pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma? Can the task of teaching be instructed by the clinical experience, and can the clinical experience be instructed, on the other hand, by the task of teaching?

Psychoanalysis, as well as other disciplines of human mental welfare, proceed by taking testimonies from their patients. Can educators be in turn edified by the practice of the testimony, while attempting to enrich it and rethink it through some striking literary lessons? What does literature tell us about testimony? What does psychoanalysis tell us about testimony? Can the implications of the psychoanalytic lesson and the literary lesson about testimony *interact* in the pedagogical experience? Can the process of the testimony—that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma—be made use of in the classroom situation? What, indeed, does testimony mean in general, and what in general does it attempt to do? In a post-traumatic century, what and how can testimony teach us, not merely in the areas of law, of medicine, of history, which routinely use it in their daily practice, but in the larger areas of the *interactions between the clinical and the historical, between the literary and the pedagogical*?



## THE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN WITNESSES

In his book entitled *Kafka's Other Trial*, writer, critic, and Nobel prize laureate for literature Elias Canetti narrates the effect that Kafka's correspondence has had on him:

I found those letters more gripping and absorbing than any literary work I have read for years past. They belong among those singular memoirs, autobiographies, collection of letters from which Kafka himself drew sustenance. He himself . . . [read] over and over again, the letters of Kleist, of Flaubert, and of Hebbel. . . .

To call these letters documents would be saying too little, unless one were to apply the same title to the *life-testimonies* of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky. For my part, I can only say that these letters have *penetrated me like an actual life*. (Canetti, 1974, 4; emphasis mine)

A "life-testimony" is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*. As such, Kafka's correspondence is testimony not merely to the life of Kafka, but to something larger than the life of Kafka, and which Canetti's title designates, suggestively and enigmatically, as *Kafka's Other Trial*. Both through Kafka's life and through his work, something crucial takes place which is of the order of a *trial*. Canetti's very reading of Kafka's correspondence, in line with Kafka's reading of the letters of Kleist, Hebbel, and Flaubert, thus adds its testimony—adds as yet another witness—to Kafka's *Trial*. Canetti writes:

In the face of life's horror—luckily most people notice it only on occasion, but a few whom inner forces *appoint to bear witness* are always conscious of it—there is only one comfort: *its alignment with the horror experienced by previous witnesses*. (ibid.; emphasis mine)

How is the act of *writing* tied up with the act of *bearing witness*—and with the experience of the trial? Is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*? If literature is the *alignment between witnesses*, what would this alignment mean? And by virtue of what sort of agency is one *appointed to bear witness*?

## THE APPOINTMENT

It is a strange appointment, from which the witness-appointee cannot relieve himself by any delegation, substitution, or representation. "If someone else could have written my stories," says Elie Wiesel, "I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of

the loneliness that can be glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences" (1984; my translation). Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated, or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, noninterchangeable, and solitary burden. "No one bears witness for the witness," writes the poet Paul Celan (Aschenglorie ["Ashes-Glory"]): "Niemand zeugt für den zeugen" (Celan, 1980a). To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility; and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude.

And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas can thus suggest that the witness' speech is one that, by its very definition, transcends the witness who is; but its medium, the medium of realization of the testimony. "The witness," writes Levinas, "testifies to what has been said *through* him. Because the witness has said 'here I am' before the other" (Levinas, 1982, 115, my translation; emphasis mine). By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*.

Is the appointment to the testimony voluntary or involuntary, given *to* or *against* the witness' will? The contemporary writer often dramatizes the predicament (whether chosen or imposed, whether conscious or unconscious) of a voluntary or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes *involuntary witness*: witness to a trauma, to a crime, or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization.

## THE SCANDAL OF AN ILLNESS

In Albert Camus' *The Plague*, for instance, the narrator, a physician by profession, feels historically appointed—by the magnitude of the catastrophe he has survived and by the very nature of his vocation as a healer—to narrate the story and bear witness to the history of the deadly epidemic that has struck his town:

This chronicle is drawing to an end, and this seems to be the moment for Dr. Bernard Rieux to confess that he is the narrator. . . . His profession put him in touch with a great many of our townspeople while plague was raging, and he had opportunities of hearing their various opinions. Thus he was well placed for giving a true account of all he saw and heard. . . .



Summoned to give evidence [*appelé à témoigner*] regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised the restraint that behooves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he had deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common—love, exile, and suffering. . . . Thus, decidedly, it was up to him to speak for all. . . . Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice done them might endure. (1972, 270, 287)

Camus' choice of the physician as the privileged narrator and the designated witness might suggest that the capacity to witness and the act of bearing witness in themselves embody some remedial quality and belong already, in obscure ways, to the healing process. But the presence of the doctor as key witness also tells us, on the other hand, that what there is to witness urgently in the human world, what alerts and mobilizes the attention of the witness and what necessitates the testimony is always fundamentally, in one way or another, the scandal of an illness, of a metaphorical or literal disease; and that the imperative of bearing witness, which here proceeds from the contagion of the Plague—from the eruption of an evil that is radically incurable—is itself somehow a philosophical and ethical correlative of a situation with no cure, and of a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability.

#### IN AN ERA OF TESTIMONY

Oftentimes, contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literal transmission. Films like *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, *The Sorrow and the Pity* by Marcel Ophüls, or *Hiroshima mon amour* by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, instruct us in the ways in which testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities. As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.

What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constataion of a

verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory. To testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is impact that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations.

#### CRISIS OF TRUTH

It has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony. "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet," writes Elie Wiesel, "our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (1977, 9). What is the significance of this growing predominance of testimony as a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication? Why has testimony in effect become at once so central and so omnipresent in our recent cultural accounts of ourselves?

In its most traditional, routine use in the legal context—in the courtroom situation—testimony is provided, and is called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt, and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question. The legal model of the trial dramatizes, in this way, a contained, and culturally channeled, institutionalized, crisis of truth. The trial both derives from and proceeds by, a crisis of evidence, which the verdict must resolve.

What, however, are the stakes of the larger, more profound, less definable crisis of truth which, in proceeding from contemporary trauma, has brought the discourse of the testimony to the fore of the contemporary cultural narrative, way beyond the implications of its limited, restricted usage in the legal context?

#### II

#### THE STORY OF A CLASS

As a way of investigating the significance of such a question, as well as of the questions raised in the beginning of this chapter concerning the interaction between the clinical and the historical and the instructional relations



but from the destruction and the devastation which the Second World War and in particular, the Holocaust, have set in motion. In exploding, once again—in the footsteps of the lesson taught by Mallarmé—its own poetic medium, in dislocating its own language and in breaking down its own verse, the poetry of Paul Celan gives testimony, in effect, no longer simply to what Mallarmé refers to as an undefined, generic “accident,” but to a more specific, more particularly crushing and more recent, cultural and historical breakdown, to the individual and the communal, massive trauma of a catastrophic loss and a disastrous fate in which nothing any more can be construed as *accident* except, perhaps, for *the poet's own survival*. Mallarmé's crisis of verse has come now to express, concretely and specifically, Celan's particular historical reality and his literally shattering experience as a Holocaust survivor. *The breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world.*

Like Mallarmé, the witness to the accident, Celan, the witness to catastrophe, is in turn a traveler, a witness-traveler whose poetry precisely is researching, through its testimony, the obscure direction and the unknown destination of his journey. “I have written poems,” says Celan, “so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself” (see Felstiner, 1982, 23). Unlike Mallarmé, however, who brings “surprising news” to England as an “invited traveler” (“an invited traveller who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known, and pursuing him”), Celan's witness is not that of an “invited,” but rather that of an evicted, traveler, one whose journey has originated in the constraint of deportation, in the throes of *exile* from his native country.

Paul Ancel, who will after the war rename himself—anagrammatically—Celan, was born to German-Jewish parents in 1920 in Czernowitz, Bukovina, a northern province of Romania. In July 1941 an S.S. *Einsatzgruppe*, aided by Romanian troops, began destroying Czernowitz's Jewish community. In 1942, Celan's parents were deported to a concentration camp. Paul Celan managed to escape, but was sent to a forced labor camp, in which he hauled debris and shoveled rocks for eighteen months. The only letter Paul received from his mother informed him that his father, totally spent, had been killed by the S.S. A few months later, Paul learned from an escaped cousin that his mother was in turn murdered, shot through the back of the neck. A story published in a German newspaper in the late seventies suggests that Celan (uncannily not unlike Dostoevsky) escaped execution in the camp by crossing over a dividing line—by switching places *in extremis* from a formation marked for death to one designated for the fate of slave labor.

In 1944, Celan returns to Czernowitz, which has been liberated by Soviet troops. After the war, he moves to Bucharest, then to Vienna, and finally settles in Paris in 1948. His poetic translations from French, English and Russian into German, accompany the publication of his own poetic works, which win him both prestigious literary prizes and immediate critical acclaim in the German-speaking world.

In April 1970, at the age of forty nine, Paul Celan commits suicide by drowning himself in the Seine.

In spite of his mastery of many languages and of his fluency in many literatures, in spite of his own choice to live in Paris and to be conversant with French culture, Celan could not give up writing in German. “I do not believe in bilingualness in poetry,” he said, in reply to a question about his linguistic choices. “Poetry—that is the fateful uniqueness of language” (see Felstiner, 1986, 122). To his biographer Israel Chalfen, Celan explained his loyalty to German: “Only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies” (see Washburn, 1986, vii). Yet, this bonding to the mother tongue, this intimate connection to the spoken legacy of his lost mother as the only language to which truth—his own unique truth—can be *native*, is also, quite unbearably, an indissoluble connection to the language of the murderers of his own parents, a subjugation to the very language from which death, humiliation, torture and destruction issued, in a verdict of his own annihilation. Celan's poetic writing therefore struggles with the German to annihilate his own annihilation in it, to *reappropriate the language* that has marked his own exclusion: the poems dislocate the language so as to remold it, to radically shift its semantic and grammatical assumptions and remake—creatively and critically—a new poetic language entirely Celan's own. Mallarmé's crisis of language here becomes the vital effort—and the critical endeavor—to reclaim and repossess the very language in which *testimony* must—and cannot simply and uncritically—be given. This radical, exacting working through of language and of memory at once, takes place through a desperate poetic and linguistic struggle to, precisely, reappropriate the very language of one's own expropriation, to reclaim the German from its Nazi past and to retrieve the mother tongue—the sole possession of the dispossessed—from the Holocaust it has inflicted. “These,” says Celan, “are the efforts of someone . . . shelterless in a sense undreamt of till now . . . who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality”:

Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.



This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening—but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, “enriched” by all that.

In this language I have sought, then and in the years since then, to write poems—so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.

This, you see, was event, movement, a being under way, an attempt to gain direction. And if I ask about its meaning, I think I must say that this question also involves the clockhand’s meaning.

... These are the efforts of someone coursed over by the stars of human handiwork, someone also shelterless in a sense undreamt-of till now and thus most uncannily out in the open, who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality [*wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchend*]. (see Felstiner, 1982, 23)

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it—to turn back on, and to try to penetrate, the state of being *stricken*, wounded by reality [*wirklichkeitswund*—and to attempt, at the same time, to re-emerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality [*Wirklichkeit suchend*] as an advent, a movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of moving on. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible. The wound gives access to the darkness that the language had to go through and traverse in the very process of its “frightful falling-mute.” To seek reality through language “with one’s very being,” to seek in language what the language had precisely to *pass through*, is thus to make of one’s own “shelterlessness”—of the openness and the accessibility of one’s own wounds—an unexpected and unprecedented means of *accessing reality*, the radical condition for a wrenching exploration of the testimonial function, and the testimonial power, of the language: it is to give reality one’s own vulnerability, as a conditional of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned-in attention to the *relation between language and events*.

One such poem that attempts to probe precisely this relation between language and events is *Todesfuge* (“Death Fugue”), Celan’s first published poem, written toward the end of 1944, immediately upon the poet’s own emergence from his devastating war experience. The poem dramatizes and

evokes a concentration camp experience, not directly and explicitly, however, not through linear narrative, through personal confession or through testimonial reportage, but elliptically and circularly, through the polyphonic but ironically disjointed art of counterpoint, and through the obsessional, compulsive repetitions and the vertiginous explosion of a mad song whose lament—half-blasphemy, half-prayer—bursts at once into a speechless, voiceless crying and into the dancing tumult of drunken celebration. Amazingly enough, the poem that depicts the most unthinkable complexities of horror and the most outrageously degrading depths of suffering is not a poem about killing, but, primarily, a poem about *drinking*, and about the relation (and the non-relation) between “drinking” and “writing.”

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at  
night  
we drink and we drink it  
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies  
unconfined

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents  
he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden  
hair Margarete  
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are  
flashing he whistles his pack out  
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a  
grave  
he commands us strike up for the dance

he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden  
hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the  
breezes there one lies unconfined. (Celan, 1980a, 51)

The performance of the act of drinking, traditionally a poetic metaphor for yearning, for romantic thirst and for desire, is here transformed into the surprisingly abusive figure of an endless torture and a limitless exposure, a figure for the impotent predicament and the unbearable ordeal of having to endure, absorb, continue to *take in* with no end and no limit. This image of the drunkenness of torture ironically perverts, and ironically demystifies, on the one hand, the Hellenic-mythic connotation of libidinal, euphoric Dionysiac drinking of both wine and poetry, and on the other



hand, the Christian connotation of ritual religious consecration and of Eucharistic, sacred drinking of Christ's blood—and of Christ's virtue. The prominent underlying Eucharistic image suggests, however, that the enigmatic drinking that the poem repetitiously invokes is, indeed, essentially drinking of blood.

The perversion of the metaphor of drinking is further aggravated by the enigmatic image of the "black milk," which, in its obsessive repetitions, suggests the further underlying—though unspeakable and inarticulated—image of a child striving to drink from the mother's breast. But the denatured "black milk," tainted possibly by blackened, burnt ashes, springs not from the mother's breast but from the darkness of murder and death, from the blackness of the night and of the "dusk" that "falls to Germany" when death uncannily becomes a "master." Ingesting through the liquefied black milk at once dark blood and burnt ashes, the drinking takes place not at the maternal source but at the deadly source, precisely, of the wound, at the bleeding site of reality as stigma.

The Christian figure of the wound, traditionally viewed as the mythic vehicle and as the metaphoric means for a *historical transcendence*—for the erasure of Christ's death in the advent of Resurrection—is reinvested by the poem with the literal concreteness of the death camp blood and ashes, and is made thus to include, within the wound, *not resurrection* and historical transcendence, but the specificity of history—of the concrete historical reality of massacre and race annihilation—as unerasable and untranscendable. What Celan does, in this way, is to force the language of the Christian metaphors to *witness* in effect the Holocaust, and be in turn witnessed by it.

The entire poem is, indeed, not simply about violence but about the relation between violence and language, about the passage of the language through the violence and the passage of the violence through language. The violence enacted by the poem is in the *speech acts* of the German master, the commandant who directs the orchestra of the camp inmates to musically accompany their own grave-digging and to celebrate, in an ecstatic death fugue, at once the wounding of the earth and their own destruction and annihilation. But it is already in the very practice of his language that the commandant in effect annihilates the Jews, by actively denying them as *subjects*, by reducing their subjective individuality to a mass of indistinct, debased, inhuman *objects*, playthings of his whims, marionettes of his own pleasure of destruction and musical instruments of his own sadistic passion.

he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave

he commands us strike up for the dance

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play

jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany

he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air

then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

The violence is all the more obscene by being thus *estheticized* and by estheticizing its own dehumanization, by transforming its own murderous perversity into the cultural sophistication and the cultivated trances of a hedonistic art performance. But the poem works specifically and contrapuntally to dislocate this masquerade of cruelty as art, and to exhibit the obscenity of this estheticization, by opposing the melodious ecstasy of the esthetic pleasure to the dissonance of the commandant's speech acts and to the violence of his verbal abuse, and by reintroducing into the amnesia of the "fugue"—into the obliviousness of the *artistic drunkenness*—the drinking of black milk as *the impossibility of forgetting* and of getting a reprieve from suffering and memory, and as the sinister, insistent, *unforgettable return of what the esthetic pleasure has forgotten*.

we drink and we drink you

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes

he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete

your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breeze there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

we drink you at noon . . .

. . . we drink and we drink you

death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue

he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true



a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
 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

Your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith

The entire poem is contingent upon various forms of apostrophe and of address. The dehumanizing and annihilating interjections of the murderous address—"you lot, you others"—the address that institutes the other not as *subject* but as *target* ("He strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true"), meets and clashes with the dreamy yearnings of the desiring address, the address that institutes the other as a *subject of desire* and, as such, a *subject of response*, of a called-for *answer*.

your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith

19 Marguerite, Faust's object of desire and Goethe's incarnation of romantic love, evokes at once the general tradition of German literary yearning and the actual longing—possibly of the commandant—for his German beloved. Shulamith, a female emblem of both beauty and desire celebrated and admired in *The Song of Songs*, evokes the Jewish biblical and literary yearning and the longing for the Jewish beloved. The invocation of the cherished name is traversed by the same depth of joy and sadness, charged with the same energy of human longing and desire. The yearnings, as such, resonate with one another. And yet, a bitter difference and a shocking irony resound from within this echoing resemblance. In contrast to the golden hair of Marguerite, the ashen hair of Shulamith connotes not just a mark of racial difference between the fair haired maiden of the Aryan ideal and the ashen pallor of the Semitic beauty, but the hair reduced to ashes, the burnt hair of one race as opposed to the esthetic idealization and self-idealization of the other race. Like the light of "daybreak" turned into night and into darkness, the dissonance of golden and of ashen thus produces, once again, only "black milk" as an answer to one's thirst, one's longing, one's desire. The call to Shulamith—beauty reduced to smoke—is bound to remain unanswered.

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

we drink and we drink you

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents  
 he writes  
 he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden  
 hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the  
 breeze there one lies unconfined

The wound within the culture opens up in the discrepancy, the muteness, the abrupt disjunction, not only between "Marguerite" and "Shulamith," but, primarily, between "*we drink*," "*we dig*" and "*he writes*." The open wound is marked within the language by the incapacity of "*we*" to address, precisely, in this poem of apostrophe and of address, the "*he*." It is in this radical disruption of address between the "*we*" (who "drink" and "dig") and the "*he*" (who "writes" and who "commands"), that Celan locates the very essence of the violence, and the very essence of the Holocaust. 20

If "death is a master from Germany," it is a "master" not just in the sense that it brings death and that it totally controls its slaves, nor even merely, in addition, in the sense that it plays the *maestro*, the musician or the *meister-singer*, *master of arts* who strives, ironically enough, to produce death as artistic *masterpiece*, but in the sense that Germany, unwittingly, has instituted death as *Meister*, as a *master-teacher*. Death has taught a lesson that can henceforth never be forgotten. If art is to survive the Holocaust—to survive death as a master—it will have to break, in art, this mastery, which insidiously pervades the whole of culture and the whole of the esthetic project.

The necessity for art to *de-estheticize* itself and to justify henceforth its own existence, has been forcefully articulated by the German critic Theodor Adorno, in a famous dictum that defines, indeed, Celan's predicament but which has become itself (perhaps too readily) a critical cliché, too hastily consumed and too hastily reduced to a summary dismissal of Celan's troubling poetic efficacy in poems like "Death Fugue"; "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems" (Adorno, 1973, 362): "The esthetic principle of stylization," writes Adorno, "... make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims. ... [Some] works ... are even willingly absorbed as contributions to clearing up the past" (Adorno, 1982, 313). In Adorno's radical conception, it is, however, not just these specific works, nor simply lyric poetry as genre, but all of thinking, all of writing that has now to think, to write *against itself*. 21



If thinking is to be true—if it is to be true today, in any case—it must be thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims. (Adorno, 1973, 365)

Adorno himself, however, will return to his statement about poetry and Auschwitz in a later essay, to redefine its emphasis, to underscore the aporetic, and not simply negative, intention of his radical pronouncement, and to emphasize the fact (less known and more complex) that, paradoxically enough, it is only art that can henceforth be equal to its own historical impossibility, that art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness, and yet escape the subtly omnipresent and the almost unavoidable cultural betrayal both of history and of the victims.

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. . . . But Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that *literature must resist this verdict*. . . . It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.

Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. (Adorno, 1982, 312, 318)

The whole endeavor of Celan's poetic work can be defined precisely, in Adorno's terms, as poetry's creative and self-critical *resistance to the verdict* that it is barbaric, henceforth, to write lyrically, poetically; a verdict that the poetry receives, however, not from the outside but from inside itself, a verdict that "Death Fugue" encompasses already, and in fact enacts and sets in motion through the master's usurpation of the singing of the inmates.

Something of that usurpation has, however, inadvertently reproduced itself even in the very destiny of "Todesfuge," whose immense success and frequent anthologization in the German-speaking world has soon turned Celan into something like another celebrated "master." Celan himself, in later years, thus turned against his early poem, refused to allow its reprinting in further anthologies, and changed his writing style into a less explicit, less melodious, more disrupted and disruptively elliptical verse:

NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters.

Nothing won by dicing. How many  
dumb ones?  
Seventeen.

Your question—your answer.  
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,  
Eepinnow,  
Ee—i—o.

To prevent the possibility of an esthetic, drunken infatuation with its own verse, the later poetry rejects, within the language, not its music and its singing—which continue to define the essence of poetic language for Celan—but a certain predetermined kind of recognizably *melodious* musicality. In Celan's own words, the verse henceforth "distrusts the beautiful, . . . insists on having its 'musicality' placed in a region where it no longer has anything in common with that 'melodious sound' which more or less undisturbed sounded side by side with the greatest horror. The concern of this language is, in all the unalterable multivalence of the expression, *precision*. It doesn't transfigure, doesn't 'poeticize,' it names and places" (Celan, 1980b, 23; emphasis mine).

Deep in Time's crevasse  
by the alveolate  
waits, a crystal of breath,  
your irreversible  
witness.

(Celan, 1980a, 189)

The quest for musical precision—which shuns melody and which refrains, above all, from "poeticizing"—is, however, coupled with a tendency toward silence. "Tendency toward silence," notes Celan, "—this, too, can't be said just so. We mustn't create new fetishes. Even the anti-fetish can become a fetish" (1980b, 45).

NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters.

"One of the truths hardest to demonstrate," writes Pierre Boulez in an analysis of contemporary music that could apply as well to Celan's revised poetic musicality; "one of the truths hardest to demonstrate is that music is not just the 'Art of sound'—that it must be defined rather as a counterpoint



of sound and silence. [Contemporary music's] rhythmic innovation is this conception whereby sound and silence are linked in a precise organization directed toward the exhaustive exploitation of our powers of hearing" (see Washburn, 1986, xxv).

By introducing silence as a rhythmic *breakdown* and as a displacing *counterpoint* to sound not just *in between* his stanzas and his verses, but even *in the very midst* of the phonetic flow and the poetic diction of his words ("You my words being crippled / together with me . . . / with the hu, with the man, with the human being" (Celan, 1980a, 151)), Celan strives to defetishize his language and to dislocate his own esthetic mastery, by breaking down any self-possessed control of sense and by disrupting any unity, integrity, or continuity of conscious meaning. Through their very breakdown, the sounds testify, henceforth, precisely to a knowledge they do not possess, by unleashing, and by drifting into, their own buried depths of silence.

Your question—your answer.  
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,  
Eepinnow,  
Ee—i—o.

But this breakdown of the word, this drift of music and of sound of the song that resists recuperation and that does not know, and cannot own, its meaning, nonetheless reaches a *you*, attains the hearing—and perhaps the question, or the answer, of an Other: "Your question—your answer / Your song." The poem strives toward the *Du*, the *you*, the listener, over the historical abyss from which the singing has originated and across the violence and the unending, shattered resonances of the breakage of the word. "A poem," writes Celan, "as a manifest form of language and thus inherently dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the (not always greatly hopeful) belief that it may somewhere and sometime wash up on land, on heartland perhaps":

Poems in this sense are always under way, they are making toward something.

Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward a "thou" that can be *addressed*, an *addressable* reality. (see Felstiner, 1982; emphasis mine)

As an event directed toward the recreation of a "thou," poetry becomes, precisely, the event of *creating an address* for the specificity of a historical experi-

ence that annihilated any possibility of address. If the lesson of death (*Todesfuge's* executioner, *commandant*, and *maestro*)—the lesson of the master—was precisely that a master is the one who *cannot be addressed*, the one to whom one cannot say "*you*," Celan's poetry now strives not simply, as is often said, to seek out the responsive *you*, to recreate the listener, the hearer, but to subvert, to dislocate and to displace the very essence of esthetics as a *project of artistic mastery* by transforming poetry—as breakage of the word and as drifting testimony—into an inherent and unprecedented, testimonial *project of address*.

As one speaks to stone, like  
you,  
from the chasm, from  
a home become a sister to me, hurled  
toward me, you,  
you that long ago  
you in the nothingness of a night,  
you in the multi-night en-  
countered, you  
multi-you—

(Celan, 1980a, 153)

and at times when  
only the void stood between us we got  
all the way to each other.

(ibid., 135)

#### CROSSING THE VOID, OR POETRY AS SETTING FREE

Along with the above-sketched journey of the various writers, theorists and poets, the class traveled its own path. Opened up to the diversity and touched by the concrete peculiarities of literary, clinical, historical, and poetic testimonies; captivated and surprised by the unexpected ways in which the very different texts nonetheless unwittingly evolved into each other, came to engage each other's depth and put each other in an increasingly complex perspective, the students reemerged from each textual encounter somewhat changed. The formal and historical vicissitudes of Celan's poetry found them ready: ready to receive the silent counterpoints of the breakage of the words and of the poem's broken sounds; ready to be solicited by the namelessness of Celan's experience; ready, in other words, to assume the position of the "thou," to become the "you" that "in the nothingness of the night" the poetry was seeking. Through its responsive yet subdued, contained vibrations (vibrations evident both in the students' writing and in the keenness of attention in the classroom discussions), the class became, in



# Paul Celan: Death Fugue

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
we drink it and drink it

we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined  
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete  
he writes it ans steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he whistles his pack out  
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave  
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown  
we drink and we drink you

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Sulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play  
he grabs at teh iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue  
jab deper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you at at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown  
we drink and we drink you

a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Sulamith he plays with the serpents

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany  
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air

then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany  
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you  
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue  
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true  
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
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

Your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith