Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan

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Roots and Ramifications of the "Meridian" Speech

Esther Cameron
Circumference thou Bride of Awe  
Possessing thou shalt be  
Possessed by every hallowed Knight  
That dares to covet thee  

—Emily Dickinson
Introduction

The Landscape of Reading

In the intellectual history of the twentieth century, Paul Celan holds a unique position. On the one hand he was perhaps the last great figure of the Western poetic tradition, one who took up the dialogue with its classics and who responded to the questions of his day from a “global” concern, if often cryptically. And on the other hand, Paul Celan was a witness to and interim survivor of the Holocaust and, as he once put it, “perhaps . . . one of the last who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe.”[1] These two identities raise questions about each other which were evidently present for Celan in the very act of poetry.

Paul Antschel, who became Paul Celan, was born in 1920 in Czernowitz, capital of the Bukowina region which had just become part of Rumania, a city in which German-speaking Jews were the dominant element, and where Jewish and Western culture seem to have been on unusually friendly terms. This came to an end with the Nazi invasion, in which two-thirds of the Jews of Czernowitz, including the poet’s parents, were sent to the death camps, while he himself spent a year and a half in a labor camp. In 1945 he wrote “Todesfuge (Death Fugue),” his best-known poem and perhaps the most powerful poetic statement on the Shoah. In 1947 he left Rumania for the West, finally settling in Paris in 1948. He continued to write poetry in “the language of his mother and of his mother’s murderers.”[2] Of the nine collections that form the main body of his work, six had appeared before his death in 1970; three were published posthumously. In 1969 he had paid a three-week visit to Israel.

Perhaps the zenith of his poetical career came in 1960, when the German Academy of Language and Literature awarded him the Georg Büchner Prize, the highest honor which the German literary world had to offer. (It was an award not without its own history of irony: the prize was originally given by the state of Hesse, from which the young dramatist Georg Büchner had fled in 1835 to avoid arrest as a revolutionary.) As his acceptance speech, Celan composed “The Meridian,” his longest and most encompassing text.

“The Meridian” is a work of soul-searching in which the questions and tensions of Celan’s work are drawn together. He stood as an emissary from a murdered community before an audience which he
suspected of complicity. What to say to them, how to justify to his
Jewish self his acceptance of a literary honor from this body and his
writing of the works that had led to it—these questions are
frequently glimpsed beneath the surface of the speech. They drive
the definition that he tries to give of poetry, its origin, and its task
and its hopes. The working out of these tensions and questions gives
the speech almost the character of a monodrama.

The present study takes the “Meridian” speech as a base from
which to explore Celan’s work and the intellectual landscape to
which it refers, a landscape shaped both by intellectual currents and
cataclysmic historical events. It is written in commentary form,
because that form allows us to follow the road he was traveling in
the presence of that audience on that day of October 22, 1960. For
some time this book had the working title “The Impossible Way,”
taken from a sentence that stood out for me on first reading:

Ladies and gentlemen, I find something that comforts me a little
at having taken, in your presence, this impossible path, this path
of the impossible.^[3]

Amid those paragraphs that rose before my uncomprehending
eyes like a steep rock wall with few hand-holds, there was suddenly
this moment like watching someone on a very high tightrope.

Interpretation too has its road; and for the present reader’s
orientation, perhaps the road of this interpretation may be briefly
sketched.

I began reading Celan in the late 1960s, when the Western
reader of Celan’s poems still walked through an unknown landscape.
Not much had been made public about his background, beyond the
fact that he was a survivor of the Holocaust in which his parents had
been murdered. In his poems he was not given to reminiscing, and
he did not grant interviews. The name Czernowitz was new to most
of us.

Thus the glosses tended to be supplied not so much by the
poet’s background as by the setting of the reading, which in my case
was Berkeley, California. Celan was suggested to me as a thesis
topic by the late Prof. Heinz Politzer, a man of deep European
culture; but around the university raged the world of psychedelic
experiments, of protests, and revolutionary rhetoric and utopian
fantasies. It was a chaotic, still-open world, in some ways a rerun of
surrealism, to which Celan still looked back with some nostalgia at
the time of “The Meridian”;^[4] and it was the world in which, a few
days after Celan’s death, the first Earth Day would be celebrated,
and posters would come out showing pictures of Earth from space accompanied by slogans like “Your mother needs you.” It was with the questions raised by this world that I first came to Celan’s work.

Others, too, felt that in Celan’s work the fate of the world was under discussion. I find this feeling articulated in a 1987 article by his Italian translator, Giuseppe Bevilacqua:

What constitutes the greatness of Paul Celan? His enormous meaning, not only for the history of literature in this century, but altogether? I believe it is the simple fact that this eminent lyrical work is also—or even chiefly—epic in meaning. The development of this poet is perhaps the only “descensio ad inferos” of our days. By taking this upon himself without compromise, he established his claim to represent our epoch “in toto.”[5]

There was a moment, in the spring of 1971, when it seemed to me that I understood what he had wanted for—and from—all of us.

The realities from which the poems had sprung filled in gradually. In 1968 Prof. Politzer directed me to Buber’s Tales of the Hasidim and Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism as possible aids to understanding. In August, 1969, in Paris, the dialogue with the work became for a few hours a—halting, then haunting—interview with a human being.[6] The year after Celan’s death saw the appearance of the first chapter of Dr. Israel Chalfen’s book Paul Celan: Eine Jugendbiographie in a magazine called Die Pestsäule. From this chapter, which for the first time allowed the Western reader to glimpse Celan’s community of origin, I gathered that Judaism had still been a strong presence in the Czernowitz environment, and that Celan had learned Hebrew as a child. This suggested to me that in order to understand Celan it might be well to study Hebrew. With this, and with a visit to a Holocaust remembrance service in 1972, began a progress that eventually led to the last place named in Celan’s work—Jerusalem. There, and in Tel Aviv and Rechovot, I was privileged to meet a number of people from Czernowitz—David Seidmann, Ilana Shmueli, Eliyahu Pinter, Drs. Manuel and Martha Singer, Hersch Segal, Edith Huberman, Manfred Winkler, and Dr. Chalfen.

Dr. Chalfen, a retired medical doctor, was one for whom, as for me, an acquaintance with Celan’s work had been the starting point of a second education. A native of Czernowitz, ten years older than Celan, he had taken the trouble to collect, from surviving relatives and friends in Israel and elsewhere, whatever they could remember of the poet’s early years. That done, he returned to studying the poems themselves. In the fall of 1981 he began holding regular
meetings of what eventually became known as the Jerusalem Celan-Arbeitskreis. Other founding members included the poet and artist Manfred Winkler, another Czernowitz native and Celan’s first Hebrew translator; and Mary Zilzer, the Russian-born widow of the painter Gyula Zilzer and a reader par excellence in several languages. The poets Magali Zibaso and Eva Avi-Yonah also eventually became steady participants; and others, like Celan’s Ukrainian translator Moshe Fishbein, visited at various times.

We would meet in what had been Dr. Chalfen’s consulting room, a small room in his modest apartment on Keren Hayesod Street just below the junction with King George Street. The room contained several of Manfred Winkler’s sculptures, groups of intertwined clay figures that sometimes put one in mind of Celan’s “Tenebrae”; on the walls, besides paintings by Manfred, there was a pencil drawing by Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, “Toward a Center.” It showed a lot of tiny points that seemed to be converging into a shape like a tower (without the title one would not have known if they were converging or dispersing). Our method was simple: someone would suggest a poem to concentrate on for the evening, and together we would puzzle it out, generally bringing in other poems as well. Without necessarily agreeing on everything, we would end by feeling that we understood the poem better. Sometimes Dr. Chalfen or I would write a paper for the group. Members of the group participated in two symposia on Celan that were held in Israel during the 1980s.

At the second of these conferences I presented a paper entitled “Das Dunkle und das Helle: Zur Möglichen Eindeutigkeit des ‘Meridians’ (The Dark and the Light: On the Possible Non-Ambiguity of the ‘Meridian’).” In that paper I attempted to map out a certain ground of perception which I shared with the two then extant “Meridian” commentaries—Gerhard Buhr’s Celans Poetik and David Brierley’s “Der Meridian”: Ein Versuch zur Poetik und Dichtung Paul Celan’s. And in the winter of 1986–87 the idea came to me of writing my own commentary on “The Meridian,” as a form in which to sum up a view of his work which had found, in and through the Arbeitskreis, a space in which to unfold and a certain measure of confirmation.

It should be admitted that the Arbeitskreis also deepened my sense of a vast ambivalence that passes through Celan’s work like a submarine rift, that has to be negotiated before one even confronts the split that is the central theme of this study. On the one hand Celan once called “The Meridian” his Glaubensbekenntnis (confession of faith), a term that implies both a belief and an intention to communicate. (He had said this not to a literary colleague but to his friend from home, Dr. Singer, a physician.) On
the other hand, Celan told the Hegelian scholar Otto Pöggeler: “I am not a believer (gläubig), but the poem is something like a Negro spiritual.”[8] And in a 1966 interview with Hugo Huppert he said, going back to the title of his third collection, that his poems formed a “lattice of language (Sprachgitter),” so that “the reader can’t get hold of me (bekommt mich nicht in den Griff).”[9] These sound like the words of one who believed in nothing and did not want to communicate!

The present interpretation, though it tries to account for both sides of the ambivalence, starts from a choice in favor of communication and some ultimate faith. This choice can be justified “heuristically,” since only by holding skepticism at a distance can we allow vision to unfold. A further basis lies in Leo Strauss’ observation, in Persecution and the Art of Writing, that at certain periods it was common practice for an author to state both the view that was conventional in his time and a view opposed to it; the alert reader would know that the unconventional view was the one that was meant.[10] In Celan’s literary generation pessimism and nihilism were a good deal more conventional in the literary world than expressions of hope and faith; in Thread-Suns there is the telling phrase “the forbidden light (das verbotene Licht).”[11]

In the 1983 Suhrkamp edition of Celan’s collected works “The Meridian” occupies 16 rather sparsely set pages of type. This is somewhat more than a third of the prose published by Celan during his lifetime. In comparison to ordinary prose it is like the matter in dwarf stars, of which one cubic inch is said to weigh more than the earth. The attempt to explain this text soon leads us outside it to bring in other texts to which it refers or which it calls up. Most obvious among these are the works of Georg Büchner; “The Meridian” is constructed as a commentary on several passages from these works. But these explicit references are only the “outcroppings” of a subterranean dialogue which the reader must attempt to map. Less obvious are the references to Celan’s own poems, whose themes and vocabulary are woven into the speech, so that an attempt to explain this text becomes a commentary on his work as a whole. Then there are the works of other authors named in the text, or not named but evidently present to the speaker’s mind.

Indeed, the allusiveness of this text is difficult to confine. With respect to Celan’s own works, there is anticipation as well as memory. Furthermore, because they are “on the way,” in search of receptive others, Celan’s texts have a way of reminding the reader of things from his or her own sphere of reading and experience. By way of example, a few such connections have been acknowledged here.
Needless to say, this commentary can make no claim to completeness with respect either to the sources of Celan’s work or the possible perspectives on it. One envisions the speech printed in the manner of a Talmud page, with the text in a central block surrounded by the work of various commentators. But due to the multitude of universes which the references point toward, the page would have to be multidimensional!

This is a scholarly work, in the sense that I have made a “conscientious” effort to locate and consult the most pertinent secondary works, and to arrive through close textual analysis at interpretations that are not arbitrary. Such effort is held not inconsistent with a strong response to the work: when one has been affected by another, one wants to know who that other is and where they are coming from. Yet that response also brought with it a conviction that Celan’s work demands a critical practice that can include the reader’s engagement, the reader’s word. And it also brought the need not only to grasp the intent of the text but also to go on wrestling with the questions that it raises. The critical work thus becomes a conversation—at a few points even something like an argument—with the text.

Since the first writing of this study, a quarter of a century has passed, and the work has undergone two or three revisions. I have tried not to overwrite the sense of immediacy which the Arbeitskreis gave me. But much has happened, much has become known, and the light in which I read Celan has shifted somewhat; in particular, the Judaic focus has sharpened, due to an increased acquaintance with the tradition and, I hope, a deepened understanding of Celan’s situation with respect to it.

Celan’s relation to Judaism was peculiar and unique, rooted originally in the particular situation of the Czernowitz community, a community open to Western culture yet still situated close to Sadagora, a center of Hasidism. According to Dr. Chalfen, Paul Antschel’s paternal grandparents were Orthodox; his mother still lit the Sabbath candles though the family no longer observed the Sabbath strictly; his father, a Zionist, sent him for three years to a school where Hebrew was the language of instruction. According to his cousin Edith Huberman, he had a good bar mitzvah teacher. According to John Felstiner, among his personal books was found a copy of TaNaKH, the Hebrew Bible.[12]

Thus besides the recent Jewish authors that Celan is known to have read as an adult—Landauer, Kafka, Schestow, Benjamin, Buber, Scholem and others—there is also a presence of the ancestral faith, a knowledge absorbed from the environment, whose limits cannot be known. In recent years I have felt an increasing need to look back on
Celan’s work from the standpoint of traditional Judaism, to read him in the light of the Jewish sources I have been able to study, in the atmosphere of the Orthodox Jewish community I have come to know. Hence I have not confined myself to those Jewish sources which Celan is known to have consulted. I have tried to mark for the reader when I am basing myself on traceable influences and when not.

Above all, perhaps, this study asks to be read in the light of Orot HaTechiyah (The Lights of Renewal) by Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, to whose teachings I was directed by Rabbi Dr. David Shapiro z”l of Milwaukee after I had shared with him some of what I had understood from Celan’s poetry. HaRav Kook writes in the above-named work: “As long as (the Jewish people) is certain of its particular sustenance, it may be sure that the universal sustenance, which it needs no less than every other people, will return to it with a blessing.”[13] I have tried here to arrive at a vision of a “unified reality” (as one of my Jerusalem teachers, Rabbi Dr. Zvi Faier z”l, used to say) that would situate the diverse influences of Western and Westernized authors in a landscape that is both geologically plausible and illumined by some light from the Jewish sources.

The “Meridian” text and the poems by Celan that are discussed in connection with it are presented in the original and in translation; other texts are quoted in English only. Thanks are due to John Felstiner and W.W. Norton for permission to reprint John Felstiner’s translation, and to Bertrand Badiou, Eric Celan, Deutsche Verlaganstalt, A. Fischer Verlag and Suhrkamp for permission to reprint many poems and other texts by Celan. Except for the text of “The Meridian” itself, translations from the German are my own unless otherwise indicated.

I would like to thank, in addition to those friends and teachers already mentioned, Rabbi Yona Matusof and Rebbetzin Faygie Matusof, Mrs. Esther Dubinsky, and NechamaSaraGila Nadborny-Burgeman, for teachings that have helped to illuminate this quest; the poet Courtney Druz, for her reading of the manuscript and many helpful suggestions; Professor Leonard Kaplan, for his help in bringing this work to the press; and my late parents, Eugene and Adrienne Cameron, for all their teaching, example, and support. To the extent that this work succeeds in describing Celan’s world in such a way “[t]hat from the fact the word be not diverse” (Inf. XXXII, 12),[14] it reflects their devotion to truth and concern for the human future.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Felstiner, Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew, 57.
2. Milo Dor, “Paul Celan,” 281. Dor does not place these words in quotation marks, but I heard from David Seidmann that Celan himself used these words in describing his situation.

3. Paul Celan, “The Meridian,” in Celan, Selected Poems and Prose, 413. My own translation, not used here for copyright reasons, used the words “way” instead of “path” and “walked” instead of “taken.”

4. Paul Celan, The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials, 87: “Surrealism was a ragbag. But in this ragbag, besides the certainly questionable psychogram, there was also this—central—thought: Les jeux ne sont pas encore faits—a thought that accompanies every genuine poetic intention.”


11. Celan, “Der Geglückte,” in Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, 2:144. Subsequent excerpts from Celan’s poems and shorter prose are cited in the text by the volume and page number in this work—e.g. (2:144)—except where otherwise indicated.


I
Idolatry, Determinism, and Freedom

Meine Damen und Herren!


Ladies and Gentlemen!
Art, you will recall, is a puppet-like, iambic, five-footed and—mythology confirms this in the reference to Pygmalion and his creature—a childless being. In this guise art forms the subject of a conversation that takes place in a room, not in the Conciergerie prison, a conversation that could go on endlessly, we feel, if nothing intervened. Something does intervene.

“The Meridian” opens with a conventional form of address: “Ladies and Gentlemen.” This formula will be repeated no less than seventeen times in the speech, with increasing frequency toward the end, so that, discarding its conventional character, it becomes part of the speaker’s attempt to emphasize his own presence before the audience.

The self-consciousness which thus arises, on the part of both speaker and audience, testifies to a certain awkwardness about the occasion. The speaker is a Jew who survived eighteen months in a labor camp, the murder of his parents Leo and Friederike Antschel, and the scattering of the German-speaking Jewish community of his native Czernowitz. Since the war Paul Antschel, having changed his name to Paul Celan, has become known as a poet in the German language; now the German Academy of Language and Literature is conferring its highest distinction on him. In accepting the prize he
risks seeming to accept a literary distinction as compensation (Wiedergutmachung) for the atrocities that form part of the background of his poetry. Eight days after giving the speech, on November 1, 1960, Celan will write to Otto Pöggeler:

It was a dark summer, as you know. And the Büchner prize was, to the very last, a trial, that is, a temptation (Versuchung) and an affliction (Heimsuchung). Really. It is surmounted now; I even managed—at the last possible moment—to set down a (kind of) speech[.][1]

To Jerry Glenn the insistent repetition of “Ladies and gentlemen” sounds bitterly ironic, as if to suggest that the audience are “honorable men—like Brutus.”[2]

Another function of “Ladies and gentlemen” is to point up the contrast between literature as a pursuit of “polite” society, and the life-and-death matters which furnish literature, including this speech, with its themes. (Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” also uses this device.) [3]

Finally, the harping on “ladies and gentlemen” comes to underline the pervasive question of determinism. In (3) Celan will quote from Valerio’s spiel which begins “Look here, gentlemen and ladies” and purports to introduce two automatons, “one male and one female, one gentleman and one lady”[4] (they are actually the hero and heroine in disguise). And in (18) he will remark: “as you can see, Valerio’s ‘rasping tone,’ whenever Art comes forth, cannot be missed.” By repeating the phrase “ladies and gentlemen,” Celan becomes the Barker showing the audience a model of themselves—not without evoking the possibility, raised by Valerio,

that I myself am perhaps the third automaton and the most remarkable of all, if I myself actually knew what I am, which by the way is not surprising since I haven’t the faintest idea what I’m saying and don’t even know that I don’t know it, so that in all probability it’s just cogwheels and bellows that are saying all this.[5] [Italics mark the words and phrases that are quoted by Celan in the course of the speech.]

But we are anticipating; in the opening paragraph of “The Meridian” Celan is referring to a speech from, The Death of Danton, which contrasts Art as lifeless “automaton” with the living creature.

CAMILLE I tell you, if they can’t get it in wooden copies, parcelled out in theatres, concerts or art exhibitions, they have neither
eyes nor ears for it! Let someone carve a marionette, so you can see the rope hanging down that jerks it, and so the joints creak in five-footed iambics at every step—what logical development of character! Or let him take some paltry sentiment, some pithy word of wisdom, some concept, and dress it in coat and trousers, give it hands and feet, paint its face and allow the thing to agonize for three acts until it finally gets married or blows its brains out—an ideal! Or let him fiddle some opera that reproduces the soaring and sinking in the human spirit about as well as a clay pipe filled with water can imitate a nightingale—ah, Art!—Then send the people out of the theater onto the street—wretched reality! They forget their Lord God for his bad copyists. Of that Creation which every instant, glowing, surging and glittering, comes to birth around and in them, they hear and see nothing. They go to the theater, they read poems and novels, they distort their own faces in imitation of those caricatures, and all they can say to God’s creatures is: how common! The Greeks knew what they were saying when they told how Pygmalion’s statue came alive, but couldn’t have children.

DANTON And the artists treat nature the way David did, when he cold-bloodedly sketched the murdered men who were thrown from La Force into the street in September, saying: “I am catching the last twitchings of life in these villains.”[6] [Italics added.]

In his “Conversation about Dante” Mandelstamm makes a remark which—like a number of remarks in that essay—is applicable to Celan as well as to Dante: “A quotation is not an excerpt. A quotation is a cicada. Its natural property is unceasing sound.”[7] These quotations from Camille’s speech are intended to recall the entire speech to the reader’s mind. That Celan endorses its import is clear. In the letter to Pöggeler already quoted, Celan wrote: “You asked me, on our walk in H., why I translated La jeune Parque; I know it now; in order to acquire the right to say something against Art.”[8]

Note how, in quoting Camille’s speech, Celan condenses and distorts the imagery to make its grotesqueness even more apparent. The joints of the marionette which is Art “creak in five-footed iambics at every step” because of a play on the word “foot”; in Celan’s rendition Art becomes a “five-footed entity”—a monstrosity. The attribute of childlessness has associations for Celan’s auditors that it did not have for Büchner’s: the sterilizations in the camps, the
making of Europe “kinderrein.” (And on the other hand, those somewhat acquainted with the Jewish tradition will recall its emphasis on reproduction and the raising of children.) Moreover, the manufacture of lampshades from human skin has taught us that the most monstrous human impulses can express themselves “artistically.” Note that Danton already makes the connection between art and cruelty in his reply to Camille from which Celan takes one word—“twitchings”—later on in the speech.

In Camille’s view, the distorted images of reality presented by Art work back on reality itself to malform it. The admirers of Art have “neither eyes nor ears” for God’s creatures; they “distort their faces in imitation of those caricatures” which they see onstage. Camille’s words recall the biblical denunciations of graven images: “Eyes have they, but they see not; They have ears, but they hear not […] They that make them shall be like unto them; Yea, every one that trusteth in them” (Psalm 115). The caricature becomes a model that is imitated, and human stature is thereby diminished. In (6) Celan sees the prophecy of this dialogue fulfilled in the execution scene, where the condemned posture like stage heroes while the watchers comment like an audience on their performances.

Camille’s speech refers both to Greek mythology and to the Hebrew Bible. Two religious and, one may say, psychological systems are juxtaposed here; in “The Meridian” these two systems will continue to interact.

Celan’s second sentence employs three words that imply fixed form and outline: Gestalt (“shape,” or as here translated “guise”); bildet (from bilden [“to form”], a cognate of Bild, [“image”]); and Gegenstand, whose basic meaning is “object” (in English the topic of a conversation is its “subject,” while in German it is the “object”).

The first two are important terms, not only in the speech but in Celan’s poems. On the whole Gestalt has positive connotations, while Bild has negative ones. Gestalt suggests an embodiment of soul or spirit, the form which spirit assumes in passing through this world, as when Celan says in (5) that in “watching Camille speak” Lucile has perceived “Gestalt,” and still later that to the poem every thing and every human being is a Gestalt of the Other it seeks. In contrast, Bild connotes a kind of seeing that stops at appearances and is already the beginning of idolatry. The third term, Gegenstand, is associated by Buber with the I-It and opposed to Gegenwart “presence,” which is felt in the I-Thou relation.[9]

As we have seen, the Gestalt of Art as described by Camille and Celan is a monstrosity and an idol; and clearly the main effect of this triple invocation of shape /form /object is to reinforce the idea of reification and incipient idolatry. As the speech goes on we shall see
that Celan attempts to establish a the distinction between Art as idolmaking and Poetry as response to Gestalt—and finds the
distinction by no means easy to maintain. The use of the word
Gestalt here anticipates this problem.

The word Celan uses here for “conversation” is Unterhaltung,
which, as David Brierley observes, can also be translated as
“entertainment, diversion.”[10] Elsewhere in the speech and in his
work, when speaking of genuine dialogue, Celan uses the word
Gespräch. Brierley quotes an apposite passage by Pascal: “A man in
a cell, not knowing whether sentence has been passed on him, and
having only one hour in which to learn it, an hour that would suffice,
if he knew it had been passed, to get it revoked—it would be against
nature for him to employ that hour, not in learning whether sentence
has been passed, but in playing cards.”[11] This passage indeed
appears to have been in Celan’s mind, for he next points out that
this Unterhaltung does not take place in the Conciergerie, the prison
where Danton, Camille, and their comrades will subsequently await
execution. In the Conciergerie the condemned will not speak of Art
but of parting, death, dissolution, the meaning or meaninglessness
of life, the existence or nonexistence of God. As Marianne Moore also
acknowledged, “there are things that are important beyond all this
fiddle.”[12]

We feel, Celan tells us, that the discussion of Art could “go on
endlessly”—perhaps because it leads nowhere, breeds no
conclusions, no decisions for action (W.H. Auden’s dictum that poetry
is not a cause of events, is only too well known.[13]) Art is sterile in
this sense too. And it may also occur to us that this comment applies
to “The Meridian” itself, not to mention everything that might be
written about it. The attempt to tunnel a way out of this stricture
occupies Celan throughout the speech, and will occupy us
throughout this commentary.

Moreover, the “Unterhaltung” of Art will not prevent the
surrounding events from catching up with us. What “intervenes” is
that “Danton is called out” to learn of his party’s fall and his own
impending arrest. Our knowledge of this makes the pause after these
words—indicated in the printed text by a blank line—an ominous
one.

Such pauses, of which there are fifty-two in the Tübingen edition
of the speech, are one of its important constituents; as Celan himself
noted in his letter to the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und
Dichtung, the blank lines “belong to the text itself; they emphasize
units of breath and meaning.”[14] Some years ago, this writer saw a
poster with the caption: “If you do not understand my silence, you
will not understand my words.” It would be difficult to think of a better first principle for the understanding of Celan’s work. The noun and verb Schweigen (silence, to be silent) are key words in Celan’s poetry. Laconic formulations, frequent breaks in the train of thought, a way of pointing at rather than describing, seem intended to make silence audible. According to friends of Paul Celan, conversations with him were often punctuated by long silences. In “The Meridian” the silences make themselves felt as ominous, or “awkward”—like those halts in conversation which make evident what conversation is often designed to cover up: the physical presence of the other, of a fellow-mortal. In “The Meridian” Celan was particularly interested in emphasizing his own physical presence before this audience.

Each pause marks the conclusion of a unit of thought, which is further subdivided into paragraphs. But often one unit does not begin, or does not seem at first to begin, where the last unit left off. The linear continuity is broken. This again is similar to the effect of the poems, each of which has its own center of gravity, yet seems somehow fragmentary. The fragments are related by something which none of them can wholly express, yet together they allow us to intuit its wholeness—like that ancient planet of which the asteroids in our solar system are said to be the remnants. Or as Celan himself described the style of “The Meridian” in the above-quoted letter to Pöggeler: “a few formulations from the Mandelstamm broadcast [...] had to be included, as islands among other islands.”[15]

Celan’s style in “The Meridian,” and still more in the poems, calls to mind one of the most important documents of turn-of-the-century German literature, a text which is said to have deeply impressed Celan[16]: Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “A Letter,” in which the fictional Lord Chandos makes the following declarations:

I have completely lost the ability to think or speak in a connected manner about anything.[17]

[T]he abstract words which the tongue must naturally employ in order to pronounce any judgment whatever fell apart in my mouth like rotten mushrooms.[18]

[S]o it was with human beings and their actions, I was no longer able to grasp them with the simplifying gaze of habit. Everything fell apart into parts, the parts again into parts, and nothing any more allowed itself to be spanned with a concept.[19]

This state of mind is rooted in a profound distrust of reality as
society trains us to see it; and this distrust is not just epistemological skepticism, but a moral perception of the abyss over which our social life is built. Lord Chandos relates how he visualized the agony of the rats in his cellar whom he has ordered poisoned, a description that now reads like a prophecy of the gassing of Jews who had first been compared to rats.

Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos could still articulate his misgivings in a fluent, connected style which strikes the reader as curiously inconsistent with the speech inhibition it so eloquently describes. With Celan the misgivings have reached the center of articulation and have fashioned a "style" in keeping with them—fragmented, elliptical, invocational rather than descriptive, and punctuated by silences. (His relation to Buber's concept of "I-Thou" is similar: whereas Buber speaks about the I-Thou even while making clear that one cannot speak about it, Celan's poems speak from within the I-Thou relation.)

The "Letter of Lord Chandos" is a turn-of-the-century manifesto of an existential and linguistic skepticism that came to characterize modernism and postmodernism. But the "Letter" is possibly also a document of an intercultural tension that continues in "The Meridian." Hugo von Hofmannsthal owed his name to a Jewish great-grandfather, a merchant ennobled for his service to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Hofmannsthal's wife was a baptized Jew, and he was friends with several—highly-assimilated—Jewish writers.[20] Jewish themes are absent from the surface of the "Letter," which is written as if from another time and place (Elizabethan England) and has ostensibly nothing to do with any Angst suffered by a writer with Jewish associations in the Austro-Hungarian empire; and yet the un-English-sounding name Chandos stands out as a marker of cultural displacement. And the protagonist's distrust of reality, as society has trained him to see and describe it, may be partly his sense of the hidden costs of the social order, even of its approaching collapse and the arrival of the unthinkable.

Hofmannsthal's linguistic skepticism was not quite absolute. The "Letter" concludes: "... the language in which it might be possible for me not only to write, but to think is neither Latin, nor English, nor Italian and Spanish, but a language of which not a single word is known to me, in which mute things speak to us, and in which one day, in the grave, I shall render my account to a Judge who is unknown to me."[21] Here it becomes explicit that the anxiety underlying the "letter" is at least partly the anxiety of cultural pluralism—a pluralism surely deeper than the differences between the different Indo-European languages which European writers since
Dante had accepted with equanimity. Hofmannsthal probably knew little if any Hebrew, yet may have had a subconscious memory of the tradition of Hebrew as the “holy tongue” in which word and thing are identical. Celan, coming from an only partially assimilated milieu and knowing Hebrew, was very probably aware of this tradition; in “Livid-voiced (Fahlstimmig),” from the late collection Compulsion of Light (Lichtzwang) he writes, “No word, / no thing, / and the sole name of both (kein Wort, / kein Ding, / und beider einziger Name)” (2:307), possibly alluding to the Hebrew word dabar which means both word and thing.[22]

Sometimes in the pauses of “The Meridian” one can almost hear the speaker thinking, or rather listening for the echo of his own words and deciding, accordingly, what to say next. Of course, the speech was written beforehand, after much preparation and note-taking; but it was written in the imagined presence of the audience; it represents, in other words, a form of dramatic writing. In searching for logical connections between the sections, we find ourselves trying to retrace the mental steps of the speaker—steps not indicated by written signs, yet one feels “This is how it must have been.” As we shall see, this identification of hearer with speaker is also a theme of the speech.