

BEARING WITNESS TO *BLACK* BY PAUL CELAN THROUGH THE LENSE OF JACQUES

DERRIDA

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November 24th, 2018

HUM 103

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Jacques Derrida views Paul Celan's poems as bearing a testamentary witness through poetics. Derrida believes that a poem's very existence supports this notion as a poem "cannot not, do so."<sup>1</sup> Poems are both a form of testament to the past and testament to the existence of the poem. Thus, through reading poetry, readers bear witness to bearing witness. As "we" bear witness, our interpretations of the poem reflect personal understanding. This demonstrates the inherent subjectivity in interpretation.

Derrida believes that every poem holds "irreducible"<sup>2</sup> idioms; meaning that each word cannot be interpreted without considering the larger context of the poem, original language, events and references, and the meaning within the original language. This irreducible quality of language leads to difficulties when reading Celan, as his work is translated from the original German. Derrida claims that he "will not attempt to interpret"<sup>3</sup> Celan, as his writing cannot truly be translated or interpreted as it contains so much meaning that is removed through translation.

Although Derrida interprets Celan's poetry as bearing witness, Derrida believes that what it bears witness to is unclear. Derrida challenges the singularity of meaning as he argues that there are limitless possibilities within Celan's poems and "what matters most is the strange limit between what can and what cannot be determined or decided."<sup>4</sup> The ambiguous language and imagery in Celan's poetry is what Derrida finds value in as it dictates what's possible and what is impossible. Derrida considers this in his interpretation of *Aschenglorie*, as he considers the merits of three different meanings of "for" in the context of "Niemand / zeugt für den / zeugen."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 65

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, 69

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, 87

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, 70

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, 88

Each interpretation of the word changes the meaning of the poem from bearing witness on behalf of someone, to bearing witness for someone, to bearing witness in place of someone. Derrida shows the true power of the uncertainty and lack of a definitive conclusion in the meaning of Celan's poems. If a testimony is proven to be evidence, "it risks losing its value" as a testimony the moment it is "guaranteed, certain as *theoretical proof*, a testimony *can no longer* be guaranteed as testimony."<sup>6</sup> The absence of an absolute thesis allows Celan's poems to bear testamentary witness as it compels the readers, the witnesses, to discover the multiple meanings within the writing and find their own understanding.

*Schwarz  
wie die Erinnerungswunde,  
wühlen die Augen nach dir  
in dem von Herzzähnen hell-  
geibissenen Kronland,  
das unser Bett bleibt*

*Black  
like memory's wound,  
the eyes grub toward you  
in a Crownland bitten  
bright by heart's teeth -  
it remains our bed:*

*durch diesen Schacht musst du kommen-  
du kommst.*

*through this shaft you must come -  
you come*

*Im Samen-  
sinn  
sternt dich das Meer aus, zuinnerst, für immer.*

*In the seed's  
sense  
the sea stars you out, innermost, for ever*

*Das Namengeben hat ein Ende,  
über dich werf ich mein Schicksal.*

*An end to the granting of names,  
over you I cast my fate*

In examining Paul Celan's *Black*, I returned to the original German to adopt Derrida's lens. There is traditional symbolism behind black, as it represents darkness, pain, death, and absence. The first line of the poem reads "wie die Erinnerungswunde" or "like memory's wound."<sup>7</sup> Erinnerungswunde is a "composite word"<sup>8</sup> created by Celan, and therefore the exact

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida, 68

<sup>7</sup> Paul Celan, "Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan," (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 254-55

meaning of the word is unknown. Erinnerung means reminiscent or referring to memory. Wunde can mean wound, trauma, or weak spot. Each meaning leads to a different interpretation, as “black like memory’s trauma” bears a different meaning than “black like memory’s wound.” Trauma implies an event or experience that evokes a visceral, painful response that is all encompassing while a wound is a physical reminder and its impact varies. I find “black like memory’s trauma” to be more meaningful in the context of bearing witness. Black like memory’s trauma could refer to the Holocaust or death and suffering. If this part of memory is traumatic, than that means that the process of bearing witness to this memory is painful.

The third stanza of the poem also leads to alternative translations. My alternate translation of this stanza is:

**Original**

*In the seed’s  
sense  
the sea stars you out, innermost, for ever*

**Alternative**

In the sperm’s  
mind  
the sea stars you out, in the depths of one’s soul, ad infinitum.

This alternative translation shows a possible interpretation of the stanza as talking about birth and life. While this possibility exists in the original translation, it is much more obvious in this translation. The replacement of “sperm’s” instead of “seed’s” directly addresses fertility and life. Seeds symbolize growth, property, sustenance while sperm symbolizes fertilization and life. “Seed’s sense” or a seeds motivation is to use nutrients to grow. “Sperm’s sense” is to fertilize an egg and create life. While both have a purpose to achieve life, sperm transforms into a zygote, creating rather than growing. This stanza can now be interpreted as describing how in creation’s mind, the sea adorns you out with stars deeply for all of eternity. The sea can represent a

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida, 71

collective unconscious, stability, the beginning of life, a journey or challenges, or can refer to the end of life by a burial out to sea. The obvious symbolism of stars as the Star of David. During the Holocaust, German Jews were forced to wear yellow Stars of David. This history creates the image of stars as labels. I chose to interpret the sea as a journey or challenges, referring to Odysseus's journey across the sea to return from Troy to Ithaca. Given this interpretation the stanza could mean that life adorns you with deep labels or experiences that remain forever. This interpretation speaks to the idea of bearing witness, as it implies that a witness's experiences remain with them *ad infinitum*, or endlessly.

Like Derrida described, the meaning of most of this poem is lost in translation. It is difficult to replicate words that don't exist in German, like "sternt," and translate them into English. There are also other uncertainties in the poem, such as Celan's use of pronouns. The poem begins using "you" then "our" then shifts to back "you", then to "I". None of these pronouns have a known subject, leading to endless possibilities of who they could be. This could refer to the act of bearing witness if "you" refers to the witness, "our" refers to the shared experience of the initial witness and the witness to the testimony, and "I" refers to the singular experience that the secondary witness cannot understand. This is the sealing, unsealing, and resealing that Derrida refers to.