

“Weisst du noch, dass ich sang?”: Conversation in Celan’s Poetry

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“The poem becomes conversation—often desperate conversation,” Paul Celan said in his “Meridian” Speech in 1960.¹ This statement is as important as it seems paradoxical. Celan’s poetic language seems far removed indeed from anything resembling ordinary conversation, and Pierre Joris, in his introduction to his recent translations (*Breath-turn*² and *Threadsun*s³), seems right when he says: “Celan’s German is an eerie, nearly ghostly language; it is both mother-tongue, and thus firmly anchored in the realm of the dead, and a language that the poet has to make up, to re-create, to re-invent, to bring back to life [...]. To try to translate it as if it were current, commonly spoken or available German—i.e. to find a similarly current English or American ‘Umgangssprache’—would be to miss an essential aspect of the poetry.”⁴

Yet Celan’s intensely and increasingly complex, sometimes impenetrable poetry, hewn as if from hard rock, is, in large part, and more and more in the later works, imbued with address to a “you,” a “Du.” This “Du” can cover a wide range of possibilities: it can shift, or merge, or otherwise change, sometimes within the same poem; critics have variously analyzed—and analyzed variously—many of its functions in many poems. The “you” may be lover, or sister, or friend, or—often—mother, as Felstiner points out succinctly,⁵ or it can be the self, in the mode of Apollinaire’s “Zone” and other poems.

I will not try to entertain this question in its large sense—for instance, to consider Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s argument, in his book on Celan, that the poet’s work is a long dialogue with Heidegger⁶—but limit myself as specifically as possible to one main textual exam-

ple which shows at work the dynamics of a poetic “conversation” with an addressee. I will try to show how interpretation can be influenced by the open workings of this system, despite the enormous difficulties of understanding. First, “Gespräch im Gebirg” (“Conversation in the Mountains”), Celan’s short prose narrative (alone of its kind) will serve as a blueprint that sets the tone and levels of a *conversation* with one or several interlocutors. In the prose piece, the speaker is more or less defined in a way which is missing in the poetry, and I will try to show, secondly, in the example of “Zähle die Mandeln,” how widely interpretation can vary because of differences in the attribution of the *you*. “Es war Erde in ihnen,” the third example, illustrates in the most starkly tragic sense, how personal pronouns can emerge from the void of the Apocalypse. Finally, several examples will illustrate that, eventually, even the stone can be made sentient by a you, or rather, by “you” to whom the poem speaks. In that sense I will turn to a conclusion similar to that of Dietlind Meinecke’s study, *Wort und Name bei Paul Celan*: “Through always new naming, through new naming discovery or invention of a you or something made to be spoken to, the human being can perhaps attain a place, put together in multiple ways, toward which there might be a free movement.” (“durch die immer neue Nennung, durch neue nennende Findung oder Erfindung eines Du oder sonst ansprechbar Gemachten, kann der Mensch möglicherweise einen vielfältig zusammengesetzten Ort gewinnen, auf den hin es eine freie Bewegung geben könnte”).⁷ She says “Bewegung”—a movement that is certainly congruent with Celan’s thought, but “Begegnung”—encounter—should be implicit also. When Celan said “The poem becomes conversation,” he did not, of course, say it in English, using a word that can evoke the pleasant-ries of sociability, possible banter, and playful exchanges. “Gespräch” can be grave; it is closely associated with “Sprache,” language, “Sprechen,” speak: language in the act of speech.

Now, in “Gespräch im Gebirg” a character sets out in the manner of Büchner’s Lenz, a human being—perhaps of the same ilk as the poet that Celan characterized in a letter to Hans Bender (May 18, 1960):

"one person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness" (translated by Rosmarie Waldrop).⁸ This person is "the Jew"—later called "Klein" (in relation to "Jew Gross," who came up to meet him). Identity is partial—and gradual—here, and Jew Klein's real name is "unspeakable," but it is in his human, Jewish capacity that he has left home and is meeting an older "cousin":

"I know, I know. Yes I've come a long way, I've come like you."

"I know."

"You know and you're still asking. So you've come anyway, you've anyway come here—Why, and what for?"

"Why and what for . . . Because maybe I had to talk to myself or to you, had to talk with my mouth and my tongue and not with my stick."⁹

All that matters here is talk—"because I'm asking, who is it meant for then, the earth, it's not meant for you, I'm saying, and not for me—well then, a language with no I and no Thou, pure He, pure It, d'you see, pure They, and nothing but that." "A language with no I and no Thou": that is the negative definition and the negative approach to the human world, "I and Thou." Practically all critics of Celan have taken into account the major influence of Martin Buber's thought on Celan's conception of the "I/Thou" relation.¹⁰ The encounter with Osip Mandelstam's work is also crucial here.¹¹ "Gespräch im Gebirg" sets out some of its modulations in ways specifically related to language and especially speech.

John Felstiner provides a superb analysis of this text on which I will partly draw here. He mentions the term "Geschwätz" (which he translates as "babble") that Celan uses, a term liked by Kafka and that Heidegger uses in the sense of everyday talk.¹² The two "cousins" in "Gespräch im Gebirg" talk and babble, "Alright, let them talk." There are different levels of talk, speech, babble. There are also different levels and kinds of language used. Words of a Southern German dialect, Middle High German, Yiddish, High German are layered in a combination that some critics see as indicating a fragmentation of the speaker. Fragmentation, perhaps, in this process where a history of

the language is sketched in these transformations, but it is also a reaffirmation of an identity: "I, I, I" is reiterated and Jewishness is reclaimed. Felstiner shows aptly how "Celan's 'Conversation' starts with a semiotic flip [from "Jud" to "Sohn eines Juden"], the tag of shame a mark of pride."¹³

Unquestionably, however, the "Geschwätz" here is mostly fallen speech. As Felstiner says, "in Walter Benjamin's essay 'On Language in General and on Language of Man,' *Geschwätz* designates empty speech after the Fall [...]. The 'babbling' of Celan's Jews is a come-down—via the cataclysm that ruined Benjamin—from God-given speech."¹⁴ And the speaker may or may not have had a listener—"Hearest Thou ('Hörst Du'), he says nothing, he doesn't answer." Felstiner is right again in saying that "Gespräch" contracts into a monologue. And yet again, at the end there is reaffirmation: "you here and I here—I here, I; who can say, could have said, all that to you; who don't say and haven't said it to you." This I is "on the way" to himself.

"Zähle die Mandeln" was written about seven years before "Gespräch im Gebirg," and I would like to take up the two works side by side, following the lead of Amy Colin in *Paul Celan: Holograms of Darkness*.¹⁵ Both texts are strongly marked by Celan's crucial encounter with the work of Osip Mandelstam. "In fact [Colin writes], Celan's 'Zähle die Mandeln' dramatizes a key concept of Mandelstam's work, the dialogical character of poems, their address to an 'Other,' their movements toward an unknown 'You.'"¹⁶ And Felstiner is undoubtedly right in thinking that among other elements in the background of "Conversation in the Mountains" the presence of Mandelstam is strongly felt.¹⁷

I am taking the two texts, however, in reverse chronological order because we are now entering the realms of poetry. Although, as the translator Rosmarie Waldrop says, "Celan's prose is a poet's prose,"¹⁸ there are nevertheless important differences—and that is a part of the main point I am trying to make. In the poem speech is unmediated—we have no "I say," "he says," "I say" to guide or distract us—and we

are summoned to an immediate response to a harsh imperative: "Zähle die Mandeln." Celan's imperatives tend to be biblically concrete and active: "Geh," "Komm"—and the first "Zähle" has a special formal gravity here in contrast to what follows the "dich" in the third line: "zähl mich dazu," familiar and inclusive. Once a "you" has been alluded to—not named, the name, distanced and sacred, will only be mentioned in the third stanza: "Dort erst tratest Du ganz in den Namen, der dein ist"—once a "you" has been mentioned, a passage to the past opens up: the past tense is used, and the sounds become softer, more muted and liquid:

Ich suchte dein Aug, als du's aufschlugst und niemand dich ansah,
ich spann jenen heimlichen Faden,
an dem der Tau, den du dachtest,
hinunterglitt [...].

The past also corresponds to the subjectivity established for "you": "zähle, was bitter war und *dich wachhielt*" (my emphasis). The wakefulness—in the mode of bitter awareness—is the mark of consciousness, in an extraordinary—prefigured—illustration of what Emmanuel Lévinas wrote about Celan's work: "insomnia in the Bed of Being."¹⁹ This subjectivity is further pursued through "dein Aug, als du's aufschlugst," "der Tau, den du dachtest"—and finally, action: "tratest du," "schrittst du," and the plural "ihr ginget."

Strikingly, the I, the first person, is granted only two instances of the nominative: "Ich suchte dein Aug" and "ich spann" in the second stanza. "Ich suchte dein Aug" is a quest which, as has been noted by critics,²⁰ is deflected: a quest for a face to face encounter, eye to eye (and I to I). Perhaps there may be here an echo of the haunting poem by Apollinaire, "Le Pont Mirabeau," whose fateful name runs through Celan's tragic death from the bridge over the Seine: "Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine [...]. Les mains dans les mains restons face à face."²¹ "Let us remain face to face" but the hands form a bridge over the extinct past, the water inexorably flowing beneath.

"Standing" and "eye" (as well as the almond as eye) recur throughout Celan's poetry in different constellations. The "gegenüber stehen"

and the "eye" are in stark contrast not only inherently, but also to the notion of being together, next to one another. The two "cousins" in "Conversation in the Mountains" talk and walk together, and there were "next to me the others who were like me, the others who were different and yet like me [...] and they did not love me, and I did not love them because I was one, and who wants to love when there are many [...] I did not love them who could not love me [...]." ²²

In "Zähle die Mandeln" there is no being together and not directly a coming together. But I would submit the following suggestion: in the third stanza, "Dort erst tratest du ganz in den Namen, der dein ist," a wondrously complete subjectivity is formed and consecrated. The image "schwangen die Hämmer frei," which will recur in Celan, indicates a kind of triumphant hope no matter how much compounded of pain and loss. And this reclaiming of personhood and freedom has occurred in that place—"Dort"—in the "Krügen," the vessels, the urn perhaps (as in "Der Sand aus den Urnen") protected by "ein Spruch." "Ein Spruch," a saying, can be proverbially general, can also be a benediction to be said—but is certainly related to "Sprechen" and "Sprache," a saying in language. And the "dew" reached the vessels through the agency of the "I"—the speaking poet-poem: "ich spann jenen heimlichen Faden." "Faden" is another word which will often acquire great importance in Celan. Here in its relation to "spann" ("spun") it may evoke thought, the spinning of words as well as possibly the threads of life and death held by the three Fates.

At the end, the first person only reappears in the accusative—as it appeared at the beginning—"zähl mich dazu"—now "Mache mich bitter. / Zähle mich zu den Mandeln"—a bitter desire for inclusion marked by specific *effect*—"Make me bitter." But this desire, I think, is validated by the quest and the activity of an I that made thought—the "dew you thought"—speak.

Now I must admit that the little I have said about this poem assumes that the "I," self-effacing and muted, is the poem-and-poet, in whatever symbolic and concrete relation, that speaks. I do not know how else one could read a poem. 'Who speaks to whom?' is a question

that has been repeatedly asked and answered in highly diverse ways. Amy Colin sketches a masterful review of critical interpretations of "Zähle die Mandeln," including the question as to who is the speaker and who the you. For instance, "Peter Paul Schwarz [...] associates the 'Thou' with the poet himself, the speaker with the mother, etc. [...]." ²³ Felstiner baldly states that the poem is "addressed to" the poet's mother. ²⁴

This opens up the endlessly debated question, still as active as ever, in the understanding of Celan's poetry: what role should referential information play? A recent review by J. M. Coetzee mentions again Hans-Georg Gadamer's position "that background information should take second place to what the poem [itself] knows" ²⁵ as well as the opposite points of view, which claim with equal plausibility that some poems are incomprehensible without some historical or literary information to shed light on them.

To consider this question in the light of our poem and of the question of "conversation," Celan is again the best guide in his "Meridian" Speech: "[...] the poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks." ²⁶ Turning a little later to the poem as "conversation," Celan says: "Only the space of this conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather it into a 'you' around the naming and speaking I." ²⁷ The "conversation," the *Gespräch*, the speaking, takes place in that time and in that space—and through that time and space. In "Zähle die Mandeln," if one brings to the poem knowledge of the "you" (or the "I") from outside—from external knowledge, so to speak, interpretation is necessarily narrowed into certain paths. For instance, Felstiner, when he says "The poet is speaking to his mother," then goes on (understandably): "The *Mandeln* he wants to be numbered among call to mind the almonds she baked in breads and cakes." ²⁸ Of course, he also mentions other associations of almonds in Celan, but I believe that the complex system of relations and meanings in the poem no longer works as well or as richly as it can when an initial identification directs the meanings from the start. ²⁹

The “You” of “Zähle die Mandeln” constitutes itself, in the third stanza, into a glorious form of completion, which turns away from the present, the speaker, and the frame: “und ihr ginget selbdritt durch den Abend.” Colin writes that “the term *selbdritt* (‘with two others’) [...] refers to Anna selbdritt, a recurrent motif in painting since the late Middle Ages, depicting Anna together with Mary and the infant Jesus.”³⁰ Perhaps this motif of the *third* also marks the irrevocable nature of the turning away, here a sign of completeness and separation.

In one of Celan’s most somber poems written not long after “Todesfuge,” “Es war Erde in ihnen,” the whole range of personal pronouns comes forth from catastrophic nothingness. Repeatedly, the third person, plural and singular, dominates until there is a new conjugation, which, as Felstiner remarks, instead of the usual “amo, amas,” the conjugation of the verb “to love,” is “Ich grabe, du gräbst,” etc. And then this extraordinary line, this “waltzing tune,” in Felstiner’s words,³¹ “O einer, o keiner, o niemand, o du” figures as pure evocation and invocation. Looked at in a certain way, the first “O” and the last are the pillars of the line: “O einer” and “o du” hold up everything, as in “Gespräch im Gebirg” the I and the Thou. But “einer” is not a subject, not an “I” yet. “Einer,” one alone, says Jew Klein in “Conversation in the Mountains” cannot love and cannot be loved; after “einer” comes “keiner,” none. But from the bottom of the abyss with “niemand” (no one) arises a “You”—and that “You” will lead, even through the black earth, to an “I” (“du gräbst und ich grab”) and an “us,” through the moving *toward* you: “Ich grab mich dir zu.”

If the poem places the “you” addressed in its coordinates—in the dialogic structure of its seeking and speaking (and this is the relation that everybody always writes about), who is the reader? Where is the reader? Is the reader a part of the “conversation”?

To just make a few suggestions in this largely unanswerable question, I would like to mention the study by Klaus Weissenberger, *Die Elegie bei Paul Celan*,³² not in its specific arguments, but for this idea: considering certain poems of Celan as elegies (“Zähle die Mandeln”

among them) can indicate important aspects of orientation. There is the commemoration of the dead, and they may be addressed in the poem's dialogue. But to come back to "Zähle die Mandeln," when the dead have walked away into the night of the past, does not the poem speak to the living?

The last lines of "Zähle die Mandeln" make the poem resonate into a present or a future with the me-oriented imperatives: "Mache mich bitter. / Zähle mich zu den Mandeln." These lines, as has often been noted, echo the beginning. As we go from this first stanza into the extraordinary evocation of the two middle stanzas and then out of them into the last lines, aren't there some "Breath-turns," in Celan's later term ("*Atemwende*")? Perhaps there is a turn, and a break, a rupture, a split within the first "Zähle," which then shifts onto "Zähl mich dazu," a shift comparable to Rimbaud's famous "Je est un Autre."

The first "Zähle" seems launched into the open—a gesture which may resemble the launching of the poem as "a message in a bottle." Celan says in the "Bremen" Speech: "A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle [an image from Mandelstam] thrown out to sea with the—surely not always strong—hope that it may be somehow washed up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart."³³ A message, thus, *toward* a listener, a reader. "Whenever we speak with things in this way [Celan says in the "Meridian" Speech in relation to the poem as conversation] we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an 'open' question 'without resolution' [...]."³⁴ Does this open question not entail the reader?

It may be crucial, for Celan, to take very seriously the notion of poetry as "conversation." It may be appropriate to add to the kind of modernist dictum by Solzhenitsyn—"Whatever else a text is about, it is also about itself"—the following principle: whomever or whatever the poem speaks with, it also speaks with a reader, that other, or other other.

The principle also brings with it some imperatives on how to listen and that is undoubtedly an endless task, “without resolution.” Isn’t the reader, though, like Lucile in *Danton’s Death* by Büchner? To come back for a last time to Celan’s “Meridian” Speech (on receiving the Büchner Prize), Lucile, in Celan’s words, is “somebody who hears, listens, looks [...] and then does not know what it was about. But who hears the speaker, ‘sees him speaking,’ who perceives language as a physical shape and also—who could doubt it within Büchner’s work—breath, that is, direction and destiny.”³⁵

How to listen—that brings back the question of interpretation. Far be it from me to underestimate the admirable contribution of John Felstiner as translator and in his recent book on Celan. As George Steiner said in his review in the *Times Literary Supplement*,³⁶ Felstiner comes close to being a “perfect” reader. His scholarship, insights, and formidable knowledge of Celan are unequalled, and he could not be more justified in showing how wrong-headed critics were who saw nothing but formal and contentless structure in Celan’s poetry.

Yet I tried to make the point that even such an ideal reader could be misled by chronological and biographical bias. If we insist on poetry as conversation, we deal not only with the “where-from” but also the “where-to,” within and without, a labor of Sisyphus—a Sisyphus among the constellations of time:

Es ist,

Ich weiß es, nicht wahr,
 daß wir lebten, es ging
 blind nur ein Atem zwischen
 Dort und Nicht-da und Zuweilen,
 kometenhaft schwirrte ein Aug
 auf Erloschenes zu, in den Schluchten,
 da, wo’s verglühte, stand
 zitzenprächtigt die Zeit,
 an der schon empor- und hinab-
 und hinwegwuchs, was
 ist oder war oder sein wird—,

(“Soviel Gestirne”)³⁷

We knew and we knew not—"wir wußten, wir wußten nicht"—we know and we do not know, but the dialogue should go on.

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NOTES

¹Paul Celan, "The Meridian," trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, *Collected Prose* (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 50. German quotations of Celan's poetry and prose are from *Gesammelte Werke*, vols. 1-3, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983).

²Paul Celan, *Breathturn*, trans. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995).

³Paul Celan, *Threadsuns*, trans. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 2000).

⁴Pierre Joris, "Introduction," *Breathturn*, by Paul Celan (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995).

⁵John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995).

⁶Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999).

⁷Dietlind Meinecke, *Wort und Name bei Paul Celan: Zur Widerruflichkeit des Gedichts* (Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970) 293-94.

⁸Celan, *Collected Prose* 26.

⁹Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains," trans. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) 142.

¹⁰Martin Buber, *Ich und du* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1936).

¹¹Felstiner 141.

¹²Felstiner 144.

¹³Felstiner 144.

¹⁴Felstiner 145.

¹⁵Amy Colin, *Paul Celan: Holograms of Darkness* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991).

¹⁶Colin 107.

¹⁷Felstiner 141.

¹⁸Rosmarie Waldrop, "Introduction," *Collected Prose*, by Paul Celan (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1986) IX.

¹⁹Felstiner 288; quoting Emmanuel Lévinas, "De l'être à l'autre," *Revue de Belles-Lettres* 96. 2-3 (1972): 198, and in *Chicago Review* 29.3 (1978): 16-22.

²⁰Colin 113.

²¹Guillaume Apollinaire, *Poetische Werke – Œuvres Poétiques*, ed. Gerd Henninger (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1969) 64.

²²Celan, *Collected Prose* 21.

²³Colin 107.

²⁴Felstiner 63.

²⁵J. M. Coetzee, "In the Midst of Losses," *New York Review of Books* (5 July 2001): 4.

²⁶Celan, *Collected Prose* 48.

²⁷Celan, *Collected Prose* 50.

²⁸Celan, *Collected Prose* 63.

²⁹[Editors' note:] At the symposium on "The Poetics of Conversation in 20th-Century Literature" in Halberstadt (August 5-9, 2001) Felstiner's consideration of baking gave rise to some discussion which made clear that the allusion to baking by no means implies that the poet is speaking to his mother. Inge Leimberg pointed out that the words "Zähle die Mandeln" might well be imagined to be addressed by a master to an apprentice or a mother to a daughter or maid, since too many bitter almonds do not only spoil the flavour but, containing prussic acid, are dangerous. Baking has, however, not only a nutritive but a sacramental aspect, and when precision is necessary for baking or preparing a meal in general, it is essential for a ritual means as, in Celan's instance, the Seder. The *Matzes* (covered by a fine cloth) on the Seder-plate are surrounded by other symbolic ingredients (especially bitter herbs) meticulously selected and arranged. The prototypical clay of the Egyptian slavery is symbolized by a mixture containing almonds. Other components in Celan's poem which may be suggestive of a mystic kind of partnership in its "conversation" include the mysterious thread combining above and below, on which the tear-like dewdrops glide (from the almond-like eye) into ampullas guarded by a saying. Nearly all of these images may be traced in George Herbert's *The Temple*, which is centred round the altar where bread and wine are administered and which ends with the words "So I did sit and eat." Matthias Bauer's question whether Celan knew Herbert (e.g. the "viall full of tears" in "Hope") was answered by Hanna Charney that in all probability he did. Maurice Charney and Lothar Hönnighausen remarked that the bottle of tears (frequent in folklore and fairy tales) is also well known as a classical topos.

When this note was revised for the press, Inge Leimberg added that Luther's translation of Ps 56:9 reads to her like a kind of fingerpost to "Zähle die Mandeln" (including its possible addressee): "Zähle die Wege meiner Flucht; fasse meine Tränen in deinen Krug. Ohne Zweifel, du zählst sie." Ps 126 also suggests itself as a foil.

³⁰Colin 106.

³¹Felstiner 201.

³²Klaus Weissenberger, *Die Elegie bei Paul Celan* (München: Francke, 1969).

³³Celan, *Collected Prose* 34-35.

³⁴Celan, *Collected Prose* 63.

³⁵Celan, *Collected Prose* 40.

³⁶George Steiner, "A Lacerated Destiny: The Dark and Glittering Genius of Paul Celan," *Times Literary Supplement* (2 June 1995): 2-3.

³⁷Paul Celan, "Soviel Gestirne," *Die Niemandsrose* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1963).