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The Inconclusive Text: On Paul Celan’s “Blume”

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This paper presents a close reading of the poem “Blume,” which emphasizes the intertextual relations between the final and the preliminary drafts. More specifically, the paper proposes to read the textual history of the poem as a singular expression of a past that remains active in the present. The poem, while remaining mindful of the past and its impact on the present, is ultimately about releasing potentialities that remain and will continue to remain yet-to-be-realized. The poem, on this view, is not an autonomous aesthetic totality, but a singular expression of inconclusive textuality.

Keywords: Paul Celan, Blume, close reading, intertextuality, hermeneutics

Paul Celan’s poetry has come to symbolize – perhaps more than any other literary work – the moral imperative in post-war Germany to take a long, hard, and unapologetic look at the nation’s modern history. Arguably, this line of interpretation has been pushed the furthest by Peter Szondi, for whom the poem “Engführung” is not merely about “das, was geschah” (Celan, Gesammelte Werke 3: 186; hereafter all references to this edition are abbreviated GW); it rejects the aesthetics of representation, as it was still prevailing in “Todesfuge,” in order to symbolically re-enact the universe of the camp in front of the reader. Understanding Celan’s poem, according to Szondi, is the equivalent of visiting – and seeing with our own eyes – the camps, the places, the names (Szondi Celan-Studien). The poem is not a representation but a traumatic re-enactment, in which the past event is still active in the present; and reading Celan’s poetry is equivalent to witnessing a re-enactment, which is a necessary part of confronting and working through a traumatic past. The virtues of this interpretation include a robust moral stance against any kind of apology or relativism vis-à-vis the Holocaust; furthermore, it is able to integrate and account for some of the great themes in Celan’s poetry – the still active past in the present, the magical conjuration of objects, and the dialogic relation.

In many respects, Szondi’s reading of Celan constitutes a model of self-critical reflection, which we might wish to extend to other areas of contemporary scholarship. Yet it presupposes a certain subject position on behalf of the reader – that he or she in some meaningful way is related to the perpetrators, the victims, or the bystanders of the Holocaust. Szondi’s assumption, I wish to emphasize, is not a weakness or a blind spot in his critical self-reflection; he is

seminar 51:3 (September 2015)
justified in making such an assumption, as it includes most – if not all – of Celan’s readership in Germany. It is one of those “prejudices,” as Gadamer would say, that facilitate interpretation (Gadamer *Wahrheit und Methode* 281–312). Yet this presupposition raises a difficult question concerning the possibility of a neutral reading. How, if at all, is it possible to respond to Celan’s poetry, if the reader is not perpetrator, victim, nor bystander? How is it possible to read his poetry, if we are not descendants of – or related meaningfully to – those clearly distinguishable subject positions? How, if at all, is it possible to read Celan’s poetry from a neutral point of view? Or, to give this question a more specific context, how is it possible to read Celan’s poetry in contemporary East Asia? This question of a neutral reader, I will add, concerns not only geographical but also temporal distance, and it is likely to become more prevalent as the catastrophic events of twentieth-century Europe slowly recede into the past and beyond living memory.

One of the great themes in Paul Celan’s poetry concerns the past as a still active force in the present (see, among others, Derrida). Arguably, it is rivaled in importance only by the themes of language mysticism – associated with Scholem and Benjamin – and the dialogic principle – associated with Buber and, to a lesser extent, Levinas. This theme of the still active past in the present occupies a prominent position in *Der Meridian*: “Perhaps one can say that each poem has its own ‘20th of January’ inscribed in it?” (*The Meridian* 8; GW 3: 196) The date, here, refers to past events that still affect the present: Heydrich’s disclosure of the plans for the so-called Final Solution of the Jewish Question at the Wannsee Conference (20 January 1942) as well as the opening lines of Büchner’s *Lenz* and its anticipation of literary modernism – or, more precisely, one strand of European modernism. Although Celan, characteristically, establishes the link between poems and dates in the form of a question, he subsequently rephrases and qualifies the point in a more affirmative mode: the poem, Celan maintains, “stays mindful of its dates” (*Es bleibt seiner Daten eingedenk*) (*The Meridian* 8; GW 3: 196). These passages from *Der Meridian* are not transparent theorems that we can simply extract from one context and apply to another; rather, they demand to be interpreted in their own right as contextually embedded discursive statements – speaking simultaneously in a descriptive, a normative, and a prophetic mode.

Here, I invoke these famous passages merely to establish a working hypothesis concerning the significance of the still active past in the present. An influential strand in the Celan scholarship tends to conceptualize such relations between past and present in psychological terms – for example memory, trauma, or even haunting. However, if we read carefully the cited passages from *Der Meridian*, it is evident that they are not about psychological entities; the poem, not a psychological entity, “stays mindful of its dates.” To what extent, then, is it possible to understand the theme of the still active past in the present as a strictly textual issue? And, further, to what extent can our reading of Celan’s poems accommodate such as a notion of temporal textuality?
Hans-Jost Frey has provided an interpretation of the poems “Zwölf Jahre” and “Auf Reisen,” which demonstrates how the theme of the still active past in the present can be understood as intertextual relations (Frey 52–75). I consider Frey’s essay on the infinite text to be a model of theoretically informed close reading, and I follow his understanding of intertextuality (Zwischentextlichkeit) as networks of connections between two or more texts in which the relations are more significant than the terms. An important consequence of this view is a rejection of the idea of an autonomous work of art: the notion of a complete and finished aesthetic totality must be rejected as an inadequate model for reading and understanding Celan’s texts (Frey 11). My main concern is the notion of infinity (unendlichkeit). It is too metaphysical, too pious, inviting a whole range of misunderstandings, including the idea that, on this view, everything is discourse or imprisoned in discourse. I prefer instead to describe intertextual relations as simply “inconclusive.”

This paper argues for a close reading of a single poem and its textual genealogy. In this respect, it follows the precedence set by Szondi, Frey, and other critics who draw inspiration from the mainstream tradition of hermeneutics (see Mueller-Vollmer) as well as the more radical branch of hermeneutics described by Ricoeur as a school of “suspicion” (Ricoeur Freud and Philosophy 32). Gadamer maintains that a reconciliation of the two traditions is impossible: one tradition seeks a dialogic rapprochement between self-conscious autonomous subjects, whereas the other tradition interprets self-consciousness to be merely false consciousness (Gadamer “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion” 317). While agreeing with Gadamer on a theoretical level, this paper nevertheless suggests that the practice of close reading – which, of course, does not exhaust in any way the hermeneutic problem – might be the locus of a dynamic mediation between the mainstream and the radical traditions of hermeneutics. Such an experience of theoretical disjunction and practical mediation is a central feature of what might be termed a hermeneutics of becoming. More specifically, the paper argues for an understanding of the still active past in the present as a strictly textual – rather than a psychological – phenomenon, which informs the intertextual relations between the published version and the preliminary drafts of the poem “Blume.” The resulting reading of “Blume” emphasizes a release of potentialities, which opens the textual horizon for a situated, a non-utopian, a meaningful future.

Paul Celan’s poem “Blume” is part of the third cycle of the collection Sprachgitter (1959).

**BLUME**

Der Stein.
Der Stein in der Luft, dem ich folgte.
Dein Aug, so blind wie der Stein.
Wir waren
Hände,
wir schöpften die Finsternis leer, wir fanden
das Wort, das den Sommer heraufkam:
Blume.

Blume – ein Blindenwort.
Dein Aug und mein Aug:
sie sorgen
für Wasser.

Wachstum.
Herzwand um Herzwand
blättert hinzu.

Ein Wort noch, wie dies, und die Hämmer
schwingen im Freien. (GW 1: 164)

In Michael Hamburger’s elegant translation, the poem reads as follows:

“FLOWER// The stone./ The stone in the air, which I followed./ Your eye, as
blind as the stone./ We were/ hands,/ we baled the darkness empty, we found/
the word that ascended summer:/ flower./ Flower – a blind man’s word./ Your
eye and mine:/ they see/ to water./ Growth./ Heart wall upon heart wall/ adds
petals to it./ One more word like this, and the hammers/ will swing over open
ground.” (Hamburger 115)

Thematically, the poem describes a movement from stone (Stein) to eye
(Aug), from darkness (Finsternis) to summer (Sommer). A step is taken out of
the darkness, and this process is initiated with the “finding” of the word “flower”
(verse 6–8). The change of line and colon in the seventh verse emphasize the
“finding” of the word as an event. The ninth verse appears to carry special signif-
icance as it marks the threshold and the centre of the poem. Subsequently, the
poem describes the growing flower (verse 10–15) and the possibility of greater
freedom in the future (verse 16–17). The central metaphor is developed through
association with geological, anatomical, and linguistic metaphors.

The ninth verse, as Szondi and Menninghaus have pointed out, is the geo-
mnetical and visual centre of the poem (Szondi 150; Menninghaus 125). The
verse allows a number of different interpretations, depending on our precise
understanding of the dash – for instance as a predicate, an analogy, or a substitu-
tion. If we read the dash as a predicate, then the logical subject “Blume” is linked
with the predicate “Blindenwort.” The result is a determining judgment, in
which flower (Blume) is subsumed under a general category of words (Blinden-
wort). Alternatively, we may read the dash as an analogy: a flower (Blume) is
like a blind man’s word (Blindenwort), emerging due to the water from your eye
and my eye (dein Aug und mein Aug). We hereby establish an equivalence
between language and nature; flowers are like words and vice versa. Or, if the dash is read as a substitution, the verse appears as a word-for-word substitution so that “Blindenwort” is a figurative flower, a language flower. However, these interpretations – and more could easily be adduced – share the assumption that the dash is not read literally. The dash is injected with meaning, which it – in terms of its sheer materiality – does not possess: the dash is merely a spatial and temporal difference.

Nevertheless, the dash – emphasized by the alliteration – marks a connection between “Blume” and “ein Blendenwort.” In terms of the text in its entirety, it is precisely here, at this moment, that the first eight verses are linked to the last eight; at this point, where the two halves are joined, the text turns from the pret erite to the present, and the threshold is described thematically in the poem as a process of finding words. The verb “fanden,” however, is determined ambivalently due to the enjambment: the word “fanden” marks the metrical end of the verse, indicating a pause or even a break in the rhythmical pattern of signifiers, while the grammatical structure carries on and into the next verse, indicating a continuously linked semantic flow. The process of “finding words,” related to the central event of the text, is ambiguous, indicating a conflict that disrupts the otherwise harmonious relationship between rhythmic sensibility and grammatical intelligibility (see Englund). At the end of the poem, therefore, it remains unclear if this tension between sensibility and intelligibility, between interruption and flow, will be resolved in the future or whether the future word (Ein Wort noch, wie dies . . .) might simply repeat or even aggravate the tension.

Despite such ambiguities, the overall thematic movement of the poem suggests a step out of the dark and into the summer, reinforced by a mood of hope associated with the imagery of eyes that provide nourishment to the growing flower. The poem’s performative iteration of this theme localizes the threshold exactly in the dash of the ninth verse. Interpreting the poem in an existential rather than a strictly textual perspective, it might be reasonable to read it as a poetic attempt to work through the devastating after-effects of the Holocaust; it concerns the poet’s desperate search for a way back to a normal life, to overcome the impact of traumatic guilt, and regain a sense of hope for the future.

A noteworthy aspect of “Blume” is the fact that no less than eight preliminary drafts of the poem have been preserved (Sprachgitter 32–35 and 127–28; in the following, all references to the text “Blume” and its various drafts refer to this edition). This provides an opportunity to study closely the poem’s various stages of creation. The primary phase of writing spans from late February 1957 to the end of April 1957. In April, the poem is included in a collection of texts to be published in the journal Jahresring later in the year. This collection constitutes the first draft of the book Sprachgitter published in 1959.

The earliest version of the poem, dated “End of February 1957” (Ende Februar 1957), is in many ways distinctly different from the subsequent versions. The text is untitled and is constructed around five main sentences, which almost establish a narrative structure: the son, Eric – with the articulation of his
first word – steps out of infans, the inarticulate, and into the symbolic order. The first draft of the poem, then, provides us with an interesting hint, on both a thematic and a formal level, which inevitably informs – without exhausting – our subsequent understanding of the poem.

Celan’s son, according to Gadamer, articulated as his first word the German “Blume” (Gadamer Wer bin Ich 119). Apparently, none of Celan’s German readers have questioned the authenticity or originality of this word. Fioretos, however, observes that the boy articulated as his first word the French “fleur” (Fioretos 169). The biographical context, in so far as Eric grew up in French surroundings, might seem to support such a reading. At one level, of course, it is rather pedantic to discuss whether the word, in fact, is “Blume” or “fleur.” Yet, in another sense, if the word in question is understood as the authentic, original, primordial word, indicating not only the boy’s entry into the symbolic order but also the origin of the poem, its moment of birth, then it is far from trivial that the word is ambiguous. The reconstruction of the poem’s original word, its moment of inception, is challenged by the fact that the poem – already in the first draft – is situated in a displaced position vis-à-vis the original articulation. Thus, it seems impossible to determine whether the word “Blume” in the first draft of the text is a translation of the French or a private quotation. One may, in Celan’s idiom, speak of a certain “unreadability” (Unlesbarkeit) (GW 2: 338).

The second and the third drafts of the poem, dated 12 March 1957, carry the French title “Fleur” (Sprachgitter 32 and 34). These drafts also include a number of scattered lines. The interaction between the French title and the German text produces a peculiar semantic complexity, which might easily have been lost in a simple paraphrase. Furthermore, the poem emphasizes the importance of a listening interpretation: “Ein Mund/ taucht uns entgegen,/ schläfennah/ hörst du ihn lallen:/ Blume” (Sprachgitter 34). The connection to the alleged original word is the listening interpretation, the hearing, of the babbling mouth.

One of the interesting features of these two drafts is the appearance for the first time of the neologism “Blindenwort.” In a biographical perspective, “Blindenwort” might be associated with the child, suggesting a parallel between learning to speak and learning to see; the child, by saying “Blume,” is learning to see. This reading can be supported by material from the first draft: “Ich bin blind wie mein Stern/ [. . .] Das Kind unserer Augen/ es lernt/ sehen” (Sprachgitter 32). The learning to see, here, indicates a discontinuity between father and son, suggesting perhaps that the burden of “mein Stern” is not transferred onto the next generation. Simultaneously, we find hints of such a parallel between language and vision on the textual level. In the third-last line “behind the walls” (hinter de(r)n Wänden) is crossed out and substituted with “behind” (dahinter). In this version, the line “Herzblatt um Herzblatt” appears for the first time, suggesting a field of wildly growing grass of Parnassus or overlapping leaves of the flower. In the following drafts, including the final version of the poem, the crossed out “walls” (Wänden) reappear in the line “Herzwand um Herzwand” (see Lyon 594). These walls (Wänden) have been crossed out, over-written, and rewritten; they are
partly hidden, like layers of a palimpsest, while interacting with “Herzblatt um Herzblatt” in producing “Herzwand um Herzwand.” The displacement from “Wänden” to “Herzwand um Herzwand” is operating on both the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axis. The composition metaphor “Blindenwort” suggests, at least in this context, an invisible word, a word buried in the hidden but still recoverable palimpsest, an invisible poetic germ that engenders the unfolding of the poem, the addition of layer upon layer of signification. In short, “Blindenwort” might be read as a poetic as well as a metapoetic statement, reflecting the growth of the flower along with the growth of the poem itself.

Arguably, the most significant feature of the third draft is the emergence of the imagery of a floating stone. It is evident that Celan created this imagery by substituting the stone (der Stein) for my star (mein Stern). The line “so blind wie mein Stern,” which appears in the second draft, is replaced first by “So blind wie der Stein” and then by “Wie der Stein” (Sprachgitter 32 and 34). This helps to clarify some of the semantic relations between the floating stone and the blindness of the eye, which sets the initial tone of the poem “Blume”: the floating stone is a guiding star that has been extinguished. This reading is further supported by material appearing in drafts five and six: “Das Leuchten des Steins, das Erlöschen” (Sprachgitter 33–34). Here, the image of the stone as an extinguished star is almost too obvious, lacking some of the striking paradox of a floating stone. Yet the shift from possessive pronoun (mein Stern) to definite article (der Stein) leaves no doubt that the poet also associates to the Star of David. Celan’s image of a floating stone, on this reading, is similar in many respects to the guiding Star of David; it is a symbol not of a living but an extinguished community – and this dead star leads its followers into blindness and darkness.

The fourth and the fifth drafts of the text, in which the poem receives its final title “Blume,” are dated “Easter Day 1957” (Ostersonntag 1957). These drafts include a few scattered lines. In translating the title to “Blume,” the semantic complexity between the French and the German languages is not dissolved but on the contrary supplemented by the movement of translation. The two opening verses are stabilized in this version, and it is noteworthy that “Blindenwort” occurs twice: “Blume:/ ein Blidenwort” and “Blindenwort unter dem Stein.” The preposition under (unter) alludes to the floating stone, which is described twice as standing above us (Er steht über uns // der über uns steht). However, it might also suggest a “Blindenwort” under the word “Stein.” A restoration of “Stern” (as in draft two), which in certain semantic regards resembles “Stein” (e.g. expanded in space, chemical composition, lifeless), would first of all destroy the paradoxical notion of a floating stone, while, second, the phonetic association with “sein” (ließ ich dich sein) would be lost (see Sprachgitter 34). The line “Blindenwort unter dem Stein,” therefore, might be read as a metapoetic statement that cautions against a specific model of interpretation: first, a metaphor is understood as a substitution of a literal with a figurative sense, and, second, the interpretation of metaphors consists of recovering the literal beneath the figurative sense of the metaphor (Ricoeur The Rule of Metaphor 52). While a
A straightforward reading of the line “Blindenwort unter dem Stein” might indicate a vertical correlation of word and stone, further expanding and complicating the visual, linguistic, and geological imagery of the poem, a metapoetic reading of the line might suggest that it cautions the reader against an influential model of interpreting metaphors.

The sixth and the seventh drafts of the text, dated “Easter Monday 1957” (Ostermontag 1957), bring the poem fairly close to its final form. The sixth draft includes a few scattered lines. One of the interesting features of these drafts is the introduction of “Wachstum” or growth, just like “Wort” appears twice; “wir fanden einander,/ wir lauschten dem Wort, das den Sommer heraufkam”; and later “Ein Wort noch, wie dies” (Sprachgitter 35). The poet stresses once again the lurking and listening interpretation (lauschten) of the original word. In this draft, the balance of the poem is tipping away from the initial framework – a child who learns to speak – and towards a metapoetical reflection on poetry or the poem itself. However, the process of finding (fanden) is still associated with another subject (einander) and not the word.

The association of finding and word (wir fanden/ das Wort) is established in the eighth and penultimate draft of the text, dated 7 October 1957. This is the version that was published in the journal Jahresring. Between the poem’s initial publication and its later inclusion in the collection Sprachgitter, two further changes occur; the previous enjambment “Finsternis leer,/ wir fanden” is altered to the current change of line, emphasizing an ambiguity in “fanden,” while the last five verses, which in the sixth draft were tied together, are separated into two stanzas.

The changes from the earliest draft to the final poem, according to Witte, can be summarized as follows: “the development from the first to the final draft is one that gradually replaces referential relations to a phenomenal world with meta-linguistic relations to language itself; as a result, instead of an anecdote about a child that learns to speak, we end with a meta-narrative about emancipation through language” (Witte 139–140). This interpretation, no doubt, is compelling due to its relative simplicity and clarity. It elegantly synthesizes a complicated multiplicity of disjointed semantic fragments into a single coherent whole.

The strength of this reading, however, is simultaneously its weakness. During the successive stages of the poem’s emergence, we see how the lines “ein Regen noch” (draft three), “ein Blatt noch” (draft four), and “ein Kelchblatt noch” (draft six) anticipate the penultimate line of the final draft, “Ein Wort noch, wie dies, und die Hämmer” (Sprachgitter 33–35). This series of substitutions – from rain (Regen), leaf (Blatt), and sepal (Kelchblatt) to word (Wort) – forms in many respects a miniature of the poem’s emergence. Here, I draw attention to this series of substitutions in order to provide a specific frame of reference and thereby continue the discussion with greater precision.

According to Witte’s interpretation of the poem and its emergence, there is a qualitative leap from rain and leaf to word, which repeats and mimics on a meta-
linguistic level the boy’s articulation of his first word. Such an interpretation, attractive as it may be, relies on at least two important assumptions. First, it assumes that the relation between text and pretext, final and previous drafts, can be understood as an actualization of a potentiality. The preliminary drafts, on this view, are understood to contain a potentiality, a poem in nuce, while the final draft is the full realization and culmination of this potentiality. Accordingly, the metonymy rain (Regen) and the synecdoches leaf (Blatt) and sepal (Kelchblatt) are mere potentialities, which are finally realized in the word (Wort). Furthermore, it assumes that the realization of the potential is a gathering of multiple disjointed elements within a single coherent form; it is the “finding” or the “providing” of a poetic form that realizes the potentiality. Or, to be more specific, it reads the series of substitutions – rain, leaf, sepal, word – as a process of subordination, whereby a multiplicity of natural phenomena (Regen, Blatt, Kelchblatt) are subsumed under a universal concept (Wort); thus, it introduces a dichotomy and a hierarchy between nature and language. Witte’s interpretation of the poem and its emergence, in short, assumes a complex set of aesthetic values: realization over and against potentiality, unity over and against multiplicity.

I propose an alternative interpretation of the poem and its emergence, which emphasizes multiplicity instead of unity, potentiality instead of realization. First, I suggest we read the series of drafts according to a paratactical rather than a hypothactical model. The substitutions, accordingly, do not establish a hierarchical structure but a series of additions: rain and leaf and sepal and word. The word – or, more precisely, the name – is part of “the flower” along with rain, leaves, and sepals. The name is one among a multiplicity of phenomena that “belong to” or “constitute” the poetic flower; but the name, here, in this particular context, does not occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis its natural parts. The poem and its various drafts, as far as I can see, do not support a conception of nature and language as two radically different spheres. Furthermore, instead of reading the emergence of the poem – from initial to final draft – as a teleological process of realization, I suggest that it is an open-ended process of variation. The first draft, as discussed previously, is already in a displaced position vis-à-vis the alleged first expression. Similarly, the final draft is not to be considered the last word on the matter. In fact, the final stanza of the poem is explicitly open ended, awaiting another word – or another draft – to come. Each draft of the poem, then, contains a potentiality, a promise, a gesture towards the future, which is simply the meaning of the poem: the poem “Blume” is about a potentiality, a future, which is not exhausted by any event.

This becomes apparent in the theme of a third, a potential “Herzwand.” The fourteenth verse, “Herzwand um Herzwand,” is a self-citation from the poem “Niedrigwasser.” The fifth verse reads: “Niemand schnitt uns das Wort von der Herzwand” (GW 1: 193). This verse is subsequently repeated in a syncopated and italicized form, while a parenthesis suspends the verse from the rest of the stanza: “(niemand/ schnitt uns das Wort von der ——)” (GW 1: 193). The poem “Niedrigwasser” conjures the idea, as well as the process, of cutting or trimming
of words: the word “Herzwand” literally disappears from the text. This associates to a number of other poems – for example “Einem, der vor der Tür stand” (GW 1: 242), as well as Scholem’s retelling of the story of the Golem (Scholem 210). The cutting of words, in “Niedrigwasser,” results in the disappearance of “Herzwand,” merely leaving “ein kleines/ unbefahrbares Schweigen” at the end of the poem (GW 1: 193). It remains unclear how exactly this cutting or trimming of words is related to “Blume” – whether it has already, or has not yet, occurred. If the cutting of words in “Niedrigwasser” occurs after the growth in “Blume,” then it might indicate an insurmountable barrier to the process of “finding words.” Conversely, the trimming of words – to continue the metaphor of the poetic flower – may also induce further growth. These ambiguities are further intensified in the theme of a third or potential “Herzwand.” We remember that the second draft of the poem “Blume,” as mentioned earlier, condenses “Herzblatt um Herzblatt” and “Wänden” to produce the line “Herzwand um Herzwand.” Interestingly, the plural form “Wänden” is cancelled and overwritten only to reappear in the poem “Niedrigwasser”: “das/ von den Wänden Gelöste” (GW 1: 193). The most important aspect of these “Wänden,” arguably, is that they indicate a numerical indeterminacy. The line “Herzwand um Herzwand” might suggest a pairing of walls, a restricted twosomeness; however, it simultaneously suggests a process of folding and enveloping that repeats, multiplies, and diversifies the same basic pattern. Both the undetermined plural form “Wänden” – appearing in the earlier draft of the poem as well as in the poem “Niedrigwasser” – and the repeated process of enveloping “Herzwand um Herzwand” indicate a third or indeterminate “Herzwand,” which is marked in the margin of the poem as a non-realized potentiality.

The poem “Blume,” in its published form, is not a single coherent whole, subsuming a multiplicity of sensuous phenomena under a single form, nor is its history merely a realization of a given potential. It is inadequate to describe the process from initial to final draft as one of replacing referential relations to a phenomenal world with meta-linguistic relations to language itself; rather, the emergence of the poem through successive stages of writing and rewriting is a process of embedding a reference, a name, within layer upon layer of thick contextual significance. There is no abrupt or decisive jump from natural to linguistic objects. There is a continuous development, from first to final draft, centred on a specific linguistic reference, a name, which is gradually embedded in more and more polyvalent contextual figurations. The name, in fact, remains legible, and therefore still active, in the final draft of the poem. It is precisely the continuous presence of the name, which allows us to understand the poem as an expression of a still active past in the present – here, understood in strictly textual rather than psychological terms. The poem, therefore, is not an autonomous aesthetic totality but a singular expression of inconclusive textuality.

The poem, arguably, is about potentiality, about the meaning of a form of potentiality which remains and will continue to remain yet-to-be-realized. In less textual and more existential terms, the poem is about the aftermath of the
Holocaust. It concerns the poet’s attempt to return to a normal life – not by forgetting the “grave accent” of the historical (GW 3: 190) but by working through the historical experience (durch sie hindurch, nicht über sie hinweg) (GW 3: 186). In many respects, this poem and its sense of rekindled hope is singular and, one might even say, rather atypical of Celan. As he writes in a letter to Hans Bender: “The hopes that I still have are not strong” (Die Hoffnungen, die ich noch habe, sind nicht groß) (GW 3: 178). Many of Celan’s poems, in particular from the later period, become increasingly hermetic – bordering on the solipsistic. As is well known, he suffered from intense trauma – feelings of persecution, guilt, and other forms of self-beratement – and he was one among many survivors that did not survive the survival. On this background, the poem stands out even more as a small miracle, a masterpiece, testifying to the poet’s intense struggle for a renewed release of potentialities, for a rekindled sense of hope. This struggle, I believe, is a theme in Celan’s poetry with a universal intersubjective appeal. In this perspective, the poem “Blume” is not simply about happiness; it is about becoming worthy of happiness.

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Works Cited


