Melancholy Hope: Friendship in Paul Celan’s Letters

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One of the distinct features of so-called primary friendship in Aristotle is time. Aristotle’s observation that “there is no friend without time [oud’ áneu khrónou phílos]” both limits and points beyond the concept of friendship in classical Greek thought, inasmuch as its condition of possibility will change in accordance with the specific concept of time related to friendship. According to the Eudemian Ethics, one can move through time to a realm of absolute friendship which is stable - or, as the Greek text has it, bèbaios - and which will endure beyond death. This notion of friendship, however, will change within a different metaphysical or post-metaphysical setting which emphasises - as Derrida has done in The Politics of Friendship - that the move beyond time occurs in time. Paul Celan’s chronography, his writing in and of time in his poetry as well as in his theoretical prose, establishes a framework in which Aristotle’s remark does not offer the condition of possibility of a stable, or ultimately absolute, friendship, but indeed its opposite, a mode of friendship which lacks the stability of politico-metaphysical thought. We can find this mode of friendship in the Eudemian Ethics and at the centre of virtually any metaphysical concept of friendship. Aristotle outlines a certain relationship to the other, in which a comprehensive knowledge of the other person is the guarantor for the stability of friendship; and in this outline, we can find the matrix of a notion of the metaphysical (as the “metachronical,” that which is beyond time; the eternal), the political, and, in particular, the ethical. If, conversely, the metaphysical as the metachronical shapes this notion of friendship, then the passing remark that “there is no friend without time” may point to a notion of friendship which will temporise the relationship to the other in a way that, first, destabilises the relationship, second, relates it to the (coming) death of the other, and, third, establishes the possibility of a radical otherness of the other or an irreducible alterity. In the following, I would like to outline this temporisation of friendship as it can be found in Celan’s letters, and relate it to Celan’s non-conceptual thinking of the human after the Shoah.

Celan’s poetic production and his letters are inextricably intertwined. In the correspondence between Celan and Nelly Sachs, the 1966 Nobel laureate, both the content of the letters (by addressing the poetic production of the two writers respectively) as well as their form (as an assemblage of prose and poetry) represent a mode of writing which does not clearly distinguish between the letters as an apostrophe, in the rhetorical sense of the term, and the poems sent with the letters. The poems are intrinsically structured as dialogue. In her very first letter to Celan, which instigates the correspondence, Sachs addresses him as “Dear
Poet Paul Celan,” and she further elaborates this form of address by calling him “Dear Poet and Dear Person Paul Celan.” This twofold naming, which speaks to both the author and the living person, will merge, in Sachs’s next letter, in the single address “friend”: “Dear Friend Paul Celan, / today [I send] this greeting, which is to tell you that your letter lies among those letters I will never part with for as long as I am alive.” - "Lieber Freund Paul Celan, heute diesen Gruß der Ihnen sagen soll, daß Ihr Brief bei jenen Briefen liegt, von denen ich mich bei Lebzeiten nicht mehr trennen werde.” For Sachs, who fled from Germany to Stockholm in 1940, Celan’s writing and his letters, in their materiality, become a space she lives in; a non-exile as opposed to her position as a German-Jewish refugee. In letter 17 of the correspondence, she writes to Celan:

Two handwritings are left for me in the world in which the letters [die Buchstaben] glow. If a word comes flying up to me like that, even the worst day is redeemed. One of these handwritings belongs to my friend Gudrun, who saved my mother’s life and my own. The other belongs to you. Throughout almost eight years in a Germany bristling with betrayal this one human being was enough to keep the balance.

In Celan’s reply, his first letter to her after he had found an anti-Semitic caricature placed on his lectern at a reading in Bonn, he encloses a harsh, and possibly anti-Semitic, review of his latest volume of verse. He writes: “Thanks, heartfelt thanks for your letter. / Ah you have no idea of the situation in Germany these days.” In her subsequent reply, Sachs construes a linguistic landscape that will enable Celan to compose the central idiom of his Büchner Prize speech, the most important poetological text written in the German language in the second half of the 20th century. Interpretations of this text by Emmanuel Levinas, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jacques Derrida have related Celan’s work to the general discussion of an ethics of alterity, to an ethics after Auschwitz. “Paul Celan, dear Paul Celan,” she writes,

blessed by Bach and Hölderlin, blessed by the Hasidim. Your letter went straight to my heart. During the last summer, I too had my eyelid raised, I, who am so afraid of lightning-flashes. Your letter - it flashed through me […] At that time a hope in which I had been gathering my innermost strength was dashed to pieces - I fell ill, so badly was I struck. Dear Paul Celan, let us keep reaching
across to each other with the truth. Between Paris and Stockholm runs the meridian of pain and comfort.\textsuperscript{16}

Within the German and Hebrew references of the letter, Sachs reports the hope of a, perhaps, fundamental change in German-Jewish relations after World War II, not only with regard to the absolute negativity of the Shoah that destroys our notions of history, of the human, and the very concepts we think and live by, but also as implying a halt of anti-Semitism in the present; but she has that hope dashed. In reaction, she outlines what she calls the “meridian” as a signature of the line from Celan’s Paris to Sachs’s Stockholm, and, thereby, provides Celan with one of the central terms of his thinking of the “human,” or the “creature,” the meridian as a name for a non-violent relationship to the other. The poem, then, hopes to speak “\textit{on behalf of the other},” as Celan phrased it in “The Meridian,” the speech he holds on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize: “[…] I think […] that the poem has always hoped […] to speak also on behalf of the strange - no, I can no longer use this word here - \textit{on behalf of the other}, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other.” And he adds: “The poem takes such thoughts for its home and hope - a word for living creatures.”\textsuperscript{17} The act of speaking on behalf of the other occurs within a specific and actual time frame, which centrally relates to 20\textsuperscript{th} January 1942, the date of the Wannsee Conference, but indeed also to any other specific date. Almost every poem Celan ever wrote - including all the drafts - bears, in his immaculate handwriting, the date of its composition.

The poem as an act of speaking to the other is an utterance at a specific point in time. This concept of a relationship to the other is radically different from both the concept of biopolitics as a means of political control, which entails a notion of political sovereignty as power over life, and also that of bioethics, which as a corrective or counter-force to biopolitics, remains related to biopolitical axioms as long as it does not consider the singularity of the other. Giorgio Agamben polemically formulates this very problem in \textit{Homo Sacer} in his analysis of “The Camp as a Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern”:

\begin{quote}
The separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the extreme phase of separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen. In the final analysis, however, humanitarian organizations […] can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}
Celan’s language, both in his poems and in the Büchner Prize speech, operates on a level of self-referentiality that questions the condition of possibility of the poetic, in every sense of the term, after Auschwitz. The complete breakdown of the horizon for experience, or the rupture, in, through, and after the Shoah, also questions the fundamentals of language. According to Ulrich Baer’s study on trauma and the experience of modernity,

Celan must express that interruption of the contexts of experience that took place in, through, and with language, and that this interruption could not be limited to the reality that language names. If Celan were to name, represent, or refer to the interruption in history or experience, the breakdown would appear as a reference to language and thus remain “outside” the language used to describe it. Because a meaningful account of this interruption or breakdown of a horizon for experience within language depends on language, Celan must at once note the interruption by relying on nonbroken language and, at the same time, suggest this breakdown in his verse. He must turn language, as it were, against itself.  

In reading Celan’s letters, we not only find a highly complex poetics complementary to Adorno’s assertion that “[t]he need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” in the Negative Dialectics, but also an elaborate realism in the sense that Celan’s poetry strives for the other in an - ultimately - concrete fashion. This concrete address, however, can be established only after one has crossed, as Walter Benjamin remarked on Adorno’s metacritique of epistemology, “the frozen waste of abstraction.” In such concrete fashion, the poem becomes what Celan - in his reply to a request to contribute to an anthology called My Poem is My Knife - calls “a handshake,” which is an atopian assertion of a non-violent address to the other. The central passage of this letter to Hans Bender reads:

Craft means handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to one person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness. Only truthful hands write true poems. I
cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem.”

The view of the poem as a handshake, conceived in a letter that strives for the same quality, is a melancholy, self-reflective hope that appeared to be on the brink of vanishing. Celan closes the letter by saying that “We live under dark skies and - there are few human beings. Hence, I assume, so few poems. The hopes I have left are small. I try to hold on to what remains.”

Celan’s poem “Zürich, the Stork Inn,” which he wrote after meeting Nelly Sachs in Zurich and sent to her on the forth day after the meeting, establishes a mode of language that turns against itself by, first, establishing a hope that appears to possess the qualities of fear, and, second, by introducing a self-contradictory statement similar to the inherent contradiction of so-called relativism or subjectivism. The poem reads:

Zürich, the Stork Inn

*For Nelly Sachs*

Of too much was our talk, of
too little, Of the You
and You-Again, of
how clarity troubles, of
Jewishness, of
your God.

Of
that.
On the day of ascension, the
Minster stood over there, it sent
some gold across the water.

Of your God was our talk, I spoke
against him, I
let the heart that I had
hope:
for
his highest, death-rattled, his
quarrelling word -
Your eye looked on, looked away,  
your mouth  
spoke its way to the eye, and I heard:

We  
don’t know, you know,  
we  
don’t know, do we?,  
what  
counts.  

The final knowledge of the poetic voice renounces all knowledge of values in general and in particular any knowledge relating to the theological questions discussed by the persona in the first three stanzas of the poem. The verses represent the climax of a poetic correspondence whose fragility in time is related to the Shoah as the complete destruction of stability. In the same year, Celan visits Sachs in Stockholm, but her mental condition - related to her fear of being overpowered by Nazis or neo-Nazis - is such that she does not even recognise him.

This extreme negativity or destabilisation, within which one of the friends does not recognise the other, is not conceivable within the Aristotelian categories. The unstable basis of Celan’s friendships in and through time leads, in the 1960s, to the questioning of several of the friendships in the aftermath of Claire Goll’s publication of an article in which she accuses Celan of plagiarising her late husband, Yvan Goll.

The disintegration of all human relationships appears to be counterbalanced only by the possibilities of language:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained amid the losses this one thing: language. It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech.

In language, the possibilities of speaking both on behalf of the self and on behalf of the other - as the condition of possibility of an ethics - remain intact, but only inasmuch as language takes into account its radical historicity in the aftermath of the Shoah. The speaking on behalf of the singular entails, in Celan, a hope that is also political, but refrains from connecting to any collective action or political systems. Celan’s answer to the question whether a revolution is unavoidable emphasises a
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I still hope, and not only in regard to the Federal Republic and Germany, for change, for transformation. Substitute systems will not bring it about, and revolution - a social and at the same time anti-authoritarian one - can only be conceived with change as its basis. It begins, in Germany, here, today, with the individual.28

Judith Butler’s Adorno Lectures Against Ethical Violence, delivered at the Institut für Sozialforschung in 2002, closely examine the violence entailed in an ethics which does not take into account the failure of the attempt to establish a comprehensive knowledge of the self and of the other. The knowledge of the self and of the other occurs in time, and cannot come to a closure - a closure which might provide the basis of an ethics as the foundation of moral action. The emphasis on the temporality of the knowledge of the other, as we find it in Celan - in his emphasis on the date as a datum, a given or gift of every poem -, asks for an ethics based on the unobtainable singularity of the other. The failure of establishing a stable relationship through time, as it can be found in Celan’s letters, does not ask for a normative morality, but for a continuation of the project of an open, unstable ethics. This process, which cannot come to a close, implies “a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to know,”29 as we can find it in Celan’s poetic address to Sachs, which quotes the Zurich conversation with her: “We / don’t know, you know, / we / don’t know, do we?, / what counts.”30

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Notes


Ibid., 5.

Ibid., 7.


Celan and Sachs, 13.

Whether or not Arnold Böcker’s review of *Sprachgitter* is in fact anti-Semitic is open to debate; but its terms are certainly highly questionable. Cf. the editor’s note to letter 18 in Celan and Sachs, 79.

Ibid., 14.


Celan and Sachs, 14.


Ibid., xix.

25 Cf. Celan and Sachs, 89.
27 Celan and Sachs, vii.

**Bibliography**


