Zäsuren | Caesurae

Paul Celans Spätwerk | Paul Celan's Later Work

Herausgegeben von Chiara Caradonna und Vivian Liska
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Shy Abady

Cycle of Drawings on Celan in Jerusalem



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Photo Credit: Roni Kaufmann

Galili Shahar

Im Eselsschrei

Paul Celan, Jerusalem/Al-Quds, a Step Back

This essay reflects a moment in Paul Celan's visit in Israel/Palestine in October 1969. The reflection is associated with a reading of his poem Die Glut, which belongs to the so-called Jerusalem cycle, written after the visit and first published in the posthumous volume *Zeitgehöft* (1976). The reading of this poem will be guided by several works by the Israeli artist Shy Abady that are devoted to Die Glut. My reading of Celan's poem reflects itself in the mirror of these artworks in search for mutual affinities, while tracing the central motifs of Die Glut. These affinities are local: they belong to a specific Jewish/Arab (Israeli/Palestinian) experience in the terrain of Celan's poem. It is the experience of a landscape (*Gelände*) charged with historical and political signs, in which a certain theological (liturgical) weight is sealed.[1] In these paintings Abady refers to certain oriental aspects of Celan's visit, aspects which remain almost unheard in his poems. Celan (*Antschel*) is reflected in Abady's work as an »Oriental Jew«, bearing both the portrait of a *Mizrahi* (Arab Jew) and an *Ostjude* (Eastern European Jew). This reflection, ironic in its kind, is not atypical for Abady, who, in his paintings, often engages European (Christian) heritages as well as German-Jewish traditions, with a keen awareness of their repressed (denied/forgotten) oriental depths. In his works dedicated to Celan's visit in Jerusalem/Al-Quds, Abady creates a language, both in image and in script, so as to re-present precisely these aspects – the unseen, unheard of/in Celan's poetry, suggesting a *re-orientation* in his Jerusalem cycle.

Celan's visit in Israel/Palestine left significant traces in German and Hebrew life and letters. The poems and letters that he wrote before, during, and after his visit, his conversations, interviews, readings and speeches there, such as his unforgotten remark about the green of the land and on Jewish solitude,[2] have left a deep impression. Celan's 1969 visit offers us, particularly his readers in Israel, not just insights, but also moments of blindness, silence, and voices unheard. A reading of Die Glut should reflect these moments, in which Celan

1 Reading Celan's poem as a terrain of traces follows Szondi's method; see: Peter Szondi, »Durch die Enge geführt«, in: id., *Schriften*, II, Frankfurt a. M. 1996, 345–349.

2 Paul Celan, *Der Meridian und andere Prosa*, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, 63.

provides us with images and voices of this land yet associated with something – unheard.

Die Glut zählt uns zusammen
im Eselsschrei vor
Absaloms Grab, auch hier,

Gethsemane, drüben,
das umgangene, wen
überhäufts?

Am nächsten der Tore tut sich nichts auf,

über dich, Offene, trag ich dich zu mir.[3]

The poem gathers impressions from a visit Celan made with Ilana Shmueli in East Jerusalem/Al-Quds during an especially hot day at the beginning of October 1969. The heat, *Glut*, is the climate of the poem, referring perhaps to desire and longing, and also alluding to melting and states of ecstasy and being-together. It can be read as the prologue to a love poem, addressing a friend, yearning for a beloved. The poem's readers may be familiar with its biographical background, of which Shmueli provided testimony. However, a reading of Celan's Die Glut calls for a step back; it requires a moving through and beyond its biographical context.[4] A reading of this poem needs space, distant and free, to explore its potentialities,[5] to renew the conversation (*Gespräch*) with the poem.[6]

In her memoirs Ilana Shmueli writes of Celan's visit,[7] recalling that warm day from October 1969. She recounts how she and Celan began their visit on Mount Scopus [Ǧabal al-Mašārif], from where they saw the Dead Sea, before

3 Celan, Die Glut, in: id., *Die Gedichte. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 2014, 360–361.

4 On reading Celan's poetry with/without its biographical context, see: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du?,* Frankfurt a. M. 1986, 112–136, 137–157.

5 Peter Szondi, »Über philologische Erkenntnis«, *Schriften*, Vol. I, Frankfurt a. M. 2011, 263–286.

6 On the interpretation of poetry as »Gespräch«, conversation, compare Heidegger's notes on Hölderlin's poem Der Ister: Martin Heidegger, »Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung«, in: id., *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, Frankfurt a. M. 1996, 38–40. However, Celan's poetry should be read as an intervention in the Germanic poetical plan, calling for a different, concrete attention to language and being.

7 Ilana Shmueli, *Imri sheIerushalaim ieshna. Reshimot 'al Paul Celan*, Jerusalem 1999.

proceeding to the Mount of Olives, looking from there through the distance to the Temple Mount [al-Ḥaram al-Šarīf]. Shmueli notes the view over the Jewish cemetery and the Mosques. According to her memoir, they bypassed Gethsemane and descended directly to the Absalom Pillar in the Kidron Valley, where they heard the cry of donkeys.[8] Above and before them stood the wall of the Old City, the Golden Gate [Sha'ar ha-Raḥamim], known in Hebrew as the Gate of Mercy. This gate has been left sealed since the occupation of Jerusalem by Saladin in the twelfth century. According to Christian legend, Jesus entered Jerusalem through this gate, which, according to a late Jewish tale, is the gate to be opened upon the Messiah's arrival. In his poem Celan writes: »Am nächsten der Tore tut sich nichts auf«.

The messianic dimension of both traditions, the Jewish and the Christian, is being echoed in Celan's poem. In her memoir, Shmueli notes Celan's words »too much sacredness«, referring to the »holy places« in Jerusalem, which they had avoided visiting.[9] There is much healthy irony in these words ascribed to Celan. During his visit to Jerusalem/Al-Quds he avoided any false encounter with monuments of the Holy. His poetry, however, refers to the concealments of theological traditions, and often deals with the inner structure of liturgical experience. By-passing, walking around, descending from the mountain, escaping, departing – these poetical movements signify affinities, critical engagement, awareness. In his poem Celan attests to the inner tensions within the messianic tradition by means of withdrawal, through inversions. The gate in the wall that is not yet open may refer, in Celan's poem, to the messianic arrival as it is being deferred, inverted. How, then, should the unopened gate of his poem be read? Is this a promise? An anticipation? A prayer? An expression of despair?

In the poem Die Pole, which also belongs to the Jerusalem cycle,[10] Celan writes:

Die Pole
sind in uns,
unübersteigbar
im Wachen,
wir schlafen hinüber, vors Tor
des Erbarmens,

8 Ibid., 11–12.
9 Ibid.,12.
10 Celan, Die Pole, *Die Gedichte*, 362.

The poem does not deny the »poles«, unbridged, that prevail in states of awakening (*Wachen*). The sleepers, however, are gathered before the sealed gate of Jerusalem, the Golden Gate or the Gate of Mercy [Sha'ar ha-Raḥamim], *Tor des Erbarmens*.

In one of his drawings Abady names the gate – »Tore der Vergeblichkeit«. This phrase appears in one of Celan's letters to Shmueli and indicates the gates in Jerusalem's wall. The word *Vergeblichkeit* implies futility, pretending, nothingness. In Der Königsweg,[11] another poem of the Jerusalem cycle, Celan refers to these false gates: »Der Königsweg hinter der Scheintür«.

The gates of Jerusalem are bright and constitute an illusion (*Schein*). The poem stands before, against, behind these gates, calling »you« (*du*) – *vergeblich*, in vain? In the same semantic zone, however, the word *Vergeben* implies forgiveness, mercy. Celan's readers, who are brought to the terrain of this poem, should bear in mind this ambiguous texture.[12] Being closed (a gate not yet open) refers to concealment and intimacy, to mercy and falseness. One recalls in this context the sealed gate of the beloved in the *Song of Songs* (5:2–6) – the locked door, which in the Midrash refers (allegorically) to messianic deferment. This recalls a famous Talmudic story about the messianic arrival:

> Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi encountered Elijah the Prophet standing at the grave of Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohai. – He said to him [Elijah], »When will the Messiah come?« He replied to him, »Go ask him himself!«
> »Where does he sit?«
> »At the gate of Rome«.
> »And what is his sign [by which I will recognize him]?«
> »He sits among the poor suffering from diseases and all of them loosen and tighten all their bandages at one time, and he, loosens one and tightens it [then another and another], saying ›perhaps I will be required and this way I won't delay‹«.[13]

The messiah, dressed as a poor, sick man, sitting before the gate of Rome, will come, the Talmud argues, »Today«. Yet, his arrival implies endless intervention, awaiting, anticipation – a promise alone, not a date. The delay reveals the core meaning of the messianic arrival, namely, its postponement. The messianic idea is futuristic, yet not in progressive terms. It is associated with regressions. Not in vain is the messianic figure called in Hebrew *'akev*. The name re-

11 Celan, Der Königsweg, *Die Gedichte*, 363.

12 Cf. Szondi, »Durch die Enge geführt«, 347.

13 Talmud Bavli, *Tractate Sanhedrin*, 98, A (Trans. Daniel Boyarin).

fers to the heel, the lowest part of the human body, and hints at slow walking, at a step back.

Celan's poem, we should assume, is not allegorical and uses no such Talmudic tropes. It proceeds instead through inversions. Once we return, however, to listen to this line in Celan's Die Glut (»Am nächsten der Tore tut sich nichts auf«) we hear through the traces it gathers. We may then recognize the imprint of the messianic tradition, holding both radical hopes and anxieties, anticipations, falseness, and despair. The gate which does not yet open holds a potential, an opening which lies in the future and is empty. Does this line in Celan's poem relate itself to nothingness, to the empty, concealed content of the messianic tradition?

The poet stood against a closed gate, he stood against the wall. Standing against the wall belongs to the act of prayer itself, as the plea for the opening of the gates is at the core of Jewish liturgy. In standing against, standing in front of, *gegenüber*, Celan associates himself with these walls of tradition. Yet this is not without distance and irony. The poem Die Glut bears no liturgical value in and of itself; rather, it reads as an intervention in this tradition, perhaps providing an echo of its reminders, while withdrawing from its realization.

Celan's poem can be heard as a plea, a desperate one, for an opening. It is undersigned with the verse: »über dich, Offene, trag ich dich zu mir«. What is left open, the opening of the poem itself, its message, is written in front of, against the wall. The poem, which is dedicated to Shmueli, recalls perhaps – in its opening (*Offene*) – her name too, *Shmu-Eli*, »listen (to) my lord«. This call too belongs to the unheard voices of Die Glut.

The dialogical dimension of Celan's poetry, signified by the call »Du« (you) in many of his poems, is well known. However, the encounter of »Ich und Du« in Celan's poetry is estranged, confused, and often left silent,[14] as in his prose text »Gespräch im Gebirg«.[15] There, the dialogue is heard as a conversation between third persons, unrepresented bodies. When we ask about the dialogical aspects of Die Glut and its reference to the liturgical tradition, to a prayer before the wall, we should assume the absence (unrepresentable presence) of both speaker and addressee in his poetry. Die Glut, one may argue, provides its readers with another version of a »conversation in the mountains«.

During his visit in Jerusalem/Al-Quds Celan almost avoided the »holy sites« of the Temple Mount. He preferred to pass over these places – including the Western Wall [haKotel haMa'aravi] – avoiding a long stay. His poem

14 On the constellations of »Ich und Du« in Celan's poetry see: Jean Bollack, *Paul Celan. Poetik der Fremdheit*, Wien 2000, 24–25; Gadamer, *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du?*, 9–13.

15 Celan, »Gespräch im Gebirg«, in: id., *Der Meridian und andere Prosa*, 23–29.

too avoids false rituals and does not reclaim a presence, *Da-sein*.[16] The presence in his poetry is associated with absence, with not-being-there. The following verse from Die Pole, too, calls: »Sag, daß Jerusalem *ist*«.[17] Jerusalem exists in this speech act, in the prayer for someone, unrepresented, to speak in the terrain of the poem, to play with its words. The existence of Jerusalem in Celan's poetry is neither an empirical fact nor an ontological statement. It is, rather, a plea, an invitation, a call (a cry). The verse asks »you« to speak, but how? In Celan's poetry »you« speaks as »he/she«. »You« (*du*) is not a presence alone but a gathering of the unrepresentable. Not in vain the next verses say:

sags, als wäre ich dieses
dein Weiß,
als wärst du
meins

als könnten wir ohne uns wir sein[18]

The encounter of »ich und du«, the gathering, being-together (we, *wir*) is reflected in »white« (*Weiß*), in opening, in emptiness, in death. It expresses itself as conditional (»als wärst du | meins«), in the form of a wish (as if) with a caesura (»du | meins«). The poem does not deny the non-existence (un-reality), the absence, the separation that brings »us« (*uns*) into »we« (*wir*).

Celan's poem acts in resistance, stepping back from false attempts of realization and instead stating its foreignness, withdrawing from the main road (*Königsweg*) of tradition into its bypasses. The poet and his readers are still standing »before the gate«. The readers of Celan's poem who today follow the tracks of his visit, tracing the paths of Die Glut, are aware of another wall, namely, »the separation fence«, the West Bank barrier, an Israeli security enterprise which was initiated after the year 2000, not without dubious political aims concerning the occupied Palestinian territories. A current reading of Die Glut cannot deny the presence of this new wall, expressing different yet affiliated closures, associated with states of distance, solitude, and despair. The significant place of the stone (*Stein*) in Celan's poetry,[19] the material that sig-

16 Celan's poetry answers/corresponds not without inversion to the (false) ontological terms of Martin Heidegger, in order to signify its own acts of witnessing. For further reading see: Werner Hamacher, »Wasen: On Celan's Todtnauberg«, in: *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 57 (2011), 15–54.

17 Celan, DIE POLE, 362.

18 Ibid.

19 Cf. Winfried Menninghaus, *Paul Celan. Magie der Form*, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, 80–129;

nifies death, coldness, silence, but also volcanic potential, a substance of writing and memory in his writing, gains a different (further) meaning, once it is discussed in association with the Jerusalem walls in the terrain of Die Glut. The cry of the poem, the prayer for an opening – if one is allowed to suggest an »acute accent« in reading Celan's poetry – is now also associated with these fences and barriers.

Celan's poem can be read as an echo chamber of messianic tradition, bypassing, inverting its core values. This tradition, while related to the idea of a radical correction of world-being, namely, the idea of salvation, was also a tradition to which the figure of a dead son, a martyr, was associated. Celan's poem explicitly refers to two figures of a lost son:

> Absaloms Grab, auch hier,
>
> Gethsemane, drüben,
> das umgangene, wen
> überhäufts?

Absalom's Pillar [Yad Avshalom] is the name given to a monument, a burial chamber, located in the Kidron Valley, in front of the Northern wall of the Old City of Jerusalem. The tomb was actually built in the Roman period (first century AD). Current research identifies it as the tomb of King Herod Agrippa, a Judeo-Roman ruler from the Herodian dynasty.[20] Alongside its Hellenistic-Roman foundation the monument includes layers and additions of later periods. In the Arabic-Muslim tradition the chamber is called *Tantur Faron* (Pharaoh's Hat), referring to an ancient Egyptian legacy. In his poem Celan employs the Hebrew/Jewish name of the grave, referring to Absalom, the rebellious son of King David. Absalom, according to the biblical story, challenged his father and died after the defeat of his army, while trying to escape. The episode from the Book of Samuel (II, 18:9, King James Version) reads:

> And Absalom met the servants of David. And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head

James K. Lyon, »Paul Celan's Language of Stone: The Geology of the Poetic Landscape«, in: *Colloquia Germanica* 8 (1974), 298–317; Gertrude Durusoy, »Der Stein als vielseitige Metapher in der Lyrik Paul Celans«, in: *Jura Soyfer* 3 (1999), 26–29; Uta Werner, *Textgräber. Paul Celans geologische Lyrik*, München 1998; Erika Schellenberger-Diederich, *Geopoetik. Studien zur Metaphorik des Gesteins in der Lyrik von Hölderlin bis Celan*, Bielefeld 2006.

20 Cf. Gabriel Barkay, »Absalom's Pillar«, in: *City of David Studies of Ancient Jerusalem* 8 (2013), 79–99.

caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away.

The rebellious son was caught on his route of escape, was caught up in an oak, was hit by three drafts at his heart, died, and was buried with a »very great heap of stones upon him«. Does the poem recall his path? Does it stand for revolt, resistance, escape – in the name of the son?

Celan's poem refers also to another place – Gethsemane [Geth Shemanim], in Hebrew »the place of the oil press«, considered in the Christian tradition to be the garden in which Jesus, in agony, spent the night before his arrest. Here too the tradition tells a story of a son on his path of escape. Yet Celan, in his poem, goes around it: Gethsemane is left bypassed (»das umgangene«). The poem goes through an *Umweg*, a detour, passes by the Christian site and relates itself to it from a distance, by taking a step back and withdrawing once more from the main road of messianic tradition.

However, the readers of this poem who follow its traces, the routes of Celan's visit, are invited to recall its covers, as the poem itself asks: »wen | überhäufts?« What, and who, is being covered, buried, in this (broken) verse? What is being accumulated in these words? What is yet to be found in the semantic pile of Die Glut?

The readers of Die Glut are invited to »visit Palestine«, as the Arabic inscription in Abady's drawing of Absalom's Pillar suggests. Abady's drawing borrows the Arabic inscription from a Palestinian tourism placard. His work is based on an older Hebrew version of the placard, however, one created by the German-Jewish designer Franz Kraus in 1936, advocating (in English) for a visit Mandatory Palestine.

Abady appropriates motives, colors, and shadows of the Zionist placard – the paperwork, the reddish soil, the yellowish sky, the shade of the tree branches, while introducing the Arabic script, hinting at layers of images and sounds that were covered, sealed in Celan's poem. It is the Arabic – the written as well as the spoken language – that remains unheard in Die Glut.

Celan's visit is reflected in Abady's studio in a pile of (news-) papers, hinting at a certain urgency, implying a certain time concept – the now (*Jetztzeit*). Celan's visit still takes place in Abady's workshop, echoing the phrase »current affairs« (in Hebrew: בעיות השעה, literally: problems of the hour). This phrase appears on a newspaper page seen in a picture taken at Abady's studio. The material of his works, which are themselves made of paper, holds in it a dimension of urgency: these works refer to the »hour« – to a short time segment, the »present«. They attest to a minor form of re-presentation, which does not deny the momentary value of artwork. Abady's drawings do not claim monumen-

tal measure. Celan's visit is not celebrated in these works with epic gestures. Neither stone, nor iron or wood, but rather paper was chosen by the artist for the initial negotiation with Celan's poetry. There is a sense of (healthy) irony in these works, which avoid any false pathos of sacredness.

Our reading of Celan's poem continues. We read by taking a step back. Our reading withdraws to the opening verses:

> Die Glut
> zählt uns zusammen
> im Eselsschrei vor
> Absaloms Grab, auch hier

These verses count, bring together, gather »us« (*uns*) in a scream, the cry of a donkey – *im Eselsschrei*.

The donkey – al-ḥemar, in Arabic – enters Celan's poem with a scream. Abady writes, then deletes or stresses these words in Hebrew at the bottom of his drawing: »lament of a donkey« [kinat ha-ḥamor]. The lamenting voice, the cry of the donkey, is the sound of a creature that interferes in the verse of Celan's poem. Its lament is one of those primal cells of language, an expression of sorrow, before all words and proper names.[21] Yet the cry of the donkey also carries the burden of tradition. As the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9) relates, the Messiah will arrive, righteous and victorious, as a poor man riding on a donkey:

> הִנֵּה מַלְכֵּךְ יָבוֹא לָךְ צַדִּיק וְנוֹשָׁע הוּא עָנִי וְרֹכֵב עַל חֲמוֹר וְעַל-עַיִר בֶּן אֲתֹנוֹת

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass. (King James Version)

The figure of a king, just and righteous, who brings salvation upon the world as he rides upon an ass, appears also in the Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin. In the same section that announces the messianic arrival and discusses its time conception, it says: the messiah will arrive, not from heaven and not in a hurry, but in proper time, riding on a donkey.[22]

What is being heard in this cry, *im Eselsschrei*, the call of a donkey in Celan's poem, can be understood in its affinity to the messianic tradition. This episode,

21 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Stuttgart 1986, 5–10.
22 Talmud Bavli, *Tractate Sanhedrin*, 98, A.

perhaps one of the most comic scenes in messianic tradition, bears, not without bitter irony, a witnessing to the abject condition of mankind, as it refers to the agony of all created being, which constitutes the substance of redemption. In Celan's poem the cry of the donkey is also a gathering (congregation), the counting together of »us« (*uns*), in front of Absalom's grave, against the gates that are not yet open. Indeed, Absalom was a rebellious son who stood against the house of his father, David, son of Jesse, the head of the family line to which the messiah will belong, as it is said, »a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse« (Isaiah 11:1). Absalom stood against, resisted, reclaimed the promise of messianic heritage. Was it, however, not Absalom himself, on his path of escape, who was riding a mule just before he was captured, his head caught in the branches of a great oak?

Should we assume that these unheard voices, the cry of a donkey, the lament of a dying son, are imprinted in Celan's poem? These voices, the sounds of Hebrew, Arabic, the cry of creaturely being, are gathered in Die Glut.

Reading Paul Celan on Mount Scopus, on the border between Israel and Palestine, where Jerusalem and Al-Quds reflect each other as if in a broken mirror, in torn textures of Semitic languages, demands an attention to these sounds, unheard in the German poem. Reading Celan's poem in this framework is not free from a certain reflection of/on messianic traditions, which are transformed into concealment in the poem. Reading Die Glut calls us to the path, gathering voices, noises of this land, torn and fragmented. Celan left us a trace that forces us to take a step back, to begin with.