



Trauma and Memory in Paul Celan's Post-Holocaust Poetry

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Abstract

Paul Celan's poem *Death fugue* is not just a poetic text that addresses the events of the Jewish Holocaust. Rather, it is a complex work that combines individual and collective memory in a poetic discourse charged with symbols through images such as black milk, Margaret with her mental hair, and Shulamit with her gray hair. The poet paints a contrasting picture that combines beauty and destruction, life and death, Aryan identity and Jewish identity. The repetitive rhythm in the text reflects the nature of the trauma that reproduces itself in the consciousness of the survivors. The research reveals an organized brutality aimed at erasing human dignity. The poem moves in an absolute circle, where the beginning meets the end, in a simulation of the continuity of memory and the impossibility of transcending the wound. The poem fugue-like structure represents the poet intention to draw the symphony of devastation which is quite systematic and repetitive like a musical fugue.

Keywords: Death fugue , holocaust, memory, and Paul Celan.

الصدمة والذاكرة في شعر ما بعد المحرقة لبول تسيلان

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المستخلص

قصيدة بول تسيلان فوغة الموت ليست مجرد نص شعري يتناول أحداث المحرقة اليهودية. بل هي عمل معقد يجمع بين الذاكرة الفردية والجماعية في خطاب شعري مشحون بالرموز من خلال صور مثل الحليب الأسود حيث شعر مارغريت الذهبي وشعر شولاميت الرمادي. كما يرسم الشاعر صورة متناقضة تجمع بين الجمال والدمار و الحياة والموت و الهوية الآرية والهوية اليهودية. و يعكس الإيقاع المتكرر في النص طبيعة الصدمة التي تعيد إنتاج نفسها في وعي الناجين. و يكشف البحث عن وحشية منظمة تهدف إلى محو الكرامة الإنسانية. حيث تتحرك القصيدة في دائرة حيث تلتقي البداية بالنهاية في محاكاة لاستمرارية الذاكرة واستحالة تجاوز الصدمة. كما تمثل بنية القصيدة الشبيهة بالفوغة نية الشاعر في رسم سيمفونية الدمار المنهجية والمتكررة مثل الفوغة الموسيقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فوغة الموت ، المحرقة، الذاكرة ، و بول تسيلان .

Introduction

The Greek origin of the word "trauma" refers to the "physical injuries." and has gradually expanded to name the wound the psyche incurs. Cathy Caruth introduced a definition to: "trauma as an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events whereby the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." (p.11) The crucial point is that the wound is belated, what the



psyche could not record at the moment comes later, in the form of repetitive intrusion. Trauma is simply not felt in its fullness until time has slipped past the point of impact, and is instead recollected in the form of its re-executions. Janet Pierre names the same process "delayed response; "Freud calls it "deferred action" or "afterwardness. " In each case, the fractured moment waits in the wings before it arrives (Wang & Xiaoyu, 2017).

Jenni Adams (2014) introduces a comprehensive definition of Holocaust:

The term 'Holocaust literature' encompasses a diverse body of work, from testimony and other writing by survivors through to poetry, fiction, drama and memoir by those who did not experience the events themselves but who nevertheless feel compelled to engage with the long shadow they continue to cast over twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. The task of precisely delineating 'Holocaust literature' and its key properties is further complicated by the extent to which significant issues in the understanding and interpretation of Holocaust texts differ across geographical, temporal and cultural contexts. (p.1)

According to contemporary neurobiologists, the recurrence of the traumatic event in flashbacks can be re-traumatizing in and of itself; if not fatal, it poses a threat to the brain's chemical makeup and may eventually cause deterioration. Additionally, this would appear to account for the high suicide rate among survivors, such as those who survived the Vietnam War. One could argue that people who have experienced trauma carry an impossible past with them. Alternatively, they become the symptoms of a history that they cannot fully own and that, thus, owns them (Caruth, 2016).

The process of transforming traumatic memories into "social acts, and narrative memories addressed to others," according to Jacek Partyka (2018, p. 297), is crucial for Holocaust studies. After winning "The Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen" in 1958, Celan (2001, p.396) as cited in Partyka (2018) gave a talk introducing the notions of "an addressable Thou" and "an addressable reality" as destinations for any poem: "A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and



sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps... Such realities, I think, are at stake in a poem."(p.297)

The tropes that are accessible to address the situations at hand determine the actions of Holocaust perpetrators and victims as well as our responses to them. Young highlights how the long-standing anti-Semitic history may have prevented many people from seeing the true seriousness of the situation, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with the Nazi threat. Although the figurative aspect of language has the capacity to be freeing, metaphors may also become political and conceal politics. The linguistic construction of the past shapes human understanding of the present and the choices individuals make for the future. For this reason, Young finds that the understanding that "particular kinds of knowledge lead to particular kinds of actions" is where literature has the explicit ability to change social practices (Bleiker, 1999, p. 668).

Acting-out is connected with repetition, and even the repetition-compulsion. This is particularly evident with respect to trauma: Victims of a trauma are inclined to relive what has happened; they tend to be living their present as though it were still entirely part of the past, there being no distance between past and present; they tend to relive events, or at least have those events intrude on their present life, for example through flashbacks; or nightmares; or compulsively repeated words that no longer seem to have their usual meaning because they have acquired a different significance from another place (Goldberg, 1998).

As modernity developed, authors would continue to denigrate all forms of memory in favor of reason, nature, life, originality, individuality, innovation, progress, and whatever gods they might serve; Harald Weinrich explains it this way: In either event, the hostility between reason and memory that Juan Huarte (the Spanish philosopher) identified early on and which has continued throughout Europe since the Enlightenment resulted in a war against all types of memory with enlightened reason finally emerging victorious; human no longer being ashamed about admitting to having a bad memory but rarely hear anyone complain about poor reason (Assmann, 2011).

The scientists claim that humans have the ability to retain, store, and then retrieve knowledge and experiences from the past. The simplest definition of memory is the ongoing process of information retention across time. It is a crucial component of human cognition, enabling people to recall and connect memories, experiences, and events from the past and utilise them to inform their comprehension and actions in the present. Poetry frequently has an impact on readers, which makes them want to read it again and even commit the lines to memory. Poetic words are simpler to memorise than non-poetic ones; they enhance memory and increase the likelihood that we will recall other facts as



well. Poetry strengthens memory and promotes introspection. Numerous studies demonstrate that when reading or listening to poetry, the area of the brain that is engaged during daydreaming illuminates (Al-Rwaie, 2023).

In poetry, memory is just as powerful as regret, love, and nostalgia. Writing a poem that explores a certain incident or emotion and highlights its key elements for another person to share is a fantastic method to get the reader's attention to something noteworthy. Poets employ language, structure, and literary devices to convey the concept of memory. Poetry with a reminiscence subject tends to employ direct language (Atchley & Hare, 2013).

According to Reinhart Koselleck (1994,) the Holocaust experience will be confined to history and limited to academic studies. However, the situation is reversed; rather than waning, this memory has grown more acute and vivid. It has seen how memory has been honed and reformed in historically novel ways rather than inevitably deteriorating and giving way to historical study. At the moment, it is confronting, reconstructing, and discussing new types of memory that allow access to the past that is different from and enhances that which historical scholarship offers (as cited in Assmann, 2011).

Thus, a cultural memory supported by media and material bearers like monuments, memorials, museums, and archives replaces living memory. On an institutional level, new types of memory are created within a purposeful strategy of remembering or forgetting, whereas individual memories naturally deteriorate and expire with their previous owners. The self-organization and self-regulation of cultural memory are non-existent; instead, it is contingent upon individual choices, institutions, and the media. The process of moving from short-term to long-term memory by transferring one's life experiences to artificial cultural memory is extremely complicated and problematic; it combines temporal extension with the risk of reduction, distortion, and manipulation, which can only be avoided by ongoing public criticism, contemplation, and dialogue (Assmann, 2011).

Paul Celan's *Deathfugue* as a Poem of Collective Trauma

Paul Celan, the poet, lived from 1920 to 1970. In this sense, he is post-modern, inheriting the issues and ideals of individuals who lived from the 1890s to the 1930s. As a poet who wrote most of his poems after the war, he did so with a steady, disbelieving eye towards Europe's sudden return to "normalcy." Today, Celan is considered the greatest poet in the German language of the second half of this century, carrying on the speculative heritage of German poetry that dates back to the eighteenth century with Hölderlin and continues into the twentieth century with Trakl and Rilke (Klink, 2000).

Paul Celan, a German-speaking poet who was born in Romania in 1920, wrote *Death fugue* in 1944. The poem gained a lot of attention in German



educational institutions and media during the 1950s and 1960s. Readers frequently ignored its subject, the Nazi death camps and genocide, in favour of concentrating on its artistic value. *Death fugue* is likely the most famous lyric to have come out of the European Jewish tragedy, and interpreting it can help uncover the poem's true meaning (Felstiner, 1986).

There have been attempts in Celan's critical reception to fully adapt his poetry to the Holocaust, as if the poems were typical of the type of poetry that could only be written in reaction to Auschwitz rather than exemplary poems in and of themselves. Celan's method, however, places him alongside other poets, so-called difficult poets, such as Mallarmé and Hart Crane, who place their poems near a symbolic source of meaning, Poets who are "... wounded by the real and in search of it" transform their own existence into language (Klink, 2000, p.1).

The experience of annihilation is a recurring theme in Paul Celan's poetry, which alludes to "my 20th of January," the day the Nazis at Wannsee decided on the "final solution" to exterminate the Jewish race. When seen within the framework of his work, nearly all of his poems appear to generalise the historical tragedy of the Holocaust in negative and self-defeating ways, revealing this annihilation lurking in everything and everywhere, at the edge of speech. In the evocation of a screaming silence in the most personal centre of every experience, Celan's distinctive voice reverberates in the unflinching naming of nothing or perhaps the negation of name altogether. The phrases of Celan's poetry are oddly resistant to interpretation because of this piercing stillness. According to Aris Fioretos, "What is still incomparable in Celan's poetry today are its word traces—its lingering expatriated meaning that cannot be effectively assimilated in the 'digestion' of any interpretation" (Franke, 2014, p. 273).

The poem *Death fugue* written in the middle of the 1940s, gained Celan quick and widespread acclaim upon its publication in 1952. It is also his approach to the Holocaust that is the clearest, most straightforward, and easiest to understand. The concepts that alternately reoccur in rhythmic form throughout the rest of the poem are established in the following introductory stanza:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall

we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night

we drink and drink it (ll.1-3)

In the same way that memory nearly corresponds with reality, *Death fugue* considers memory itself as a feature of the initial trauma, going beyond the pathos of black milk (FELSTINER, 1995). In the image of a *Death fugue*, Black Milk (one of the most prominent images) combines the elements of life



and death in one image. Milk is originally a song for life, but its black colour transforms it into the daily poisoning that prisoners experienced in concentration camps. The constant repetition of the drink, "we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at night fall drink you drink you" (ll.12-13), a liquid that limits the state of memory that cannot be escaped, as if the survivors are able to consume the shock every day.

The subject of historical study will alter significantly as generations grow older, according to historian Reinhart Koselleck. A pure past detaching from sensuous sensation replaces the survivor's embodied experience of their present history. As memory fades, the historical event's temporal distance not only increases but also changes in quality. With the addition of images, videos, and memories, written documents will soon be the only source of information left. The words "less colourful," "loss," and "fading out" refer to an unavoidable process of forgetting that, in Koselleck's opinion, leads from the dynamic, individual reality of memory to the academic abstraction of historical study. According to this concept, before history can emerge phoenix-like from the ashes of experience and take on new life as scholarship, it must first "die" in the minds, emotions, and bodies of those who have experienced it (Assamann, 2011).

On the other hand, Allodia Assamann (2011) asserted that that process Koselleck outlined is the exact reverse of what is occurring today. The experiential reality of the Holocaust is not simply being quietly transferred into the hands of qualified historians; the situation is far from that. This recollection has not become any less intense due to the passage of time; on the contrary, it is now more powerful and immediate than before. It is not uncommon to hear statements such as these: "The more distant Auschwitz becomes, the closer this event and the memory of this crime comes to us. As Celan indicates in his poem "then you'll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie there" (l. 29) (p.5)

What might have pushed him toward Israel was also what kept him in Europe: the trauma of loss, the precarious hold on his native tongue, and the struggle to see his work in print. "There's nothing in the world, " he says, "for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German". Traumatized by the loss of his mother, he would have winced at Bruno Bettelheim's reading of black milk' as "the image of a mother destroying her infant" (FELSTINER, 1995).

A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes

he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete. (ll.5-6)

The character who appears in the poem, A man who lives in the house, plays with snakes, and writes to Germany, "Your golden hair, Margaret" represents



the Nazi commander who controls the lives and deaths of the prisoners, and creates a contrast between the false beauty (Margaret with her golden hair) and the brutal safety (Shulamit with her ash-grey hair). The character of the man in the house appears in the text as a symbol of the fiery nag who controls the lives and deaths of the prisoners, and he plays with the snakes, which represent the constant danger and betrayal. This repeated presence of the commander in the poem with a spear in the memory is the image of the executioner who does not disappear from the scene.

He whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave

he commands us strike up for the dance. (ll.10-11)

The grave-digging scene also carries a shockingly realistic dimension, as it is a direct reference to real-life practices in concentration camps, where victims were forced to dig their own or others' graves. The dancing that appears in the commander's order to the prisoners to "beat to the music" is a symbol of deadly mockery and the distortion of human meanings, as art and music are transformed into tools of humiliation and death, rather than means of life and beauty.

In fact, *Death fugue* is one of the few poems that attempts to depict a concentration camp from the inside, through the multiple voices of its victims. Concrete images (a Nazi official [the man in the house who "whistles his Jews", for example) alternate with more indirect accounts of events that are still easily recognizable "he commands us strike up for the dance" this may refer to orchestras actually existing in some camps). According to Michael Hamburger, the poem is a manifestation of Celan's personal suffering, which is conveyed through a melodic framework and distanced imagery that, at first glance, appear completely unconnected, with an event as monstrous as the Holocaust. But in juxtaposing celebration of beauty against commemoration of destruction there arises thinking space (Bleiker, 1999).

with a bullet of lead he will hit in the mark he will hit
you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a
grave
he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a
master from Germany
your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith. (ll.35-40)

These lines show that the poet uses the pronoun "we" to express the collective identity rather than disclosing his own horrific experience. Assamann



(2011) argues that in the modern era, memory has become a topic of conversation to an unparalleled extent. Memory is used to legitimize, to heal, and to assign blame. It is now a location of both identification and struggle, and a key idiom in the creation of both individual and collective identity. It is clear that the past, which is becoming increasingly distant from us, does not simply and completely fall into the hands of the professional historian; rather, it continues to influence the present through competing needs and responsibilities. Nobody could argue that these memories, which originated from personal experiences and transformed into group assertions, have grown to be an essential and disputed component of contemporary culture.

The speaker of *Death fugue*, however, cannot be identified: He is only victim, prisoner, "Jew": he must not have a human personality; he is part of an entire doomed group. Yet when the speaker of *Death fugue* utters the lines "Your golden hair Margarete / your ashen hair Shulamit," something within him that is not yet reduced to doom has emerged into view: Margarete and Shulamit inhabit an alternative world; a world that could be redemptive if it were permitted to exist. And when, speaking directly to the images of what the soul desires, calling them "you" in spite of everything, the speaker draws those images into consciousness (Ostriker, 2017).

The poem's reference to Margareta and Shulamith opens up a vast array of references and allusions, both explicit and implicit, to German and Jewish literary and religious traditions: Margareta is both the namesake of the character from Goethe's *Faust* and the recipient of a letter dictated by the camp commandant, a simple innocent maiden seduced by the powers of Faust, who bears him an illegitimate child, and who, in the final scene of part two of the epic, becomes the personification of patriarchal mythos, "das Ewig-Weibliche", the eternal feminine. The only physical characteristic mentioned in *Deathfugue* is this maiden's golden hair, which functions as an echo of a popular Romantic lyric by Heinrich Heine on Lorelei, and thus also plays out the Nordic (Aryan) archetypical ideal of beauty that it immediately undermines (Partyka, 2018).

Margarete, the golden-haired woman, is the image of ideal beauty in the fiery Aryan imagination. She is also an echo of Goethe's character in *Faust*, the innocent girl who falls victim in the poem. Margarete turns into a symbol of beauty exploited in the service of the discourse of domination and power, while Shulamith represents the other side of the equation, a Jewish woman from the *Song of Songs*, a symbol of Jewish heritage and oppressed femininity. Her gray hair is reminiscent of the ashes of the victims who were distorted in the Holocaust. Combining the two characters in one verse of the poem enables the conflict between German identity and Jewish identity, and between the image of ideal beauty and the image of oppression and tyranny.



The renowned epigraph "dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith," which appears to have been taken from Paul Celan's *Deathfugue* was chosen as the epigraph for Cynthia Ozick's Holocaust fiction novel *The Shawl*. When Celan's words are examined more closely, they reveal *The Shawl's* original fabric and cause some intertextual dynamics. The epigraph can be viewed as a non-traditional midrash in this regard. In the larger Western cultural tradition, the verse and story's entwining might be interpreted as versions of the ancient theme of "Death and the Maiden," emphasising connections to the visual arts and music. The topic of how the "addressability" of the Holocaust is communicated in literature and witness is brought up by the intertextual linkages between *Deathfugue* and *The Shawl*. The following statement appeared before *Deathfugue* when it was first released: "The poem whose translation we are publishing is built upon the evocation of a real fact." In Lublin, some condemned people were made to dig graves while others were made to perform sentimental melodies (Partyka, 2018).

Ironically, the title alludes to music as though pointing to an inaccessible realm of romance and beauty. The name "fugue" in *Death fugue* refers to more than just music; its Latin root, fuga, means "flight," and it is frequently connected to hunting and the hunted. Additionally, a "fugue state" is a psychiatric illness in which memory and identity have escaped the person. The tone of the poem, which starts in constraint, escalates to desperation, and finishes in complete loss, is based on hypnotic repetition. The speaker, a guy with no future or influence, uses the picture of the attractive woman as a counterpoint to his dejection, desirable but out of reach (Ostriker, 2017).

People who act out have trouble telling the difference between the past and the present and struggle with ideas of the future. Acting out is a compulsive and repetitive reliving of the trauma. They are stuck in the past that hurt them and are plagued by their experience. After experiencing trauma, this is inevitable; nonetheless, traumatised people must start working through their traumatic experience in order to navigate the restriction that defines their existence and re-engage with everyday life. If they are to overcome the most crippling symptoms of their trauma, they must give voice to it. These symptoms include hyper-arousal, in which the traumatised person lives in fight-or-flight mode; intrusion, in which the person has nightmares and flashbacks; and constriction, in which the individual withdraws from regular social interactions and leads a severely limited life (Schick, 2011).

Caruth (2016) states that according to contemporary neurobiologists, the recurrence of the traumatic event in flashbacks can be re-traumatizing in and of itself; if not fatal, it poses a threat to the brain's chemical makeup and may eventually cause deterioration. Additionally, this would appear to account for the high suicide rate among survivors, such as those who survived the Vietnam



War. One could argue that people who have experienced trauma carry an impossible past with them. Alternatively, they become the symptoms of a history that they cannot fully own and that, thus, owns them.

Living in the past and unable to separate the past from the present, as the trauma victim compulsively re-experiences the traumatic event, living in the past, unable to differentiate between past and present. If the traumatized are compelled to repeat the trauma in order to experience the truth of it, then we might say that they live in the past and not the present (and therefore cannot separate the past from the present). In *Deathfugue*, for example, this is evident through the compulsive repetition of the phrase: "drink it and drink it" this endless circular recurrence represents a state in which there can never have been a past to reconstruct or present to live but only an infinite suffering now.

He shouts play sweeter death's music death comes as a master from Germany. (ll.27-28)

Here, death is not something that happened long ago but rather something that was and continues to be inflicted on victims as if they had never left it; this resonates with the ongoing flashbacks of a traumatized person. The victim may retreat from life, existing in a limited way. These are also visible in the images of the oppressed body in the poem:

Your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith. (ll.15-16)

The transformation from gold to ash is the total obliteration of humanity, the transition from living to figurative death (that is, to a living death, to living in a permanent state of victimhood). Because trauma keeps someone constantly in fight-or-flight mode. This is clearly depicted in the poem's breathless, tense rhythm and repetitions of commands. This is not only true for a poem like *Death fugue*, but also for its representation of acting out: being ensnared within a cycle of time, unable to move past or transcend the past into the present, exposed to penetration by trauma memories, and in existential tension and withdrawal.

Conclusion

Through *Death fugue* Paul Celan was able to transform the traumatic experience of the Holocaust into a literary testimony with a profound human dimension. The text not only documents the event, but also reframes it in poetic language that makes the reader a partner in the memory.

Participating in carrying the burden of history, the symbols employed by the poet are not merely an aesthetic test, but rather conscious tools for preserving memory and transmitting the trauma to future generations, in what critics call testimonial transmission. This poem proves that literature is capable of transcending the limits of historical documentation, becoming an act of



resistance against forgetting and a reconstruction of identity in the face of attempts at cultural and physical annihilation. By blending religious and literary symbols with personal experience, Celan presents a narrative that can only be read as a space of confrontation between beauty and tragedy, between the ever-present past and the present, which remains captive to its shadows.

A study of *Death fugue*, by Celan reveals that poetry can be an effective tool for preserving collective memory. And in the formation and denial of history, this does not merely summon distorted events, but rather reconstructs them in a symbolic and rhythmic structure that carries the reader through the experience in its psychological and cultural context. Through intertwined symbols, Celan employs a gathering capable of resisting forgetfulness and transforming individual pain into a comprehensive human testimony.

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