



“Your country behind the mountain, behind the year”: Insistence of an Inaccessible Alterity in Paul Celan’s Poetics

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Abstract

Alterity is a key issue in modern literature and in related disciplines such as philosophy. In ‘The Meridian’ (1960) Paul Celan clearly foregrounds his poetics of otherness. He posits that “[f]or the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading.” In this paper, Celan’s conception of alterity will be examined with regard to Levinas’s account of otherness in *Existence and Existents* (1947). Both men believed that poetry stands in a relation of proximity to the Other. This relationality means above all a listening to the Other, as poetry addresses the Other who made a claim on poetry. This paper seeks to underscore that Celan’s poetics principally has an ethical dimension which shows affinities with Levinas’s conception of the *il y a* or there is. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, key issues such as the interconnectedness between poetry, alterity, and Being will be clarified.

Keywords: *Poetics, Alterity, Ethics, Paul Celan, The Meridian, Levinas, Existence and Existents.*

Rilke once wrote in 1923 “Gesang ist Dasein” which can be translated as: “song is being.”¹ The world is grounded on the poetic word and can take on meaning and reality through poetry. But is poetry not a dangerous activity? After all, ancient medicine and philosophy attributed the poetic faculty to a psychic disorder. Plato banished the poets from his Republic because they were considered “[...] mere imitators and deceivers, and their art is concerned with the world of appearance, not with reality” (Green 1). However, the reason for his rejection of poetry comes out of his desire to master and control reality. This paper argues that poetry goes beyond a conceptual interpretation of reality and therefore it will always be more than what our conscious interpretation can offer. More precisely, language can be seen as a tool by which we can master reality conceptual-

¹My translation.

ly. In modern poetry, on the contrary, language takes itself out of our hands. Gerald Bruns argues, “poetry is the withdrawal of language from the world or, more accurately, from our grasp of the world by means of concepts” (“The Remembrance of Language” 10). The following argument does not give an exhaustive definition of poetry. Instead, it discusses *how* poetic language manifests itself and *how* an experience with poetry relates to our approach of Being.

The relation between modern poetry and Being is far from clear since, in the course of history, poetry has been interpreted in many ways. Some turn to poetry for their amusement or distraction. Others, however, claim that poetry constitutes a necessity because it provides insights about our understanding of existence and, accordingly, poetry is to be considered as a revelation of meaning rather than a form of escapism. Sartre, for one, argues that the world can very well do without literature (229). Paul Celan, however, emphasizes that poetry speaks on its own behalf and is in search of a place (48). Why did Sartre believe that a society without literature could be possible, while the distinguished poet Paul Celan grants major importance to poetry? In order to provide an answer to this question, it is necessary to bear in mind that there are several possible relations between language and reality.

In modern poetry the traditional view of reality is challenged since we cannot rely on our conceptual knowledge in order to grasp reality. Truth, then, can no longer be derived from reason. Put differently, poetic truth does not depend on one’s ability to use language in the right way and as a result of this, we cannot be in charge of truth; poetry happens to us and truth happens through poetry. Bruns believes that “philosophers divide into those who see, and those who don’t see, that the language of literature is finally irreducible to its use as a form of mediation in the construction of meanings, concepts, propositions, narratives, and so on” (*Tragic Thoughts* 14). In this paper the attention has been turned to the poetic conceptions of Paul Celan and ideas of Emmanuel Levinas who think about a certain otherness of poetic language and oppose the general Cartesian belief that our interpretation of literature can guarantee certainty. More specifically, the critical reflections on the relation between poetry and otherness in Paul Celan’s in ‘The Meridian’ (1960) have been investigated after a clarification of Levinas’s philosophical arguments in *Existence and Existents* (1947). Celan and Levinas were familiar with each other’s ideas, and Hand argues that, for Levinas, Celan’s poetry causes a “[...] shift in attitude, away from the basic belief that it is prose and not poetry that remains the only appropriate means of communication in the ethical relation” (75). Celan, in turn, was aware of Levinas’s stance on ethics and believed that the ethical in language was related to poetry and art (Ziarek 161). Moreover, Levinas and Celan shared a concern for the other in their works which is not so astonishing, given that, as Jewish

survivors of the Holocaust, the failure to acknowledge another human being was a reminder of what happened during the Shoah. As such, the Other plays a prominent role in their post-war thinking.

After a general outline of Levinas's ethics various selections from *Existence and Existents* will be analysed in order to investigate the relation between ethics and art. The reasons for picking this work are two-fold: firstly, in this book, Levinas clearly explains his understanding of Being and otherness. It is of primary importance to address these issues to shed light on his account of poetic language. The focus lies in particular on aspects such as the *il y a*, consciousness, materiality, and proximity. Secondly, *Existence and Existents* will help to clarify Paul Celan's account of alterity in 'The Meridian' (1960).² Many critical essays and studies have focused on this speech. Aris Fioretos, for instance, clarifies that it "[...] reflects on how language related to the necessity of referring to something other than itself, and thus on the indispensability of an aspect of it about which it cannot provide knowledge" (x). By the end of this paper's argument, Fioretos's statement will sound familiar with regard to Levinas's ethics. The course of this paper will be demonstrating throughout that one can relate to the *il y a* or Other through poetic language even though it will always exceed our knowledge.

In 1961, Levinas claimed he was developing the "first philosophy" which was a description of precognitive experience with the Other. A precognitive experience with the Other implies that the Other exists prior to the emergence of our consciousness. Levinas's conception of otherness, therefore, does not take place at the level of consciousness: his ethical relation is irreducible to comprehension. It is thereby important to note that his account of otherness is not similar to a person or physical substance. Alterity should rather be seen as the otherness of another person which will always escape one's understanding. In line with these reflections, Hand claims that Levinas's ethical vision "[...] is above all dramatically embodied by him in the *face* of the other [...] and our relation with the other which the face stands for, is one that begins, in Levinas's ethics, even before self-consciousness emerges" (36). This claim indicates that we are always already in an ethical relation before we can even realize what it means to stand in a relation with otherness. Hence, otherness must already be present before we come into existence. Nevertheless, its presence cannot be perceived or experienced by us. Libertson explained that "the Other is that which cannot be present or "here," and which cannot simply be "gone" (227). In terms of the notion of responsibility, Levinas's conception of the face is important because it is the face of the Other which appeals to us and this appeal concerns the very notion of our

²"The Meridian" is Celan's speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg-Büchner Literature Prize in 1960.

being-in-the-world. This is not to say that it interests us. Rudi Visker, for example, argued that it “[...] is in opposition to our very interest that we turn towards the Other” (29). Levinas’s ethical relation seems to imply that one is obliged to the Other since one cannot escape its appeal. The Levinassian understanding of responsibility, then, is not a free engagement. Instead, ethical responsibility is “an answer without a question” (Visker 91). More precisely, whether or not the Other is turned towards a person, that person is always turned to the Other. Hence, our relation to alterity is based on responsibility and this responsibility is a fundamental aspect of the ethical relation, because it is evoked by the constant appeal of the Other. Alterity thus manifests itself in a face and this face presents the inadequate manifestation of otherness. The adjective ‘inadequate’ is used because otherness will never completely be revealed to us. Alterity retains its alterity: the other is always already Other than any possible conceptualization.

*Existence and Existents*³ was Levinas’s first book that he began writing in captivity during the war (Critchley xxii). In 1946 Levinas had already published a fragment of this book under the title “Il y a.” The concept of *il y a* (translated as ‘There is’) is crucial for understanding his notion of alterity. Furthermore, as Bruns claims in his essay “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings”: “[...] for Levinas the experience of poetry or art is continuous with the experience of the *il y a*” (213). In order to come to terms with this assertion, it is first necessary to distinguish between Levinas’s understanding of existence and existents and his account of the *il y a*. According to Alphonso Lingis, an existent refers to a term or a subject of existence (5). In *EE*, another term for ‘existent’ is ‘being,’ whereas ‘existence’ is designated as ‘Being’ where both these terms are not independent of each other. A being or existent cannot be isolated from Being since they stand in relation to each other. However, Levinas seeks to approach Being separately since he questions how Being can be understood. He provides an answer to his own speculations by claiming that “Being cannot be specified, and does not specify anything” (9). According to Levinas, “Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world” (10). So, it can be drawn that in Levinassian ethics we are always already in a relation with the Other, because the Other is there before our self-consciousness emerges. To return to Levinas’s statement, then, the Other can be understood as existence, but this existence is not identical to the world in which we find ourselves. More specifically, the world refers to that which comes into existence by our mind and, for this reason, it differs from Being since the latter cannot be a product of our cognition. Levinas argued in *EE* that “life in the world is consciousness inasmuch as it pro-

³Hereafter referred to as *EE*.

vides the possibility of existing in a withdrawal from existence” (25). Consciousness, for Levinas, thus implies a negation of existence. Nonetheless, the word ‘negation’ means that there is something which we can deny. And this ‘something’ is otherness or Being. In this sense, we can only become aware of Being when the world disappears. However, how can we experience a world which vanishes if our own existence is part of this world? It seems that we cannot speak of the disappearance of a world without making ourselves as existents disappear.

Levinas claimed that “[...] existing involves a relationship by which the existent makes a contract with existence” (15). Since we are seized by existence without coming to terms with it, the contract is a commitment which is already there prior to awareness. One can wonder, however, how a contract can be made with something that is incomprehensible. The ethical relation, or a relation of an existent with its existence, does not consist of a one-to-one relation between our thoughts and the meaning of alterity. More precisely, we cannot think the Other, so its meaning is not a unity between our thought and the phenomenon that it corresponds to; the Other is an enigma and remains undetermined. Levinas argued the following:

What is Being? – has never been answered. There is no answer to Being. It is absolutely impossible to envisage the direction in which that answer would have to be sought. The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being. Being is essentially alien and strikes us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. (11)

Levinas’s statement shows that our only relation to Being or existence is one of questioning and incomprehension. As such, the notion of Being will always be absent. According to Levinas, it “[...] is not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that there is” (11). Levinas refers to *il y a* as “being in general,” so it is implied that the *il y a* is not conditioned by the negative. This means that it should not be understood as non-being in the sense of emptiness, but rather as uncertainty. More precisely, the presence of the *il y a* includes absence since it cannot be constructed as a content of consciousness, and this absence leads to insecurity.

According to Levinas, the night is the experience of the presence of the *il y a* (33). At night, the mind finds itself no longer faced with material things and therefore the world disappears; nothing seems to be there. The nocturnal space, however, should not be seen as an empty space, because it is full of the nothingness of everything. ‘Nothing’ does not refer to ‘no thing’ but to a phenomenon which can be encountered, and therefore it is seen as something which is there. More specifically, it

is through darkness that the *il y a* becomes a presence. In addition, Hand states that the *il y a* “[...] is what does not and cannot disappear when everything else, including the I, has disappeared” (31). Due to the darkness, anything can count for anything else and it becomes impossible to maintain a perspective on the world. Levinas claims that the absence of perspective does not come forward out of the things of the day world which the night conceals, but “it is due to the fact that nothing approaches, that nothing comes” (34). Perhaps now it is understandable why Levinas refers to the *il y a* as that “which murmurs in the depths of nothingness” (33). More precisely, for Levinas, nothingness is not similar to non-existence: it rather stands for absence that is brought to presence through the darkness of the night. As Levinas puts it: “There is nothing, but there is being” (37). In nothingness, the subject is stripped of his subjectivity and he is depersonalized. Levinas states that “what we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it” (33). This depersonalization of the subject is a participation in the *il y a*. However, this can never be a conscious participation since Levinas explains that “to be conscious is to be torn away from the there is” (34). Nevertheless, this statement does not mean that an unconscious subject can experience the *il y a*. Instead, Levinas introduces a different understanding of consciousness.

In *EE* Levinas states that “Western philosophy does know of other forms of consciousness besides the intellect, but even in its least intellectual meanderings, the mind is taken to be what knows” (27). Knowing, in Levinas’s philosophy, however, is “[...] a way of relating to events while still being able to not be caught up in them” (28). In other words, our relation to existence consists of separateness so that we always remain outside of objects and history. Levinas explains that “The I is a being that is always outside of being” (28). Levinas’s understanding of consciousness, then, is not the reverse or negative of consciousness. It is rather a mode of being in the world which is prior to every relationship with things (Lingis 4). As such, it is fair to speak of a ‘pure’ relation that is not determined by the meaning of the other of the relation or the relatum. Alternately, Levinas’s account of consciousness includes an absence of the meaning of things to which it relates so that there is an infinite movement of comprehension possible.

Returning to Levinas’s connection between the night and the *il y a*: at night one is detached from any object and any content, therefore, the experience of the night can be seen as existence without existents. However, it would be wrong to assume that every form of relation disappears. Instead, the absence of existents should be interpreted as an extraction from the world in which everything is deemed to be functional and subject to our intentions. Alterity is an objectless dimension in which objects or things cease to be regarded as tools. Another way to approach exist-

ence without existents, then, is by means of pre-objective relationships. However, as Critchley accurately wonders: “How can a relation with a being be other than comprehension?” (11). Levinas’s response would be that it cannot, insofar as he supports an alternative notion of comprehension and non-comprehension. Consequently, the ethical relation to the other is not a relation of knowledge and, as such, comprehension in Levinassian ethics has nothing to do with values or concepts. He posited the following in *EE*: “In our relationship with the world we are able to withdraw from the world (29).” More precisely, there is a possibility of detaching oneself from objects in the world and this detachment takes place through art. According to Levinas,

Art makes [objects of knowledge or use] stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject. The elementary function of art [...] is to furnish an image of an object in place of the object itself [...] This way of interposing an image of things between us and the things has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world. (29)

His assertion demonstrates that art dispossesses us from the things in our world. A book, painting, or sculpture are still objects of the world, but the things that are represented through them are extracted from our world because they are no longer subject to our intention or control. Levinas explained that “the intention gets lost in the sensation” (30). As such, in art the notion of sensation undermines subjectivity and makes way for the impersonality of objects. Consequently, objects of art cease to be familiar to us; they have a character of otherness. In view of the above, one can wonder whether it is right to equate art with the nocturnal experience: both reshape our perspective of the world and through both a form of being that precedes the world of our everyday life can become present.

It is important to note, though, that darkness does not coincide with the *il y a*. Levinas claims that, “darkness, as the presence of absence, is not a purely present content. There is not a “something” that remains. There is the atmosphere of presence” (37). Hence, we cannot experience alterity whenever the night appears: alterity itself will always remain inaccessible. We can only sense its nearness. The Other, then, has to be understood as an experience of proximity. Otherness is a pre-articulated region which language is incapable of expressing. It thus seems to be the case that the *il y a* exceeds any description. When Levinas’s ideas are recapitulated, then, the proximity of the *il y a* is present in a world that is devoid of subjectivity. Objects become impersonal and it could therefore be interesting to equate this with the depersonalization of language in modern poetry. That is to say that words become depersonalized when one realizes that they can no longer be applied. In addition, as Bruns posits, poetic language is no longer a form of mediation because it withdraws

in its materiality (“The Concepts of Art and Poetry” 222). If poetry is no longer a form of mediation, then it alters our relation to language. Words become impersonal and they address us. Beginning of this paper underscored that language in modern poetry is no longer something which we can make conscious use of: a poem is thus not reducible to a specific meaning, concept, or expression. Firstly, the Other, like poetry, cannot be comprehended or mastered; secondly, the Other addresses us in the same way that poetry makes a claim on us; thirdly, the world or space in which the *il y a* manifests itself is an existence without existents. Nevertheless, what is the similarity between the third argument and the nature of poetry? In other words, the world of the *il y a* precedes our conscious existence, but poetry can only precede comprehension if it fulfills the following conditions: first, there is an ethical relation between poetry and an existent and, secondly, poetry is always already there so we have no control over its origin. However, the *il y a* does not begin with language since it is a nonlinguistic region. Critchley explains:

Although Levinas’s choice of terminology suggests otherwise, the face-to-face relation with the other is not a relation of perception or vision, but is always linguistic. The face is not something I see, but something I speak to. Furthermore, in speaking or calling or listening to the other, I am not reflecting upon the other [...] I am not contemplating, I am conversing. (12)

This statement indicates that the approach to the Other is based on a conversation that is detached from any form of understanding. Here communication does not mean, as is the case in modern poetry, that one consciously makes use of words. More precisely, Levinas argues in *EE*: “Behind the signification of a poem which thought penetrates, thought also loses itself in the musicality of the poem” (30). In other words, the materiality of poetry precedes any form of meaning that we attach to the poem: it is liberated from our cognition. If meaning is anterior to language, it is implied that meaning does not belong to the same site as language. As Levinas puts it: “There is first the materiality of the sound [...] and a word detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible” (30). More specifically, the origin of language is wordless because the sound precedes any conceptual understanding. This, however, does not mean that the word ceases to be a word. Instead, it means that the function of thought is set aside and that we are left with is the materiality of the word. Words in their materiality, therefore, should be understood as the absence of things.

Bruns states: “The poet is simply one who listens to the language of his or her environment and responds to it – doesn’t try to reduce it or objectify it” (*The Remembrance of Language* 4). Perhaps now it is easier to understand the statement: “the experience of poetry or art is continuous

with the experience of the *il y a*” (“The Concept of Art and Poetry” 213). To be more specific, Levinas claims that “there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnamable and can only appear in poetry” (32). It thus seems to be the case that poetic language opens up a dimension of wordlessness or a world without things; or perhaps it is better to speak of things which are freed from the world. According to Wyschogrod, Levinas believes that “to speak is not the same as to see” (199). In other words, the language of poetry does not reveal or show something which can be perceived; rather, speech frees itself from visibility.

Consequently, words extend beyond the realm of our perception. Similarly, objects in the world are more than what our subjective perception reveals. After all, Hand argues that things are also there when we do not perceive them and, for this reason, they exist in themselves. In line with these reflections, Bruns states, “The idea is that in art our relation to things is no longer one of knowing and making visible. Art does not represent things, it materializes them; or, as Levinas would prefer, it presents things in their materiality and not as representations” (“The Concept of Art and Poetry” 211). Things in their materiality are thus to be distinguished from things that we perceive from a subjective point of view. To be involved in the moment when things are free from their conceptual grasp is, for Levinas, similar to being involved in an experience of poetry. The point is that the materiality of existence and the materiality of words provide an access to the nearness of the *il y a*. ‘Nearness’ is not the same as ‘presence’ because the other will always be inadequate to manifestation. As such, Bruns mentions that poetry is a relation of proximity (“The Concept of Art and Poetry” 224).

In Levinassian ethics, then, the argument is that the only form of communication with the Other is contingent on distance. Liberton posits that “its distance is a contact, its inaccessibility an involvement” (3). The involvement refers to the insistence of alterity with regard to the notion of responsibility. More accurately, it belongs to the very essence of alterity that it summons ‘me’ and that ‘I’ therefore must respond to it. This response happens by means of poetry. Hand, for example, claimed that poetry and philosophy share the same “unrealizable ideal” by seeking for and by reaching out to the Other (76). In other words, the ethical and the poetic both stand in a relation of proximity with alterity, in contrast to the conceptual and propositional understanding of language or existence. Wyschogrod states that “For Levinas, Celan’s poetry is a speaking to the other that precedes thematization” (200). Levinas’s appreciation of Celan’s poetry can be seen in works such as his essay “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other” (1972), which is hardly surprising as, after all, the notion of proximity is an integral aspect of Celan’s works. Ziarek even

argues that, “perhaps the single most characteristic feature of Paul Celan’s poetry is its concern with the other” (133).

After an analysis of Levinas’s conceptions of poetry and otherness, it is time to discuss the content of ‘The Meridian’ (1960) and clarify the relation between nearness, communication, and poetry from Celan’s point of view. This discussion will make clear why Ziarek claims that, “Celan’s poetics can be characterized as ethical in the Levinassian sense” (160). In the previous sections it already argued that existence or Being in the Levinassian sense can neither be reduced to a cognitive experience nor can it be explicitly expressed through language. Nevertheless, the world in which we conceptually make use of language cannot be extricated from the *il y a* or existence, so there is always a relation between the expressible and inexpressible. The world in which one intentionally approaches language and the realm in which words are beyond intentional control are not different places, but are based on distinctive experiences of language. In our experience with poetry, we are thus withdrawn from the extra-poetic world. As a consequence, our relation to words alters because poetic language evades our attempts at mastery so that all we are left with is its materiality. The materiality of words is preconceptual and for this reason it is not explainable by the cognitive or conceptual experience which permeates our daily life. Bruns articulates this better by concluding that, “each man dwells in a reality of the mind, an incorporeal world, of which (paradoxically) the corporeal world is a dimension which he shares with other men” (*Modern Poetry* 220).

For Levinas, as mentioned above, we are detached from a conceptual grasp of words in an experience with modern poetry. While attention is drawn to the corporeal nature of poetry, otherness possibly becomes present in poetry because they share a similar ground. This means that an experience with the Other or with poetry precedes our comprehension, so that all we are left with is our relation to the materiality of things or words. Coming to terms with otherness via poetry is thus not possible because the Other goes beyond it; its meaning is elusive, inaccessible, and excessive. In fact, otherness does not begin with poetry, it is already there. More specifically, these arguments have to be understood with regard to the *il y a* or existence which precedes existents. In this sense, poetry can be seen as an existent or being that stands in an ethical relation to existence or Being. This ‘ethical relation’ is mentioned since Celan claims in ‘The Meridian’ that “poetry rushes ahead” and is “responding” to something (45, 49). This sounds as if poetry takes up the ethical responsibility towards the Other by responding to it. In ‘The Meridian’ Celan speaks of language as a “speaking” and “[...] language actualized, set free under the radical sign of individuation” (49). It thus seems to be the case that language, for Celan, speaks on its own behalf and its meaning is therefore not determined solely by the subject. Language is set free from

the individual and its material aspect is what Celan considers its “physical shape” (39). This physicality means that language is made of words instead of meanings or concepts: it is dissociated from things. That is, language no longer points away from itself to things in reality, but it points towards itself. According to Bruns, this is the very nature of language before it has been repressed or forgotten by semantic or propositional operations of the mind (*Modern Poetry* 5). Poetry, then, is a withdrawal from our grasp of the world by means of concepts. It is an unforgetting of language or the remembrance of a language that is not a formal system. Language thus means something in itself and it is not something which is only meaningful when we use it; it is a being that is. Following lines of Celan’s poetry concur with the same:

What is it called, your country
behind the mountain, behind the year?
I know what it is called.
[...]
it wanders off everywhere, like language
Throw it away, throw it away,
Then you’ll have it again, like that other thing
(qtd. in Thomas 152).

In these lines the elusive nature of language is associated with a nameless place. After all, if the physicality of language precedes meaning and words are dissociated from things, they no longer stand for something and become nameless. The repetition of “throw it away” can refer to a command to the subject to abandon language from a conceptual grasp, for it is only then that we will be faced with language in its original sense again. Language then itself becomes the subject of speech and man is no longer in control. Further, the “wandering off” of language implies a movement. Celan states in ‘The Meridian’: “The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes towards it, bespeaks it” (49). It is relevant, to emphasize the verb ‘need’ in Celan’s quote, as this implies that poetry is apparently not that independent after all and its being is therefore dependent on something other. This ‘other,’ however, cannot be understood as a subject or physical person because, as mentioned before, in modern poetry the role of the subject is undermined, and the poem is autonomous enough to make a claim on the reader. As such, poetry can be a sort of strangeness to us because its language frees things from categories and meanings and therefore we cannot define poetry. Or, as Celan puts it: “This, ladies and gentlemen, has no definitive name, but I believe that this is... poetry” (40). Nevertheless, poetry also experiences a claim from the Other which is equally strange to poetry. More precisely, with regard to Celan’s claim that poetry “needs this other,” there must be something else

which differs from the poetic realm and this other can make a claim on poetry—for this is perhaps the reason that poetry goes towards it.

Celan touches upon Büchner's *Lenz* in his speech in order to indicate that art provokes a distance from the subject ('I'). He states that, "The man whose eyes and mind are occupied with art – I am still with Lenz – forgets about himself. Art makes distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road" (44). In order to understand what Celan means by his reference, the paper will shed light upon Büchner's *Lenz* (1935). This work covers a period in the life of the German poet Lenz who lived in the 17th century. The main events of *Lenz* can be summarized as follows: the poet Lenz is a young man who is drifting around in the woods and who is overcome by melancholy. He spends a few days with a pastor called Oberlin and his company makes Lenz less restless. A man called Kaufmann visits and they have a discussion about art in which Lenz disagrees with him because he does not support the view that art should represent a copy of reality. When Lenz is alone again, his mental condition deteriorates. At the end of the story, he isolates himself and heads off into nature. In this way, the work has a cyclic structure, because the beginning and end are characterized by the same miserable feelings of a lonely writer who is trying to get a grip on life. Ziarek claims that art "[...] opens a distance from the I, a distance that furnishes a direction, a road that art traverses. Celan's own questioning continues precisely within this opening, in the direction suggested by Lenz" (138). To return to 'The Meridian,' then, during Lenz's conversation about art, he is no longer conscious about himself and therefore Celan speculates that "Perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself" (44).⁴

In order to further understand Celan's assertions in his speech, it is helpful to go back to Levinas's ideas. Levinas believes that through poetry we can withdraw from the world because it extracts words from the belongingness to a subject (29). As such, the intentional consciousness is shattered and we are depersonalized from words. This depersonalization should not be interpreted negatively, because it is a crucial characteristic of the relation between poetry and the Other. Poetry moves away from the voice of the subject in order to respond on its own behalf to the appeal of the Other. In other words, the relation of proximity is independ-

⁴In view of this claim from 'The Meridian,' the following lines from Celan's poem 'Psalm' dwell upon the inaccessible, strange Other by presenting it as a "no one": "No one moulds us again out of earth and clay, / no one conjures our dust. / No one. / Praised be your name, no one. / For your sake / we shall flower / towards / You" (Hamburger 69). Moreover, the last lines of this poem indicate the direction of poetry towards a lyrical 'You.' This personal pronoun can be seen as the condition of dialogue which entails the movement away from the conscious self.

ent of a subject and his/her conceptual mastery, so that poetry in its “physical shape” is exposed and receptive to the possible meaning of alterity. Levinas also explains that the artwork opens a new world which precedes everyday life. This can be understood as the *il y a* which is “essentially alien and it strikes us” (11). With regard to Celan’s statement, then, it can be said that poetry moves toward the *il y a* or otherness which is, for Celan, “the uncanny and strange.” He clarifies that the other is strange or uncanny precisely because it goes beyond what is human “[...] into a realm which is turned toward the human” but in which art “seems to be at home” (42).

For Levinas, an experience with the other is thus similar to being involved in an experience with poetry. Yet poetry, a physical shape which moves towards the other, cannot be equated with otherness. Bruns posits that the movement of poetry “[...] is not toward a point of being finished but a ceaseless, open-ended movement of indeterminacy toward what is always elsewhere” (*Modern Poetry* 19). Nevertheless, the very fact that poetry moves towards the other and bespeaks it means that it acknowledges alterity, in contrast with ordinary speech. Celan claims that: “the poem has always hoped [...] to speak also on behalf of the strange – no, I can no longer use this word here – on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other” (48). It is important to underscore that Celan’s understanding of poetry and alterity consists of an ethical dimension with regard to another person.

In view of Levinas’s ethics, otherness presents itself in the guise of another person. The Other appeals to us, hence we must take up the responsibility to respond to its claim. However, since the Other is not identical to a human being, we cannot simply communicate with it by means of dialogue. As a result, an alternative way to approach the Other consists of nearness or proximity. To return to Celan, then, otherness is not simply the otherness of another person, but rather the otherness of the other person’s language. Fynsk explains that “the relation in question is a relation in and of language, for the relation to the other toward which the poem moves and which it seeks to bring to speech is given essentially in language” (175). This means that the ethical relation can only take place in language. Yet the possibility of a conversation is not possible either, since the Other is placed “[...] beyond the world, beyond the limits of what can be seen, and what can be named by language” (Ziarek 146). In its relation to the Other, poetry will always reach towards it, but speaking *towards* the Other is a waiting for a response that will never come. The movement of poetry to the Other will thus result in silence. Bruns asserts that “Modern poetry is non-discourse: the modern poetic act is not intentional; it is a refusal to mean” (*Modern Poetry* 195). Though it is not clear what Bruns means by “non-discourse,” nevertheless, poetry is not a negation of meaning, but rather its meaning is just not a matter of correspond-

ing to concepts. The meaning of poetry lies in its movement towards an inaccessible otherness which it tries to encounter. This movement does not result in a space where poetry and alterity meet, but one should rather consider poetry to be a perpetual relation towards the Other which is independent of our conceptual mastery. There is thus more than our conceptualization and this “more” cannot be reduced to a concept whereby the relation between poetry and alterity remains open.

In the previous section the notion of an ethical relation was touched upon when it was discussed that, for Celan, poetry is a movement and speaking to the Other. It is true that a conversation with the Other is not similar to a dialogue and perhaps some will for this reason claim that it is inaccurate to speak of a “conversation.” Yet, Celan posits that “the poem becomes conversation – often desperate conversation” (49). The conversation is desperate because there will not be any response; the Other maintains its alterity. According to Ziarek, the Other cannot be seen as a participant in a conversation “rather, the other must be seen as the very condition of dialogue” (148). This can be linked to the notion of ethical responsibility. More precisely, it is due to the existence of the Other that poetry experiences the need to reach it. As indicated earlier, in Levinas’s ethics the notion of responsibility does not mean that one can choose to turn towards the Other. Responsibility is part of the relation to alterity which means that one will always be turned towards the Other, whether one wants to or not. Likewise, poetry takes up the responsibility towards the Other by speaking and moving towards it. Or perhaps it is better to say that poetry speaks precisely because the existence of the Other. In line with these reflections, Fynsk states: “For the approach, Celan says, is in ‘dialogue’: the poem answers to what it approaches or it broaches a “conversation” (164). The movement of poetry towards otherness is a matter of nearness or proximity because language gives no words for the experience of alterity. As such, Celan argues in ‘The Meridian’ that “the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence” (48). It is important to consider what it means to speak about a language that has no words for the Other with whom it stands in a relation. Silence does not indicate an inability to speak, instead, it should be understood in a philosophical sense which implies that it refers to a form of communication with Nothing.⁵ The Other is not a phenomenon which can be conceptually understood or remain present, it is rather “No-thing.” The silence of language, from Celan’s point of view, then indicates that the voice of mastery and conceptualization is silenced in order to bring the materiality of words to the fore.⁶ The materiality or “physical shape” is language in its purest,

⁵Nothing is deliberately capitalized in order to evoke the analogy with the Other.

⁶The first line from the poem ‘Radix, Matrix’ beautifully indicate this materiality and silence: “As one speaks to stone, like you” (Hamburger 139). The Other is conceived as a stone—an image which is often present in Celan’s poems—which could point to

silent form and makes way for communication with the Other. In short, silence is a mode of discourse where conceptual voice is silenced to let language speak. Fynsk, for one, states that: “Despite its silence, and perhaps even through its silence [...] language gives itself as the persistence of the possibility of relation. A pure possibility, we might say, for in its silence it gives no relation other than a relation to itself as “reachable” (161).

With reference to this statement, it can be clearly understood that the relation with the Other can become possible through silence. It is in the unspoken condition of language, then, that things exist as beings and not as signifieds. That is, the silencing of language is not similar to an absence of words, but to an impossibility of poetry to speak or articulate an unspeakable alterity. As such, language simply *is* and it does not represent anything. Bruns speaks of “negative discourse” only because poetry cannot be used to signify or represent anything in our world (*Modern Poetry* 194). But this negativity, however, does not mean that poetry is meaningless. Instead, in modern poetry the belief that language is a system of signification is negated. To put it in a different manner, poetry, as an activity, reaches out towards the Other and in its approach to the Other, becomes silent and ceases to signify anything so that its material being or “physical shape” is brought to the fore. As Ziarek puts it: “Attempting to address otherness, to bespeak it, the poem already silences itself, refrains from words, from naming and compromising the other [...] the encounter becomes possible only in silence, yet in silence in a sense produced or induced by words” (140). Silence has thus nothing to do with the inadequacy of language but is rather a waiting for words, in their materiality, to encounter the Other. The absence of the propositional form of language seems to be a prerequisite for the silencing of language and for a possible encounter with otherness. Nevertheless, pure alterity or otherness will always remain unreachable, so silence can only be a relation of proximity. So far it is fair to assume that Celan’s ‘The Meridian’ can be characterized as ethical in a Levinassian sense. Poetry stands in an ethical relation with the Other towards which it is heading and this Other is a form of meaning that goes beyond language and comprehension. In the same way, existents stand in a relation with existence or the *il y a* which is equally incomprehensible and cannot be grasped by means of ordinary speech. It is rather through the materiality of the word and the world that the nearness or proximity of otherness can be sensed. As such, the ethical relation is characterized by a distance because the poetic word can only come near the experience of otherness through silence, but it cannot express alterity.

the materiality of its being. Furthermore, the idea of a conscious self is undermined which can be noticed in lines such as “At that time when I was not there, / at that time when you / paced the ploughed field, alone.” This absence of the I is clearly linked to a presence of the Other or “you.”

However, it has been mentioned that poetry moves in a space towards somewhere else, but it is unclear so far whether it is possible to locate this space and whether an encounter with alterity can be realized. Celan asks himself the following question: “Can we perhaps now locate the strangeness [...], can we locate this place, this step?” (46). Fioretos explains that Celan’s poetry seems to be moving towards an unlocated light (320). This light has been referred to by Celan as “a u-topian light” (51). When we speak of words in their materiality and their withdrawal from our world, Celan argues, “[...] we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an ‘open’ question ‘without resolution,’ a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces – we have ventured far out. The poem also searches for this place” (50). This fragment of ‘The Meridian’ indicates that poetry is in search of a specific place in its movement towards the Other. However, at the end of his speech, Celan concedes the following: “None of these places can be found. They do not exist” (54). Consequently, it seems to be the case that the encounter with the Other—which poetry hopes for—cannot happen. After all, it might seem logical that poetry cannot reach something which is nowhere. Still, this sentence requires a reformulation since it is rather the case that poetry cannot reach Being instead of ‘something.’ This Being, existence or otherness is nowhere simply because it cannot be approached as a phenomenon which is part of the poetic realm.

In the essay “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other” Levinas states: “The movement thus described goes from place to non-place, from here to utopia” (42). This statement shows that poetry is directed towards a ‘nowhere’ which is seen as a utopia. Why, however, would one associate these terms? Usually ‘utopia’ is semantically linked with words such as ‘paradise’ or ‘promised land.’ A non-place, though, implies ‘dislocatedness’ and ‘statelessness’ which does not sound like a promise. Nevertheless, utopia has to be understood as a non-place or a-topia that is meaningful precisely because it is nowhere. The Other is beyond comprehension or language, so any definition or description would incorrectly presume that an access to the meaning of otherness is possible. If one can grasp it, it would be fair to assume that one can convey it by means of language, that is, language which is made up of meanings and concepts. However, there is no single realm of signification because understanding otherness is impossible and, more importantly, language will always fall short in the face of the Other because otherness is located in a pre-syntactic realm.⁷ It would be incorrect to assume that poetry, in its move-

⁷The utopic character of the other is referred to as a “forevered Nowhere” in the following lines from the poem ‘What’s written’: “What’s written goes hollow, what’s / spoken, seagreen, / burns in the bays, / dolphins race / through / liquefied names, / here in forevered Nowhere, / in a memory of out- / crying belles in – but where? / Who / in this / shadow quadrant / is grasping, who / underneath / glimmers

ment towards the Other, will at one point arrive at a place where the Other dwells. An arrival would imply that poetry has left its own place or poetic realm in order to enter the realm of the Other and the relation with the Other, as such, has come to an end. Nevertheless, this will not happen because the relation with the Other is always there and poetry cannot escape it. Instead of a relationship that is closed, then, poetry cannot reach otherness so there is an open-ended movement towards somewhere else. In this sense, Celan states that “[...] the absolute poem – no, it certainly does not, cannot exist” (51).

The fact that Celan’s poems are on their way to a non-place should not be interpreted as something hopeless or pessimistic. His view rather requires a reconsideration of truth. To be more specific, in Celan’s poetics, meaning is to be found in the nomadic movement of poetry. Bruns calls Celan’s language “a “nomad” language whose words leave behind the space of their meanings” (*Anarchy of Poetry* 20). This nomadism refers to language’s internal movement to the Other which can be frequently noticed in Celan’s poems in which there is often an “I” going or speaking to a “you.” In addition, Levinas believes that “the absolute poem does not say the meaning of being [...] it speaks the defection of all dimension; it goes toward utopia” (46). This “speaking of the defection of all dimension” can be linked to the silencing of language. Poetic language cannot articulate the inexpressible so its words become silent and nameless. This namelessness, though, implies an openness towards the meaning of the Other. In other words, if there are no words for alterity then every word can potentially relate to it and the relation is therefore based on infinite possibilities to approach the Other. By now it is perhaps easier to comprehend why an unreachable and unlocatable otherness is seen as a utopia or ‘promised land.’ To be precise, it depends on the notion of poetic truth. Fynsk states:

We may understand better now what it means to say that the poem is seeking its truth – its truth, in relation. Its truth is the opening of a possibility of relation realized in the movement of reaching poetically for an other. This is not its truth in the sense that this possibility would be something it brings to the other or institutes from itself. Rather, it would be something that come about or occurs as

up, glimmers up, glimmers up?” (Felstiner 127). The repetition of “who” and the question at the end of the poem support the enigmatic meaning of the Other. From the first lines onwards, it becomes clear that the meaning of what is written is not similar to the one that the author has in mind because it “goes hollow” and what is spoken becomes “seagreen.” The adjective “hollow,” then, can imply the silent and preconceptual state of words in which there is an opening towards the Other and its possible meanings. Words are not fixed, but “liquefied names.”

it proceeds [...] The poem seeks its truth in going to the other, it draws out a relation, a relation that is open-ended. (173)

The relation can only remain open-ended if otherness is a place that needs to be searched for. Truth is not to be located, for this would reduce the meaning of the ethical relation. Truth, then, lies with the impossibility of a possible place. Or, as Levinas puts it: "Outside all enrootedness and all dwelling: statelessness as authenticity" (44). In addition to the utopian character of alterity Celan claims in his speech that "[n]one of these places can be found. They do not exist." Nevertheless, he also expresses: "[...] I find something else. Ladies and gentlemen, I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road [...] I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters [...] I find... a meridian" (54–55). This statement leads us to the title of Celan's speech. According to Ziarek, the poetic meridian marks "the (im)possible encounter of language with the other" (161). It thus seems to be the case that the meridian is a curve which indicates the direction of poetry towards the other. It is a circular movement which does not end in a specific point. As such, this movement sustains the utopian character of the Other and, consequently, of truth.

In view of the above Celan's conceptions of the Other principally have an ethical dimension, which means that poetry experiences the responsibility to turn towards the call of the Other. This turn, though, will never be reciprocated because if it would, the infinite waiting for the presence of alterity will be brought to an end. Although the presence of the Other is impossible in Celan's poetics, as is the case in Levinas's ethics, it is precisely this impossibility that respects the excess of meaning that is inherent in the Other. Reaching the realm of alterity would reduce the openness and continuous interpretations that poetry's relation to alterity can offer. An arrival cannot take place for the Other is a utopia or non-place: a realm which is undetermined and endless. Accordingly, poetry offers a turn towards the Other that is beyond comprehension and language.⁸ To conclude, the poem 'To Stand' from Celan's poetry volume *Atemwende* (1967) illustrates the core of the relation between his poetry and alterity:

To stand, in the shadow
of the scar up in the air.
To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.

⁸The larger point one could retrieve from these pages is that the movement of poetry towards an inaccessible Other is not just an interesting, abstract curiosity. In fact, Levinas's and Celan's take on alterity remains relevant today for it shows that poetry goes beyond the limits of our knowledge and consequently no act of interpretation can be definitive. Though literature occurs by means of signs, it is thus not restricted to it.

Unrecognized,
for you
alone.

With all there is room for in that,
even without
language

(qtd. in Hamburger 82).



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