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Poetry as anti-discourse: formalism, hermeneutics, and the poetics of Paul Celan

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Abstract I argue from a hermeneutic point of view that formal elements of poetry can only be identified because poetry is based on both the phenomenon and the conception of poetry, both of which precede the attempt to identify formal elements as the defining moment of poetry. Furthermore, I argue with Gadamer that poetry is based on a rupture with and an *epoche* of our non-poetic use of language in such a way that it liberates "fixed" universal aspects of everyday language, and that through establishing itself in a new, self-referential and monologue unity, *it individualizes speech*. From the hermeneutic position, poetry is a form of speaking rather than a "fixed" object. As such, I will try to make sense of what Paul Celan said in his famous "Meridian" speech: namely, that the poem is "actualized language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation, which at the same time stays mindful of the limits drawn by language, the possibilities opened by language."

Keywords Celan · Ribeiro · Gadamer · Heidegger · Hermeneutics · Poetry · Language · Poetic speech · Poetics

> The moment of self-forgetting in which the subject submerges itself in language is not a sacrifice of the subject to Being. It is a moment not of violence, nor of violence against the subject, but reconciliation: language itself

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> speaks only when it speaks not as something alien to the subject but as the subject's own voice.[1]
> —Adorno, Lecture on Lyric Poetry and Society

1 Introduction

The German-Jewish poet Paul Celan said in his now famous Büchner-Prize speech in 1960 that the poem is "actualized language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation, which at the same time stays mindful of the limits drawn by language, the possibilities opened by language."[2] What Celan means in his unique style of speaking is that the poem is a synthesis of two aspects of language, namely, on the one hand, the aspect of a radical individualization through being spoken and, on the other hand, the aspect of an opening up and liberation of possibilities inherent in language formulation insofar as it sets language free from being fixed to the normal and everyday usage of language.

In the considerations that follow I shall elaborate on how we could further make sense of Celan's claim, for Celan himself does not develop his thesis much further. I indeed believe that the poem should be understood as a mixture of two tendencies, which could be formulated in a dialectical fashion in the following way: the poem is at one and the same time both a *liberation of the individual, subjective, or even the singular moment in speech* as well as a *liberation of the universal moment* in speech. We might have noticed that Celan prefers to say "the poem" instead of "poetry." The reason for his use of "the poem" hints at the aforementioned combination of individuality and universality; for the term "poetry" is in its abstraction disconnected not only from the speaker, but also from any *unique* configuration, which does not do justice to what poetry is. The poem is, as I shall argue, an event that falls outside of the ordinary inasmuch as it sharply sets itself in opposition to the everyday use of language and thereby establishes new configurations of the relation between speech and language. In this connection, the poem is, in the words of Karl-Heinz Stierle, an "anti-discourse."[3]

My considerations are divided into the following steps: I shall first argue that poetry, or poetic speech, should be understood as a negation of the normal and everyday use of language. Through this negation and alienation, language *itself*

[1] Sections of two earlier versions of this paper were presented in 2009 at Grand Valley State University and at the meeting of the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy in London (Ontario). I would like to thank David Vessey of Grand Valley State University for making me aware of the problem of how to distinguish between poetry and poetry as art. However, I feel unable to address this problem in this paper appropriately, though I agree with Adorno (as well as with Hegel and Gadamer) that poems "become a matter of art only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given aesthetic form;" see Adorno (1991, p. 38). I would also thank the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their helpful comments.

[2] Celan (2001a, p. 409). "Das Gedicht: ein Sichrealisieren der Sprache durch radikale Individuation, d.h. durch einmaliges, unwiederholbares Sprechen eines Einzelnen;"see Celan (1999, p. 117) (The poem: a self-actualization of language through radical individuation, i.e. through a singular and unrepeatable speaking of an individual").

[3] Stierle (1982, p. 276).

appears. Poetry is, thus, a sort of voicing of language. I will then claim that, in addition, poetry is a monological form of speech and therefore falls outside the everyday use of language. Finally, I will argue with Celan that the poem should be understood as the very moment of speaking, within which words have to be found for what can no longer be said in an everyday mode of speaking. Poetry, in other words, is the coming into being of the word itself. Celan's poetry can be seen as the most *extreme* realization of this idea.

Before I elaborate my thesis, I shall, however, first introduce my own approach to poetry by contrasting it with a prominent position in contemporary analytic poetics, namely, Anna Ribeiro's defense of what I would call a formalist approach to poetry. Ribeiro explicitly argues that she intends to work out a philosophy of poetry from the perspective of analytic philosophy.[4] I shall argue that her approach fails to understand the essence of poetry, mainly because her concept of poetry is tied to a positivistic idea of poetics. In short, she presupposes that poems are simply given and observable in their objective and, according to her, formal properties. She operates with an abstract difference between concept and object, whereas I submit that all poetry is possible only in the context of its own historical *intrinsic* conceptualizations, which are taken to be the *ideal* forms of poetry.[5]

2 Critique of the positivistic approach to poetry

Ribeiro's attempt to clarify the essence of poetry is based on two claims: (1) she argues that a given text is poetry because it is "intentionally linked to previous poems,"[6] which is a way of saying that the poet must belong with her creations to a tradition in poetry and the arts. If this were not the case, she argues, poetic works could not be identified as such. Moreover, she argues that all poetry is based on what she calls "repetition schemes,"[7] such as rhyme schemes, stanza form, foot, alliteration, etc., and she thus concludes that poetry is in each case "following, transforming, or rejecting the repetition techniques."[8] She takes this to be a satisfactory minimal definition of poetry. She claims that

> a closer look at the poems from literary traditions around the world will reveal that the history of poetry is one of the texts whose universal and enduring characteristics is their exhibiting certain types of repetition schemes.[9]

[4] In addition, I am convinced that poetry cannot be understood if we start with fixed entities and results; rather, we must investigate the conditions under which these products are possible, which was the core of early romantic poetics, such as Schiller, Schelling, Schlegel, and Novalis. In this paper, however, I will not deal with the transcendental theory of poetry; rather, I would like to develop my thought in relation to the hermeneutic tradition, as we find it in Gadamer, Heidegger, Jauss, Blumenberg, and Stierle. For her discussion of why poetry was largely neglected in the analytic tradition see Ribeiro (2009, pp. 63–66).

[5] "We, however, are searching for something truly essential, something that will force us to decide whether we shall take poetry at all seriously in the future;" see Heidegger (2000, p. 52).

[6] Ribeiro (2007, p. 103).

[7] Ribeiro (2007, p. 191).

[8] Ribeiro (2007, p. 193).

[9] Ribeiro (2007, p. 191).

The repetition schemes are spelled out in the following way:

> In part because, for much of our history, what was said could not be easily recorded and had to be memorized, the use of various kinds of patterned repetition was essential to the preservation and dissemination of works. Thus, the early oral poets created and relied on metrical schemes, formulaic phrases, and many other mnemonic devices that promoted aesthetic effects even as they aided memory. Indeed, the aesthetic and mnemonic properties of poetic devices are inextricably linked, if we can rely on the empirical assumption that what follows a pattern is more pleasing to the ear as well as more easily retained and recalled.[10]

These statements are very revelatory, insofar as they clearly show the overall methodological approach and its unspoken assumptions. We can list at least four of these assumptions: Ribeiro's approach to uncovering universal features of poetry (a) is empirical and positivistic; (b) is based on generalization; (c) presupposes an abstract distinction between definition/essence and poem; (d) takes poems as *fixed objects* to be analyzed through empirical comparisons; and (e) separates the intellectual and social content [*Gehalt*] from its abstractly conceived form.

First, any identification of a specific object, in this case a poem, presupposes that we have an idea of the type of object under investigation, which is to say, that we presuppose that we have access to this thing as precisely that which it is. We must, accordingly, understand in advance what constitutes the object under investigation. We not only have to know the *object* under investigation. Rather, the claim that (in principle) we should investigate all poems ever written presupposes that we have access to the *conceptualization* of the object *in advance*; otherwise we would not be able to identify what falls under this conceptualization. Accordingly, an approach to the "definition" of poetry, such as Ribeiro's, argues in circles, since she must already presuppose a concept of poetry *before* she can find certain properties of those objects that fall under it. What the object is, then, must be already in play as the condition for the possibility of finding out and determining empirical features of that object. Consequently, we should reject the idea that statements about the essence of something can be made through empirical generalizations.[11]

Second, Ribeiro's claim that new poetry must be intentionally linked to the tradition of poetry is unable to respond to the more metaphysical task and question of how a tradition in poetry was established and what we take to be the *beginning* and *origin* of that tradition. Since the question of what happened at the beginning of a tradition cannot be answered on an empirical basis, we can only determine it in a speculative way. Accordingly, Ribeiro's empirical approach presupposes (again) a concept of poetry that cannot be found through what she proposes, namely, a historical comparison of what exists as poetry in different cultures and traditions. Consequently, the question of how to think about the *origin* of poetry pushes us

[10] Ribeiro (2009, p. 64).

[11] What is at issue here is the concept of definition itself, or, in more phenomenological terms, the "essence" of poetry. The essence or *eidos*, according to the phenomenological tradition, is not identical with a definition, for essences are not based on empirical generalizations. Essences can also be found in individuals, as Husserl explains in the first sections of his *Ideas I*.

back to a concept of poetry that must be able to dialectically integrate its historical dimension *and* its *eidos*.

Third, the conceptualization of poetry in the form of poetics is itself historical. A "definition" of poetry in abstraction and separation from the material cannot be successful if we take into account that poetry itself is only accessible *through* its conceptualization and through the *historical* dimension of this conceptualization. The conceptualization of poetry is *intrinsically* historical—in a Hegelian fashion we could say that the concept of poetry *contains* its own historical versions, which might compete with each other. However, Ribeiro's own conception only accounts for *one* of these and it remains unclear how it is related to other conceptualizations. In other words, what I am claiming is that poetry and poetics are inseparable aspects, given that we need at least one conception of poetry in order to say something about the object of poetics. Thinking of the *origin* of poetry (or what poetry *is*) precisely means thinking about the universal concept of poetry *in* its competing versions. These competing versions of what poetry is can be found throughout the whole history of poetry and poetics. Accordingly, with the aforementioned considerations, we can reject Ribeiro's formalism altogether, especially since she claims that new forms of poetry depend upon the *intention* of the poet to place herself within a tradition of what has been done in poetry before. Against this, we must claim that any intention of any artist depends upon an *understanding* of what the intention is based on, namely, a *conception* of poetic speech. Moreover, Ribeiro's empirical conception cannot deal with *future* developments of poetry and poetics, for her empirical study would have to be redone whenever new conceptions occur.

From this it also follows that all competing conceptualizations are normative in a specific sense, namely, in the sense that they *exclude* other conceptualizations as well as *compete* with different conceptualizations of poetry. The history of poetry is—because it is a *history* and therefore presupposes some rationality—a history of competing conceptualizations, which, when they emerge, lead to exclusions of some other conceptualizations. If, for example, we think that poetry is related to truth, then every "poem" that is not truth related, will be excluded and not taken as poetry or, in a weaker approach, taken as bad poetry. We can say, then, that every form of poetry is related to what Karl-Heinz Stierle calls a "poetic norm."[12] This poetic norm has to be redefined by poets throughout the history of poetic speech. Every form of poetry cannot avoid redefining this norm simply because every poem must as such claim that it *is* poetry. This implicit conceptualization makes it questionable whether Ribeiro's approach to compare Homer, South-American poetry, Bob Dylan, middle age *Minnegesang,* Baudelaire and Celan makes any sense.

Moreover, Ribeiro's positivism presupposes a concept of poems that takes them to be finished and "stable" objects with properties, which leads back to my first remark. Here, I would object that this assumption is based on an ontological confusion: Not only is it the case, as I claimed above, that the being of poems must be accessible before we can identify and handle them as *objects* of investigation, but also, poems can only *be* poems because they *constitute* themselves as poems. Poetic

[12] Stierle (1982, p. 276).

formations are not finished and stable objects; rather, they *come into being* through reading and participation, experience, understanding, speaking, performance, etc. In other words, they have a *temporal* nature, which can be opened up through phenomenological investigation. Formal elements are *secondary* to this investigation and can only appear as such *on the basis of* poetry, understood as an unstable phenomenon. In short, form follows phenomenon! Coming up with formal elements of that phenomenon implies a *reduction* of the phenomenon to something that is formalizable, in this case, a text. Accordingly, Ribeiro's concept of poetry is in play even before she starts looking for formal properties, and it is based on poetry as an *observable* entity.

Due to the fact that Ribeiro's approach to poetry is unable to give us the origin or the *ideal* determination of poetry, it has to pay a high price, namely, it is forced to give up all prominent ideas developed throughout the history of poetics, which include the conflict between philosophy and poetry, as it has been handed down from Ancient philosophy, the relation to truth as developed by Hegel, the romantic idea of absolutes as in Schlegel, Adorno's dialectic aesthetics, and Heidegger's claim that poetry is the essentialization of language—all of which are anti-formalist examples of poetics (with metaphysical bents). The difference between the European tradition and Ribeiro's background is that for philosophers, such as Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer, poetry is itself *philosophical* (though without explicit philosophical means) and not, as in Ribeiro's case, simply an object *of* philosophy.

At this point I would like to add a final observation. Ribeiro's abstract formalistic approach to poetry separates form and content both without addressing the problem of whether this abstract separation makes sense in regard to poetry and without addressing whether this "operation" is even possible. One could argue that, on the contrary, the intensity of the poetic word is precisely characterized by a *substantial* unity of sound and meaning, which is also the reason for the untranslatability of poetry. What Ribeiro calls "form" is therefore misleading, because she identifies—without discussion—formal elements as mainly musical elements. It remains debatable, however, whether the form in poetry should instead be grasped as a specific aesthetic form, as one could consider how the language in the poem is composed, how an overall unity of single elements with the whole is reached, how poetry is a form of self-consciousness and making sense of oneself or how the social character of language is mediated *in* the poem, etc. Ribeiro's attempt to separate both sides seems to be grounded in her claim that through formal elements poetry is "more pleasing to the ear as well as more easily retained and recalled."[13] This claim, however, leads to a subjectivist position, insofar as the sound and form of the poem are no longer considered in relation to what is said in the poem; rather, the poem is related and reduced to the psychological experience ("pleasing to the ear") of its audience. Accordingly, poetry is reduced to its effects.

Having outlined my critique of formalism, I would now like to turn my attention to some aspects of what we (hopefully) can take to be the entry point to a non-formalist and hermeneutic position. My first thesis is the following: poetry must

[13] Ribeiro (2009, p. 64).

somehow be distinguished from non-poetic forms of speaking, which, as such, is not a very revolutionary thesis. There are, however, different ways of how to differentiate poetic language from everyday language. For example, in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel tries to show that poetry and what he calls "prose" are primarily differentiated from each other through a different form of *consciousness of* the world. Lyrical poetry, according to Hegel, is a specific mode of representing and being related to the world around us. Though Hegel's view is very complex and deserves an extensive treatment, I will not here reflect on his idealist position; rather, I will try to reconstruct the emergence of poetry out of and in contrast to the everyday use of language. By doing this it will become clear that Hegel's claim that the difference between prose and lyric poetry as poetry proper [*Dichtung*] perhaps cannot be reduced to subjective categories. According to Hegel, lyric poetry finds its center as a form of how a single *ego* expresses itself and its feelings in words, and thereby becomes conscious of itself.[14] According to the position developed here, poetry finds its center in how it deals with the expression itself. Given what I have said above about the artificial separation of the sensual, social, and intellectual dimensions of poetry in Ribeiro, it should be clear that I do not claim (in this paper) to offer a counter-position to Ribeiro's generalization of empirical properties; rather, I prefer to deal with a specific conception of poetry, which is based on radicalized and self-reflective forms of modern poetry, such as Celan and Bachmann, in connection with modern poetics as it can be found in the hermeneutic tradition.[15] The difference between formalism and hermeneutics is the following: the hermeneutic position tries to go back to the *phenomenological* origin of poetry, i.e., the "place" where poetic speaking is constituted *as* poetic speaking. "Origin" here does not refer to a historical origin; rather, it refers to the *constitutional* origin of poetic speech. This origin and the constitution of poetry *as* poetry is presupposed by the formalist approach to poetry, for the abstraction of properties presupposes the phenomenon of poetry as the basis and fundament from which properties can be abstracted.

3 Epoche

If we ask in a phenomenological manner how language shows itself in its everyday mode and its averageness, we should first note that it does not appear as a system that can be objectified through logical analysis, grammatical rules, or written statements; rather, language shows up, as Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, as *talking* either in the form of explicitly spoken or in the form of silent articulation

[14] For this claim see Hegel (1988, pp. 972–974).

[15] The abstract distinction between form and content, as well as between structure and thought, as Ribeiro proposes, does not make sense in those traditions: As Adorno puts it in his celebrated lecture on lyrical poetry and society in 1957:"Specification through thought is not some external reflection alien to art; on the contrary, all linguistic works of art demand it. The material proper to them, concepts, does not exhaust itself in mere contemplation. In order to be susceptible of aesthetic contemplation, works of art must always be thought through as well, and once thought has been called into play by the poem it does not let itself be stopped at the poem's behest;" see Adorno (1991, p. 39).

[*Rede*]. Before we are able to experience and to be related to language as a system of words or sentences we encounter language where it exists, namely, in the ordinary world. In this connection, I think that there are two major characteristics of how language operates on the level of everyday life: (1) language operates through its *self-explanatoryness*, and (2) it operates through its *averageness*.[16]

As to self-explanatoryness, language, when it appears in the lived everyday world, is characterized by its hidden character, which is to say, it does not appear as such. Most words used in our daily conversations, even if these conversations are intellectual in nature or emotional exchanges, point away from themselves. In a lively dialogue and even now, while you try to comprehend my (written) words, you are fully immersed in the process of understanding. Within this process my words *as* words are not coming to the forefront as units, but remain covered up throughout my speaking (even if it appears in written form). What you are reading and listening to are not isolated words. You do not even have sentences *as* sentences (as long as you are in the process of reading and/or listening).[17] Every single word remains totally embedded within its structural context and within the whole of my words.[18] Accordingly, what shows itself as itself in everyday speech is not language as a system of words, rules and sentences; rather it appears by not appearing as such. Language is used here and appears as something else, namely speaking, which in turn is a form of listening to and an articulation of meaning without making the tools used explicit. In addition, speaking does not appear—at least not on this level—as something that is individualized as such. Even if I use the word "I," as I just did, in my speaking, the reference to me as a single speaker also disappears behind a veil of what I am speaking about and of what I try to let you see in this moment. Consequently, what is present in this moment for both of us, is not language indicating *me* as such; rather, speaking in a normal and average mode points away from my *words*, as it points away from *my* words. In this way, language is here a mere *passage* to what is talked about in speaking. Put differently, speaking in action forgets itself.[19]

As to averageness, in the everyday use of language we communicate through a shared understanding of what we are talking about. As Heidegger puts it,

> What is said-in-the-talk gets understood; but what the talk is about is understood only approximately and superficially. We have *the same thing* in

[16] The contrast between everyday and poetic language is also discussed in Lawn (2001, pp. 116–118). Lawn, however, claims that the distinction can be explained by Gadamer's concept of "play." I do not think that the concept of play is sufficient for explaining the distinction, for the concept of play is also used for a hermeneutics of art, language, and festivals.

[17] Though you now deal with a written text (and no longer with my lecture on which this text is based) you still must listen to my words and, as such, sound and meaning are not linked to each other.

[18] According to Gadamer, all language is *verbal*—even written texts. Given the purpose of this essay, I am unable to discuss this background; for this see Gadamer (2003, pp. 384–395).

[19] For this, see also Cesare (2004, p. 79). As Gadamer puts it, "poetry is the emergence of the appearance of language itself and not a mere passage to meaning;" see Gadamer (1993/1998, p. 267). It should be clear that at this point a confrontation between Gadamer and Adorno would be needed, for the self-constitution of poetic speech in contrast to everyday speech is in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* interpreted as negativity, through which poetry (and art in general) separates itself from *the given* society.

> view, because it is in *the same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said.[20]

What Heidegger has in mind here, is that we take what we are talking about as the same because we do not pay attention to the differences between us and the semantic ambiguities that would be in play if we would question our speaking with each other. When we talk about the weather or on the phone with our friends, we usually do not ask each other what we. *Accordingly, we leave everything as what it "usually" and "in average" means*. Semantic plurality, ambiguity, and the breakdown of understanding, in other words, are only possible if what we are talking about, or the perspective from which it was addressed, etc. becomes unclear. In other words, the *differences* between speakers and the perspectives from which things can be seen and understood, usually are not established as such, partly because any form of conversation would soon become impossible. Idle-talk, as I said above, is nothing negative; rather, it enables us to speak publicly to each other—without actualizing the "real" possibilities of talking. In fact almost all of our speaking operates in this mode. The main tendency here is that we share (and enjoy) our speaking together and with each other, but primarily not as an explicit *dialogue* about something, and usually without a full appropriation of the issues in question. Instead, we accept what has already been publicly laid out and is in use in worn out phrases and linguistic clichés.

Given what I have said so far, it is easier to see what poetry introduces above all, namely, on the one hand, it alienates elements that are embedded in our language as it functions in our life-world; and, on the other hand, it introduces a *specific* use of language, which is usually covered over through what we simply share in our conversation. Whereas conversations are *unspecific,* the specificity of the poem shows up as a form of exceptionality. Put simply, poems are exceptional, which is to say, they violate norms of our everyday speaking and establish norms that are only understandable on the basis of what they establish on a new level.

As to alienation, if it is true that poetic speech inhibits and "brackets" the primary function of language in our everyday world, such as conversation, information, narration, description, and performative tasks, then it is easier to see how poetry not only releases words out of their ordinary connections, but also introduces and builds up new relations. As Blumenberg puts it, the poem is based on a "coming out of self-explanatory aspects out of the as such unnoticed life-world",[21] which leads to a destabilization of everyday language and to the constitution of new connections and semantic configurations. In short, the bracketing of our normal use of language leads to semantic plurality, ambiguity and the establishment of new worlds.[22] As Gadamer—following Jacobson—puts it,

[20] Heidegger (1967, p. 212).

[21] Blumenberg (2001, p. 127).

[22] It is precisely at this point that Derrida and Gadamer depart in their Celan interpretation. Gadamer presupposes the *unity* of sense, whereas Derrida presupposes the plurality of sense as the condition of the poem. Celan's poetry seems to lean more towards a Derridian conception, especially given the later radicalization of his poetry in *Lichtzwang*. For the claim that poetry is necessarily ambiguous, see Jacobson (1979, p. 110).

> by standing for themselves, individual words gain in presence and illuminating power. Syntactic indeterminacy is responsible for the free play of both the connotations to which the word owes its rich content and, even more, for the semantic weight that inhabits every word and suggests a variety of possible meanings.[23]

Modern poetry has intensified this tendency to release the semantic content from its context; for some of its most important proponents, such as Mallarme, Celan, and E.E. Cummings, have left almost all descriptive moments and imaginary components behind, inasmuch as they tried to (radically) break down everything that could even remotely remind us of conversation, prose, description, or narration.[24] As Celan puts it, the poem is the "the reminiscence [*Anklingen*] of language in the midst of information systems."[25] Nevertheless, this radicalization has its limits precisely at the point where the participation of the listener in the meaning of the poetic work *totally* breaks down and poetry turns into *Dadaism* or visual experimentation, such as what we discover in concrete poetry, for in these cases we are left with the materiality of the poem. We should also note that the thing-like character of the poetic formation[26] is not characterized by formal properties, since formal properties do not show up as such, but show themselves only through theoretical investigation. Instead, the poem's materiality can be found at the level between meaning and sound, or, as for example in Celan, in the radical decontextualization of the words used or new words invented in the poem, that open up new surprising connections within which these words. It is only in this way that the poem shows a tendency to use language autonomously and to reconnect the act of speaking with what this speaking is about.

As to the exceptionality, we must note that the breakdown of what is simply shared in our normal conversations establishes the poem as something that falls outside of the aforementioned averageness. The poem establishes itself as something *distinct* from our normal discourse and therefore introduces what Celan called in his Meridian speech "individualization," which does not necessarily mean that the poem establishes itself as the voice of an individual ego; rather, the individual *perspective* and *unique form of speaking* that the poem introduces is an effect of separating itself from any other form of speech and discourse, for the alienation that poetic speaking introduces can no longer be understood as a conversation. The poem stands out. The poem is a formation that establishes itself within a *new* unity of elements that are internally related to each other and bring the *fleeting character* of our normal way of speaking to a standstill, which in turn leads to semantic ambiguities, given that the meaning of poems is only established through self-referentiality.[27] I will come back to this point later.

[23] Gadamer (1993/1998, p. 235).

[24] For this, also see Blumenberg (2001, p. 128).

[25] Celan (1999, p. 61); for this, also see Celan (2001a, p. 128). Celan claims here that poetry has to separate itself from the de-spoken [*zersprochene*] language of everyday discourse.

[26] Blumenberg (2001, p. 129).

[27] For this, see also Jacobson (1979, p. 110). Ribeiro addresses this point in her newest publication, too; see Ribeiro (2009, p. 73).

The turn from the fleeting character of speaking to poetic speaking, additionally, is connected to the turn to what Gadamer calls, in *Truth and Method*, "structure" [*Gebilde*], or, in a better translation, *image formation*, which in turn leads to the *ideality* of the poem as something that we are able to return to through re-reading, repeating, etc. Whereas all types of informational texts, for example, are purely functional because they are simply used for transporting and delivering information and can be dispensed after usage, in image formations the opposite happens. What is said in poetic speaking is not simply a passage towards effective communication and results; rather, it forms itself into an image that exists only in our returning back to the image. It is as if speaking suddenly becomes aware of itself. In this vein, Gadamer writes:

> I call this change, in which human play comes to its true consummation in being art, *transformation into a formation*. Only through this change does play achieve ideality, so that it can be intended and understood as play. Only now does it emerge as detached from the representing activity of the players and consists in the pure appearance [*Erscheinung*] of what they are playing.[28]

What Gadamer describes in relation to art in general can very easily be applied to the issue discussed here, namely human speaking comes to its true consummation in poetic speaking by *transformation into a formation*. Only through this change does speaking achieve ideality, so that it can be intended and understood as speaking. Only now does it emerge as detached from the representing activity of the speakers and consists in the pure appearance [*Erscheinung*] of speaking itself. As a consequence, it can be repeated and must be repeated in order to be what it is. As Gadamer underlines, the ideality can only be addressed and be "recognized" [*wiedererkennen*] *in* its repetition as a meaningful whole.[29] The poem, in other words, only exists *in* its coming-back to it, whereas any other non-poetic speaking paradoxically exists because we do *not* come back to it. Once arguments are understood and decided we can leave them behind; once we have read a newspaper article, we can throw the paper away. Language, in these cases, does not appear as such and as what it is; rather, it is used for something else after which it disappears as a phenomenon.

A consequence of the last points is that the poeticizing of language is not about discovering lost meanings or discovering the real meanings of words used in our everyday language, especially since it introduces a fully *new* perspective on language by opening up the whole semantic field of words, formerly hidden in the everyday and prose form of speech. Through heightened and intensified wordings[30] and, consequently, the establishment of new worlds,[31] it is as if someone were to speak for the first time in the poem. The poem becomes a *voicing* of language. It is the voicing itself.

[28] Gadamer (2003, p. 110).

[29] Gadamer (2003, p. 116).

[30] Stierle (2008, p. 134).

[31] Celan: "the language of the poem hopes to be a different, more original language, than the one we usually live in;" see Celan (2005, p. 129). If Celan is right, then, indeed, poetry would be life changing.

4 Voicing and monologue

At this point I would like to use an example to clarify what I have in mind[32]:

Voices	*Stimmen*
Voices from the nettle path:	Stimmen vom Nesselweg her:
Come on your hands to us.	Komm auf den Händen zu uns
Whoever is alone with the lamp	Wer mit der Lampe allein ist,
Has only his hand to read from	hat nur die Hand, draus zu lesen

Celan (1999, p. 47); Celan (2001b, p. 412); the longer version of *Voices* can be found in Celan (2005, p. 91)

The poem that Celan references in his Meridian speech is far too complex for a satisfactory discussion here, given that it is a poem about poetry and Celan's own situation in connection with several other texts, such as Büchner's *Lenz*. Accordingly, for the purpose of this analysis I shall only outline moments that are of importance for the purpose of this paper.

Let us first consider the following image: Someone who walks on his or her hands on a path with nettles reaches one's goal only with scars, which are left on this person's hands, since nettles are burning and stinging plants. It is indeed the case that a touch of some of these plants leads to tiny cuts on the surface of human skin. These scars, scratches, slits, or cuts are therefore wounds and signs of pain. If we take into account that writing is nothing else than a cutting, carving, and scratching of traces into material, then we can conclude that the scars that the nettles leave on someone's hands who walks on such a painful path is what is *written* into ones hands.[33] These traces remain visible when one is alone with one's hands—especially if these hands are used for holding a pen and for writing poems. Put bluntly, poets are *cutters*. Their writing is a form of being wounded and is very painful. If one is alone with the lamp and has to write, all that is left are the scars of what has been written in the hand that holds the pen. Writing, then, is another form of reading, namely, a reading of painful signs, painful former words, written by hands into hands, and that were on their way to the—their?—voices. Every act of this hand that the poem mentions depends upon something that is already in place as something hurtful, namely, language, and is on its way to those voices. Every act of writing is, according to Celan's poem, a re-writing and reproducing of words as

[32] I am indebted to the insights presented in Ivanovic (2002) (on voices), Lacoue-Labarthe (1999), and Derrida (2005). I am less impressed by Gadamer's own volume on Celan; see Gadamer (1997). Especially helpful for approaching Celan's *Meridian* speech is the extended volume of the "Tübinger Ausgabe," which contains a volume with notes by Celan that he produced in preparation for his *Meridian* speech; see Celan (1999).

[33] This is easier in German: in the longer version of *Stimmen* Celan uses the word "ritzen," which can be used as a verb [*einritzen*] and refers to a physical type of scratching, drawing, and carving, such as in "to carve a name in wood" [*einen Namen ins Holz einritzen*]. Writing in danger and in situations in which no paper is available is a form of "ritzen."

wounds, thereby reproducing the wound.[34] What does the poem determine as the goal of this process of writing and finding words? Someone who walks on his hands on the nettle path is on his way *towards* the voices, towards what wants to be voiced, and towards what wants to *become* word, and towards the other. The voices are coming from the *end* of the path. The poet is searching for something that can be spoken out, aloud, into the open. Voicing is—as such—painful, a painful moving towards what one wants to reach. This reminds us of what Celan says in his award speech for the Bremen literature prize in regard to poetry after Auschwitz: "It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech."[35]

The poem itself, then, is the voice and the voicing of what wants to come into being, namely, the word, which wants to be said and be heard in and through the poem's words. As such, the word is not only a result and product of writing, but is also *becoming voiced*. Through breathing this word remains unstable, endangered, at the limit either of being successful and staying alive or of being unsuccessful and dying. Voices are a form of breathing. Even if someone does not speak aloud, having voice implies that words are *coming alive*.[36] Indeed, the voice is nothing else than the lungs pressing air through the vocal cords (which in German is called the "voice band" or "voice ribbon" [*Stimmband*]). The vocal chord, as we know, is located in us, in our throat, located where air and breathing turn into words, where life turns into words, and where words become what they are. The voice as the principle of the word between life and death is this turn—the moment when the word is neither inside nor outside, the moment when we hold our breath; it is a sort of turn of breath [*Atemwende*].[37] Voices reappear in other poems by Celan. One of these finishes with the following line.

A word, with all of its green,	Ein Wort, mit all seinem Grün,
Turns into itself, replants itself	geht in sich, verpflanzt sich,
Follow it	folg ihm

Celan (2005, p. 319); my translation

[34] In Celan's poetics this situation and syncope through which language as a voice has to go, appears as a wound and as something that is "ripped apart." The word "sowing" that Celan uses in Voices refers in German to something that is "ripped apart" [zerrissen]. The poem Voices, the short form of which I discussed earlier, starts with the following lines: What sews/this voice? At what/sews this voice/in this world, beyond? "Was näht/An dieser Stimme? woran/näht diese Stimme/dieseits, jenseits?"; see Celan (2005, p. 317).

[35] Celan (2001b, p. 395).

[36] Topics, such as life, death, and breathing, would require a more careful elaboration in an essay on Celan. Here, however, I am only concerned with using this example for preparing the next part of my essay.

[37] To use Celan's expression here: "The poem: the voice;" see Celan (1999, p. 66). For this also see Celan (1999, p. 145). We should also take into account that the German word for silencing and for losing one's voice is "de-voicing" [*verstummen*, which contains *Stimme*].

The "green" reappears at the beginning of the longer version of "voices:"

Voices, cut into the green	Stimmen, ins Grün
of the water-surface	der Wasseroberfläche geritzt

Clean (2005, p. 91)

Here, we find again: the hopeful (green) and nevertheless painful voice, "cut" into another skin, namely, the surface and skin of water. To sum up, these poems are "paths on which language gets its voice, they are encounters [*Begegnungen*], paths of a voice to a perceiving Thou, creaturely paths, sketches of existence perhaps, a sending oneself ahead toward oneself."[38] I will return to what I have said so far about Celan's poems as a form of *voicing* in the last section of this essay.

We can see in these very simple, but beautiful poems how poetic speech differs from anything "normal": What is shared in our way of talking about words, such as "voices," "pain," and "hands," is "extra-ordinary," and all semantic elements of the poem reconfigure themselves as a very unique unity of something that "stands out" in the form of constellations. Every word in these poems is related back to the poem and the other words spoken by the poem. Words refer to words and are no longer used as a passage to meaning.[39] Accordingly, the flow of usual language comes to a halt. In the words of Stierle, the poem "remains with itself,"[40] and something is called into a unique presence. The poem, in short, is a monad and therefore establishes its meaning through separation, a new unity, and self-referentiality.[41] It is precisely this self-referentiality that makes commentaries on poetry so difficult.[42]

But: how is this possible? What does this self-referentiality further imply? I think that the main form of speaking that this poem (and perhaps all poems) are based on, is an *inner monologue* form and therefore the poem interrupts the dialogue form of our normal speech.[43] An inner monologue is a strange form of speaking, since although a speaker seems to speak to someone, the addressee of that speaking remains neutralized and absent. In this case it is not clear to whom the lyrical ego is speaking. Imagine a theater actor reciting a monologue in a play. The effect of neutralizing all dialogue in such a situation is visible through the disconnect from a real dialogue with other actors and the *inwardness* introduced through the monologue. It seems as if a speaker in a monologue speaks to herself, but that is not true. It is rather a form of speaking in which someone speaks *as if* someone else were present. A poem is like

[38] Celan (2001b, p. 412).

[39] Moreover, in Celan the theme of the poem is itself language and cannot be formulated in prosaic and discursive terms.

[40] Stierle (2008, p. 133).

[41] Celan (1999, p. 222).

[42] As Celan puts it, "poems try to speak for themselves, […] they exclude everything not of themselves;" see Celan (1999, p. 53).

[43] I am following here a thesis presented in Peterson (1996).

that: it is something spoken to someone without *really* being spoken to someone. Instead, it is spoken into *silence* because no one really expects a response to a monologue. Prayers and laments are the most visible examples of monologues, but even folk songs fall under this concept, for the sung poem is despite the fact that it is *spoken out* not used for *directly* conversing with another. It is as if we are enjoying or living *in* language—now taken as speaking—without the force of intersubjective communication and the expectation of a response to what is said. I will shortly come back to this point when I discuss Celan's claim that the poem *nevertheless* is on the way *towards* the other.

As such, poetry is a mixture of neutralized dialogue and a paradoxical communicative-anti-communicative form, which, as a consequence, brings out and points to a moment of subjectivity. This subjectivity should not be seen in the individuality of the poet; rather, it is the *unique* and *single* configuration that the poem itself presents as *a* voice.[44] Subjectivity does not come into play because, as Hegel claims, human beings *express* their own inwardness in poetry [*sich aussprechen*]; rather, it is indicated through a specific form of speech, which disconnects the poetic voice from its context and thereby establishes itself as something that stands out. As a consequence, the voice of the monologue and therefore of the poem are *alone*. This standing out of the poem *individualizes* language as a *configured* speech event.[45] Hence, in the last part of my paper, I would like to clarify this distinction and clarify the individualized aspect of the poem.

5 Individualization. Towards the other

In this last part of my paper, I shall attempt to shed more light on how a poem can be both based on a monological mode of speaking and nevertheless be a dialogue or, in the words of Celan, an *encounter* with an Other. Let me quote two excerpts from Celan's Meridian-speech:

> The Poem is lonely. It is lonely and underway. Whoever writes one stays mated with it. But in just this way doesn't the poem stand, right here, in an encounter—in the mystery of an encounter?
>
> The poem wants to reach an Other, it needs this Other, it needs an Over-Against. It seeks it out, speaks toward it.[46]

[44] Gadamer's claim that the "I" in poetry is a universal "I;" see Gadamer (1997, p. 70), as he outlines it at the beginning of his Celan commentary, is misleading, for Celan would not have agreed with such a claim. Gadamer's thesis is—given Gadamer's superb knowledge of Celan—most likely intentionally directed *against* Celan's own poetics. In this vein, one should note that Gadamer—to my knowledge—*ignores* Celan's *Meridian* speech, which is rooted in his claim that poems want to be understood without external references to additional material.

[45] Accordingly, the speech event and language as a system are not abstractly differentiated from each other; rather, the poem is the unity of both. It is precisely this subjective moment that remains neglected in Gadamer's and Heidegger's poetics—and it is precisely this point where Gadamer's and Heidegger's poetics depart from Celan's. Here, I find myself much closer to Adorno's position, viewing it, as I do, as a mediation between the subjective and objective moment in lyrical poetry; for this, see Adorno (1991).

[46] Celan (2001a, p. 409).

After what I have said about the distinction of poetic speech and the monologue we can now make sense of what Celan has in mind here when he mentions the loneliness of the poem. The loneliness of the poem does not refer to the existential situation of the poet; rather, it is the standing-out and the establishment of a new word configuration, seen in contrast to the moving and ongoing character of normal speech. Normal speech does not have an *artificially constructed* beginning and an end. In the case of the poem, however, speech becomes a *separated* configuration and formation that has *its own* temporality and time constitution. Thereby, it becomes an individual configuration.

It is precisely this singular status of each poem that enables the poem and its search for the "right" words to encounter either the other as something else or the other as someone else. What Celan has in mind is the *radical* situation in which humans have to find the right word, in which language comes to word, because all words that we usually use no longer "fit." And it is precisely this that I tried to indicated in the previous part: the poem struggles with and expresses this original situation of speaking that we all know but forget in our everyday discourses. How to find the right word, the right expression, the "perfect" response or *Entsprechung* (Heidegger) to what one is about to say—without arbitrarily making up new words. Accordingly, we can say the *initial* situation of the poem echoes the *original* situation of how to say something. Language comes here to itself not as an abstract system of syntax, lexical elements, and grammar, but as a concrete individualized act of speaking. It *repeats* the very moment in which language becomes real, *through* a speaker who must find the right word, must unlock what she wants to say, and must search for the right way to say it—without being able to use *any word* how it is usually used. The poem *essentializes* this moment. It tries to be a word. The poem, then, must invent a new norm, a new measure and a new way of saying things because the connection to our normal mode of speech and its averageness no longer exists. The measure, the *Mass* that the poem *is*, cannot be found outside of the poem, nor can it be arbitrarily invented—that is *if* we assume that the poem wants to say something, and wants to speak! Poetry, and here I agree with Heidegger and Celan, is this internal taking measure that belongs to language, which cannot be objectified in any criterion.[47] As Celan puts it, "who falls into line with language, whom words will find."[48] What Celan means here is that words cannot simply be "made up," created and constructed; rather, we must search for them and listen to language. Poetic speech is a form of active creation *through* being receptive and listening *to* language. It therefore recovers what gets forgotten in our everyday use of language. Gadamer has something similar in mind when he claims that meaning

[47] See Heidegger (2001, p. 206): "Mortals speak insofar as they listen. They heed the bidding call of the stillness of the dif-ference even when they do not know that call. The listening draws from the command of the difference what it brings out as sounding word. This speaking that listens and accepts is responding [*Entsprechung*]." Poetic speech is a form of active creation *through* being receptive *to* language. We can see here, though, the difference between Heidegger and Gadamer, at least if we refer to Heidegger's WWII writings on Hölderlin; for Heidegger takes the poetic word as the original force of language for *opening up* a world and establishing the relation between Being and beings; for this, see the end of his essay on the work of art, and the essay on Hölderlin entitled "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" (Sect. 5), both of which are exemplary.

[48] Celan (2005, p. 31; my translation).

is *neither* in someone's head *nor* external in discursive configurations; rather, it constantly comes into being and is negotiated within a process of *articulation* through which the "universal" and the "individual" expression come together, so that speakers can recognize *what* they want to say *in* what they say. This is what Gadamer calls the "coming-to-stand"[49] [*Zum-Stehen-Kommen*], or, in the context of his ontology of art, an "image formation" [*Gebilde*]. He writes:

> We are all aquainted with this, for instance, in the attempt to translate, in practical life or in literature or whatever; that is, we are familiar with the strange, uncomfortable, and tortuous feeling we have as long as we do not have the right word. When we have found the right expression (it need not always be one word), when we are certain that we have it, then it 'stands,' then something has come to a 'stand.'[50]

Poetry, accordingly, is a form of *making both language and the use of language visible as something that originates in itself*. In this way, it turns our "normal" speech situation on its head and thereby returns to the origin of language itself in the act of speaking to (the other).[51] It does this by achieving *the* unity of the word itself, namely, that of sound and meaning.

The paradoxical status of the poem as something inside and outside language, between losing all ties to our usual way of speaking and gaining a new—appropriate—mode of speaking, comes to the center in Celan's poetics. He writes:

> The poem is the place where what can be accomplished by language comes insolubly together with the speechless; where the question of the where to and the where from, where one speaks pregnant of voice and without voice at the same time; where the wish to reach world and, through this, the original wish of the poet to become liberated from world, is encountered.[52]

Once a poem loses its ground in any normal way of speech, the world established in our everyday mode of speaking is gone. Consequently, one is left with the possible poem and language itself, which now must come into being and which

[49] Gadamer (2008, p. 14).

[50] Gadamer (2008, p. 15).

[51] For the purpose of this paper I do not want to further lay out what is meant by "the other." In Celan's *Meridian* speech three candidates are implicitly mentioned: (1) reality, (2) the other person, and (3) God; see Celan (2001b, p. 396 and p. 408).

[52] Celan (1999, p. 147; my translation); this reminds us of the last verse of Celan's poem which has been the subject of embattled commentaries by Derrida and Gadamer on Celan. It reads: *Die Welt ist fort, ich muss Dich tragen.* "The world is gone, I must carry you" Derrida comments on this sentence and discusses four possible ways to make sense of the word "tragen" [to carry]: birth, Freud's theory of mourning, Husserl's concept of the wordless ego, and Heidegger's concept of world; see Derrida (2005, pp. 159–163). It seems to me that all of the aforementioned contexts are abstract and are a philosophical misreading of Celan's line, except perhaps the first one. If we take the situation into account that I have outlined so far, then the line can be read rather as a self-reference to poetry. There are two other contexts that Derrida is not aware of in his commentary: "the world is gone" is a reference to the homelessness of human beings as being speechless and without world; see Celan (2005, p. 30), as well as a reference to the German tradition in poetry, especially the Romantic tradition, where we often find the image of a wanderer who is *lost to the world* and thereby *loses her world.* Also see Celan (1999, p. 125 and p. 147) ["Weltgewinnen" and "Weltfreiwerden"].

must re-create and establish a world. Put in the exalted terms of Lacoue-Labarthe: "When a word occurs in the pure suspension of speech poetry is the spasm and syncope[53] of language."[54]

If we determine the poem as essentializing the moment at which something comes to word, becomes articulated, and as a struggle to say something appropriately, then we can also see why every poem must go through three aspects that are important for hermeneutic poetics: (a) silence, (b) listening, and (c) calling. The moment in which language comes to being, in which *it speaks* and in which a world originates, silence is a necessary condition. Listening is only possible in silence and, accordingly, the beginning of language is *in* the situation of speaking. Finally, given that the normal way of speaking and its world have receded into the background, something can now be called forth into the light and into a new—and perhaps true—configuration. As Adorno said in regard to Goethe's *Wanderers Nachtlied*, "what is human, language itself, seems to become creation again."[55]

The event-like encounter that Celan mentions, reminding us of the mystic tradition in philosophy, should now be clearer: The monologue form disconnects the poem from any real form of dialogue, which is another aspect of the almost mystic quality that Celan mentions in regard to poetry. Left alone in this moment, almost conceived like a moment of holding your breath and as a moment between life and death, the poem *can*—if it succeeds—encounter its other as well as what it is searching for.

> The poem—under what conditions!—becomes the poem of someone (ever yet) perceiving, facing phenomena, questioning and addressing these phenomena; it becomes dialogue—often despairing dialogue [*Gespraech*].[56]

The radical speech situation of the poem, paradoxically, opens up a new relation to its other and to become a dialogue with what wants to be said, but must first be listened to. The poem becomes the poem of someone because *it speaks* and therefore is, as Celan says in another essay, "actualized language"[57] or "language as voice."[58] Even in a hermetic poem, the poem speaks, despite all problems to make sense of it. As long as it speaks, it is *on its way* to language and on its way to say something—that is, it is on its way to saying something *appropriately*, by doing justice to, being true to, and genuinely encountering what it wants to say.[59]

Addressing the other, if taken in its performative dimension, not only says something; rather, addressing *calls for* the other, it *hopes for* the other, and it *asks*

[53] Syncope has several meanings. In medicine "syncope" means the temporary loss of consciousness and posture, described as "fainting." It is related to temporary insufficient blood flow to the brain. In linguistics "syncope" refers to the loss of a vowel in a word, such as in "ich handle" instead of "ich handele."

[54] Lacoue-Labarthe (1999, p. 49).

[55] Adorno (1991, p. 41).

[56] Celan (2001a, p. 410).

[57] Celan (1999, p. 215).

[58] Celan (1999, p. 145).

[59] Here we must look for a Heideggerian concept of truth as something that shows itself as itself from itself. Poetry is truth oriented because it points to and calls forth what is said.

for the presence of the other.[60] Expressed as an analogy, the poem's situation of finding the right word is primarily performative (without being a dialogue), as it not only has to say something; rather, in order to say something it must call forth what the speaking is all about. Succeeding then means to encounter the other of the poem.

6 Conclusion: The poem between Individualization and Universality

By way of conclusion, let me repeat my main points: I first argued against a formalist approach to poetry. In contradistinction to Ribeiro, I believe that we must first try to establish an appropriate analysis of how poetry comes into being before we are able to find formal properties. I then sought to make sense of Celan's claim that poetry is both a liberation of language as well as an individualization of language. The poem has two aspects: A universal aspect insofar as it liberates itself from the everyday use of language, and an individual aspect, insofar as it separates itself from all other speakers through entering a highly self-reflective and self-contained mode. Both the universal and the individual are present in the original situation, within which true poetry finds itself, namely, in attempt *to say something*. The contrast between my position and Ribeiro's position could not be stronger, as she writes: "Ur-poetry may be defined by a psychological propensity to pattern language in certain ways—ways that are memorable."[61] As I would put it, the task is not to come up with the right pattern and rhythm; rather, the task is to find the right word. "Ur-poetry" defines the situation, in which the word becomes itself and *is* word.

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[60] It is not by chance that Celan uses the word "encounter" here since "encounter" is one of the most central terms of Martin Buber's philosophy. Also, see Gadamer on addressing the Thou: "The address has an aim, but it has no object;" see Gadamer (1993, p. 385) and (1997, p. 69).

[61] Ribeiro (2007, p. 199).

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