

BOOK REVIEW

Esther Cameron, *Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2014), 307 pages.

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“**T**o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” wrote the German-Jewish philosopher and culture critic, Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) in his 1949 essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society” (ADORNO 1997, p. 34). These words became famous and are still widely cited. After all, how can language speak the unspeakable? How can one make that horrific event into something “aesthetic” or “poetic”? In the larger context of that essay, though, Adorno didn’t mean that writing poetry after Auschwitz is impossible. He meant that the barbarism of the “high” European culture that produced Auschwitz inextricably encompasses any poetry coming from... and after that event.

That leaves the artist in a paradoxical and impossible position. For the event still must be told and witnessed and transmitted. Literature, poetry, film, art have all been produced from and after the Holocaust. And they must be. One of the great European poets and survivors of the Holocaust was Paul Celan (1920–1970), whose poetry Adorno had read. Celan responded to Adorno that in poetry “we know at last where to seek the barbarians” (GLENN 1973, p. 35). Adorno later modified his statement, writing in *Negative Dialectics*: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (ADORNO 2004, p. 362).

Adorno, whose mother was Catholic and father Jewish, had been able to flee Germany during the war years, but returned afterwards to critique and reconstruct German culture. Celan, born Paul Antschel, came from the largely Jewish, German-speaking city of Czernowitz in Romania. “Celan” was a pseudonym he adapted, formed from the

Romanian spelling of his original name, Antschel. His father was a Zionist and gave him a Jewish primary education; his mother shared with him her love for German literature and poetry. After the Nazi occupation, his parents were deported and murdered. Celan, their only child, was sent to various work camps, but survived — until his suicide one night in 1970 in the Seine River, after a period of great suffering from depression and loneliness. In the years after the war, until his death, he became one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

His work is lacerated with the agony of trying to express what he, his family, his people, his country, and the world had gone through. Celan saw himself, as he once put it, as “perhaps one of the last who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe” (FELSTINER 2001, pp. 28–29). Here, for example, is a poem of his from approximately 1961 called “Psalm”

Psalm

No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,
no one speaks to our dust.
No one.

Praised be Thou, No One.
For Thy sake we
will flower,
toward [or: against]
Thee.

A nothingness
we were, we are, we
will be, blossoming:
the nothing-, the
No-One's-Rose.

With
the pistil soul-bright,
the stamen heaven-desolate,
the corolla red
with the purple-word we sang
over, O over
the thorn.

Translated from the German by Esther Cameron

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.

Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.

Dir zulieb wollen

wir blühen.

Dir

entgegen.

Ein Nichts

waren wir, sind wir, werden

wir bleiben, blühend:

die Nichts-, die

Niemandrose.

Mit

dem Griffel seelenhell,

dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,

der Krone rot

vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen

über, o über

dem Dorn. (CAMERON 2014, pp. 50–51)

Of language after Auschwitz, Celan once said in a speech:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, “enriched” by it all. (CELAN 2003, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen in 1958”)

Such is the nature of his own poetic language and of our experience reading him.

As Celan was reaching the peak of his career in the 1960s, Esther Cameron — a young spiritual seeker, poet, and graduate student of German literature at the University of California Berkeley — started reading his poetry across the ocean in America. Berkeley in the 1960s was the epicenter of the great cultural upheavals and rebellions then

taking place in America, which affected her as well. Her graduate advisor suggested Celan as a topic for her PhD dissertation. To understand all the dimensions of Celan's work, she began to study Jewish sources, eventually arriving in Israel, where she remained for several years — immersing herself in Hebrew and Torah study, and becoming an Orthodox Jew. (She also had one difficult personal meeting with Celan in 1969.)

Her work on Celan did not end with graduate school but continued for decades, culminating in this book: *Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan*. It's the result of twenty-five years of engagement with his work. Celan once said that his poems were an attempt "to orient myself, to find out where I was and where it wanted to go with me, in order to project reality for myself" (CAMERON 2014, p. 174). Quoting this statement early in her book, Cameron tells us it describes her own work as a creative poet; for her, Celan's poetry was a path, a way to engage her own existential dilemmas. He was, in short, a poet who changed her life, and this book is her witness.

In 1960, Celan was awarded the Georg Buchner prize by the German Academy for Language and Literature, which (along with the Goethe prize) is the highest honor in German literature any writer can achieve. Many Buchner prize honorees went on to receive the Nobel Prize. The annual winner receives monetary as well as honorary recognition, and gives an acceptance speech in Darmstadt, Germany. One can only try to imagine the ambivalence, angst, and difficulty of a Jewish Holocaust survivor standing before a German audience, being honored by them for the poetry he wrote in "the language of his mother and his mother's murderers" as he once put it (MEINECKE, ed. 1973, p. 281). His acceptance speech, which he entitled "The Meridian," walks a complex rhetorical, intellectual, literary, and existential tightrope as he addresses the assembled "Ladies and gentlemen" — as Celan repeatedly refers to them in what begins to feel like an ironic tone (CELAN 2003, p. 40). Cameron's book is an exhaustive analysis and commentary on this speech: each word, each reference, its themes and allusions, what is said and what is not said. She views this speech not only as a key to Celan's entire life and *oeuvre*, but also to the past and future possible relations of contemporary Western and Jewish culture. Her reading of

it is passionate, intellectual, religious, poetic, academic, and personal all at once.

The exacting, exhaustive word-by-word commentary parallels traditional rabbinic literary modes of interpretation. In an autobiographical note, Cameron writes that her father was a geologist, and there is indeed something geological in her method here as well in the way she lifts and scrapes every fragment, digging slowly and patiently from layer to layer, trying to decipher and put patterns and structures together, probing the crevices. Unfortunately, the speech itself is not printed at the beginning of the book to first give the reader an overall sense of it and a continuous reference point. However, it is available online.

Cameron's own website is called *pointandcircumference*, a title influenced by the title "The Meridian." The speech is the point from which she tries to trace the meridian and circumference of Celan's life and work, and relations between Judaism and Western art. The original speech totals sixteen printed pages in the volume of his collected works, and is printed with large margins. These sixteen pages comprise one-third of his entire published prose output.

There have been many other books, articles, and translations of Celan. What distinguishes this book is Cameron's attempt to interpret Celan in relation to his personal past and to the collective Jewish past in light of a utopian, redemptive, Jewish perspective — one with which he struggled ambivalently. It is also a perspective from which she herself lives and works. In other words, she is also attempting to write a kind of Jewish theological literary criticism. She liberally cites from rabbinic teachers she has learned with, and from Ḥasidism and Jewish thought, as well as performing her professional academic archaeology. The book is part of her own stated project to create a voice and community responsive to the needs of the contemporary Jewish artistic soul.

Toward the end of the volume, she also writes of herself: "Perhaps, too, a returning poet could bring to observance an appreciation of the tradition as the highest art form (so to speak), which could help to strengthen the sustaining qualities of awe and *simcha* [joy]" (CAMERON 2014, p. 278). She then quotes a scientist and poet friend, Haim Sokolik, who had said to her that "living the Orthodox way of life is like living inside a great poem" (CAMERON 2014, p. 278). She often also mentions the great kabbalist, poet, first chief Rabbi of Israel, and giant of modern

Jewish thought, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935). In her opening pages, she suggests her book should be read in the light of Rav Kook's *Orot Ha'Tehiyah* ("The Lights of Renewal").

In a passage Cameron does not cite, Rabbi Kook discusses the meaning of literature in his introduction to that most poetic of all biblical books, the Song of Songs. Commenting on Rabbi Akiva's statement, "If all of Scripture is holy, the Song of Songs is the holy of holies" (Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:25), Rabbi Kook writes that there is a love of God generated by the beauty of creation and G-d's kindnesses; and another love emanates from the exalted nature of the soul to love the complete good. The latter love, he says, is the most precious and essential — and to describe it truly, one needs all the forms of representation and description in the Song of Songs: "Literature and painting and sculpture," he continues, "actualize all the spiritual concepts impressed deep in the human soul." The duty of art is to bring every last "etching secreted in the depths of the thinking and feeling soul" to full expression. But, he cautions, only those deep inner "treasures" whose development "perfumes the air of existence" are worthy of development; those that do the opposite should be kept covered. In other words, there is an art that unveils what ought to be unveiled, and veils what ought to be veiled (MIRSKY 2014, p. 39).

In April, 1970, a week before Celan drowned himself, he began what would be his final poem, one that deals with generating poetry and its audience, and whose last words are "on the Sabbath."

Vineyardmen are redigging
 the dark-houred clock,
 depth upon depth,
 you are reading,
 the Invisible
 summons the wind
 into bounds,
 you are reading,
 The open ones carry
 the stone behind the eye,
 it recognizes you
 on the Sabbath.

Translated from the German by Esther Cameron

Rebleute graben
 die dunkelstündige Uhr um,
 Tiefe um Tiefe,
 du liest,
 es fordert
 der Unsichtbare den Wind
 in die Schranken,
 du liest,
 die Offenen tragen
 den Stein hinterm Aug,
 der erkennt dich,
 am Sabbath. (CAMERON 2014, pp. 149–150)

Rabbi Kook died before the Holocaust. What he would have written and said about literature and poetry had he lived through that experience is hard to know, as is what he would have thought of Paul Celan's work: Did Celan unveil what ought to be unveiled, or veil what ought to be veiled? Celan, finally, took the German language and twisted, tortured, turned it into a new and remarkable idiom to speak the unspeakable.

This review opened with Theodor Adorno's famous comment about writing poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno was a secular philosopher, and no kabbalist, but he wrote something in 1951 that I think Rabbi Kook, Paul Celan, and Esther Cameron could all agree with — and which might also guide all those who seek the place of art in Judaism and human thought after Auschwitz:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from the felt contact with its objects — this alone is the task of thought. (ADORNO 2005, p. 247)

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