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ESSAYS

INTERPRETATION OF SILENCE IN PAUL CELAN'S HOLOCAUST POETICS

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*Perhaps I write because I see no better way to be silent.
There are many kinds of silence and many ways to be silent. ...
Silence ... speaks and is as risky as speech.*

(Schlant 1999:1)

Introduction and Background

After Hitler's ascension to the power in 1933 we witness a rather dramatic increase in anti-Semitic acts", (Brustein 2003: 14) and his success in establishing the Nazi supremacy and anti-Semitic extermination. The magnitude of suffering almost wiped out "The Word" and the word "God" in all the writers except for a few mentions like Etty Hillesum and Corrie ten Boom. While some accounts of suffering stand as testimonies to realize the sustenance and endurance beyond Job or the Hemingwayian heroes; more experiences permanently fractured the self confidence, belief in the Biblical "chosenness" and the power of language. If the romantic period contributed the explosion of voice, then the period of the Holocaust contributed vociferous silence. The bleeding literary voices that came out after the

Holocaust had only a muted hum, like that of a startled swallow still numb with shock. Jane Yolen writes:

Fiction cannot recite the numbing numbers, but it can be that witness, that memory. A storyteller can attempt to tell the human tale, can make a galaxy out of the chaos, can point to the fact that some people survived even as most people died. And can remind us that the swallows still sing around the smokestacks (Stephens et al. 1995).

The subsequent spiritual paralysis shattered the dreams of “the promised land”. The culmination of the frustration can be seen in the famous Richard Rubenstein – Elie Weisel debate. This legacy of Semitic faith underwent a textural change with serious deconstructions and sought the alternative possibilities of hope in the philosophies of the 21st century like existentialism. So much language was worn off after the survivors’ voices tried to preserve the unprecedented history from 1933 to 1945. Literature, art and music archived the grim stories of this darkest plight. Writers like Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank, Halina Birenbaum, Corrie Ten Boom, Etty Hillesum and Paul Celan have put the best of their efforts to anthologize the testimonies of pain in the concentration camps. The words of pathos these writers tried to tune their literature with were too inadequate to portray the Nazi experimental methods in mass executions. Besides one must know why history has muted this “Area of Darkness” to this day.

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The Question of Life and Language after the Holocaust

What is the meaning of human existence after Auschwitz? What remained after the Nazis and the Holocaust? Is “writing poetry after Auschwitz (really) barbaric” as said by Theodre Adorno? These questions may be answered from the point of a Holocaust survivor like Paul Celan who was “almost certainly the major European poet of the period after 1945” (Steiner 1998: 191). His poetry is the most experimental in portraying the collective psyche of the Holocaust victims. The uniqueness of his poetry from other poets of the Holocaust lies in his interpretation of the Holocaust with the technique of silence which results from various concepts. The episode of death with a voluminous witness of every Holocaust survivor in the post-Holocaust world can be paradoxically considered as a metaphor of hope but in most cases, it ends only in expanding the scope of Jewish existentialism expressed in the technique of silence in Paul Celan’s poetry and questioning the ultimate objective of theodicy. If the manifestation of evil is essential for the

omnipotent to demonstrate his power and ways; and if the Jews are his chosen ones through whom he will do this, then why there are no prophets like Moses and Abraham among the Holocaust survivors today?

Origins of Silence

Paul Celan's concept of silence originates from the Nazi terror, murder of his parents, persecution in death camps and alienation, "which he survived in body but not in spirit" (Celan 1972: 9). Mostly it is the outcome of his experience as a Holocaust victim in concentration camps, best portrayed in his most defining poem *Todsfluege*. "Realists and literalists among Celan's critics objected to this 'aestheticising' of the death camps" (Celan 1972: 6). Yet, can a Holocaust survivor's domain of experience, in faltering fragments of language and which itself is a testimony of a painful experience, beyond the words, be denied as 'aestheticising' of the death camps? The dialectics on the art of Paul Celan, in which a "terrible beauty is born," are worth-considering as one of the important issues in the Holocaust Literature. The ambiguity of the contrary theories of silence and vociferousness in his poetry needs a serious analysis.

From a "Polyglot Milieu" and the Narrow Confines

While Celan flourished in *muttersprache* under his mother's influence, on the other hand his childhood in Bukovina was influenced by the speakers of various languages like Ukrainian, Romanian, German, Swabian and Yiddish. So he struggled to give precise expression to his painful experiences in the haze of the language entanglements. Language was like "eye's roundness between the bars" (Celan 1972: 50). Silence in Celan's poetry also originates from his struggle to rise up against the myriad Holocaust experiences in confrontation with two-fold alterity which can be expressed in the view of Martin Heidegger – "the invisible and inaudible mesh of paths or furrows, which bring language into being" (Ziarek 1994: 154). His voice is suppressed between two opposites like French and German, the pre-Holocaust and the post-Holocaust experiences, the self and the other, and between the foreign and the native land, when they encounter with language which is always painfully elusive. In a small poem from *Glottol Stop* he strives to redeem himself from this confinement "between worlds" and move towards an expression instead of withdrawing into silence. He must find his way through "the manifold of meanings" by "trust (ing) the tearstain". Consider the following lines:

Don't sign your name
 between worlds,

 surmount
 the manifold of meanings,

 trust the tearstain,
 learn to live. (Popov & Mc Hugh 2000: 108)

After reading his poetry with its epilepsy, paradox, haltingness, sparser images, idiosyncrasy, broken syntax, reticence, quickening emphases, retards, pauses, caustic articulation, misspoken phrases and neologisms we certainly empathize with the collective Holocaust voice. A poem develops by breath units rather than meter. Consider the following lines from the poem *Largo* which witnesses this in a style similar to Dickensonian unsayability:

More- than-
 death-
 sized we lie
 together, the time-
 less one teems
 under our breathing eyelids (Daniel 1991: 23)

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Silence as a Representing Voice of Celan

According to Celan, the Holocaust has contributed only to the existentialistic silence as its consequence with every surviving victim as a mere entity without substantial words of life in a metaphoric sense. In a poem "Tübingen, January" Celan – himself subjected to a variety of psychiatric treatments in post-war France – while comparing his concept of silence with the loneliness of Friedrich Hölderlin, writes:

Should
 should a man
 should a man come into the world, today, with
 the shining beard of the

patriarchs: he could,
if he spoke of this
time, he
could
only babble and babble
over, over
againagain. (Englund 2012: 125)

Paul Celan is a post-Holocaust voice par excellence representing estrangement, existentialism and madness engulfed by the language of silence. Since they have nothing, nobody left and nowhere to go except the haunting nightmares of the Holocaust, they are lost beings without a remote hope in God resorting to suicidal tendencies and insanity. Waiting for liberty was only a deception. Every day the Holocaust prisoner looked for a way out but in the words of Primo Levi, it was like “dawn came on us like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of our enemies to assist in our destruction” (Fisher 1991: 31). One does not know what comes next or what happens when. In the words of Amos Oz it was like “Something is rising up in the night, something is mounting, gathering, something is silently happening” (Patterson 1992: 1).

This concept of uncertainty can be interpreted from Celan's experience when “in July 1941 S.S. Einsatzgruppe... began destroying Czernowitz's Jewish community” (Caruth 1995: 32). In a poem *Darkness* which records this incident, Celan expresses his fear of the creeping uncertainty and fear that were going to wipe out “six-hundred-year Jewish presence” (Felstiner 2001: 12). In a lyrical response to this political upheaval the poem evokes the note of silence and the image of Keats' immortal “*Grecian Urn*” in the image of “urns” at the outset of the poem but unlike Keats', Celan's poem is about the theme of death. Mark the notes of silence, speechlessness and choking sensation which result from fear, eeriness, and imminence of death:

The urns of stillness are empty.

In the branches
the swelter of speechless songs
chokes black.

Blunt hourposts
grope toward a strange time.

A wingbeat whirls.

For the owls in the heart

death dawns.

Treason falls into your eyes –

My shadow strives with your scream –

The east smokes after this night...

Only dying

Sparkles. (Felstiner 2001: 13)

The first line “The urns of stillness” denote the cremation or funeral urns and the words “stillness” and “empty” attributed mean not only that the life of Celan’s fellow-sufferers will end in emptiness that is without any significance but also that the “urns” are ready for the ashes of their approaching fate. Further they also symbolize the outwardly silence of the concentration camps.

In the next three lines we see the choking sensation of the mass persecutions which may be referred to the line “The branches were broken off” in *Romans*, chapter 11. The branches here are symbolically the Jews about to be cut off and their voice is choked as they are about to be burnt to ash in the “swelter(ing)” heat of the death camps shortly. This fear in the poet’s awareness of the death makes him to “grope toward strange time” and unimaginable violence ahead that will be inflicted by the Nazis. As already “A wingbeat whirls”, the poet senses this. Here there is a hidden image of eagle which symbolizes the “Coat of Arms” of the “Weimar Republic”. So, in the first and the second stanzas those follow the opening line the poet uses surrealistic imagery to portray the concept of silence which is the outcome of uncertainty.

In the next stanza the poet depicts the image of terror that engulfs his land by “the owls in the heart” where “death dawns”. When “treason falls into ... (the poet’s) ... eyes –”, it leads to his struggle between his silence and the scream of those dying, in the line “My shadow strives with your scream –” as he is already aware that “The east ... (Ukraine) ... smokes after this night...” since “Only dying sparkles”. The word “sparkles” indicates either the gunfire or the mass cremation in the death camps like Auschwitz. Throughout the poem one remarkable thing is the technique of silence. There are only two references of sound of which one is muffled and the other is loud – “wingbeat” and “scream”.

The end note of the poem *Darkness* stands for the concept of silence as an outcome of immovability and struggle for expression due to the serious questions of language, time, self and region among which concepts he is caught up and is often exploded into surrealistic fragments of repetition.

The Images of Shulamith & Margret

Language is the only “addressable thou” for Celan after the Holocaust. The “thou” in the poem *Todsfluege* is a silent woman figure which represents the beloved of the Jewish race or the land of milk and honey. But the Holocaust has broken all the dreams. He represents the endless silent fear of the “collective psyche” of his brethren and their haunting sense of being *unhomed*, disruption of their perception and their feeling of peril and imminent extermination which is already decided in the lines:

A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden
hair Margrete
Your ashen hair Shulamith.... (Celan 1972: 33)

The concept of silence can also be seen in the comparison of the images of golden-haired Margret and ashen-haired Shulamit. While the golden-haired Margret stands for Germany, the executioner, symbolizing beauty and riches – the ashen-haired Shulamit symbolizes death, suffering and hopelessness unlike the Biblical Shulamit in the *Song of Solomon*:

Return, Return, O Shulamite; return, return
that we may look upon thee. What will
ye see in the Shulmite? As it were company
of the two armies. (King James Version)

Now the Holocaust saga which is represented in the figures of Shulamit in two different shades indicate physical pain (in reddish brown) and the other indicates both spiritual and psychological pain (grey). Celan paints his pain and deprivation in colors which create a very strong empathetic impact on the reader. Basically Jews believe that the Promised Land is a land of hope where all the Jews will finally settle. It is a utopian world mentioned as a promise in Exodus 33:3:

Unto a land flowing with milk and honey;
 for I will not go up in your midst, because
 you are an obstinate people; otherwise,
 I might destroy you on the way (King James Version)

But Paul Celan's poetry represents the shattered hope that becomes silent after the Holocaust.

Stylistic Analysis of Silence

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According to Celan everything is lost in the Holocaust and nobody belongs to anybody. The victims can neither be dependent nor independent. They have no alternative but to accept their fate and continue with it or to end their life with their own hands which many had done including Celan. So after the Holocaust, according to Celan, the history of a people has been destroyed and the little number of survivors by 1945 had nothing of their own. They were exiles once for all. And for Celan it is only language which had left to record the memories. On the occasion of receiving a literary prize at Bremen he says:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language...

But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech... (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010: 246)

Yet, it is utterly silent. Modifying Martin Heidegger's Christian concept of existence as a "status viatoris", Celan hopes that poetry with its dialogue is like a message in a bottle sent in hope of reaching its destination:

A Poem as a manifestation of language, and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it would wash up on land on heartland perhaps (Lyon 2006: 86).

Doesn't this sensitive and brittle voice evoke Sylvia Plath's in the Bell Jar? If the Holocaust is the sound of terror, its aftermath is silence. And if the language of poetry is a witness to this, the language then is void or silent because "No one bears witness for the witness" (Chare 2011: 68). Preoccupied with the Jewish "collective unconscious", there is an inherent juxtaposed argument in Celan's poetry between remote belief in God and Post-Holocaust shattered spirit, culminating in his last poems which are compressed, spaceless, surfeit and suffocating. In by passage of another he writes:

The trumpet part
deep in the glowing
lacuna
at lamp height
in the time hole:

listen your way in
with your mouth. (Fioretos 1994: 91)

Hearing with mouth indicates the air emptying out of the hollowness of the trumpet ending in silence and while ear is an organ for receiving, mouth is for emptying. Trumpet also denotes the background sound when Moses went up the Sinai which is a symbolic music of revealing God's covenant to his people. Thus the poem is "full of sound ... (but) signifying" silence and death. The ambience in his poems is always either twilight or night. There is a gradual receding into death – his own suicide in Seine in April 1970. According to Primo Levi his poetry is a "pre-suicide writing", a "last inarticulate babble ... (which) ... consternates like the rattle of a dying man" (Magavern 2009: 149). It is "tragic and noble", a natural response to The Holocaust

like Elie Wiesel's *Night*. His poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Celan had transformed the wild discordant note into the poetry of silence with a deep melancholic note.

Interpretation of Fear & Death

The poem *Todesfuge* is the best example of the themes of fear and death. The poem opens with an oxymoron of dark note:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
 we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
 drink it and drink it
 we are digging grave in the sky... (Celan 1972: 33)

The “exilic voice” of Celan draws a painful image of silence. The color black absorbs other colours implying the de-flamboyant setting. The “black milk” is consumed day and night. This suggests the continuous presence of hunger and death. Only death lives and they have no space even for a grave that they must be buried only in the sky. The spread of this absence is a symbolic theme of silence. A Jew, Celan explored the meaning of existence after the Holocaust, between hope and hopelessness with an “Amichaian confrontation” (Mansour et al 2014: 72) and towards the end it was silence that remained in his poems. Fear of murder is another thing which haunted Celan till the end.

As a Holocaust survivor, he was preoccupied with the fear of being caught by his parents' murderers. Moreover he was writing in his mother-tongue (German) to take his mother's murderers to task. The case of his fear can be compared to Harold Pinter's (also a Jew) Anti-Semitic fear of Fascists coming back to life in London which he expressed through silences in his most acclaimed work *The Birthday Party*. “Celan's ever-deepening fear, and mistrust of people, even close friends” (Joris 2001: 5) left him aphasic in his writings resulting in chronic stuttering and epileptically broken phrases. “His pathological fear of being hurt” (Joris 2001: 207) pervades in the frequent surrealistic leaps of indecisiveness being displaced in a *Waiting for Godot*-like absurdity of life; in fact paradoxically waiting for death. Mark this pattern in “The Straitening”:

Came, came.

Came a word, came,

came through the night

wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash.

Ash, ash.

Night.

Night – and – night. – Go

to the eye, the moist one. (Celan 1972: 59)

These babbles of unsayability do not just denote silence but also a kind of voice broken from language. As Dennis J. Schmidt puts it, “such silence is not to be confused with mere quiet but needs to be heard as the unvocalised voice of the poem... a voice estranged from language, rendering the effort to listen to language in the poem rare, demanding, and painful at once” (Wolfson & Brown 2006: 197). Celan’s poetry is a metaphor of a silence in broken syllables of death-signifying moan which is a tragic outcome of a long-haunted apocalyptic fear that muted millions of voices. His language is that of the dead. Theodor Adorno says, “Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: it is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars” (1997: 422). Celan’s poetry is a most important part of the Holocaust Literature particularly as a literature of silence.

Death is an important theme that pervades throughout his poetry. With ‘night’ and ‘autumn’ as metaphoric portrayals of death, he tunes silence with a vociferous prosody. There is a frequent withdrawal from life that even the daybreak appears to be nightfall when he says, “the night is the night, it begins with morning” (Celan 1972: 31). Fear of death stills the life everywhere and very moment in the ‘death camps’ proceeds in a snail-slow pace, the pain of which he mumbles in silent, explosive words:

Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.

From the nuts we shell time and we teach it to walk:

Then time returns to the shell. (Celan 1972: 32)

Conclusion

To conclude in the light of Theodore Adorno's reconsideration of his own dictum – "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" – Paul Celan's Holocaust-born epochal art restates "*only* poetry is possible after Auschwitz" Only the poetry of silence can be the best metaphor to represent the history of ashes because

All the poetry there is in the world
appears to rise out of ashes. (Mahapatra 1992: 9)

Though Mahapatra's words cannot be justified in all the cases, they are true in the sense of what kind of themes is the genre of poetry precise for and its emotional depth with a lyrical intensity? When the greatest poets in history like King David, Charles Baudelaire, John Keats, John Berryman, Emile Dickenson, Edgar Elan Poe, and Sylvia Plath are considered for instance, the essence of their poetry is the remnant of what they suffered either mentally or physically which burnt them to the quintessence of what their place in history is. When Berryman saw his father's suicide, the theme of death became the subject all his poetry culminating in *The Dream Songs*. Leonard Cohen says, "If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash" (Reiner 2012: 11). The consequence of the capacity to suffer or endure the ordeal of a classic magnitude is Cohen's metaphor of poetry – ash because in John Cage's words. "There is poetry as soon as we realize that we possess nothing" (Courtney and Keppler 2013: 1).

So to justify, that only poetry is the precise genre, in the light of the thematic analysis of silence in Paul Celan's Holocaust poetics, one must examine how the experience of tribulations confronts with the scope of language "thinking through pain" in a Heideggerian sense and comes to a staggering halt at the periphery thus breaking down into most valuable nothings from the permanently choked voices of history. We come across the most vociferous adjectival and adverbial manifestations of silence of these voices in the poems like *Speak, you Also*. It may be concluded that if according to the poetry of Celan the thematic essence of the Holocaust

persecution is silence and if ash is its metaphor, then the process of the annihilation portrayed in both the topographical and the individual picture of the poem justifies this.

He insists the silent – “you also” – who have nothing; who are unworthy to speak or rather who permanently lost their voice, to give their last “inarticulate babble” before they “grope your (their) way up” which points to death. The execution of six million Jews creates a metaphoric truth that an episode of history was wiped out from the world map because had there been no Holocaust, that absence of today might have been probably something else remarkable. This diminishing picture and its human voice and the burning sensation of which is about to be ash is obvious in the lines:

But now shrinks the place where you stand:

Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?

.....

Thinner you grow less knowable,

.....sand dunes

of wandering words. (Celan 1972: 43)

The words like “shrinks”, “stripped by shade”, “thinner you grow”, “less knowable”, “sand dunes”, and “wandering words” contribute to the deteriorating pattern of both voice and picture. Especially the phrase “the sand dunes of wandering words” is evocative of the ashy picture of the cremation of corpses which in Celan’s words disappeared into ash before they expressed their pain and wish. Lastly the opening line of the poem *Aspen tree* proves the role poetry in explaining the significance of ash in the thematic richness in the concealed epigrammatic images of “ash”, “pen” and “tree” in the words “Aspen tree” connoting the tragic account of the Holocaust; and those died are leaves which also mean pages of history. “They glance white into the dark” speaks of their eyes towards death or God which “white” signifies or hopeless future which Celan expresses clearer in the line “Upward. Grope your way up” in the poem *Speak, You Also*.

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ABSTRACT

Interpretation of Silence in Paul Celan’s Holocaust Poetics

To discuss in the light of Theodre Adorno’s reconsideration of his own dictum – “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” – Paul Celan’s Holocaust-born epochal art restates “*only* poetry is possible after Auschwitz”. The Shoah stands as a testimony of the most painful endurance in history thus permanently fracturing the self-confidence especially of many Jews and their belief in the “Biblical Chosenness”. The consequent literature of continuing silence with a guilt of survival has redefined the term suffering especially in the poetry of Paul Celan which if turned out to be the “last inarticulate babble” had the merit of silencing words into a condensed metaphoric image of recurring complexity that finally brings out a paradoxical message with a strange “capacity to have the incapacity to speak”. Unlike the poetry of the Romantics which was verbally vociferous, Celan’s was more so with silence being a displaced being like a blurred horizon between the Pre-Holocaust land and the Post-Holocaust sky. Silence as a form of dense literary genre which is like “a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea” in Celan’s poetry starts at the periphery of Auschwitz cries. Ironically enough his suicide culminates in this mission. His metaphoric voice sets out for excavation of memories in Shoah painfully encountering aphasia with a parallel pursuit for a language that replays the action and music of the perpetual death in the still fresh picture of ash-flake rain or charred chunks of human flesh. Celan explored the darkest domains of human history with a polysemeous canon and systematically constructed the art of silence as an emerging literary consequence where the words become cryptic, fractured and attain what Gilles Deleuze and Guttari said: “the becoming minor of the major language”.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust, Existential Silence, Language Grille, Persecution, Death, Ash.

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