

The Idiom *of* the Poem

A Foreword

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Compared to most of modern poetry, which has been qualified by its tendency toward muteness, Paul Celan's poems pose a particular challenge to the reader. Indeed, according to *The Meridian*, Celan's sole text on poetry, "the poem does speak" (Celan, *Meridian*, 31a). And yet, his poems, especially the later ones, are held to be impenetrable, obscure, or hermetic. However, on the other hand, obscurity and hermeticism are considered to be essential characteristics of modern poetry.¹ Therefore, the question to be asked in the case of Celan concerns the kind of obscurity of his poems, especially since the poems speak in a language that has gone "through terrifying muteness, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech" (Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34; translation modified). What kind of intelligibility characterizes an obscurity associated with poems that go through a language that experienced its own loss as a result of "what happened [*das, was geschah*]" and that are dialogically "headed toward," that is, "toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality" (35)? What kind of impenetrability might characterize a poem for which this experience is one that can no longer be attributed to some epochal distinction such as "modern" but also, even though it is closer to Hölderlinean poetry than to Goethean, no longer fits the Mallarméan striving for the absolute and universal poem? When, in the Bremen speech, Celan famously speaks of the poem as a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea, he emphasizes not only that it speaks in hopes of an addressee but also, and especially, that the

poem is always a singular address rather than an instance of an epochal genre, modern or not; in other words, the poem is not “wearing a uniform” (Dostoevsky, *Writer’s Diary*, 52), to quote in this context an unlikely source. If what is new about the poem today is that it “stays mindful of its dates,” this does not mean that it is “modern” but, rather, that it in a way belongs to a genre all by itself (Celan, *Meridian*, 31a). Perhaps this would even be something other than a genre to begin with! If, moreover, such a letter headed toward an Other is obscure, how does this destination shape its intelligibility? If, in all its obscurity, the poem is intelligible, it is because its singularity consists not in an individual personality and his or her purely personal or even idiosyncratic nature but, rather, in a resistance to all forms of understanding that, already in advance, have decided its meaning. Needless to say, since such singularity resists all appropriation, it inevitably remains obscure, but it is also, for this very reason, (minimally) intelligible as the universal trait of a singularity in all its irreducible uniqueness. This is thus an obscurity that must be respected, one that solely manifests itself in readings that themselves can and must remain singular. The reader of this foreword will by now already have understood that, hereafter, I will be interested in the readability and intelligibility of a poet who is also, as we will see, a thinker.

Pablo Oyarzun’s *Between Celan and Heidegger* is a philosopher’s book on Paul Celan. There is nothing particular in this respect, since a number of prior thinkers have been drawn to the study of poetry. Within the present context, Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of Friedrich Hölderlin—but also of Rainer Maria Rilke, Georg Trakl, and Stefan George—is a case in point. Furthermore, though Heidegger’s interest in Celan’s poetry did not materialize in a written philosophical commentary on his work, Celan’s own complex and subtle debate, both in *The Meridian* and in his poetry, with Heidegger’s thought and understanding of language is testimony to what has been called a dialogue between the poet and the thinker. Celan’s poetry has certainly attracted considerable attention from literary critics, philologists, and poetologists, but remarkable in his case is the consistent attention his work has drawn from philosophers and philosophically sophisticated literary critics. With this, the question arises: what is it in Celan’s writings that challenges philosophical thought? Among its many accomplishments, Oyarzun’s study not only engages the philosophers’ accounts of the poetry in question, along with the poet’s relation to the thinker, but also inquires into what motivates this philosophical interest in the first place. In short, it is an inquiry into the stakes of the philosophical encounter with poetry.

The Meridian, a speech given by Celan on the occasion of receiving the Büchner prize in 1960, is not only devoted to Georg Büchner's reflections on art and poetry, as the circumstances demanded, but also a debate with the poetological speeches of several previous recipients of the prize, among whom figures—to name only one—Gottfried Benn. Taking his point of departure from Büchner's reflections on the complex relation between art and poetry, indeed, the singular occasion of the award presents Celan with the unique opportunity of elaborating on the nature of the poem and, more precisely, "the poem *today*" (Celan, *Meridian* 32a; emphasis mine). Because of his concern with the poem's datedness, Celan's speech already, unlike speeches made by previous recipients of the prize, ceases to be poetological: it is not a theoretical speech on poetry in general or on poetry from an epochal perspective like, for example, "modern" poetry. Its prose, it has been observed, is also that of the poet as a poet.² But what does this mean in the specific case of Celan? First and foremost, Celan's is a "speech," that is, a performance that, as Kristina Mendicino remarks, must be approached on its own terms and through the position it assumes "within a tradition of public speaking, while resisting and participating in the tradition of rhetoric" (Mendicino, "Other Rhetoric," 633). This intrinsic resistance of the speech to its own public form manifests itself in several ways. First, the talk anaphorically repeats the rhetorical figure of the apostrophe ("Ladies and gentlemen"), especially toward the end, where, "from a transparent means of opening the speech," this figure turns into "an insistent poetic figure" (633–34). Furthermore, "the pervasiveness of citation throughout the address," whose aim as a rhetorical device is to "[bring] a witness to the fore" in view of persuasion, "overwhelms the speaker's voice" to such a degree, indeed, as to "render it impossible to locate from whom this speech comes in any univocal way" (634–35). In short, through the "intensification of a rhetorical technique" required by public speech, *The Meridian* turns this technique "into something else, threatening to obscure the rhetor rather than submit to his purpose" (635). In both cases, Celan's rhetoric or, rather, what Mendicino calls "an 'Other' rhetoric," an altering rhetoric, one that "speak[s] *in the cause of an Other*—who knows, perhaps in the cause of a *wholly Other*," "bends his speech toward poetry" (635, 643–50).

Yet, in *The Meridian*, Celan also enlarges on a subject matter. What, then, about this text's discursive dimension? How does Celan meet the challenge of discoursing in his sole text on what he terms "the poem today"? Even supposing that one could make the distinction between the rhetorical and the discursive dimensions of a public speech, the latter would still have

a rhetoricity of its own. And yet, no one particular figure dominates it—say, for example, the figure of inversion. Indeed, if it is true that, as Celan advances in his text, the poem's images are “what is perceived and is to be perceived once and always again once, and only here and now,” it follows that “the poem would be the place where all tropes and metaphors want to be carried ad absurdum” (Celan, *Meridian*, 39b). Furthermore, what is true of the poem in all its uniqueness is no less true of a prose text such as *The Meridian*. Not through any one particular rhetorical figure but, rather, through what I call, for better or worse, the “deconstruction” of rhetoric as a whole does a text like this accomplish its aim, namely, opening up on the level of discursiveness a space not for dialogical consent or for the fusion of self and other but, rather, for an encounter that preserves that which divides it in order for it to take place. However, as we learn from *Between Celan and Heidegger*, such a “deconstruction” of rhetoric is in no way a nostalgic return to an immediacy of encounter. Nor does it amount to an annihilation of one extreme by its opposite. On the contrary, it consists in tracing a line through opposite poles, a line that keeps them vacillating in their “between.”

As is obvious from *The Meridian*, while meeting the challenge that the occasion represents by taking as his starting point writings on poetry by Büchner, according to whom art (distinct in a complex way from poetry) is the business of market criers, barkers, or monkeys and marionette players, Celan also engages the tradition of the more academic and technical poetological approaches to poetry and their established conventions. This characterization of art and theorizing about it is, unmistakably, indebted to Büchner. The same obtains when Celan observes that art, along with discourses about it such as that of Büchner's Lenz in the story of the same name, “creates I-distance [*Ich-Ferne*]” (Celan, *Meridian*, 20d). Yet, when we read:

Ladies and gentlemen, please, take note: “One wishes one were a Medusa's head” in order to . . . grasp the natural as the natural with the help of art! / *One* wishes to does of course not mean here: *I* wish to,

it is shown that, though citing Lenz and apart from discussing art according to Büchner, Celan is also in the same breath arguing that art, at its most fundamental, belongs to the realm of the Heideggerian *Man*, a realm of inauthenticity that *The Meridian* characterizes in terms of uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*), a realm in which the *I* is not at home (16a–b).

With Gottfried Benn in mind, Celan qualifies as “artistic” not only the latter’s art but also, implicitly, his technical elaborations on “modern lyric.” The predicate “artistic” refers to academic discourse’s nature as a public theatrical spectacle and intellectual entertainment. Celan evokes this artistic, artificial, and mechanical dimension of modern poetry in what seems, at first, to be a rejection. Moreover, it also has all the appearances of the entirely conventional gesture by which natural immediacy and the merely private or personal are construed as the opposites of art. But the specificity of the accomplishments of *The Meridian* begin to come into view when one pays attention to the fact that, rather than one of these opposites, Celan seeks to secure the space between them and in which he locates the place of poetry and of “the poem today.” In spite of the rejection of art, poetry needs art. It must “tread the route of art” in order to set itself free from it and, thus, make “the step” to address itself (*spricht sich zu*) to not only the human other but also any “opposite [*Gegenüber*]” (Celan, *Meridian*, 21, 35a). In distinction from the “distance of the I” that characterizes art and the discourse about it, however, does poetry need the private or the personal? No doubt, but only on the condition that, in the Celanian perspective, one understands poetry as dated, singular, and yet as having a universality of its own, one that resists not only universality as we know it but also its opposite in the immediacy of the particular. Rather than a rejection, the Celanian approach to the poem is of the order of a resistance against embracing art, subjectivity, or both.

Poetry, according to *The Meridian*, is not artlike, and—unlike art—one cannot endlessly chat about it. It originates in a certain lack of understanding of what is said about art, suddenly, in the same way as Lucile’s counterword, “Long live the King,” irrupts in Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*. Rather than “a declaration of loyalty to the ‘ancien régime,’” the exclamation is, by contrast, “an act of freedom,” a “step” that “intervenes” in the struggle between the right and the leftist defenders of the revolution, a “step” that has something personal about it, not in the sense of the private but, rather, in that it consists in the singularity of the individual (Celan, *Meridian*, 6c–8a, 31f). This something personal has “direction and destiny,” while its “absurdity” is the index of its specific intelligibility compared to that of the words piled upon words in artful fashion by all the defenders of the revolution (5b). As Celan remarks, Lucile’s counterword is testimony of “the presence of the human” in the face not only of the Regime of Terror but also of the rhetoric of those who are its victims—“homage . . . to the majesty of the absurd” (8c). Lucile’s exclamation, her counterword (*Gegenwort*), is “absurd” because of

the insistence of presence (*Gegenwart*), of the now in all its singularity, and because of its being dated. Celan writes: “That, ladies and gentlemen, has no name fixed once and for all, but I believe that this is . . . poetry” (9).

This is, then, what Celan understands by *Dichtung*, along with what about the latter is *precise*: its concern with the singular and the datedness of its “step.”³ Not unlike Lucile, “one who is blind to art” (Celan, *Meridian*, 6c) and whose sudden interjection interrupts the artful words and theatrical speeches of her former companions who are being driven to the place of the revolution to be executed, Pablo Oyarzun *resists* the highly, often astoundingly brilliant and intimidating scholarship on Celan in *Between Celan and Heidegger*. In doing so, in an equally brilliant fashion, Oyarzun’s text makes us hear and see in Celan’s poetry not only what cannot be reduced to a Heideggerian interpretation but also what withstands Celan scholarship, however learned it proves to be. Again like Lucile, Oyarzun has heard and acknowledged the language of scholarship, but, having heard it spoken, he also distances himself from it and refuses to understand it if, however critically, understanding means to subscribe to the interpretations that it offers. The uniqueness of Celanian poetry, he holds, is that it literally winds itself out of the Western mode of thinking about poetry, a mode of thinking presupposed by any reading that seeks to understand it in the frame of a purported dialogue with Heidegger, and into an other space. This does not mean that there has not been something like a dialogue between Heidegger and Celan. But such a dialogue has only taken place, indeed, if it can be shown that Celan resisted Heidegger’s Western bent and, in a way similar to what Lucile achieved with her counterword, that this dialogue is interrupted by something that “intervenes”—the “between” of something non-Western.

Rather than hasten to conclusions, however, I wish to turn to the importance that *The Meridian* plays in Oyarzun’s text. In this respect, a reflection on the title of Celan’s speech may first be warranted, not simply because *Between Celan and Heidegger* is a thorough exposition of this speech, but also because the way this title punctuates Oyarzun’s elaborations may already point to what is at stake in his reading of this text. Even before asking what the one (*einen*)—that is, also the singular—meridian is that, at the end of his talk, Celan claims to have found and touched again, we must ask what “a” meridian is in the first place, although “one should not see in *The Meridian*,” as Oyarzun remarks, “the essence of a sovereign word” (*Between Celan and Heidegger*, 17).

Known as an avid reader of dictionaries, in all likelihood, Celan may also have consulted them in the context of preparing his speech. I do so,

too, and learn that the origin of this foreign word “meridian” makes it, indeed, a very complex one. From the dictionary, I take it that the term derives from the Latin *meridianus*, itself the adjective of *meridies*, meaning midday or noon. *Meridianus* signifies “of or belonging to mid-day,” noon, that is, “the meridian hour” (*meridies*), but it also signifies in its figural sense “the middle of a given time” (Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, 1137), that is, the time midway between the times of sunrise and sunset, *medius* signifying “middle” (or “south”). The word “meridian” thus refers to the midday line, the line that connects all places on the earth that simultaneously share midday and where, during that time, the position reached by the sun is at its highest. In short, then, geographically or terrestrially speaking, the meridian corresponds to the line or degree of longitude that cuts the equator at a right angle.⁴

Yet, I learn also from the dictionary that the word has a double sense, astronomical and geographical. In geography, the meridian, or midday circle, signifies “a great circle [of the earth] which passes through the equator in two opposed points, and which passes as well through both poles, dividing the globe of the earth in each place where it is drawn into an *eastern* and a *western* part. Each place has its meridian. In other words, from each place I can draw a circle, which cuts through the equator and the poles” (*Brockhaus Conversations-Lexikon*, 3:126). In astronomy, the meridian designates “the great circle of the celestial sphere that passes through its poles and the observer’s zenith” (*Webster’s*, 1203). However, before further exploring the word’s celestial sense, let me take note of the fact that, when the dictionaries also—on the basis of Latin literary references—identify the meridian as a *circulus meridianus* with the equator, the meridian as the greatest among the latitudinal lines is not only seen to be the line that divides the earth into a northern and southern hemisphere; it also has connotations of what, geographically, is situated in the south or belongs to the south. Furthermore, as the equator, the *circulus meridianus* is thus also understood in view of the equator’s equalizing properties, in the sense that it not only partitions the earth’s surface in two equal halves, south and north, but also divides all its hours through their middle. Finally, this circle may also occur midway between the earth and the sky.

Indeed, distinct from its geographical or terrestrial meaning, the meridian also has an astronomic or celestial meaning. As the midday circle, it is the great circle that, in the celestial sphere, passes through the north and south poles (of the celestial sphere), as well as through the zenith and nadir in whose plane the terrestrial observer is situated, dividing the plane into the

latter's upper and lower meridian. In the same way that, stretching from one pole to the other, the terrestrial longitudinal semicircle stands vertically on the equator, the celestial semicircle "stands [also] vertically on the observer's horizon and cuts the latter at its north- or midnight point, as well as at its south or midday point," and it is thus perpendicular to the celestial equator. "Both points are connected with one another through the *midday-line*. By passing through the meridian, the stars are for their observer at their highest position (meridian-, midday-height), or, twelve hours later, at their lowest height (midnight-low)" (*Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*, 425). Finally, since an astronomical meridian is in the same plane as the terrestrial meridian projected onto the celestial sphere, its number of meridians is also infinite.

It should be clear by now that the word "meridian" is not just any word. If "each place has its meridian," then it is a word that has to be thought on the basis of all its meanings, which imply connections that divide and divisions that connect all places and all times, such as south/north, east/west, upper/lower, day/night, sunrise/sunset, and in particular the divide between the terrestrial and the celestial, the earth and the sky. It is a word that also names the middle, the "between"—midday, midnight—and is itself situated between the poles that it interlinks while at the same time keeping them at a distance, resisting their proximity. Is this word, which Celan has found and touched, not perhaps a counterword—a *Gegenwort*—to the term "das Geviert," a counterword against the unifying and harmonizing movement of the Heideggerian "fourfold"? Like Lucile's "absurd" exclamation with which Celan opens his speech, then, he closes it with reference to a word just as provocative.

Undoubtedly, Celan's speech is a debate with the academic discourses on poetry, but it is also, as several scholars—including Oyarzun—have noted, a debate with the Heideggerian conception of language and poetry. At the end of his speech, Celan "undertake[s] some topos research" into the four regions or topoi from whence Karl Emil Franzos and Reinhold Lenz came, two figures to whom he refers in the speech and whom he "met on the way here and in Georg Büchner," but this is also a study of "the place of [his] origin" (Celan, *Meridian*, 49a–b). These four topoi are places of origin, regions from whence all four named—Franzos, Lenz, Büchner, and Celan himself—come. Notwithstanding the fact that none of these regions can be found, since none of them exist, Celan claims to find something: "I find something—like language—immaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while—cheerfully—even crossing the tropics: I find . . . a *meridian*" (50c). Rather than a region whose poles or

extremes are gathered in one unifying ring (*Reigen*), as in Heidegger's fourfold or topology of Being, Celan finds a meridian in pursuing the study of topoi. What exactly is meant here by a meridian is not easy to understand. But let me emphasize that Celan finds *a* meridian, a singular meridian, and not *the* meridian! Needless to say, if this meridian traverses both poles and returns to itself, crossing and even crossing out (*Durchkreuzendes*) with the tropics also all *topoi*, that is, all accommodating (*Commode*) commonplaces, it is barely distinct from the gathering ringing of the Heideggerian fourfold.⁵ Therefore, it is crucial to understand the almost nothing—or to use Celan's word, to which Oyarzun devotes a whole chapter of his study, the “doit [*Deut*]”—that separates this meridian from the gathering fourfold. Seemingly made in passing, Celan's remark that, by crossing the tropics, the meridian also “merrily [*heiterweise*]” crosses out all topoi shows this meridian to be of the order of language—more precisely, for Celan, the order of what language is and does. Indeed, what he claims to find after “having . . . taken this impossible route, this route of the impossible,” the path of the study of topoi on which he embarked in the presence of his audience, “is something . . . like language” (Celan, *Meridian*, 50a–c). That is, what he claims to find is not language as it is commonly understood but rather something that, by crossing out language as constituted by topoi, is language in another sense—“language actualized [*aktualisierte Sprache*]” rather than “language as such [*Sprache schlechthin*]” (33a–b). “I find what connects and leads, like the poem, to an encounter” (50b).⁶ What distinguishes the singular meridian—that which Celan holds to have touched “just now again”—ever so slightly from something like the fourfold is, first, that it is found only in the singularity of its occurrence and, second, that it is the object of something as singular as a touch. Furthermore, the traversing and the crossing out of which it consists are what binds, and it binds by separating and dividing. A meridian is a singular happening, just like the poem, and like the poem it enables an encounter. It is the happening of an encounter, and it is also, as a movement that returns to itself like a circle, the “between” or nondialectical middle of all the places and commonplaces that it crosses and crosses out. It is the u-topic place not of a community to come but, rather, of a community that comes into being in the fragile moment of the encounter.

All of this does not make *The Meridian* a poem—the difference is preserved—but *a* meridian has made this speech the event of an encounter like that effectuated by the poem. At this juncture, I wish to evoke a remark made by Emmanuel Levinas about Celan's speech. Having described it as

a text “in which Celan gives us what he is able to perceive of his poetic act,” Levinas adds that it is “an elliptic, allusive text, constantly interrupting itself in order to let through, in the interruptions, his other voice, as if two or more discourses were on top of one another, with a strange coherence, not that of a dialogue, but woven in [*ourdie selon*] a counterpoint that constitutes their immediate melodic unity—the texture [*tissu*] of his poems” (Levinas, *Proper Names*, 41). If, indeed, Celan’s speech—a prose text, as well as a discursive engagement with poetry and its relation to art—is interwoven by way of a counterpoint, if not even several counterpoints like the fabric of his poems, then his poems become instrumental to the interpretation of the speech’s vibrant formulations. In *Between Celan and Heidegger*, Oyarzun engages in precisely such a reading of *The Meridian* that allows it to be interrupted in all its moments by its counterpoints. Yet, rather than poetizing the speech by weaving Celan’s poems into the discursive text, his reading breaks down the classical divide between discursive speech and poetry. It is from the complex tissue that the text of *The Meridian* reveals when read in this manner, rather than being interpreted, that Oyarzun engages several among the most sophisticated interpretations, mostly philosophical, of Celan’s work.

As I have already noted, Celan is generally considered to be cryptic, impenetrable, in short, a “hermetic poet” (Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 164). His poetry is exposed to “the ‘idiomatic’ threat: the threat of hermeticism and obscurity,” and his poems, consequently, are “completely untranslatable, including within their own language” (Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, 56, 13). All “the approaches traditionally employed in literary interpretation” (Szondi, *Celan Studies*, 27) fail in the face of poems that challenge intelligibility vis-à-vis these traditional tools. Right from the beginning of his reading, Oyarzun takes issue with these claims, noting that “obscurity” is, first of all, the inevitable correlate of a hermeneutic approach to the poems, one that understands itself as concerned with an intended meaning of literary texts that, through interpretation, is to be brought to light in univocal clarity. It is not by accident, therefore, that *Between Celan and Heidegger* opens and closes with chapters devoted to explicitly hermeneutic approaches to Celan’s writings: first that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and then, in the concluding chapter, that of Peter Szondi. It is this assumption that the poem intends a unitary and transparent meaning different from its linguistic formation that drives “the zeal of hermeneutics” and explains, in Oyarzun’s words, “Gadamer’s grandiose deafness to what the poem says” (Oyarzun, *Between Celan and Heidegger*, 3, 4–5).⁷ Distinct from Gadamer’s emphasis on the

univocity of the poem is Szondi's hermeneutic approach, which conceives of itself as a hermeneutic reading rather than a hermeneutic interpretation. As Szondi holds, reading is the only appropriate response to a poem that has ceased to be mimetic—no longer a representation of something real but likewise, I add, not merely formal, as so much of modern poetry—and that is to be understood as a text “projecting itself, constituting itself as reality” (Szondi, *Celan Studies*, 31). “The language of reading,” Szondi states, is the only appropriate approach to a poem when the latter is “neither verbal nor discursive” (38). As his reading of Celan's “Engführung” demonstrates in an admirable fashion, reading requires untiring attention to the nonsemantic complexity of the poem, such as the structure of the words themselves, their own tissue. This is true especially in the case of Celan's considerably expanded vocabulary through compounded words (*paranomasia*), as well as the textual tissue deriving from their undecidable syntactic relations to one another, the caesuras that punctuate the poem, the hiatuses and ellipses that interrupt it, the movements of its rhetorical figures, the movements of inversion, *correctio*, or *obscuritas* that affect these figures themselves, and so forth. With a poem, one is from the start in a territory other than that with which one is familiar, a territory of “ambiguity [which is] neither a defect nor purely a stylistic trait, [but] determines the structure of the poetic text itself” (29). Since an “essential ambiguity” characterizes the territory of the poem, to ask what its words mean is to disregard the laws of their composition—or as Szondi holds, in the case of “Engführung,” their musical composition (66–67). In reading a poem such as “Engführung,” it is not “a matter of selecting one of several meanings, but of understanding that they *coincide*, rather than differ. Ambiguity, which has become a means of knowledge, shows us the unity of what only appeared to be difference” (82). Compared to Gadamer's hermeneutics of univocity, then, Szondi's hermeneutic reading is one of polysemy whose unity, furthermore, is of Hegelian inspiration. It is, Szondi holds, the result of “the mediation and thus the negation of [. . .] opposed elements, the negation of negation” (80).

Oyarzun's reading of Celan is suspended *between* these two poles of hermeneutics. In the opening chapter, he distances himself from an interpretation that claims that each Celanian poem has a distinct unity of meaning, and in the concluding chapter he distances himself from a reading that, despite its admirable complexity, also reunifies the plurality and ambiguity of meanings despite having been called “essential.” In what follows, I wish to engage the space of reading *The Meridian* and Celanian poetry—the “between”—opened up by Oyarzun's text, which returns at its

end to its beginning, in order to search for what Oyarzun, in turn, finds along this trajectory.

Let us, then, also take note of the titles of the beginning and concluding chapters. They are identical: “Dialogue.” The central chapter, chapter four, is titled “Language.” Suspending these titles between, to quote *The Meridian*, “Hasenöhrchen’ [hare’s ears], that is, something not completely fearless, that listens beyond itself and the words” (Celan, *Meridian*, 48c), the quotation marks are also an indication that both are translations from the German: *Gespräch* and *Sprache*, respectively. From the opening chapter to the concluding chapter, while passing through the tropics of language or, more precisely, through Celan’s resistance to a topical understanding of language—what he calls “metaphor-flurry” in a poem from *Breathturn*—a more profound understanding of “dialogue” will have emerged (Oyarzun, *Between Celan and Heidegger*, 135 note 22). For the time being, however, it is certainly appropriate to note that *Between Celan and Heidegger* is also about a particular “dialogue” that began in 1967 with Celan’s first visit to Heidegger in Todtnauberg, a dialogue that, while it “delighted the thinker” (Petzet, *Auf einen Stern zugehen*, 209), left the poet bitterly disappointed, as demonstrated by the poem of the same name (“Todtnauberg”), as well as testimony from some of those involved.⁸ Hailed as a summit talk of *the* thinker and *the* poet and described by one of its witnesses—Gerhard Neumann—as an epochal event, the meeting has been the subject of numerous scholarly discussions. Let us note that such an interpretation of the event is, from the start, already an interpretation from a Heideggerian perspective. Oyarzun’s intervention in this discussion resists not only the pathos with which a number of scholars have spoken of it but also the idea that the encounter that took place was, indeed, a dialogue. If an encounter took place between both, between thought and poetry, it was an “encounter without encounter,” and not a dialogue but rather, at best, “something like a dialogue” occurred at the occasion (Oyarzun, *Between Celan and Heidegger*, 6 and 9, 10). Since there is no question that Celan’s poetry and his thought of the poem—and *The Meridian* is a case in point—were always defined by not only a certain proximity to Heidegger’s thought but also, at the same time, an extreme distance from the latter, Oyarzun assiduously focuses on the “between” opened up by the impossible encounter and dialogue. In question is an examination not of the abstract intermediate space presupposed by all encounter and dialogue but, rather, of the “between” of this complex exchange in all its radical singularity, owing to what Oyarzun calls Celan’s “incarnated resistance, a resistance that comes imposed and surpasses all

sentiment or certainty even of proximity” and that is “prior to every purpose, intention, or will” (8). If the author can speak of “the experience of the ‘between’” (10), it is because this “between,” which opens the space of all being-with and togetherness, is rooted in the resistance that singularity, not to be confused with privacy, represents as such. This peculiar “between” is also the language of the poem, which in Oyarzun’s words is “the place to which an other and all others are called” (10). The place of the “between,” the place “of *inter-esse*, which makes possible *Mitsein* and *Miteinandersein*” (10), is something like a dialogue. In the same way as, according to *The Meridian*, the poem resists and frees itself from art in order to be a poem, for something worthy of the name “dialogue” to occur, it must resist what is commonly understood by the term. In other words, the dialogue that took place between Celan and Heidegger, the former’s poetry and thought having always been in an intimate relation with the latter’s thought, has thus been a dialogue in resistance to a dialogue about language, about language in general, in the name of individuated speech, in the name of what Oyarzun, with Celan, also refers to as a wound and, in particular, as the “raw [*Krudes*]” (8), which resist all translation.

At this point, I wish to bring into greater relief what I believe to be a fundamental gesture and remarkable tonality of not only Oyarzun’s reading of the hermeneutical attempt to reduce the so-called obscurity of Celan’s poetry and his prose by establishing the unity of its univocal or polysemic meaning but also his reading of a variety of outstanding philosophical discussions of Celan’s work—in particular by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Emmanuel Levinas, Werner Hamacher, and Jacques Derrida—intent on dispelling some of its obscurity. First, however, I should emphasize that, although Oyarzun acknowledges his own indebtedness to these brilliant readings, it is precisely their brilliancy that, for him, is at issue. Indeed, the accounts of Celan’s poetry that Oyarzun takes on stand out not only for their impeccable scholarship and the impressive discipline of their readings but also for their striking lucidity. If Oyarzun guards against these readings, whose impressive rigor he nonetheless adopts, it is certainly not because they would promote a facile lucidity, however laborious, but rather because their very lucidity risks the paradox of covering over what shines forth through the obscurity of the poems themselves. Take, for example, Oyarzun’s response to Levinas’s emphasis that Celan’s poetry is to be understood in terms of the relation to the Other that precedes all dialogic forms. Undoubtedly, Levinas has “hit upon” something crucial, Oyarzun acknowledges (*Between Celan and Heidegger*, 14). Yet, as Oyarzun also remarks, “in this enhancement,

I perceive an excessive force,” a force brilliant to the point of breaking the balance of the constant fragile oscillations between self and Other, and “the more and less than being” (14). From the beginning of *Between Celan and Heidegger*, Levinas’s interpretation serves as a reference point for Oyarzun’s acknowledgement that, in the following chapters, his readings will “take more or less distance” from the major commentaries on Celan and his poems (15). At first, such a caveat would seem to be a function of the attitude one expects from a scholar or critic, and yet something else is at stake here. At times blunt, at times subtle, Oyarzun’s resistance or reticence to adopting the conclusions of other readings, however philosophically astute, serves to prevent the “between,” with which he associates Celanian singularity, from fading from view. As Celan’s several encounters with Heidegger demonstrate, as well as the poem “Todtnauburg” and the speech *The Meridian*, something like a “dialogue” took place between the two, but it was in fact already taking place from the beginning of Celan’s work. Oyarzun inscribes a warning, the warning to preserve “the quotation marks around ‘dialogue,’” a warning that “does not affirm or negate the dialogue but, rather, holds it in suspense” (15). To approach the *Gespräch* between Celan and Heidegger as a dialogue is to fall into the temptation to take Celan’s poems and his elaborations on the poem in his speech in Darmstadt as philosophical statements. Oyarzun’s goal is to remain aware of the “extreme, intolerable friction between what Celan says [about language, in particular] . . . and what Martin Heidegger thinks” (45). As already pointed out, it is not a dialogue between *the* thinker and *the* poet; if, however, it is indeed a dialogue, then it is a dialogue between one who thinks and one who writes poems, that is, between singular individuals.⁹

A certain proximity between Heidegger and Celan is evident. Indeed, Celan was deeply familiar with Heidegger’s works and had been in contact with him by letter. They also exchanged their publications. Yet, as Oyarzun observes, unless the quotation marks around “dialogue” are kept in place, to assume that there was a dialogue between them “can become completely deceiving” (39). Unlike the hermeneutically motivated readings of Celanian poetry, the aim here is not simply to keep the poem free from what is foreign to it, such as personal interpretations or anecdotal information; instead, by resisting all “emphasis foreign to Celan’s poetry,” Oyarzun’s aim is to bring out persistently and seek to keep open the “between” that, within their “*vacillating opposition*” (13), the poems are unfolding and thus to avoid deciding in favor of one pole over the other, in which case the “between” would become invisible.

Oyarzun's study takes issue with the claim that Celan's poetry is obscure. In no way, however, does he therefore hold that it would not be difficult to understand. But what is it, precisely, that one expects from poetry and in view of which Celan's poems are judged to lack transparency? Thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition have linked this obscurity to the poet's break with the mimetic tradition, that is, to the fact that his poetry is no longer involved in representation. Celanian obscurity would thus be a function of an interpretive approach to the poetry in question, which demands, rather than interpretation, the practice of a certain reading. Undoubtedly, formidable skills are required to read Celan's poetry, since what one may call the semantic core of the poems cannot, to put it in simple terms, be separated from what they accomplish linguistically and syntactically, which keeps all semantic content in indefinite suspense. But, then, a seemingly naïve question also arises: is this not what one should expect from any poem worthy of its name? Is not the meaning that a poem offers, either in its immediacy or after some excruciating deciphering, deceitful from the start because it has been found at the expense of the poem as linguistic artifact and linguistic event? Celanian poetry is, perhaps, more demanding, but the technics of reading for which it calls might prove only somewhat more demanding and more radically demanded than those required by any poem. The unmistakable difficulty that these poems present is that they are neither "modern" nor instances of a genre, such as the lyric (a word, furthermore, that Celan does not mention even once in *The Meridian*). Their difficulty resides in their datedness, in short, in what Celan refers to as their "one, unique, punctual present" that results from "a radical individuation [of language]" (Celan, *Meridian* 36b, 33b; translation modified). Werner Hamacher has characterized this datedness of the poems as "the movement of [their] infinite singularization" (Hamacher, "Second of Inversion," 252). Indeed, in *The Meridian* Celan writes: "Poetry, ladies and gentlemen: this infinity-speaking full of mortality and to no purpose" (*Meridian*, 44). There is something "raw" about these poems, something that resists translation and even thinking. Consequently, attending solely to the syntax of these poems does not yet suffice to do justice to them. Their very idiomaticity, which threatens them with obscurity, requires meticulous attention to the rules by way of which they achieve their singularity. Only on this condition does the obscurity that they exhibit become transparent. If the poem "wants to head for the Other" and, in order to do so, must pay careful "attention . . . to everything it encounters," and if it has a "sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color," then the way by which the poem secures its datedness

begins with such “attention,” which Celan, citing Walter Benjamin citing Nicolas Malebranche, qualifies as “the natural prayer of the soul” (*Meridian*, 35a–d). Everything Celan does to language semantically and syntactically—his undoing of its tropological and rhetorical common nature, its spatial and temporal disarticulation—is at the service of accomplishing a poem that has the status of a singular address to an Other. The obscurity that results from such undoing of the structures of language in general is the price to pay for the poem to be an address and for an encounter to become possible. Its unintelligibility is intended to bring about a response. Thus, rather than bemoaning opaqueness, Celan clearly “demands the risk,” as Lacoue-Labarthe suggests (*Poetry as Experience*, 56), that comes with it.

If, as I hold, this radical singularization of language in a poem that seeks to reach the Other in his, her, or its radical singularity and that, therefore, inevitably comes with obscurity explains the fascination that Celan’s poetry has exerted on philosophers and philosophically astute literary scholars, the particular kind of obscurity involved certainly warrants greater attention. As we have already seen, rather than a deficiency, this obscurity is a positive aspect of the poem. It is not simply an effect of the poem’s reaching toward the Other; rather, it is meticulously produced by the transcendence in question. It is not produced hazardously but rather according to rules, which much of Celan scholarship has sought to elucidate. It is thus a very particular obscurity. As Szondi notes, *obscuritas* is also a rhetorical figure, one of which, without a doubt, Celan’s poetry makes occasional use. From the dictionary, we learn that *obscuritas* does not signify complete darkness but, rather, “the wanly twilight in which the contours of things and beings, after a while, can be made out” (Walde et al., “Obscuritas,” 358). Let us remind ourselves that, as a rhetorical figure, *obscuritas* intentionally aims at concealment and lack of clarity in speech, not merely to draw the attention of the addressee to the subject matter effectively but also, paradoxically, “to render a specific subject-matter all the clearer” (363).¹⁰ Even though there is thus a rather fluid limit between *obscuritas* and *perspicuitas*, the task of reading, as Szondi holds, cannot consist in seeking to explain the intentional obscurity in question completely. Instead, reading has “to note and attempt to characterize this obscurity without losing track of what, both despite and because of this obscurity, is becoming apparent [*in Erscheinung tritt*]” (Szondi, *Celan Studies*, 65). Indeed, the Celanian obscurity with which I am concerned is of another order than that of a figure of rhetoric, even that of *obscuritas*. Let me put it this way: in the so-called obscurity of Celan’s poetry, the meticulous disarticulation of language and its tropological and

rhetorical structure so as to be able to pay attention to minute detail and to possess what is expected of a poem that seeks to reach the Other, namely, precision—a disarticulation that, as all the good readings of the poems demonstrate, can be reconstructed in equal detail—is what the specific obscurity of his poems offers to understanding. Since all the procedures of such a disarticulation can be identified, the specificity of the obscurity in question consists, paradoxically speaking, in its very intelligibility.

To secure this paradoxical intelligibility of Celanian obscurity, a debunking of all attempts to lift it precipitously, pretending that the poems are about this or that, becomes necessary. This, in my view, is the great accomplishment of Oyarzun's work. From the first lines of this foreword, I have pointed out that, even though in his speech in Bremen Celan refers to a certain experience only in an extremely discrete and reserved formulation as "what happened," this experience is, for Oyarzun, undoubtedly a major concern of Celan's poetic writing. But this indelible experience, in view of which one would thus be able to situate or determine his poetry as a variation within the genre of poetry, is not what Celan's art seeks to verbalize. Rather, it is an experience concerning poetry itself; since, moreover, there is no longer anything as such after the unnamable event that has happened, it is an experience of the poem and, more precisely, an experience of the idiom *of* the poem.¹¹ Not of a poetry after the unnamable, that is, but rather of a reshaping—after and in light of "what happened"—of poetry in its totality, singularizing the poem and shaping it as an address, thus recasting the idiom of the poem today. For this reason, Celan's poetry is not simply confessional or testimonial. It cannot simply be explained by "what happened." As Szondi notes, the secret credo or guiding word of his poetry has "an essentially nonconfessional, impersonal character" (Szondi, *Celan Studies*, 74).

If the preposition "of" is italicized in the expression "the idiom *of* the poem," which I borrow from Szondi, it is not to highlight the double genitive indicating a belonging.¹² Rather than thus highlighting the ambiguity of the genitive and the ensuing equality of the subjective and objective, not to speak of an eventual dialectical relation between the two, I wish to bend the expression entirely in the direction of the poem. For Szondi the poem is idiomatic insofar as what it accomplishes "is neither verbal nor discursive" (Szondi, *Celan Studies*, 38). By contrast, by highlighting the "of" in "the idiom *of* the poem," I wish to emphasize that, as far as its total structure is concerned, *the* poem—"the poem today"—is not simply predictable in terms of general rules constitutive of what to expect from poetry as a genre.

The poem, in a Celanian sense, is marked by objective idiomaticity; it is in its very existence and its very essence idiomatic, each time unique, and it stands apart from all other poems. As we know from *The Meridian*, “the poem is lonely” (Celan, *Meridian*, 34a). It is *idios*, uniquely itself, and “speaks always only on its own, its very own behalf” (31a), and it is by implication separate and alone. However, this aloneness peculiar to the poem without a genre or an epochal variation of a general form that would make it generally meaningful, this (if I may dare say) “material” idiomaticity that is at the same time the poem’s manner of speaking “exactly *on another’s behalf*” (31b)—this is, precisely, what needs to be thought.

Compelled by a profound respect for the singularity of Celan’s poetry and for the equally singular understanding that it represents of the poem in all its constitutive datedness and precision, Oyarzun observes a methodological reservation, a profound awe before the very singularity of the Celanian poem and what the poet himself says about it, an awe that is, as I have suggested, manifest in the systematic resistance to all interpretations that presumptuously seek to fix its cause and what it says. This respect for what it is that Celan has “found”—“poetry as experience,” to cite the title of Lacoue-Labarthe’s commentary—even prevents Oyarzun from reducing it to an experience of the Holocaust. Even Oyarzun’s own observations, when they venture forth to make interpretive statements, are almost always modulated by a “perhaps,” consistently seeking to keep open the “between” and its space of “vacillating opposition.”

Since the dialogue that supposedly took place between Heidegger and Celan has to a large extent shaped the way in which the latter’s thought and poetry have been received, let me now return to the question of dialogue and, more specifically, to this particular dialogue. For reasons to which I have already alluded, there has been, undoubtedly, an exchange between Heidegger and Celan; yet, since it did not occur in a dialogic and discursive fashion, it is also one that is unmistakably still going on between their works. Oyarzun’s study is a case in point. It is an exchange that, as demonstrated by the ongoing Celan scholarship, has not come to a rest and whose form is not dialogical in the ordinary and philosophical sense. In the same way that the poem intervenes in any conversation about art, “something does interfere [*kommt dazwischen*]” in this dialogue; something interrupts it (Celan, *Meridian*, 1c)—namely, the resistance of Celan’s poetry, as well as *The Meridian*, to concerns that might at first glance be misunderstood as indicative of a certain proximity to Heidegger’s philosophy. *The Meridian* is certainly, in some of its parts, an engagement with Heidegger’s thought.

But Heidegger's thought is countered here, and it is countered not in an argumentative but, rather, first and foremost in a singular fashion, namely, countered with "the poem today" in all its singularity. In other words, what Celan opposes to the thinker's thought is not an argument but, rather, the singular poem or individuated speech, that is, a speaking that does not allow itself to be gathered into one—into one unified sense concerning Being—and that therefore, as a counterword, amounts to barely nothing, to a *doit*, as it were, incapable in its "absurdity" of being sublated and resistant to any meaningful standstill.

So far, it should be clear that Oyarzun, too, resists any attempt to arrest the exchange between Heidegger and Celan and, in particular, such an attempt in the form of a Heideggerian reading of Celan. Yet, by insisting on the fact that Celan "only" counters Heidegger's thought by way of the poem, this also excludes "counteracting Heidegger with supposed Celanian theses" (Oyarzun, *Between Celan and Heidegger*, 94).¹³ The poem opposes the Heideggerian notion of *Sprache* with a *Sprechen* that is not that of "language" but, rather, that of the singular poem. At stake in this controversy is thus language itself—language and *its* saying. Although in his talk in Bremen Celan utters confidently that, notwithstanding what happened and in spite of the absence of words for it, language "had to go through terrifying muteness, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech," but was still the only thing that "remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses" (Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34; translation modified), nothing—after all—is less certain. Rather than the language that, while preceding all singular speech acts, opens within itself the horizon of a world destined for a people, what remained was only the language allowing the poem to speak. With language at stake, however, is Celan not also resisting the very matrix that the gathering essence of language imparts to dialogue—to a dialogue between thought and poetry—even though it may, as Heidegger's analyses of Trakl have shown, preserve the singularity of what is gathered into a meaningful whole?

Heidegger's statement "die Sprache spricht" lies, Oyarzun writes in the book's central chapter titled "Language," "in the gravitational center of my reflections . . . ; its powerful force of attraction, it seems to me, should be emphasized if one seeks to discover the relation between Celan and Heidegger" (Oyarzun, *Between Celan and Heidegger*, 129n3). If the statement in question occupies the "gravitational center" of the book's reflections, it is because here the "between" of a dialogue between Celan and Heidegger is decided. This is the case, first, because a dialogue, strictly speaking, requires that one speak about the same: that *Sprache* be a self-identical sameness,

that the protagonists of the *Gespräch* speak in the same language, and that they are determined to address this one sameness. Yet, the abrupt and disruptive exclamation in *The Meridian*—“But the poem does speak [*Aber das Gedicht spricht ja!*]” (Celan, *Meridian*, 31a)—opens a space of confrontation, a “between” that is not dialogical. With the claim that it is the poem that speaks, “the possibility not only of *Sprache* but also of its sameness . . . is definitively suspended in Celan and Heidegger’s *Gespräch*,” Oyarzun avers (*Between Celan and Heidegger*, 11). With the “but” (*aber*) of the interjection, a partitioning line—a meridian, perhaps—is drawn, thus opening the space from whence the singular poem speaks, countering and resisting Heidegger’s understanding of language as what speaks—that is, countering and resisting one of Heidegger’s central thoughts.

Thematically speaking, more than merely one theme is, of course, at stake in the dialogue between Heidegger and Celan. On the basis of *The Meridian*, it can be shown that topics such as—among others—the relation of art and poetry, the centrality of Hölderlin’s poetry and thought for Heidegger’s understanding of poetry, and the status of “place” with respect to the poem occupy an important place. However, all of these topics converge in that they make gathering—the unification of everything in itself and of everything into a meaningful whole—the center of Heidegger’s thoughts not only on poetry but on language, as well. The word, or language, *is* a gathering, one that lets Being appear in beings. Yet, Oyarzun asks, “is the essential experience of [Celan’s] poetry not the word’s literally unheard-of break, an unsayable break in any of the modes in which saying is—still—possible? A break that does not permit the thread that ties thing, word, and world in the word *is* (*es ist*)” (*Between Celan and Heidegger*, 75)? That which resists gathering by the word, or through language, is for Celan something indelibly anterior to the anteriority of gathering, something to be thought as the unthinkable, “the thought of the raw, knowledge of the raw” (70), something that cleaves the dialogue, exacerbates the “between,” and prevents its poles from losing their distinctness.

This between-space is a space other than that of the medium of language—of language understood as a medium—in which some dialogue between Celan and Heidegger could have taken place and could have found its place; it is the space for another way of being-with (*Mitsein*), where language is the singular way of reaching out to the Other, an encounter that is always only actualized in a punctual and punctuating way, that is, always only in the form of an interrupting interjection resistant to the conventional dimension of language and as “absurd” as Lucile’s sudden exclamation,