

**PAUL CELAN'S "SEARCH FOR MEANING": THE  
INCOMMUNICABILITY OF HIS EXPERIENCES THROUGH SILENCE  
IN HIS POEMS**

**Sohini Jana**  
**Independent Scholar**  
**Masters in English Literature**  
**The English and Foreign Languages University**  
**Hyderabad**

**Abstract:** The Holocaust as lived experience for the survivors has brought forth many aspects to ponder over in terms of “a search for meaning”, as survivor accounts over the years canonized the literature of a rare kind of horror after the event had inscribed itself in the pages of history. This paper attempts to chart out the unique struggle of the survivor poet Paul Celan, by decoding his self-constructed poetics to depict the rare silence thus harnessing the incommunicability of the experience of bearing witness. Through a reading of his poems and a critical study of his use of language, I have attempted to show how in seeking to at once reintegrate his life with mainstream society with the help of speech and expression and to bear witness for the ones annihilated in the camps, Celan finds himself refashioning his mother tongue to reflect the jarred and fragmented mindscape of the survivor, sketching out memories that are impermeable in being absolutely un-interpretable and though historically valid, being utterly out of sync with the notion of having a specific context. Paul Celan’s “search for meaning” thus finds a voice by bringing to life the “silence” of the sufferings of the voiceless ones that perished and offers an interesting insight into the inner recesses of the traumatized mind.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Survivor accounts, “Search for Meaning”, silence

**PAUL CELAN’S “SEARCH FOR MEANING”: THE  
INCOMMUNICABILITY OF HIS EXPERIENCES THROUGH SILENCE  
IN HIS POEMS**

**Sohini Jana**  
**Independent Scholar**  
**Masters in English Literature**  
**The English and Foreign Languages University**  
**Hyderabad**

*With what words should one describe seeing thousands of innocent young creatures dragged into the gas chambers; or seeing SS officers grab babies by the feet and smash their little heads against tree trunks; or seeing mothers stand there unable even to scream at the horror, because their mouth had remained open in mid-scream! Could I describe that? If I could, I would no longer be a man but a god.*

(Klieger Bernard, *Der Weg, den wir gingen*)

*He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.*

(Nietzsche)

*All representation – whether in picture, word or sound – is a compromise with chaos.*

(Bernard Berenson, *Sehen und Wissen*)

The harrowing, lived realities of the concentration camps were experiences that were seared into the very soul of the victims. The years spent in the hell hole were years of “apathy” as Viktor Frankl famously puts it while recounting his own experiences as a camp inmate in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. The numbing of emotions and the eventual dawning of the feeling

that one has reached a stage of past- caring formed the protective cocoon that the victims had built for themselves in defense. The existential crisis and internal chaos that such an experience actually gives birth to would only manifest itself in the aftermath of its passing. Viktor Frankl, the mastermind behind the school of psychotherapy called logotherapy calls this phase in the life of the victim the phase of survivor's guilt. The survivor walked free into the sunlight only to cower under the powerful glare. He was spiritually bruised, tainted with the blood of all those who had perished around him; instinctively thus emerging responsible to speak on behalf of all the lost voices. The light only served to single him out as witness to the most shameful event in twentieth century world history.

The survivor, suffering still under the crushing weight of the task of telling the tale, hoped to find meaning in his sufferings and the sufferings of his fellow camp mates in retrospection. So he ventured forth to reorient himself to his new reality of a free man with his freedom of speech and expression. He chose a form that suited him best and fuelled his spirit incessantly to participate in a willing act of exorcism of memories of brutal lived experience.

Paul Celan, the well known poet of language was a holocaust victim himself. He managed to survive the war and was one of the few Jews who chose to take up the responsibility of telling the tale. Having lost his parents to the camp's horrors and having suffered the degrading experience of forced dehumanization in the camps, Celan found it difficult to readapt himself to a civil and free society again. The experience in the camps had served to fragment the very essence of his existence. He had been reduced to a formless whole of disproportionate experiences that rendered him incapable of re – orienting himself as a member of a society that had no power to grasp the repercussions of an experience such as the one that he had been subjected to, on the human soul. His love for language; its subtle nuances like rhythm, cadence and the world of meaning attributed to words aided him in the task that he undertook in order to find meaning in the chance happening of his survival, in the infinity of the sufferings of the billions of Jews who were annihilated. He found his voice in the poetics that he conjured up while engaging in the act of rebuilding the language of the murderers. In an attempt to

desperately re constitute himself, his existence and to map his sufferings in continuum of the sufferings that had passed, Celan became one of the very few holocaust poets in history. His contributions to the holocaust archive stand as profound testimony to the marvels of the human mind in the light of giving birth to art at its poignant best. The incommunicability of the lived experience which haunted the survivors was endowed with a unique voice by Celan in his search for meaning. He accorded to his words a rare silence in the inner recesses of the mind and undid the language of the murderers through his poetry.

Language plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning. It offers a structure and harnesses the potential of compressing the knowledge and experiences of a community within its folds and aids the socialization of individuals in the process. In the aftermath of the holocaust, language assumed the role of the “objective element that cannot be circumvented” and stood “between the author’s feelings and the printed pages” ( Schlosser, 1992: 419). It acted as a conserving force. Statistics inform us that only two percent of concentration camp survivors had written about their experiences, a figure not inconspicuous considering the lesser percentage of painters and sculptors who had voiced their grievances through their art. This record seems to embolden the oft quoted seventh proposition of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence”. The incommunicability of the experience or in other words, the unutterability of the horrors of the event thus appears to have been a recurring problem in the attempts made by the documenters of the time. The abuse of the languages that they had used before they entered the camps rendered speech inconceivable after the holocaust. The meaning of words, the new jargon from the camp had penetrated the language deeply and communicating their experiences using the same words with altered meaning was a frustrating failure of a task. The survivors often expressed the need to find a special language for the purpose of communicating the incommunicable; special words to condense the unutterable. As Joel Konig speaks, he communicates to us a certain sensitivity to language that he consciously experienced: “It was not the first time that we had used such expressions as ‘surviving the war’ or ‘saving one’s life’. We had already spoken like that in December 1939, when we had been working on

the land; they had meant more or less the same as ‘reaching Palestine’ or ‘getting out of Germany’; that is, becoming human again, not a pariah. Now the word ‘survive’ had a new and deadly serious ring for us.”(Konig, 1983:166)

The barbed wire had not only reshaped every victim’s world view but had altered every notion of normal life that they had cultivated. Peter Weiss writes, “With the pulverization of bodies and dwelling places, the values associated with them were also pulverized.”(Peter Weiss, 1968: 184). There rose a need for reshaping reality after the war. Mere documentation of experiences were insufficient in effect and art was evoked with the hope of a symbolic exploration of the world. Art offered hope of according meaning to the barbarous claims of history on the lives of billions of Jews. As per Heinz Hillman’s theory of art, Paul Celan demonstrates the capacity of language to generate meaning in his attempt to place his sufferings in the context of art reshaping reality while drawing on his experiences during the holocaust. His poetry is known to be self reflexive, giving the reader a taste of the experience of directionless, clouded sense of consciousness benumbed by excruciating pain and torture, besides being stark in reconstructing the visual captures of his surroundings.

Celan, in his “Meridian” speech talks about his art as a constituent part of the modern “calling – into – question of art”, an art that “balances itself on the edge of itself” in its tendency towards “silence”. As George Steiner looks at Celan’s use of language in his art, his works appear to epitomize the “deepening privacy”, “autism” and “hermeticism” of a poetry where “language is focused on language as in a circle of mirrors.” Michael Hamburger, a renowned translator of his poems, commends him for a “reticence that leaves the unspeakable unspoken.” Celan’s poetry in effect resembles a closed circle, closing in on itself, the obscurity and ambiguity of his words challenging interpretation to the extent that the impact borders as much on the delicate thread of silence as on that of utterance. His relation to the world as per his poems speak of utter defiance and is found constituted in his refusal of it. The poem becomes an attempt to undo language so that it can hardly retain its symbolic connection to the world. It becomes more than nature poetry. It becomes “pure poetry”. As Bede Alleman notes in his study of Celan’s poetry,

“language itself in an unmediated way comes to seem real and not a system of carriers of meaning meant to confront extra- linguistic reality.” This reality which Alleman talks about is perhaps the reality which Celan refers to when he says that he takes up the task of writing poems in order to “orient myself ... to outline reality for myself.”

Celan’s silence through his words stand from the very beginning to chart out the reality he seeks. A close look at the poet’s earliest work, an immediately personal volume of verse, *Der Sand aus den [Sand out of Urns]* testifies of the same:

*When, sultry, the dead multiply.*

*Silent I sketch death*

Celan utilizes the power of silence in more than one way through his poems. He showcases the idea of a single word evoking the horrors he is otherwise silent about throughout the poem. In his most famous poem, “Death Fugue”, he uses this technique to communicate the incommunicable horrors though he keeps the tone of the poem light and musical ( he mimics the rhythm of the tango music played in the camps often accompanying the camp inmates activities of grave digging). His use of words such as “air”, “grave”, “master”, “milk”, “morning”, “shovel” recurrently in the poem serves to testify of the poet’s preoccupation with the words and the indelible memories associated with them. The reaches of these memories go deeper than the vocabulary can hope to penetrate – the words hint at the landscape of the jarred soul in its pitiful isolation and silence.

Celan’s works can hardly be contextualized. In other words, the trace of events can hardly be detected in the text as it comes across powerfully as hermetically sealed at a cursory glance. These traces of episodes espouse his silence, the silence that entwines him closely with the reality of inexpressibility before historical massacre of a scale as magnified as the holocaust. Undisputed, in spite of the rare traces of events as context in his poems, is the inscription of history in the silences of Celan’s language. Celan’s poetry as a platform for historical record

brings together the aesthetic, historical and the metaphysical. We see Celan's conscious conjuring of poetics happening in this context.

*What have I*

*Done?*

*Enseeded the night, as if*

*Others might exist, knightlier*

*than this.*

*Birdflight, stone-flight, a thousand*

*inscribed paths. Glances*

*robbed and plucked. The sea,*

*tasted, drunk away, dreaming away. One hour,*

*soul-eclipsed. the next, an autumn-light,*

*brought as offering to a blind*

*feelings, which came this way. Others, many,*

*without place and heavy out of themselves sighted and avoided*

*Foundling, stars,*

*Black and full of speech: named*

*For a silenced oath.*

*And once( when? This too is forgotten)*

*Felt the counter hook*

*Where the pulse dared a counter-action.*

( Celan Paul, *All Souls*)

In this poem, we find Celan declaring himself engaged in the task of poetic creation with the word “ensembling” the night. The night expands into the cosmos, defined in linguistic terms as a “thousand inscribed paths” where he himself is not the only speaker of the “silenced oath”. The stars are “black and full of speech”. In the realm of linguistics, the order has been torn down and the poet struggles to refashion the language to identify with the “silenced oath”.

The poem begins with “I” though the essence of the “I” is anything but complete and absolute. The border of the “I” has been erased to quite an extent and made permeable as a result. It is situated indefinitely and is impossible to locate. The “I” seems to be flowing out. “Glances”, “a blind feeling” has been attributed to no specific person and Celan carefully avoids using markers to avoid the notion of incorporating a point of view in the poem. The “sea” has been tasted by no one in particular yet tasted nonetheless and the soul which is eclipsed bear down on the hour rather than a particular person. The “pulse” tends to implicate the internal as well as the external, that is, within the “I” as well as within the cosmos into which the “I” flows out in an act of losing self definition. This in turn displays the disorientation of the self. The difficulty of integrating one’s own self among others where it seems that one is no less than “foundlings”, cut off from the continuity of generations.

Celan’s self, fragmented quite like his perception of the world penetrates itself and seems to convey the incommunicable experience of the haunting by sketching out the distance between his present self and the suffering victim every time through the process. The interior distance creates a landscape of “two caves” and “eyes” on the “lower brow-edges”. It remains formless despite the effort made to contour the form. The poem itself, self reflexive as it is, stands as a collection of parts without a proper shape or form – sealed to the effect that the words refuse



entry into their own interior and thus speak in terms of the language of silence from the darkness within.

To conclude, Celan speaks of the unspeakable in terms of the unspoken and self reflexively declares yet again the poetics of his art through the following poem:

*With a variable key*

*you unlock the house in which*

*drifts the snow of that left unspoken.*

*Always what key you choose*

*depends on the blood that spurts*

*from your eye or from your mouth or your ear.*

*You vary the key, you vary the word*

*that is free to drift with the flakes.*

*What snowball will form round the word*

*depends on the wind that rebuffs you.*

( Celan Paul, *With a Variable Key*)

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Berenson, Bernhard. 'Sehen und Wissen', *Die Nueue Rundschau* 1959.

Celan, Paul, and Hamburger, Michael. *Poems of Paul Celan*, New York : Persea Books, 2002. Print

Frankl, Viktor. E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston : beacon Press, 2006. Print.

Kleiger, Bernhard. *Der Weg, den wir gingen. Reportage einer hollischen Reise*, with 10 drawings by Josette Cagnant and 7 official German documents on the 'final solution to the Jewish problem' in France. Brussels : Codac Juifs,1960.

Konig, Joel. *David. Aufzeichnungen eines Überlebenden*. Gottingen : Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967 ( originally published as *Den Netzen entronnen* ) (1983)

Schlosser, Hermann. ' Subjektivitat und Autoboigraphie', in Klaus Briegleb and Sigrid Weigel (eds) *Gegenwartsliteratur seit 1968*. Munich/ Vienna : Hanser, 1992.

Weiss, Peter. *Rapporte*. Frankfurt/Main : Suhrkamp, 1968

#### WEB RESOURCES

"Paul Celan : The Meridian Address." Arduity : Poetic meaning, N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. < <http://www.arduity.com/poets/celan/meridian.html> >