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## CHAPTER 12

### RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PAST

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I will explore an ethics of remembrance that is informed by Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, and I will juxtapose his critical hermeneutics with the existential-ontological hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger. It is, of course, impossible to do justice to the complicated relationship of critical theory with hermeneutics, and with Heidegger and Gadamer in particular. Since I am, however, only interested in one aspect that concerns both traditions, namely the responsibility for the past, I will look at the development of postwar continental philosophy through the lens of two authors whose lives crossed in several ways, and who both engaged in the question of responsibility for the other: Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Celan. The connection between memory and responsibility is, in my view, central for the further development of a critical political ethics *because* the latter must not only be contextual and diatopical, i. e. situated in multiple geographical and epistemological locations,<sup>1</sup> but also sensitive to the different histories in which moral agents are included.

If Christian theology in general and a critical political ethics in particular, acknowledge their own Jewish roots as theologically and ethically relevant, they must reinterpret their own central concepts in relation to the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew term and imperative to *zakor*, i. e. to remember, is one of the concepts that requires our attention. When Walter Benjamin called his political-ethical concept *Eingedenken* (remembrance) instead of using the normally used term of *Erinnerung* (memory), he might have sought to depart both from the phenomenological analyses of Bergson or Husserl but also from the idealist Platonic concept of anamnesis. This shift is decisive for my approach: it marks the transition from epistemology to ethics that I will wrestle with in this chapter.

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1 In this volume, I have repeatedly referenced de Sousa Santos in this vein: B. DE SOUSA SANTOS, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, Boulder, CO 2014.

1. “Zakor” – *The Imperative to Remember and Walter Benjamin’s Critical Hermeneutics*  
 Over against the Platonic tradition that regards philosophy’s tasks as unveiling the concealed knowledge that rests in the ideas of being or truth, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has shown that the Jewish imperative to remember is oriented towards responsibility for the other and the earth. The Jewish concept of memory is therefore a practical-ethical, not a theoretical concept.<sup>2</sup> It includes narrative reasoning and the consideration of experiences for moral judgments. It is tightly linked to the Rabbinic tradition of interpreting and reinterpreting the Torah, which commits itself to *teaching, studying, and learning* the tradition. Unlike his friend Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin does not, however, merely go back to this tradition of hermeneutical and practical reasoning that connects Jewish theology, moral practice, and ritual. He is intrigued by Jewish theological concepts that he comes to know mostly through his close friend Gershom Scholem, and which he adapts to his own philosophical interests. Not unlike Franz Kafka, Benjamin utilizes the Jewish tradition for his own purposes; for example, he discerns the *political* dimension of Jewish theology, or evokes the convergence of the (Marxist) revolutionary activist and the (Jewish) prophet in the “dialectic” of the political and the theological that Adorno sought to reflect when he titled one of Benjamin’s fragments the *Political-Theological Fragment*.<sup>3</sup> “Jews”, Benjamin reminds the secular modernity that is disconnected from the wisdom of religion, “were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance.”<sup>4</sup> This reinterpretation of remembrance as an ethical endeavor could be seen as a return to the hermeneutical-ethical tradition of practical wisdom. However, this is not the case – in fact, Benjamin’s approach departs from the virtue ethics tradition in the *critique* of the praxis that virtue ethics – at least of the Aristotelian tradition – invokes to create some common ground among the citizens.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Benjamin’s hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah

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2 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has explained the Hebrew term ‘zakor’ as practical reasoning that is rooted in experience and practical wisdom as much as in a specific memory of history. Hence, the German word Benjamin uses: “Eingedenken” keeps the link to ‘Denken’ (thinking, reasoning) better than the more common term “Erinnern”. The English word for *Eingedenken* would be more precisely ‘thinking of in remembrance’. Cf. Y. H. YERUSHALMI, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Washington 1982.

3 W. BENJAMIN, *Theological-Political Fragment*, in: H. EILAND/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. III, 1935-1938, Cambridge, MA 2002, 305–306. Cf. chapter 11 in this volume.

4 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, in: H. EILAND/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. IV, 1938-1940, Cambridge, MA 2003, 389–400, 397, Thesis VIII. Cf. chapter 11 in this volume.

5 Cf. A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, London 32013.

Arendt, and Paul Ricœur all followed this Aristotelian tradition after World War II, connecting hermeneutics with practical wisdom and prudence in moral, legal, or political judgment. Most prominently, Gadamer returned to the Aristotelian tradition of understanding, interpretation, and judgment, in an effort to connect the ontological question of truth and historical mediation through interpretation.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Benjamin's critical hermeneutics breaks with the Aristotelian tradition that situates the virtue of *phronesis* within the context of a political community, conforming to its underlying structures of power and domination. For him, the encounter with the past is possible only in a fragmentary way; in contrast to Gadamer who would acknowledge this, historical knowledge is not a part of history that unfolds over time; and historical knowledge is not embedded in a more fundamental ontology of truth.

Not only Gadamer, but Hannah Arendt, too, turned to Aristotle's concept of action, emphasizing however (political) practice, which she applied to her own understanding of the power to act together as the power of political action.<sup>7</sup> Though it has been influential as a model for democratic cooperation and deliberation,<sup>8</sup> Arendt's concept of understanding is also juxtaposed to Benjamin's understanding of political action; for him political action is a force that must strive to interrupt an existing (unjust) order rather than upholding it. Furthermore, regarding new constructive ways of political practices, Benjamin maintained the prophetic stance that turns one's back towards the future while moving into it.

Paul Ricœur also takes up Aristotle's ethics and politics in his hermeneutics, combining in his own reinterpretation insights from both Gadamer and Arendt.<sup>9</sup> As many theologians have long argued (and seen long before Ricœur was discovered as a 'serious' philosopher and not 'just' a religious thinker in the situated knowledge-world of academia!), Ricœur's hermeneutics is especially valuable for ethics, carefully navigating between the hermeneutical-ethical ethics of aiming for a good life and the normative concerns of a deontological ethics. Moreover, he also brings biblical hermeneutics into the conversation – or back into the conversation about understanding, interpretation, and narration. Ultimately, however,

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6 H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, London 1975.

7 H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1998. Cf. chapter 1 in this volume.

8 Cf. among many: S. BENHABIB, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks, CA 1996; S. BENHABIB, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*, Cambridge, NY 2004; J. HABERMAS, *Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power*, in: *Social Research* 44/1 (1977), 3–24.

9 P. RICŒUR, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Cambridge, MA 1981; R. KEARNEY (ed.), *Paul Ricœur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, Thousand Oaks, CA 1996; A. LACOCQUE/P. RICŒUR, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, Chicago 2003; P. RICŒUR, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*, Vol. 2 (translated by David Pellauer), Malden 2013.

all three approaches run counter to Benjamin's critical hermeneutics. They reflect a peculiar truth of post-war continental philosophy, namely that it was not Benjamin's critical approach to history and politics that shaped the conversation but, surprisingly, the Heidegger school, however critical his recipients may have been of his political positions. Nobody has been more influential for the development of hermeneutics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than Martin Heidegger. Yet, the controversy between what was soon called hermeneutics *writ large* over against critical theory determines how the concept of responsibility in general, but responsibility for the past in particular, is to be spelled out.

## 2. Existentialism vs. Ethics: The Heidegger Reception in France

In postwar Germany, critical theory, associated more with the philosophies of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer than with Walter Benjamin, was juxtaposed to the so-called hermeneutics school for which Martin Heidegger, and even more so Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics stood. The conflict between the two schools culminated in the clash between Gadamer and Habermas in the early 1970s. Gadamer emphasized, as early as in *Truth and Method*, published in 1960, understanding of history and tradition as the essential human practice – he highlighted *understanding's* connection to the practices of judgment as *application*, over against the methods of science, i.e. the “objective” *explanation* especially in empirical sciences. To Gadamer's credit, he was one of the few philosophers who took up the difficult question of historical reason and sought to uphold the tradition of the humanities over the by now dominating sciences: historical understanding, Gadamer claimed, is still connected to the ontology of being and truth. Habermas criticized Gadamer sharply, arguing from the perspective of Adorno's and Benjamin's critical theory, but also in light of the recent German history. He accused Gadamer of ignoring the ideological potential (and in Germany's case, the ideological realities) of tradition, and countered it with the task of ideology critique.<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s, German intellectuals were shaken again by the so-called Historians' Controversy (*Historikerstreit*) that centered on the claim by historian Ernst Nolte who denied the status of “uniqueness” of the Shoah and rejected the notion of a national guilt, emphasizing the parallel crimes of Stalin's Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

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10 J. HABERMAS/K.-O. APEL (ed.), *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik. Theorie-Diskussion. Mit Beiträgen von Karl-Otto Apel, Claus v. Bormann, Rüdiger Bubner, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans-Joachim Giegel, Jürgen Habermas*, Frankfurt a. M. 1971.

11 COLLECTION MAZAL HOLOCAUST, *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1993.

While Heidegger was certainly important for Germany's postwar philosophy, German philosophers were perhaps not the most important readers of Heidegger's work. In contrast, French philosophy, I would hold, cannot be understood *without* the reception of Heidegger's work. Postwar philosophy in France was not so much shaped by the question of hermeneutics, history, and tradition but by the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and French structuralism, including French feminist existentialism, structuralism, and poststructuralism. Heidegger's critique of modernity was attractive for many, especially for the philosophers of postmodernity;<sup>12</sup> it was better known than similar critiques from the Frankfurt school. Thus, critical theory in France developed somewhat differently than critical theory in Germany where it remained attached to the Frankfurt School.

Obviously, like in Germany, the Heidegger reception in France was never uncritical. With Emmanuel Levinas' works in phenomenology, however, a more radical critique of Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics emerged than ever before. The turn to an ethics of responsibility, soon taken up especially by Jacques Derrida, shifted the conversation again. Nobody addressed the question of responsibility with greater urgency than Emmanuel Levinas. However, his philosophy cannot be thought of without the critique of the Cartesian epistemology *and* the ontological existentialism of Heidegger. The reception of Heidegger in France determines much of 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy, from phenomenology to existentialism, deconstructivism and poststructuralism.<sup>13</sup> In this complex and complicated reception history, Heidegger and Benjamin have been compared or even brought together under one roof of thought, seen as offering a similar interest in the interruption of a (bad) continuity, namely modern thought – as is the case, for example, in Derrida's, Lacoue-Labarthe's, or Agamben's work. This particular reception history may explain the uproar that followed the publication of several studies that revealed how deeply not only the person Martin Heidegger

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12 J.-F. LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, MN 1984.

13 D. JANICAUD, *Heidegger in France*, Bloomington, IN 2015. Wolin gives an especially critical account of French "left philosophy", especially Bataille and Blanchot who are important role models for the poststructuralism of Derrida and Foucault. Like others, Wolin claims that the Heidegger reception (and Heidegger's critique of reason in the name of a higher thinking) determines much of this tradition in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. R. WOLIN, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism: From Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, Princeton, NJ 2004. Cf. also an early text by J. DERRIDA, *The End of Man*, that reflects the rivalry between Sartre's existentialism as humanism and Derrida's poststructuralism, with its method of deconstructivism. The third strand of "continental philosophy", namely the Wittgenstein School, is much closer connected to the Frankfurt School, namely through Karl-Otto Apel's transcendental pragmatics. Cf. chapter 1 for this context.

but Heidegger's *philosophy* is intertwined with his political – and antisemitic – views. Though it was long contested how exactly Heidegger's Nazism influenced his philosophy, the question was finally put to rest when Heidegger's own diaries were published, especially the *Black Notebook* that was published in 2014.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore necessary to at least point to the radical difference between Heidegger and Benjamin. In Benjamin's case, critique is put to the service of remembrance, practices of resistance, and, at least in the 1920s and early 1930s, the commitment to civil disobedience or the revolution, as Benjamin had witnessed it in 1917 in Russia and 1918 in Germany. In Heidegger's case, critique does not concern specific forms of historical reason but *reason and truth*. In their critique of modern reason, Benjamin and Heidegger examine similar questions, it seems, but their responses could not be more different. For Heidegger, language is tied to being:

Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying.<sup>15</sup>

Since language is the central concern in Heidegger's work, the difference between critique in the name of *history* and critique in the name of *being* culminates in the difference of understanding what is at stake for the subject. In Heidegger's existentialism, care is a central concept, spelled out as the care for oneself, the courage to be oneself, and the heroic mastery of one's finite existence, the "being towards death." The care for the other is a secondary endeavor, not changing the core of the existentialist ethics that remains centered on one's own truth in *Dasein* (being oneself) seeking the truth of *Sein* (Being).

## 2.1 HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Heidegger's philosophy began with the critique of modernity, and his grappling with the question of *Dasein* (the mode of being in the world) in the face of *Nothingness*, or the existential experience of *mortality*, deeply impressed his readers. The emphasis on the 'event' and/or moment of *decision*, and *care* as existential response to the givenness or thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) of one's existence, defined his claim

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14 Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Ponderings XII–XV – Black Notebooks 1939–1941* (transl. by R. Rojcewicz), Bloomington, IN 2017. Cf. also D. DI CESARE, *Heidegger and the Jews: the Black Notebooks* (translated by M. Baca), Cambridge, UK 2018; J. WERNER, *Poesie der Vernichtung: Literatur und Dichtung in Martin Heideggers Schwarzen Heften*, Wiesbaden 2018; A. J. MITCHELL, *Heidegger's Black Notebooks: Responses to Anti-Semitism*, New York 2017.

15 M. HEIDEGGER, *Letter on "Humanism"*, in: D. F. KRELL (ed.), *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, San Francisco, CA 1993. Cf. for an analysis in conversation with the Frankfurt school A. RABINBACH, *Heidegger's Letter on Humanism as Text and Event*, in: *New German Critique* 62 (1994), 3–38.

that human existence is *being towards death*. The reality of modernity, Heidegger claimed, is a managed bureaucratic society that leaves its people with no roots in their own soil, and no belonging in the kinship of blood. *Blut und Boden*, blood and soil, are, of course, central terms of the Nazi ideology, but for Heidegger, the political power of the National Socialists was but one sign among others anticipating the truth of Being. Since the truth of Being rests on language, it is most distinctly mastered by the *Dichter* (the poets, with Hölderlin as the best possible poet, closest to the disclosure of the truth of Being)<sup>16</sup> and the *Denker* (the thinkers or philosophers, with Heidegger as the poet's counterpart, likewise close to disclosing the truth of Being). History is framed in a very particular way: similar to Benjamin's reflections on time, in *Being and Time*, published in 1927,<sup>17</sup> Heidegger depicts it as the time of *decision*, a revolutionary, order-interrupting event; yet, where Benjamin warns to conflate secular history and politics with the theological messianic eschatology, Heidegger wholeheartedly embraced the vision of the "new era", defined by Hitler's "Third Reich".

In the early 1930s, Heidegger envisioned himself as the intellectual mastermind of the Nazi movement. National Socialism was meant to be a new beginning after modernity's error to believe in a universal progress history, in enlightenment, or in humanism. In this embrace of the Nazi movement (and politics), Heidegger's antisemitism is evident. Recently, Judith Werner has presented a thorough study on Heidegger's language and poetry that reveals the intersection of his antisemitism with his philosophy – Heidegger identifies 'the Jews' with well-known stereotypes such as uprootedness, cosmopolitanism, intellectualism and transcultural literacy, ultimately rooted in their race. He seeks to discern the Germanic roots, an alternative form of thinking, a deeply national (or rather: *völkisch*) Germanic culture and Germanic race. To this Werner convincingly adds Heidegger's "poetry of destruction" as an *inherent* element of his philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Heidegger became, however, quickly disillusioned about Hitler's "Third Reich", disappointed by the (distorted and in his view flat) political realization of the new politics of the people. From then on, his resort became nature and the "dwelling in" the language of poetry and (his own) philosophy.

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16 "What remains is founded by the poets" (Hölderlin). Heidegger was certain: poetry offers us the words of yearning, of the potentialities who we may become. Heidegger reads Hölderlin as a poet for the German Volk to come to itself – a radically distorted misinterpretation, but one that worked for generations of scholars. For the historical context cf. the instructive analysis by R. SAVAGE, *Hölderlin after the Catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht*, Rochester, NY 2008.

17 M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, New York, NY 1996.

18 Cf. J. WERNER, *Poesie der Vernichtung*.

Language was Heidegger's greatest trump card from the beginning. He could play with words like few other modern philosophers before him, digging up the roots of words, their etymology, creating new meanings by turning and twisting every word until it had given him what he was looking for: the way out of *enlightenment* reason, historical critique, or a phenomenology of the intertwining of self and the world à la Merleau-Ponty. His was the *Lichtung* of and in language (the clearing in the forest of words), an *ontopoetic philosophy*, often as hermetic as the poems he read, never ceasing to be concerned with *Being* and *Man's* relation towards it. Heidegger's construct of the *Geviert* (the fourfold), for example, places mortal Man in relation to the immortal divine, to earth, and to air. For Heidegger, we cannot think of one of these relations without the others: if we think earth, we think man, God, and air. They mirror each other and constitute the world (*Welt*) in this mirror play of mirrors (*Spiegel-Spiel*). World is, it cannot be explained outside of the *Geviert* – what we can explain or discern is the mirror-play. The center, however, that unifies the fourfold, is “the Thing” (*das Ding*), on which Heidegger meditates in his Bremen Lectures that introduce the fourfold.<sup>19</sup> The Thing is unrelated to any historical context; its ontology evades history, explicitly and implicitly – which would be troubling for any philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it is even more troubling since Heidegger gave the Bremen Lectures in 1949, continuing his silence about his commitment to Hitler's National Socialist cause throughout the 1930s. Here is Jürgen Habermas' verdict, issued long before the *Black Notebooks* were published:

Heidegger dealt with the theme of humanism at a time when the images of the horror that the arriving Allies encountered in Auschwitz and elsewhere had made their way into the smallest German village. If his talk of an “essential happening” had any meaning at all, the singular event of the attempted annihilation of the Jews would have drawn the philosopher's attention (if not already that of the concerned contemporary). But Heidegger dwells, as always, in the Universal.<sup>20</sup>

As I have said above, Heidegger was convinced that the true poetic language of Being is embodied in the poetry of Hölderlin. Apart from the fact that he reads Hölderlin from the perspective of his own philosophy of German supremacy, Heidegger severs the tie between aesthetics and ethics, or poetry and ethics, just as his concept of care has little place for the care for the other. Habermas continues his scathing critique:

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19 M. HEIDEGGER, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, Bloomington 2012.

20 J. HABERMAS, *Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 15/2 (1989), 431–456, 449.



*His concern is to show that man is the “neighbor of Being” – not the neighbor of man.* He directs himself, undisturbed, against “the humanistic interpretations of man as animal rationale, as ‘person’, as spiritual-ensouled-bodily being”, because “the highest determinations of the essence of man in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of man”.<sup>21</sup>

Habermas quotes from a published letter that Herbert Marcuse, a former student of Heidegger, wrote to him in 1948:

Many of us have long waited for a word from you, a statement that you would clearly and definitively free yourself from this identification, a statement that expresses your real current attitude to what has happened. You have made no such statement – at least none has escaped the private sphere.<sup>22</sup>

Heidegger, to be sure, would not give a hint that he understood how catastrophic his philosophy had been for the Jews who were persecuted and then killed in the millions by Hitler’s men and women. Although, even if Heidegger had taken a different position after the war, his ontological hermeneutics is incompatible with a critical political ethics that is sensitive to its own place and moment in time. The same holds true to Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics, notwithstanding the many valuable insights concerning practical moral judgments that Gadamer discerns.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 HERMENEUTICS OF THE SELF VERSUS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OTHER

In French philosophy, Heidegger’s philosophy was most radically critiqued by Emmanuel Levinas, who centered his response on the question of the other, reversing the existential reading of subjectivity to an ethics of responsibility for the other. While Levinas’ work has become prominent in ethical theory, the same does not hold true for the German language poet Paul Celan who played a very influential role for Levinas. Mark Anderson, who examines the French reception history of Heidegger, remarks about Celan: “The French poststructuralist interest in Celan is curious, for no other poet – not even Mallarmé – has received such sustained attention from these quarters.”<sup>24</sup> The reading of his poetry was

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21 Ibid. 449, quote from Heidegger’s Letter on Humanism (my emphasis).

22 H. MARCUSE, quoted in *ibid.* 454.

23 Gadamer remained evasive of his own entanglement with the Nazis. For a critical reading of Gadamer’s retrieval of tradition and authority in his hermeneutics cf. R. WOLIN, *The Seduction of Unreason*, Chap. 3. Wolin argues that Gadamer’s work during the Nazi time was much more embedded with the political ambition of German supremacy than Gadamer was willing to admit after the war, and, more importantly, that his hermeneutics must be seen in the context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-liberalism of the humanities. As a student of Heidegger, Gadamer remained interested in the ontological truth of history, reflected in the third part of *Truth and Method*.

24 M. M. ANDERSON, *The “Impossibility of Poetry”: Celan and Heidegger in France*, in: *New German Critique* 53 (1991), 3–18, 6.

[...] part of a larger debate in France on the relations between politics and culture in Nazi Germany, a debate that began in the early 1980s with Robert Faurisson's revisionist polemic denying the existence of the Holocaust, was inflamed by Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah* and the trial of Klaus Barbie, and reached its hysterical apogee in the so-called Heidegger affair in 1987, with the publication of Victor Farias's *Heidegger et le nazisme* (a brouhaha comparable in this country to the de Man affair). Celan is crucial for the gripping complexity of his historical position, at once the victim of German nationalist ideology as a Rumanian Jew and, as a poet, the foremost contemporary representative of a German literary tradition stretching back to Rilke, Trakl, and Hölderlin. Hence a personal dilemma which has come to mean a metaphysical aporia, the increasing terseness and density of Celan's verse until his suicide in 1970 being taken as retroactive proof that "Auschwitz" was indeed an unbreachable limit, an absolute if negative culmination.<sup>25</sup>

In the reception history in France, not only Benjamin and Heidegger but also Celan and Heidegger were read together, as Anderson notes:

This is especially true of Lacoue-Labarthe, whose hailing of Celan's poetry as the 'end of art' is not so much an echo of Adorno's pronouncement about the impossibility of poetry 'after Auschwitz' as the direct reprise of Heidegger's notion of the 'end of philosophy' in a post-metaphysical age. [...]

Celan and Heidegger are of course locked together in a powerfully symbolic constellation, united in their concern with the German tradition of 'poetic dwelling' originating in Hölderlin, but irreconcilably divided by the consequences of National Socialism.<sup>26</sup>

Both Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Celan hold against Heidegger that the ethical response is not one to Being but to the other. For Levinas especially, the ethical summons by the other person means the necessity – and urgency – to transcend ontological reason, and to transcend ontological reasoning *for the sake of* the other. What makes this radical is the fact that in contrast to an ethics that is based on the sovereignty of the agent, the acting person must come to understand that he/she is not the first actor who turns to the other but is the one who is first *addressed* beyond his/her control or will: action is, first and foremost, a response to the address by the other. Levinas' reference to humanity and history, however, differs from Celan's position. Ultimately, Celan is much closer to Walter Benjamin's concept of remembrance than to Levinas' deontological ethics of responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Ibid. 5 f.

26 Ibid. 6.

27 This did not escape the most prominent post-Levinasian philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who wrestled in his own way with the interrelation of French and German philosophy and repeatedly interpreted Benjamin and Celan together. Cf. M. G. LEVINE, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan*, New York 2014.

### 3. Poetry and Ethics as Address and Response

#### 3.1 EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND PAUL CELAN

I will now examine the difference between Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of responsibility and the poetic ethics of Paul Celan to which Levinas himself turned in an important essay.<sup>28</sup> I am comparing these two writers, because Celan, rather than Levinas, explains why remembrance is a central dimension of an ethics of responsibility. In his book *Otherwise than Being*,<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas in part revised – and radicalized – his early work, elaborating on an ethics of responsibility that is set in the furthest possible distance to Heidegger. In a short text from 1978, published in English four years after *Otherwise than Being*,<sup>30</sup> Levinas comments on Celan's *Meridian*, the speech for the Georg-Büchner-Prize given in Darmstadt on October 22, 1960.<sup>31</sup> In his commentary, Levinas sets the stage as a dispute between Heidegger and Celan – a dispute that indeed took place after the war, when Celan visited Heidegger, waiting for a word of apology, as so many of Heidegger's contemporaries did. Levinas discerns the radical difference between the philosophy of Being that Heidegger pursues and believes to find in poetry, and his own “first philosophy”, namely ethics that he had recently developed. His comment on Celan's Büchner Award speech on poetry is therefore also a self-reflection for Levinas about his own understanding of the address and responsibility. While Heidegger never ceases to explain that in art and thinking alike the truth of Being is disclosed, both Levinas and Celan position poetry as the address to the other – the reader. For Levinas, the moral stance is a mode of human existence that is “otherwise than being” that relates the self and other through address and response, rendering the responsibility for the other as an infinite task.<sup>32</sup> Taking responsibility as the primary constellation of human relationality, Levinas defines philosophy as the reflection on the summons of the self by the other.

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28 Rather than summarizing the well-known elements of Levinas' ethics, I will show how and where his ethical approach coincides with the poetical ethics of Paul Celan, and how and where it differs.

29 E. LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (translated by Alphonso Lingis), Dordrecht 1998.

30 E. LEVINAS, *Being and the Other: On Paul Celan*, in: *Chicago Review* 29/3 (1978), 16–22.

31 P. CELAN, *The Meridian. Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Georg-Büchner-Prize*, in: B. BÖSCHENSTEIN/H. SCHMULL (ed.), *The Meridian. Final Version. Drafts. Materials*, Stanford 2011 (orig. 1960), 1–14. For an analysis of the concept of the meridian (the ‘the high noon’, as the breaking point of the day, the zenith of the sun) in Büchner's works where it is enacted as the traumatic standstill of time, and its reception in Celan's own work where it also stands for the *Atemwende*, “turning of the breath”, cf. M. G. LEVINE, *A Weak Messianic Power*, chapter 3.

32 Cf. for an analysis of Levinas' ethics in conversation with Derrida, Judith Butler, and Paul Ricœur, H. HAKER, *The Fragility of the Moral Self*, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 97/4 (2005), 359–382.

In the first sentence of his essay on Celan, Levinas quotes from a letter that Celan wrote to a critic: “‘I see no difference’, Paul Celan writes to Hans Bender, ‘between a handshake and a poem.’”<sup>33</sup> Levinas sees this simple definition of poetry as a landmark, a decision between language as *disclosure of the world* and language as *address*: Celan invokes Martin Buber’s dialogical philosophy, the ‘I’ and ‘you’, which are juxtaposed to the impersonal musings of Being: for the language that eschews the ‘you’ and rather shifts to the ‘it’, Levinas says, agreeing with Celan, renders language impersonal and neuter. Celan puts it this way:

[A] language not for you and not for me – because, I ask you, who is it meant for, the earth, not for you, I tell you, is it meant, and not for me – a language, yes indeed, without any I and without any Thou, nothing but He, nothing but It, do you understand, nothing but She, and that’s all.’ Language of the neuter.<sup>34</sup> (16)

In contrast, if poetry is an address, it changes the understanding of poetry as representation, or mimesis of Being. And the poet – Heidegger’s distorted Hölderlin included – is not a genius, endowed with the exceptional potency of discernment of truth: “Enough of glorious, creative poses!” Levinas emphasizes, then quoting again from Celan’s letter to Bender: “Let’s not be bothered with *poein* and such nonsense.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, if a poem is a gesture, Levinas confirms, it is a “sign made to the other, a handshake, a speaking without speech”<sup>36</sup>. As a gesture, it must attend to the other, and get the response right.<sup>37</sup> So, Levinas asks, now speaking for himself:

Do not poetry and art begin – rather than in the cruelties of tragedy – in the for-other speaking to the other precisely as this for-other, in signaling this very giving of the sign, in love speaking that love, in lyricism? Song of Songs!<sup>38</sup>

In poetic speech, Levinas holds, the self encounters the “world” as “strange”, but moreover, “the strange is the stranger. Nothing is stranger or more alien than the other man [...]. Homelessness becomes the humanity of man [...]”.<sup>39</sup>

33 E. LEVINAS, *Being and the Other*, 16.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid. 18.

36 Ibid. Ironically, however, Celan is very explicit that his speech in Darmstadt in which he explains the poem as an address is an address, too; repeatedly, he addresses his audience with the German formula “Meine Damen und Herren”, affirming, yet subverting its formula character by “really” addressing them as the hearers he longs as much to reach as his poems long to reach their readers. Cf. also K. MENDICINO, *An Other Rhetoric: Paul Celan’s Meridian*, in: MLN 126/3 (2011), 630–650.

37 E. LEVINAS, *Being and the Other*, 19.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

Yet, there are also crucial differences between Levinas and Celan, which Levinas ignores: whereas Celan insists that a poem can only speak “in its own, individual cause,”<sup>40</sup> Levinas abstracts an existential – ontological or universal? – notion from Celan’s poetry, revealing his own inability to disentangle his thinking from the grip of Heidegger’s existential ontology.<sup>41</sup> Levinas certainly understands that Celan’s dialogical gesture goes far beyond an ontological hermeneutics that understands language or poetry as the “messenger” between Being and Man. The dates that Celan’s poems remember require a *break* with any ontological hermeneutics that brushes over the concrete history: “I do not see Celan’s references to Judaism as some picturesque particular or familial lore. No doubt the Passion of Israel under Nazism [...] has in the eyes – and the guts – of the poet a grave significance,” Levinas states, adding: “but it is a significance which signifies for the human as such, of which Judaism is an extreme possibility – to the point of impossibility – a break with the naïveté of the shepherd, the herald, the messenger of Being.”<sup>42</sup> And at this point, Levinas inserts his famous phrase that captures his departure from Heidegger: “does he [Celan] not suggest poetry itself as an unheard modality, as an ‘otherwise than being?’”<sup>43</sup>

The hermeneutics that Levinas sees in Celan’s poems is the *struggle* of poetry with its own demand, namely the responsibility to address the other, while speaking in its own cause. This is how Celan puts it, contradicting rather than supporting the abstraction that Levinas often falls prey to:

But the poem does speak! It stays mindful of its dates, but – it speaks. For sure, it speaks always only on its own, its very own behalf. But I do think – and this thought can hardly surprise you by now – I think that it had always been part of the poem’s hopes to speak on behalf of exactly this *strange* – no, I can no longer use this word this way – exactly *on another’s behalf* – who knows, perhaps on behalf of a *totally other*.<sup>44</sup>

Juxtaposing Celan and Levinas side by side through their two texts, the difference between the poet and the philosopher is striking. The difference does not only come across in their language but also rests upon their reflection on how poetry and philosophy *ought* to speak: the poet refuses to abstract, while the philosopher transcends the concrete in order to depict a universal structure of morality. Interpreting the *Song of Songs* as an allegory of poetry, for Levinas the poem is an

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40 Ibid. 18.

41 This holds true for all prominent interpreters of Celan in France: even when they critique Heidegger’s silence about his involvement with the Nazis and his antisemitism – as both Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe have done – they still read Celan in light of Heidegger’s existential ontology.

42 E. LEVINAS, *Being and the Other*, 20.

43 Ibid. 21.

44 P. CELAN, *The Meridian*, 8.

[...] unavoidable questioning, interrupting the games of the beautiful, in search of the Other; a search dedicating itself in poem towards the other: the song rises in the giving, in the one-for-the-other, in the very significance of signification – a significance which is older than ontology or the thinking of Being, and which is assumed by knowledge and desire, philosophy and libido.<sup>45</sup>

While Levinas often remains ambiguous and mostly implicit when it comes to the historical data that inform his writings, Paul Celan's poems speak of concrete things and persons that he has encountered or for whom he cares. In his poetry, they often gain a metaphorical meaning requiring utmost attention, knowledge, and study by the reader: plants, fruits, trees, snow, rain, stones, mountains, rivers or the seasons. These are "things" that often return, creating intertextual relations and an intra-poetic history that reminds the reader of the structure of biblical writings and the technique of implicit quotation that Benjamin, too, favored. Celan mentions places, dates, names, often women, body parts such as the eye, the mouth, the hand, or hair. These "things" are historical, not ontological, "things" tied to experiences, not the "Thing" invoked in Heidegger's Bremen speech *Das Ding*<sup>46</sup> and reflected upon by Levinas. In Celan's poetry, words create still-lives like the allegorical ruins of history in Benjamin's writings, and the poems often remember events that the poetic voice embraces in mourning. Celan often alludes to historical events; he comments on private, sometimes intimate conversations, often continuing them in the poem, and even hiding a secret conversation that continued over decades with Ingeborg Bachmann who would often respond to Celan in her own works. Celan's poems echo Benjamin's dream-like memories, seen at the moment of awakening and requiring utmost attention lest they are lost, as Celan says himself:

The attention the poem tries to pay to everything it encounters, its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of the 'tremors' and 'hints', all this is not, I believe, the achievement of an eye competing with (or emulating) ever more precise instruments, but is rather a concentration that remains mindful of all our dates.

'Attention' – permit me to quote here a phrase by Malebranche, via Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka – 'Attention is the natural prayer of the soul'.<sup>47</sup>

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45 E. LEVINAS, *Being and the Other*, 21.

46 M. HEIDEGGER, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*; M. HEIDEGGER, *Einblick in das was ist. Bremer Vorträge 1949*, in: P. JAEGER (ed.), *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, Frankfurt a. M. 1994 (orig. 1949), 3–77, 79.

47 P. CELAN, *The Meridian*, 9.

## 3.2 CELAN'S AND THE REMEMBRANCE OF THE SHOAH

Most of Celan's poems are written after the Shoah. Celan writes in German though he emigrated to France shortly after the war. The Shoah certainly was traumatic for Celan personally, but he articulates that trauma as a *historical* wound, a stumbling block in the experienced time while the objective time passes, from present to past, from future to present, from season to season. The historical trauma carries a significance that is indeed relevant for the human as such, as Levinas says in the quote above, "a significance which signifies for the human as such, of which Judaism is an extreme possibility – to the point of impossibility" – but the particular, personal experience and its universal relevance cannot be derived by abstraction. Rather, it requires a mediation. This mediation, I hold, is hinted towards in the address of the "You". Instead of transitioning smoothly from the "I" to a "We", Celan insists on the pause and the silence that is caused when the "I" (the poem that remembers a historical experience, a historical fact or event) speaks and the singular "You" (the reader or listener) listens to it or reads it. Before the "breath turns", as one collection of poems, *Atemwende*, is called, the poem is situated exactly at the point of the 'turn'. To render the poem "significant", it must be heard by a singular other – and then the multitude of singular others, not a "universal" other – in a specific way: it must be received with an attitude of attention that reiterates the attention that the poem has paid to the "dates" it speaks about. In other words, while the poem speaks to everyone, it can only do so in addressing a singular "you". The "universal significance" of the Shoah does not rest upon the philosophical statement of the poetic self-expression but in its address

The poem wants to head toward some other, it needs this other, it needs an opposite. It seeks it out, it bespeaks itself to it.

Each thing, each human is, for the poem heading toward this other, a figure of this.<sup>48</sup>

Celan survived the ideology of the German supremacists. Their specter returns in the poems, as the men and women with the "blond hair and the blue eyes" that Celan often juxtaposes with the "black hair" and "almond eyes" of the Jews, mocking and at the same time subverting the stereotypes with which the Jews were depicted by the German anti-Semites. In his notes to the *Meridian*, Celan addresses Heidegger directly, demanding that his rhetoric of the *Kehre* (turn) may turn into *teshuva*, the "turning around" and repentance. Amir Eshel, in an essay that examines the connection between Celan's concept of history, poetics, and ethics, quotes from Celan's notes of the *Meridian* speech:

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48 Ibid.

[Your reversal – What is it?] <sup>49</sup> Is it the word for the almond-eyed-beauties that I hear you, in convenient fashion, repeat? Only if you, with your own utmost pain, were by the crooked-nosed and the jargon-speaking and the quill-goitered dead from Auschwitz and Treblinka and other places, then you also encounter the eye and its almond. And then you stand, while your thinking grows silent [mit deinem verstummendem Denken], in a pause, which recalls your heart to you [...] and you cease to speak.

Celan's poetry marks the difference between a poetics that rests upon an Aristotelian mimesis, the probable representation or imitation of events with the function of catharsis, as Aristotle explains, and a poetics that is far more complex. Taking up Benjamin's theory of naming, Celan constructs a phenomenology of intersubjectivity that one might compare to Hegel's self-constitution:

The poem becomes – under what conditions! – the poem of someone who – always still – perceives, is turned toward phenomena, questioning and addressing these; it becomes conversation – often a desperate conversation.

Only in the space of this conversation does the addressed constitute itself, as it gathers around the I addressing and naming it. But the addressed which through naming has, as it were, become a you, brings its otherness into this present. Even in this here and now of the poem – for the poem itself, we know, has always only this one, unique, momentary present – even in this immediacy and nearness it lets the most essential aspect of the other speak; its time. <sup>50</sup>

The poet who perceives the “things” of the world *names* them, and by this addresses them, transforming them from mere things to a “you”. As addressees, they become subjects of a conversation – i. e. they respond, with the help of the poem: the poem ‘lets’ the other speak. Celan urges his readers to take up the hint: they, too, are addressed; the poet, in his speech, continues the conversation in a different genre, i. e. the direct speech that addresses the other – “Ladies and Gentlemen”, in the hope to be heard, in its own cause. <sup>51</sup>

In contrast to Adorno who decreed the end of poetry after Auschwitz, Celan claims that the poem fails when it does *not* speak, and it fails when it does not reach the reader with its words. The poem is, perhaps, “hermetic”, even protecting itself against destruction by a superficial, if not ideological reader whom Celan often encountered in Germany. His poems are, indeed, the documents of the

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49 Ibid. 127. I quote the rest of the passage, however, from Amir Eshel's essay, in a more accurate translation: A. ESHEL, *Paul Celan's Other: History, Poetics, and Ethics*, in: *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 91 (2004), 57–77, 71.

50 P. CELAN, *The Meridian*, 9.

51 With his speech, Celan of course also intervenes in the German post-war discourse on aesthetic theory, juxtaposing Adorno's verdict on “poetry after Auschwitz” with his own verdict on the *L'art pour l'art*, on the one hand, and the role of poetry as ‘disclosure’ of Being. Celan, instead, insists on the ethical role of the poem – *because* it speaks in the cause of an other. For a different position cf. K. MENDICINO, *An Other Rhetoric*.



past, and therefore difficult to decipher – yet they are meant to reach “land, heartland perhaps.”<sup>52</sup> Poems, Celan says, are *underway* and *they want to be found* – by a reader.<sup>53</sup>

Criticizing Derrida sharply, Marc Anderson holds against him that he responds to Celan’s concrete ethical remembrance with a deconstructive attitude that gestures to the *ubiquity* of death and murder. If true, Derrida would reiterate the position of Nolte in a different, now deconstructive tune, levelling out the differences between the Shoah and other murders. Regarding the French Celan reception, Anderson asks pointedly:

[T]o what extent is deconstruction willing to treat historical events, even one as “singular” as the Holocaust, as anything other than repetition? Derrida in his study of Celan explicitly claims that there is a “holocaust” for each date, everywhere in the world, at every hour.<sup>54</sup>

In his speech on Georg Büchner, Celan, in contrast, cites one particular date, stemming from a story by Büchner, *Lenz*, which Celan interprets in *The Meridian*. This date is the 20<sup>th</sup> of January. Moreover, it is also the date of the Wannsee conference in 1942, in which the inner circle of Hitler’s regime decided on the *Final Solution*, the plan to murder all Jews in the German empire which, of course, was supposed to expand over the whole world. Celan explains:

Perhaps we can say that every poem has its own ‘20<sup>th</sup> of January’ inscribed in it? Perhaps what’s new in the poems written today is exactly this: theirs is the clearest attempt to remain mindful of such dates?

But don’t we all write ourselves from such dates? And toward what dates do we write ourselves?<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, the question which dates we ascribe to ourselves, in other words, which experiences, personal and historical, we remember, is the question that any person asks. Likewise, any *moral* agent interprets experiences over time, identifying the sources of one’s moral commitments, the traces of love or harm that constitute self-esteem and trust in others, and creating a meaning that orients one’s actions. Since we are, however, not in control of the experiences we make, they include positive as well as negative experiences. Celan’s insistence on the situatedness of one’s writing is therefore indeed central for a critical political ethics that aims to be sensitive to its own history.

52 P. CELAN, *Bremer Rede*, in: S. REICHERT/B. ALLEMANN (ed.), *Gesammelte Werke in sieben Bänden*, Vol. 3, Frankfurt a. M. 2000, 185–186, 186.

53 The whole quote reads: “Das Gedicht kann, da es ja eine Erscheinungsform der Sprache und damit seinem Wesen nach dialogisch ist, eine Flaschenpost sein, aufgegeben in dem – gewiß nicht immer hoffnungsstarken – Glauben, sie könnte irgendwo und irgendwann an Land gespült werden, an Herzland vielleicht.” *Ibid.*

54 M. M. ANDERSON, *The “Impossibility of Poetry”*, 16.

55 P. CELAN, *The Meridian*, 8.

Celan's allusions are so haunting because they are often and deliberately "mindful of" (eingedenk) dates, places, images, or words that were perverted or overwritten by the Nazis. Here, the ordinary date, the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, shifts in its meaning when it cites the date Büchner names in the story *Lenz*, and the historical date of January 20, 1942. Hence, the poem's date – the *truth* from where (or when) it speaks – transcends the truth of literature or fiction, correlating it with the truth of history. While Benjamin was haunted by the "forgetting and forgiving" that is the "economy of time in the moral universe",<sup>56</sup> Celan echoes what Benjamin envisioned as the "dialectic of the standstill" (*Dialektik im Stillstand*):<sup>57</sup>

The poem tarries and tests the wind – a word related to the creaturely – through such thoughts.

Nobody can tell how long the breath pause – the testing and the thoughts – will last.<sup>58</sup>

Poetry *stops* time, creates the standstill at the point of the *Atemwende*, the turn of the breath, in order to *remember*. Celan may have offered his own comment on the Jewish-Christian relationship, almost quoting Benjamin's Messianism that invoked hope and redemption in the Jewish understanding of God:

In Judaism: God is not the one who came, and the one coming again, but rather the one who is coming [der Kommende]; in this way, time is determining, codetermining [mitbestimmend]; when God is near, time draws to an end.<sup>59</sup>

Juxtaposing this Jewish Messianism both with Christianity *and* with Heidegger's philosophy of the "coming God", which Heidegger thought of being embodied in a German poet and a German philosopher, Eshel comments:

Celan's "God" signifies the absence of an intervening, commanding, ultimately religious entity, and, at the same time, the hope for the appearance of a godly future that is not governed by human history – not governed by "darkness". The note thus hints at the Jewish messianic impulse: time, the marked historical events, are not superfluous, but constantly at hand, constantly codetermining what is conceived as the present, and not least in ethical questions. "Turning back" is by no means a mere metaphor. It describes the poem as a linguistic field that turns toward time and the trace of history, and it conceives the reading process as being in a textual space marked by the presence of such dates as "January 20".<sup>60</sup>

Similar to Benjamin's philosophy that "turns back" to respond to the shattered dreams of the past by remembering them, Celan's poetry, too, is a poetry of remembrance with an ethical claim. Celan's notes are clear in this point, as Eshel ex-

56 W. BENJAMIN, *The Meaning of Time in the Universe*, in: M. BULLOCK/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. I, 1913-1926, Cambridge, MA 2002, 286–287.

57 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*.

58 P. CELAN, *The Meridian*.

59 A. ESHEL, *Paul Celan's Other*, 73, quoting Celan's notes.

60 *Ibid.*

plains: “[t]hose who are prepared only to shed tears for the almond-eyed beauties kill them a second time.”<sup>61</sup>

As for the Germans who are indifferent to the Shoah – as Heidegger and most Germans after the war were – Celan urges them “to stand, while your thinking grows silent, in a pause.”<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, Eshel holds, Celan and Levinas do indeed agree: poetry and ethics converge in their concern, attention, and responsibility for the singular other. However, only Celan addresses the Germans with a gesture that is compared to a handshake, an opening of a conversation, a greeting – with poems that are written in their language. In Celan’s case, such a gesture, in the German language, towards his readers, is extraordinary. Returning the gesture, responding to the one whom one has harmed, must therefore be aimed at repairing the damage, the pain, and the injustices that prevail up to today.<sup>63</sup> It is this path that critical political ethics must follow.

Christian theology cannot afford, for the sake of those who rely upon its word, to merely claim the truth of “Being”. Theology must seek truth *in* history, mediated by an ethics of remembrance, witnessing, and responsibility, as response to the address by another, singular, unique human being, and in doing this, responding, at the same time, to God. Paul Celan translated the script for the 1956 documentary film *Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais that had been written by Jean Cayrol, a survivor of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, into German. This film – which I, like most high school adolescents in Germany, saw in the 1970s – made Auschwitz stand in for all the death camps of the Nazis, the symbol for the Shoah. David Coury who has examined Celan’s translation thoroughly, emphasizes the connection between this early translation work by Celan and many of his poems dealing with the Shoah. He quotes the last line of the script and documentary, in which Celan addresses not only the particular racism in Germany but any racism in the future:

Wer von uns wacht hier und warnt uns, wenn die neuen Henker kommen? Haben sie wirklich ein anderes Gesicht als wir? [...] Und es gibt uns, die wir beim Anblick dieser Trümmer aufrichtig glauben, der Rassenwahn sei für immer darunter begraben, uns die wir dieses Bild entschwinden sehen und tun, als schöpften wir neue Hoffnung, als glaubten wir wirklich, daß all das nur einer Zeit und nur einem Lande angehört. (99)

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61 Celan, quoted in *ibid.* 74.

62 *Ibid.*

63 From this perspective, that there *were* even debates on Germany’s reparations for the survivors of the Shoah adds yet another insult to the genocide; they demonstrate clearly how little *political* impact the “German memory culture” had when this had to be translated into concrete acts of reparation. The same holds true for the “other genocide” that Germany committed, namely for the genocide of the Nama and Ovaherero people. Cf. H. HAKER, *Towards a Decolonial Narrative Ethics*, in: *Humanities* 8/3 (2019), 1–31.

Who among us is standing watch and warns us when the new executioners come? Do they really have a face different from ours? [...] And there is us, who when looking at this rubble sincerely believe that the racial mania is forever buried underneath there, us who see this image vanishing and act as if we were creating a new hope, as if we really believed that all that belongs only to one time and one country.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. *Responsibility for the Past and Critical Political Ethics*

Christian theology, like Judaism, is grounded in an anthropology that goes beyond the openness to transcendence; it claims that theology itself cannot but speak of God other than as the addressed ones who wrestle with the response to God. Even the question whether there was ever the “first word” that addressed the respondent belongs into the tradition of theology. The dialogical character connects theology to poetry or literature in general: both theology and literature will at times stammer and hesitate in their speech; at times, they must stand still and pause, stop reasoning and fall silent. Like poetry, biblical and theological speech, too, sometimes borders on the silence, the struggle for words, sometimes a single word, which Celan articulated in and through his poetry. Maybe, at other times, Christian theologians, just like any Christian but with the power of their knowledge of the tradition, must raise their voices and dissent. Speaking of myself, sometimes I have no words, and sometimes I want to scream in anger – and horror. In all these expressions and articulations of experiences, there is no turning away, neither from one’s own biographical experiences which we are made aware of not abstractly but in the “flashes” of memory of our own past, nor from the catastrophes of history.

Metz demanded that theology must, first and foremost, remember the “landscape of screams” of those who are being tortured and killed – these landscapes are not abstract concepts but *real* places, and it therefore matters who remembers what – and whom – and at what price, because after all, the survivors of trauma cannot live on *without forgetting*. Thus, it seems that Metz first and foremost addressed his own people: all the bystanders and witnesses of suffering, and those who *suffer with* the suffering. This is crucial, because the last thing those who have survived moral injury need is the *obligation* to remember the past. In fact, forgetting may be the only pathway to survival. For all others, however, the imperative to remember means attending to the ongoing injustice, including the injustice of those who are forgotten over time.

Christian ethics must depart from a naïve – and indeed dangerous – theology of history that is either rooted in the mythical “forgetting and forgiving” over

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64 D. N. COURY, “Auch ruhiges Land ...”: *Remembrance and Testimony in Paul Celan’s Nuit et Brouillard Translation*, in: *Prooftexts* 22/1 (2002), 55–76, 91 f.

time or in the anti-Judaist supersessionism. Christian theology has every reason to turn to the past in a self-reflective, critical, yet prophetic act of remembrance.

A critical political ethics will insist on reinterpreting biblical texts and tropes, including the metaphors of the philosophy of history. In this vein, Christian theology, I have suggested, may turn to the figure of the *paraclete* who accompanies the witnesses of faith.<sup>65</sup> This advocate is connected to the Hebrew term *Ruach*, the live-giving breath of creation. She is a figure of remembrance, and a figure of witness, testifying to God on behalf of the witnesses of faith. This biblical-literary figure of life, remembrance, and advocacy is connected to the multiple traditions, the Greek understanding of *pneuma* or the English tradition of the Spirit. Understanding is interpretation and translation, Paul Ricœur holds, and translation means to host something that is strange in one's own. History can ultimately only be told in stories or expressed in poetry and art. Benjamin has a wonderful, Kafkaesque story to tell:

The idea is to present history as a trial in which man as an advocate for mute nature makes a complaint against the nonappearance of the promised Messiah. The court, however, decides to hear the witnesses for the future. There appear the poet who senses it, the sculptor who sees it, the musician who hears it, and the philosopher who knows it. Their testimony thus diverges, though all of them testify to his coming. The court does not dare to admit its indecision. Hence there is no end of new complaints and new witnesses. There is torture and martyrdom. The jury benches are occupied by the living, who listen to the human prosecutor and the witnesses with equal mistrust. The jurors' seats are inherited by their sons. At length they grow afraid they may be driven from their benches. Finally all the jurors take flight, and the prosecutor and the witnesses remain.<sup>66</sup>

In this story, the artists and the philosophers all testify to the coming of the Messiah – countering the “man”, the human being who complains and advocates for nature that cannot speak because it is “mute”. The religious witnesses are missing, perhaps on purpose. Taking the cue from the story then, theology should not pretend to resolve the trial. Rather, theologians (and any religious believer) should take a seat beside the other witnesses for the future, joining them in their political resistance against nihilism, false promises, and all the pied pipers of our time. In the story, history is left with the prosecutor and the witnesses – the living who are to judge take flight because they cannot decide who is right or wrong in view of “torture and martyrdom” that the advocates bring forth and the witnesses speak up against. The end of the story is left open – just as we can only hope in view of the current destruction, our own future, too, is at least this: open.

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65 Cf. chapter 11 in this volume.

66 G. SCHOLEM/W. BENJAMIN, *The Story of a Friendship* (translated by Harry Zohn), Philadelphia 1981, 186. Cf. P. BOURETZ, *Witnesses for the Future*, Baltimore MD 2010.

Ethics is the reflective theory of the practices of the life-world, be they committed in good or bad intention, and with right or wrong consequences. Without relating to the diachronical dates and the diatopical locations of this life-world, ethics fails to attend to the always specific historical constellations that entail a particular personal, yet historical summons to moral agents. This concrete situatedness of ethical judgments is necessary, because it renders the judgments also open to the critique of others. Critical political ethics must indeed be spelled out as an ethics that begins with the multiple, diatopical narratives. I – a Christian theologian, German-American, ethicist – must remember my own history differently than the survivors of the Shoah or the descendants of slavery and genocide in the Americas, Africa, Asia, or Oceania remember their history. For the ones who are, in whatever way, responsible for the history they inherit, remembrance means to attend to the victims and survivors, to pause, to fall silent, to listen. However, this does also mean that the perpetrators of history must not be named, that the accounts must be given, their stories be told, and the perpetrators be held accountable. For those who remember their own losses, or who remember the dead as losses of their own families, remembrance looks entirely different, because the relationship between remembrance and forgetting is different. For the one side, keeping open the wounds of injustice through remembrance is an obligation. For the other side, wounds that stem from *harms* by acts or omissions await rectification, reparation, or, in theological terms, redemption. The biblical narratives are as much cultural documents of personal and political histories as religious documents. The remembrance of despair, lament, and hope, and their actualization in rituals and practices, may indeed help white Christians to unlearn the habitus of superiority, but it may just as well help the non-white Christians and non-Christians – especially Jews and Muslims because they are so closely related to Christianity – to unlearn the habitus of inferiority that has been implanted in them for centuries.

The lesson I take from Benjamin, Celan, and Levinas is that ethical remembrance is not merely a memory of the past that is uncanny, perhaps even unwelcome. Instead, it is a remembrance of the past that summons the individual personally to respond. Every agent is responsible, yet all agents are responsible in different ways. They may well do so by responding to the most human gesture that connects the self and the other. Celan called it the gesture of a handshake; Derrida's calls his obituary speech for Levinas *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. He devotes his text to Levinas, the teacher who taught him the threefold meaning of the gesture – and attitude – of the *“adieu”*: first as a greeting and as a good-bye, second as a blessing of a friend at death. Third, it means the *“a-dieu”*, in the reading of Levinas, appropriated by Derrida: not just *“to God”*, but *“for God”* and *“before*

God”: coinciding with everything else, preceding everything, and in all relations to the other. This, Derrida says, has far-reaching consequences: “[e]very relation to the other would be, before and after anything else, an adieu.”<sup>67</sup>

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