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The Time of the Poem

Poetry as Messianic Action in Paul Celan's *Meridian*

When does a poem happen? Is it when that about which it speaks actually happens? Perhaps, but this criterion would only apply to those rare circumstances when a poem really talks "about" something. And even then, it is only a very shallow aspect of the temporal location of the poem. Then again, the answer might rest in time when the poem was written. Although, this perspective only makes sense from the vantage offered by a rather obsolete notion of poetry, according to which a poem happens and thereby belongs to the lived experience of the author, a time to which the reader must return. We, the arch-moderns, would certainly not endorse such naiveté. We are therefore left to return to our question: when does the poem happen? Perhaps closer to our tastes, we might answer that this happening simply emerges when the poem is being read. After all, this generally seems to be simply true. But this formula, "a poem happens when it is read," is itself open to various ambiguities of interpretation. It might mean that a poem happens each time it is being read, i.e. in all the executions, interpretations, and in each way of reading and voice of particular readers – all punctuated by diverse and plural points in time. The formula could also mean that a poem happens each time it is being read, calling the reader to leave his own time behind and enter sacred time, or inviting the reader to turn his own time into a moment of the eternal, mythical return of the same. However, if we accept that "a poem happens when it is being read," but remain unsatisfied by these two divergent interpretations, all is not lost. We can avail ourselves of a third option, spoken from the pen of a poet – Paul Celan.

At the outset, we should note that this is not necessarily an advisable path to take. In the notes for the Meridian speech, the poetic manifesto that Celan read when receiving the Georg Büchner award in 1960, the author of the *Todesfuge* invoked the ironic warning of Hugo von Hoffmannstahl: "Who wants to know what the sea is, should not ask the fish."[1] Celan himself adds the following: "This is true also when you have caught the fish and brought it to the shore in a Büchnerian net." His efforts in the

Meridian may only be attempts "to swim on dry land" (M 186). In other words, it may be that if we ask a poet about the nature of poetry, what we receive will not have much to do with the theory or practice of poetry, but it will have a lot to do with desperate fluttering of a creature taken out of its proper element. Armed with critical instruments, we should rather look at the poems themselves, look at what – and when – they do whatever it is that poetry does. Warnings aside, the whole matter need not be that simple. The image of the fish that tries to swim on dry land may be misleading, insofar as it assumes that the poetic element is something in which the poet thrives, like a fish in water. For that matter, the Meridian speech itself presents the poetic element as the realm of the alien and the abysmal, where the poet can succumb to what Franz Kafka described as seasickness on dry land. And by this measure, if poetry is not the sea, but rather the dry land on which we experience Kafkaesque vertigo, then the realm which we have so far imagined to be the dry land, i.e. the order of theory, is not necessarily hospitable to the theorist – or alien to the poet.

However this may be, the Meridian and its accompanying notes, in which Celan sketched his Büchner speech, form a text that is dense and rich enough to allow for gains without pressing against the limits of this strategy. Moreover, the Meridian speech unmistakably tries to do precisely what it speaks about. It tries to become a poem, playing with the border between theory and poetry. For this reason, it is within the Meridian speech and its notes that I will be looking for the answer to my initial question about the time of the poem, searching for a more interesting reading of the formula according to which a poem happens when it is being read, and for an answer to a series of questions concerning the temporal dimension of a poem. And finally, my argument will be that Celan offers a consistent theory of the poem as messianic action.

The Majesty of the Absurd

The main line of argument in the Meridian is based on a peculiar interplay between notions of art and poetry. "It is nice to talk about art," Celan says in reference to the conversation between Danton and Camille Desmoulin in Büchner's play *Danton's Death* (M 2). Discourse on art, even when critical (as in the aforementioned conversation) flows smoothly, as does the discourse of art itself. "Ah, art!" Camille sighs ambiguously, complaining about its sterility with great pleasure. But during this conversation someone appears who "does not listen properly" (M 3), who almost listens and when the conversation is over cannot really say what it was about. It is Lucile, Camille's wife, and it is her side that Celan takes. The conversation on art, which could last forever, is brutally interrupted, as Robespierre has ordered the arrest of Danton. Sentenced to death, Camille and Danton die artistically, theatrically, even "iambically," with their mouths full of elegant words. But what is crucial for Celan and the argument of this text is what happens at the very end of the play. Mad Lucille, who is "blind to art," cries out: "Long live the king!" (M 3) This nonsensical call, sealing Lucile's fate, is perceived by Celan as a counter-word, a step, and an act of freedom. And yet, what is at stake is not a reactionary political gesture, but a gesture of a revolt beyond revolt, and act of an insane, radical break in revolutionary discourse – in other words, a break in discourse grounded in the idea of the break. Celan says: "A tribute is paid here to the majesty of the absurd that bears witness to the humanity which is still present. This majesty, ladies and gentlemen, has no fixed name, but I think it is… poetry" (M 3-4). Which is to say that poetry is not identical with art: it appears at the moment of a radical break in artistic discourse. But it does not have its separate domain.

In order to describe this gesture more precisely, Celan takes a look at another Büchnerian character: Lenz. It is through his mediation that the strange, foreign, and alien appear in the argument of the Meridian. Celan quotes a passage in which Lenz describes the sight of two ladies whom he had seen in the valley: "Even the most beautiful, most intimate paintings of the old German school can hardly give you a clue about it. Sometimes one would like to be the Medusa's head in order to turn such a group into a stone, and then call others to have a look" (M 5). Art operates with Medusa's head, it is the domain of "automata" and "puppets": the realm of separation from what is natural and alive, and the natural ego, the given I: "Art creates I-foreignness" (M 6). But it is still art, and not poetry. The poetic utterance must indeed walk the path of art, but it also wants to find its own way to freedom. Which immediately raises the question of where such liberation might reside. This site was clearly marked by the absurd exclamation of "Long live the king!" in the Danton play, whereas Celan discovers this moment in the following passage from the Lenz novella: "except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head." To which Celan adds: "He who walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen, he who walks on his head, has the sky under him as an abyss" (M 7). By which he means to invoke the absurd revolution or inversion, which suddenly opens an infinite Pascalian space beneath our feet, in the movement of a sudden break with all continuity. And according to Celan, this break is the only "topic of the poem" (M 178). It is also the moment of alienation or foreignness, which remains different from a Medusa-like alienation. It is infinitely close to the latter and yet it transcends it: "But maybe there is also the foreignness of a double kind, even if the direction is the same, and both foreign lands are close neighbors" (M 7). It is likewise the moment of a sudden falling silent, the mute parting of broken words, when we loose our breath and the ability to speak, which is a moment even more radical than the insanity of "Long live the king!" It is for this reason that Celan can finally write: "Poetry – this can also mean the turn of the breath [*Atemwende*]. Who knows, perhaps poetry walks the path – also the path of art – for the sake of such a breath turn? Perhaps it succeeds – as the foreignness, the abyss *and* the Medusa's head, the abyss *and* the automata, seem to lie in the same direction – perhaps it succeeds in distinguishing between one foreignness and the other, perhaps it is exactly here that Medusa's head shrinks and the automata fail – for one peculiar, short moment?" (M 7)

Artistic alienation destroys nature, but poetic alienation goes even further and appears at the moment when the machine of art stops working. Poetry does not have its own autonomous realm; it must walk the path of art. And it therefore happens only when this second alienation occurs. For this reason, Celan remarks that "the poem establishes itself at its own border" (M 8). Meaning that it is necessarily a borderline phenomenon. This is also why it is defined by a turn of breath, the moment of falling silent, an *argumentum e silentio*, or Hölderlin's "caesura." By its very definition, the poem is elliptic, but such ellipsis should not be perceived as a trope (M 87): poetry transcends the artistic play of tropes, and therefore "the poem would be a place where all tropes and metaphors want to be driven *ad absurdum*" (M 10). The break is both absurd and utopian, as it transcends all the immanent common places, all the tropes of art: "A study of the topos? Sure! But only in the light of something that still needs to be studied: the light of u-topia. And man? And creation? In this light as well" (M 10).

The above-quoted passage on the "abyss *and* Medusa's head" is actually incomplete, as it ends with one more sentence in the Meridian: "Perhaps here, together with the self – together with this estranged I which *here* and *thus* finds its way into freedom – something else, something Other, is set free?" (M 7) With this, two additional issues are raised. First, the I which is necessarily alienated in the Medusa-like space of art, in the realm of the artistic play of tropes, now finds its way into freedom in this momentary alienation of poetry which is even more alien than artistic alienation – a freedom that is strange, new, and transformed, but really mine. In other words, as the final formulations of the Meridian suggest, the poem arranges a meeting of the I with itself, "a kind of home-coming" (M 11). And secondly, together with this I, something Other is likewise liberated. Celan plays with various kinds of otherness, in the first place indicating that "each thing and each person" is a form of the other. But perhaps what is at stake is also what he names under the heading of "absolutely Other" (M 8). The poem "wants the Other, it needs the Other," and for this reason it participates in the "mystery of encounter" as an "often desperate" conversation with a certain You (M 9). In which case, we have to ask how this encounter with the Other can be read together with the previously noted self-encounter. An answer to this question will emerge in the pages that follow, but for the present let us accept a tentative and relatively safe solution: in the poetic act, in the absurd turn of breath when the something most alien opens, both I and the Other find their way to freedom. At the very least, this would mean that the self-encounter is impossible without passage to the Other, without an encounter with the Other.

Taking all of this into account, we have to ask if the Meridian can tell us anything about the time of the poem and its broader temporal dimension. Despite their overall importance, only a few passages in the speech actually refer to this problem. In fact, it seems that the question of time is raised only in the moving passages that refer to the problem of memory and dating. Noting that Büchner's Lenz walked across the mountains on the 20th of January, and thereby alluding to the infamous Wannsee conference that belonged to the same date, Celan writes: "Perhaps one may say that its own '20th of January' is inscribed in every poem? Perhaps this is what is new in the poems that are written today: that here one can most clearly see the attempt to keep such dates in one's memory? But don't we all derive, de-write [*herschreiben*] ourselves from such dates? And at what dates do we arrive, a-write [*zuschreiben*]?" (M 8) This idea is soon then linked to the notion of the poem as a movement toward otherness, which manifests itself in every single thing – if granted proper attention. In his own words: “The attention which the poem strives to grant everything that it encounters, its particular sensitivity for details, shape, structure, and color, but also for the ‘quivering’ and ‘allusions’ – all this is not, I think, the achievement of the eye which so eagerly competes (or collaborates) with the machines that are perfected every day, it is rather a concentration which keeps in memory all our dates” (M 9). This is because the poem “gives speech to that what is most specific for the Other, that is, his time” (M 10). And therefore, speaking of his own self-encounter, with reference to his poem *Stimmen* and prose piece *Conversation in the Mountains*, Celan notes that “in both cases I had written myself from a ‘20th of January’, from my own ‘20th of January’” (M 11). In which case, we perhaps do not strike at the “when” of the poem, but we do gather that the poem is an act of attention, concentration, and of keeping in our memory “all our dates,” which is just another name for the poetic encounter with the other enabling an encounter with ourselves.

Is that all? Almost. Approaching the end of his speech, Celan suggests that the “study of the topos” can be conducted only “in the light of u-topia,” to which he suddenly adds: “It is time to turn back.” This short, seemingly unimportant sentence can be understood in at least two ways. First, the line might be read in a trivial sense, given that it appears right after the strong claims on utopia and after his exclamations: “What a question! What a demand!” In which case it would simply be a rhetorical admonition that Celan has addressed to himself: you have gone to far; it’s time to turn back. But the line might also be read as an imitation of the trajectory of the meridian, which comes back to its beginning, back “home” toward the self-encounter. To say “it is time to turn back” would thereby suggest that it is both the movement of the poem and the movement of this peculiar poem about poetry, i.e. the Meridian speech itself. And yet, it seems that something more lingers in his words. The sentence reads: *Es ist Zeit, umzukehren*. As we shall see, “es ist Zeit” is a phrase of key importance for Celan. The same holds for the term which appears here as a verb: *Umkehr*, which would indicate return or reversal, but also conversion. This term plays a significant role in the notes for the Meridian and, moreover, it links Celan’s text to the body of German-Jewish thought. Therefore, it will be necessary to account for the full resonance of this term before turning back to Celan.

Dialogue and Charge

Encounter, conversation, and You – the lines of Martin Buber's thought are constantly retraced in the Meridian. For this reason, the Buberian trail marks the necessary, if limited, prefix to understanding the meaning *Umkehr* in Celan's speech. For Buber, *Umkehr* is a German equivalent of the Hebrew term *teshuva*, i.e. repentance, a return to God, and likewise a response. Overflowing with these meanings, the term *Umkehr* becomes the leitmotif of the last pages of Buber's *I and Thou.*

There, *Umkehr* refers to an act of re-turning towards You, an act of re-entering the relation. Buber means to indicate any dialogical relation, as all lines going from an I to a You intersect in the "eternal You," i.e. God. By this measure, any encounter is religious in nature, and any *Umkehr*, restoring a relation, is an act of *teshuva*. This act addresses a You, it is a true response to an address, and at the same time it regenerates the I which remains distorted and unfulfilled in the subject-object relation. In his own words: "*Umkehr* signifies the re-cognition of the center, turning back to it again. In this essential deed man's buried power to relate is resurrected, the wave of all relational spheres surges up in a living flood and renews our world."[2]

The movement of *Umkehr* turns out to be one of the two fundamental metaphysical movements which permeate the world as such, not simply the realm of man: "Dimly we apprehend this double movement – the turning away from the ground by virtue of which the universe preserves itself in its becoming, and the turning toward the primal ground by virtue of which the universe redeems itself in being – as the metacosmic primal form of duality […] whose human form is the duality of attitudes, of basic words, and of the two aspects of the world."[3] Nevertheless, it is man who realizes these two movements in the clearest way: "For the two basic meta-cosmic movements of the world – its expansion into its own being and the *Umkehr* to association – attain their supreme human form […] in the history of man's relation to God. It is in the *Umkehr* that the word is born on earth; in spreading out it enters the chrysalis of religion; in a new *Umkehr* it is reborn with new wings."[4] This duality springs from the fact that man tends to misunderstand the religious relation. The encounter with God – i.e. revelation – should push man towards various encounters in the world, in which revelation is realized and renewed. However, man tends to focus on God rather than on the world, establishing and institutionalizing religion and thus losing contact with God himself. Focusing on God as a separate being turns Him into an It and marks a turning away from God, whereas movement toward the world and dialogical relations are, in fact, acts of *Umkehr*.

History as such, not simply the life of an individual, is informed by the alternation between fossilized institutional religions (or, according to Buber's later writings, eclipses of God) and renewed *Umkehr*, responses and regenerations of the word and dialogical relations with the world and God himself. However, it is not just an eternal wavering, but a kind of spiral movement. Moreover, *Umkehr* is an act through which the world "redeems itself in being." No wonder, then, that when Buber describes the spiral of history in the final, somewhat fantastic paragraph of *Ich und Du*, he once again refers to the category of redemption: "But the path is not a circle. It is the way. Doom becomes more oppressive in every new eon, and the *Umkehr* more explosive. And the theophany comes ever *closer*, it comes ever closer to the sphere *between beings* – comes closer to the realm that hides in our midst, in the between. History is a mysterious approach to closeness. Every spiral of its path leads us into deeper corruption and at the same time into more fundamental *Umkehr*. But the God-side of the event whose world-side is called *Umkehr* is called redemption."[5]

Whether or not Buber continued to subscribe to this rather schematic historico-philosophical pattern, he did retain this link between *Umkehr* and the category of redemption. In *Gog and Magog* he describes a fascinating struggle between two 19th century Hassidic schools (Lublin and Przysucha), concerning the proper interpretation of the messianic idea and possible significance of the Napoleonic wars for the process of redemption. Although *Gog and Magog* is a novel, the author is clearly taking sides in the debate. He rejects the Lublin line, i.e. the notion that the messianic idea is linked to particular historical events, that redemption can be promoted by magical techniques and that the establishment of the Kingdom first demands an apocalyptic catastrophe (the Napoleonic wars, in this case). Buber supports the party line of Przysucha, and he has its leader give a speech which can easily be read as the summary of his own interpretation of messianism which puts most stress precisely on the concept of *Umkehr*: "Perhaps it is true that [redemption] depends on us, but not on our might [i.e. magical practices], but on our *Umkehr*. Our [Talmudic] Sages were right when they said that all the dates appointed for the coming of the messiah have already passed and everything now depends on *Umkehr*. And it is not any kind of might, but it is the sole human action, which God awaits in order to redeem the world. His face is not absent; it is only hidden from our sight, because we are not turning towards Him with all our essence; let us turn towards Him and he will let it illuminate us. Sometimes, when day-dreaming, I see messiah raising the shofar to his lips, but he does not blow – what is he waiting for? He does not wait for us to summon powers but to return to our father like kids that got lost."[6]

In summary, the Buberian *Umkehr* is the act of reestablishing dialogical relations with (a) You – and so with the eternal You, i.e. God. It also means a re-gathering of one's I and a response to an address, and for these reasons it signals a regeneration of the word. It is a reaction to the prior address of revelation, both as an act of fulfillment of the task prescribed by revelation (to focus on the world rather than on God) and the site of a new revelation, because it reestablishes our contact with the divine. It is also emphatically messianic, redemptive action, the only kind that is accessible and necessary for man. Redemption is not summoned by magical formulae: it is realized precisely thanks to *Umkehr*, thanks to the turning toward You. Which is therefore not the cause of redemption, but its actual realization – even if this process is of an infinite character.[7]

While thinking aloud about the concept of poetic "attention," which is meant to "keep in memory all our dates," Celan offers the following: "'Attention,' let me quote Malebranche after Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka, 'attention is the natural prayer of the soul'" (M 9). What is peculiar about this passing reference is that in the fourth and final chapter of this very essay, Benjamin introduces the term *Umkehr* in a way that may help us in reading Celan, especially if we take into account a later use of this category in one of Benjamin's notes linked to his planned book on the Parisian arcades.

One of the peculiarities of the way Benjamin reads Kafka is his claim that Kafka's world – which is permeated with, or rather crushed by, guilt – should also be perceived as the world immersed in oblivion. In this world, man does not remember anything, beginning with own life. He does not grasp or recognize the alien of his own person – he is unknown to himself. This is why Benjamin singles out 'the students,' among the various creatures inhabiting this peculiar universe, who try to oppose the dark power of this oblivion and to regain the lost narratives of their lives. Alluding to the image that appears at the beginning of Kafka's "Report to the Academy," Benjamin says: "It is a tempest that blows from forgetting, and study is a cavalry attack against it."[11] Each movement forward only enhances our involvement: it is as if each moment we have lived has sunk into oblivion, and in this forgotten form becomes one more stone in the burden that crushes our back. This is why the chances for rescue can only be found in desperate charges in the reverse direction. It is in this context that Benjamin refers to the concept of *Umkehr*. First, rather idiosyncratically, he quotes a passage from Plutarch: "At mysteries and sacrifices, among Greeks as well as barbarians, it is taught that there must be two primary essences and two opposing forces, one of which points to the right and straight ahead, whereas the other turns around and drives back." And then Benjamin states: "*Umkehr* is the direction of study which transforms existence into script."[9]

As in Buber, there are two contradictory forces here, and the chance for liberation is linked to the movement of reversal. It also seems that this movement is supposed to lead us toward regaining ourselves or maybe toward self-encounter. The latter is also effected through the word. Not through the dialogical act, but rather in "writing" or "scripture," in a narrative, an act of rereading our own existence which opposes oblivion. A passage from Benjamin's letter to Gershom Scholem explicitly suggests that the act of *Umkehr* is also of messianic character: "Kafka's messianic category is *Umkehr* or the 'studying'."[10] However, what is peculiar is that the movement of *Umkehr* is unequivocally understood as a movement toward the past, as the cavalry charge of memory against oblivion.

The image of the storm blowing from the past and desperate attempts at opposing it returns in the essay "On the Concept of History," specifically in the famous 9th thesis, in which the angel of history looks towards the past and sees the heap of ruins, one enormous catastrophe: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and his wings have caught him; it is so strong that angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky."[11] The passage is often quoted, but what is important to note is that the model of the historian's activity that Benjamin sketches in the essay on the concept of history (together with the file of methodological notes for the work on the Parisian arcades marked with the letter N) is decidedly not limited to the melancholic recording of historical catastrophe through the eyes of the angel of history. Rather, the activity of the historian is a series of virtual, local messianic acts directed toward the past. In this sense, his activity seems to be a new version of the redemptive *Umkehr* described in the essay on Kafka. Indeed, in one of the notes Benjamin writes: "Historico-philosophical and political significance of the concept of *Umkehr*. Last Judgement as the present turned towards the past."[12] The messianic historian participates in this movement of turning back. This is why looking at the anatomy of his activity is worthwhile.

According to Benjamin, history is indeed a permanent catastrophe, a long chain of suffering and unfulfilled hopes. As he says in the N file: "That things are 'status quo' *is* catastrophe."[13] The messianic revolution would have to stop the flow of time and oppose this overpowering storm. And the opposition between the movement of the ongoing catastrophe and the revolutionary gesture parallels the opposition between two modes of historiography. The dominant, allegedly objective, narrative of history drifts forward, driven by the storm of the permanent catastrophe. Contrary to what might seem, it is not a work of memory, but a work of forgetting and suppressing voices with narrative chattering or remaining silent in line with the wants of the victors. The messianic historian breaks this narrative, and thereby uncovers that what has thus far been silenced. Such a historiography, then, is a kind of revolutionary work of memory. Perhaps noteworthy in this context is the fact that Benjamin uses the peculiar term *Eingedenken*, borrowed from Ernst Bloch. A term that is related to the phrase *eingedenk sein*, to keep in memory or mind, which is precisely the phrase that Paul Celan uses in the Meridian when talking about keeping in memory all our dates.

The relation between the present moment of the Benjaminian historian and the object of historical study must be seen as a peculiar kind of clash. Opposing the storm of history and breaking the epic continuity of the narrative of forgetting, this historian undertakes an *Umkehr* that confronts his own present with a moment in the past. In this work, he produces a constellation, a flashing dialectical image between his Now, the Now of knowability, and what is gone. However, as Benjamin himself makes clear, these images appear in language by breaking the dominant narrative to be "read" by the historian.[14] Thus, the act of historical cognition, the act of *Umkehr*, is an act of reading in which we turn toward a past moment that in our time reaches a higher level of legibility, but only for a brief moment of which we are left to make the best. Thinking of Benjamin's earlier vocabulary, which implicitly informs his work on the Parisian arcades, we might say that it is our task to uncover the hidden "names" of the past, immersed in the deadly continuum of victorious narratives. In fulfilling this task, undertaking *Umkehr* and the charge of memory, the historian uses his "weak messianic power" which is given to us both in real political action and in the practice of writing history.[15] The power in question is weak because redemption is not ours to hold – simply and directly. It is given to us only for the sake of the others, those who have no hope. In other words, unlike in the essay on Kafka, the messianic action of our *Umkehr* is not directed at regaining our own past, but toward uncovering the hidden past of previous generations. *Teshuva* and the messianic concentration of my own I is possible only thanks to a relation to something that is not me and that lays its justified claims on my weak messianic power. Nevertheless, such a messianic concentration does occur in the act of *Umkehr*, which is also an act of reading and recovering lost names. The historian makes his own present reach the higher level of messianic fulfillment and turns it into a moment of higher temporality. As we can read in the theses on the concept of history, the historian "grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time."[16]

It Is Time to Turn Back

In a note for the Meridian speech, we find the following: "The poem is an *Umkehr*" (M 131). If this is the case, then the declaration "*Es ist Zeit, umzukehren*" has additional significance. It is to the poem itself that these impatient words are addressed, it is the poem itself that is supposed to turn back. But to where, and what is the logic of this *Umkehr*? When, and in what kind of time does this poetic *Umkehr* take place? When is it time to turn back? And finally, how is this linked to the problem of messianic action?

The notes for the Meridian speech provide several rather obvious or even trivial remarks concerning the difficulties that *Umkehr* encounters today. Alluding to both Benjamin and the cowardly silent Heidegger, Celan says: "*Umkehr* – it seems that today there are too many one-way streets for this. – The movement in the opposite direction and *Umkehr* are not the same, but it seems that even on field paths there are so few occasions for this" (M 131). Or, in another note: "It is not a sign of *Umkehr* if one praises today things and people in different words, but in the same tone that one has used yesterday to deplore them" (M 173). And lastly: "All of us, each in his or her own way, witnessed the process which from what 15 years ago still was a burden for our hearts lead to the following state of affairs: to prattling about *Umkehr* instead of the *Umkehr* itself, an alleged engagement and commitment instead of true responsibility, cultural zeal instead of modest attention" (M 169).

The latter moralizing remark – or, more precisely, the phrase "fifteen years ago" – already suggests the answer to our first question: namely, toward what exactly is the poetic *Umkehr* directed? Well, each poem is an *Umkehr* and as such it can be directed toward many different things. But Celan himself apparently knows where and to whom his own poem should turn, as it springs from his own 20th of January: the victims of the Shoah. Indeed, the formula "the poem is an *Umkehr*" appears as the conclusion to the following note: "The Jewish: When in May 1945 I wrote *Todesfuge*, earlier, I think in *Izviestia*, I read an article about the ghetto in Lvov, only once. But this issue, together with so many other things, comes back to me time and again, and so – the poem is an *Umkehr*" (M 131). How should we read this "together with so many other things"? Presumably it means that the Shoah is only one issue amongst others. When Celan asks himself in another note "your *Umkehr* – what is it?", he goes on to talk about the turn toward the murdered of "Auschwitz, Treblinka and other places" (M 127). Therefore, to claim that the poem is an *Umkehr* for Celan means, first and foremost, that the poem is a testimony to Shoah. Celan's poem turns back toward the murdered.

It is not simply the object of this testimony that aligns Celan's work to a particularly Jewish modality of writing. It is the very mechanism, the very movement of *Umkehr* that Celan recognizes as Jewish. Perhaps it is hidden in the following definition of *Umkehr*: "*Umkehr* is being-by-the-other" (M 128). But in another note where this definition is extended, Celan speaks openly, using the rather shocking word *verjuden* and turning it against those who had used it in a different tone only 15 years before. "One can go Jewish: admittedly, it is difficult and, why not admit it too, some Jews also failed to do it; this is why I recommend it: in the last analysis it is a term for recognizing oneself in the other, it is a movement of reaching the other and oneself. It is an *Umkehr*" (M 199). In still another note, where he again recommends *Verjudung*, Celan claims that from this point of view the poem and the poet himself are "Jews of literature" (M 131). Thus, this Jewish-poetic act of *Umkehr* is an act of encounter with the other (M 127) and an act of self-encounter (M 128) which is only possible thanks to the turn towards the other, only in the act of testifying.

Conceived in this way, the movement of *Umkehr* is clearly linked to the notions of the turn of breath, caesura and the absurd utopian break in the poem, the key terms of the Meridian proper. In one of the notes on the concept of *Umkehr*, from which I have taken the passage concerning those murdered in "Auschwitz, Treblinka and other places," Celan first talks about the necessity of going toward all the dead with one's very own suffering and then stops: "In the remembered pauses […] your word reaches the peak. The poem today – it is the turn of breath, the mountain ridge of time, the turn of the soul, this is how you recognize it" (M 127). In another note we read: "At the moment of the remembered pause, at the mountain ridge of time, your word finds you" (M 127). Or, in still another: "Not a motive, but a pause and interval, the silent courts of breath […] guarantee in a poem the authenticity of the encounter with the other" (M 128).

It is not hard to link these notes to what we already know. For the sake of the encounter with the other, or in order to become a testimony for the past other, the poem undertakes an *Umkehr* toward our key dates, and this moment of turning back and testifying, the moment of the true word, is identical with an *Atemwende*, a caesura, or a break in discourse. For just as the Benjaminian historian had to tear apart the dominant chatter about things past, an idle chatter that was actually a daemonic silence, a poem appears to Celan at the moment of break, in the "royal caesura,"[17] the turn of breath. And these moments of the true, higher silence which opposes the false, stifling chatter, are the true moments of testimony and recovery of dates and perhaps names. This absurd, utopian break appears, thanks to the act of *Umkehr*, which is the mad charge of memory against the storm of false speech, perhaps including one's own previous speech on what has happened, which covers and conceals when it pretends to be uncovering and revealing. And if such a charge was a redemptive act for Benjamin, then we can also say that in Celan poem is a messianic act.[18]

The attractive image of the mountain ridge of time, or more precisely, the time of the mountain ridge, *Kammzeit*, can lead us to a final question: When does this *Umkehr*, this absurd, Utopian turn of breath, actually occur? When does the poem happen? In the notes for the Meridian we find the following remark: "The poem has time and it does not have time at all" (M 102). Along with the suggestion that "poetry is in a hurry" (M 136). If we decide to read these remarks in light of Benjamin's thinking, we might say that the poem is happening now, but not an everyday present. It is the "peak of the Now," from the poem *Vor einer Kerze*,[19] it is the "Now!" which defines the time when the I is on the way to itself in the *Conversation in the Mountains*. It is also the intensified "Now of knowability" which leaves behind the stream of normal time from below, so that in the act of *Umkehr* it can enter the constellation of testimony with the past, with the lost and concealed names of the others, and thereby move toward the self-encounter and the encounter necessary for the completion of the Meridian. In the time of the poem, we suddenly have no time at all. It is as if, after this "Now," nothing was to come. It is as if suddenly, for this brief moment, we stood in the time of the Last Judgment. It is with this lastness of our "Now" that we confront the things past, torn from the continuity of time. Thus, they are confronted with the end and reveal their absolute singularity, the irreplaceability of the names hidden in them, the very names that now, immediately, we are obliged to grasp in the messianic testimony of the poem. This is how one can read Celan's striking remarks about "lastness" such as the following one: "The poem talks about the first and contingent things as if they were the very last things" (M 96). And: "In a poem, in the court of time, things stand always in their last thingness" (M 146). This is also how I would read the phrase "*es ist Zeit*," which appears four times in his famous *Corona*.[20] Even though, on the most immediate level, the phrase refers to the erotic dimension ("We stand by the window, those from the street look at us – / It is time they know"), in the final lines it reaches a different pitch: "It is time there is time. // It is time". In other words: It is time that the poem had time, it is time that thanks to the messianic concentration of time there appears the utopian Now at the virtual end of all temporality, the Now turned toward the names of the past.

When does a poem happen? It happens now, which also means when it is being read. But when it is really read, it is not happening in the present of one more historical moment, or in the moment of a returning holiday which perpetuates the circling of the immanent continuity of time. It happens on a peak which rises above this continuity, a peak reached once again, at the moment which blocks the circling – the messianic Now of true testimony. The completion of the Meridian is not the mythical return of the same, but the messianic self-encounter in the Now of the testimony directed toward the other in the act of *Umkehr*.

I think this is Celan's answer to our original question about the time of the poem, especially if one reads his notes with an eye on Buber and Benjamin. Benjamin's thought seems to be a crucial context for such a reading, even if in the text of the Meridian and its notes draw attention to borrowings from the author of *Ich und Du*. It is clear that Celan is very much indebted to Buber and his notion of the poem as an *Umkehr* is closely related to the Buberian vision of the ethical turn, *teshuva* directed towards a You which also puts us in contact with the eternal You. But the dramatic vision of the turn towards the past, the vision of the poem as testimony, the messianic charge of *Eingedenken* against oblivion and against the continuity of talking and remaining silent about the past bring Celan closer to Benjamin and the task of his historian. But we must underline a crucial difference: If the Benjaminian historian, when turning toward the past, concerned himself with the harm and failed hopes of past generations, Celan's poet turns toward the victims of slaughter. In the book on the Parisian arcades, Benjamin tried to record the harm by collecting the past, unfulfilled dreams of happiness. For his part, Celan can only hope for making a place in language for the names of those who were murdered. After what happened the messianic task cannot mean more, but it should not mean less.

This way of looking at Celan is particularly promising if we want to grasp the "Jewish" dimension of his poetic activity. Such an approach takes into account the biographical moment of his poetry, but importantly avoids reducing it to biography. It likewise takes into account Celan's theological interests, without reducing his poetry to merely theological speculation. Celan's poems are not "about" the Shoah, nor are they "about" the divine of a post-divine "Nobody" that sometimes appears in them. They are not expressions of his experiences or disguised historical reports, nor are they condensed treatises in negative theology. His poems try not to mean, but to do – and this action, directed, indeed, toward the Shoah, can be seen as a messianic action to which – from a Jewish point of view – we are summoned. They try to undertake this action by their own means in a post-theological world where all the traditional patterns and mechanisms of messianic action are absent or in retreat, and where what is left of revelation is the ambivalent gift of language itself – all of which is highly problematic. Thanks to linguistic contortions of rare artistry, they strive to achieve the concreteness of testimony which is infinitely more valid than any historical description. The assumptions of this praxis certainly expose it to a paradox, of which Celan himself was very much aware. "Language: naming" (M 195), he says in one of the notes for the Meridian. Indeed, but we already know that the true moment of the testimony, the true moment of naming is what happens at the moment of *Umkehr*: the absurd, utopian turn of breath, a pause in language, the messianic ceasura, a break, or maybe the colon itself which breaks the syntax even in this brief note! This is why poetry, which again and again tries to reach the "Now of the testimony," must turn against language itself and its own products, against the speech that conceals what is most important. For the sake of its own possibility it must perceive itself as impossible. But this cannot be otherwise: the messianic gesture must repeatedly break the continuity of the possible, and the poem must relentlessly attempt an *Umkehr*. Even, or especially, if it seems that time is running out.

Notes

1 Paul CELAN, *Der Meridian. Endfassung – Entwürfe – Materialien*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999, 186. Further as M. For the sake of precision I am using the German original. For English translation see Paul CELAN, *The Meridian: Final Version-Drafts-Materials*, trans. Pierre Joris, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
2 Martin BUBER, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, 149. Kaufmann translates *Umkehr* as "return." I reinsert the original term in order to make it more visible.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid, 165.
5 Ibid, 168.
6 Martin BUBER, *Gog und Magog*, Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider Verlag, 1993, 150.
7 It is worth noting that the term *Umkehr* is also used by Rosenzweig to describe the movement of the „elements" (God, world, man) that having been separated in the first part of the *Star of Redemption*, in the second part turn towards, and reveal to, each other, thus establishing the three key relationships (creation, revelation, redemption). Thus, *Umkehr* seems to be here a generalized form of *teshuva* imbedded in the very metaphysical structure of the world. See Franz ROSENZWEIG, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970, 88.
8 Walter BENJAMIN, "Franz Kafka," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 814.
9 Ibid, 815. I substitute the original *Umkehr* for Zohn's "reversal."

10 *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre, New York: Schocken Books, 1989, 135. I substitute the original *Umkehr* for "reversal" used by the translators.

11 Walter BENJAMIN, "On the concept of history," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, 392.

12 Walter BENJAMIN, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, 1232.

13 Walter BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, 473.

14 Ibid, 462.

15 Walter BENJAMIN, "On the concept of history," 390.

16 Ibid, 397.

17 Paul CELAN, "Ich trink Wein," in *Die Gedichte* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag: 2005), 363.

18 It is worth noting that if for the Benjaminian historian the names appear in the form of dialectical images (which one, nevertheless, encounters in language), this idea seems to be paralleled by Celan's idea of image. In the *Meridian* speech he says: "So what could the images be? They would be something unique, always unique, something that is perceived and to be perceived only now and only here" (M 10). For Celan the images are not identical with tropes and metaphors, but rather with the Utopian moment of break in the poem. They are "not visual, but like everything connected to language, they are a spiritual phenomenon" (M 107).

19 Paul CELAN, "Vor einer Kerze," in *Die Gedichte*, 73.

20 Ibid, 39.