

## Article

# Dialogical Memory and Immemorial Poetics: The Ethical Imperatives of Holocaust Literature

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**Abstract:** Drawing from Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical ethics and Paul Celan's dialogical poetics, this article interrogates the impossible memorial and ethical demands that literary responses to the Holocaust place upon their readers. While Levinas reveals our position as summoned to radical responsibility, Celan shows us how that responsibility plays out in the form of ethical reading. By attending to the imperative commands found in Celan's longest poem, "Engführung", this article demonstrates how Holocaust literature memorializes the Shoah through an invocation of Levinasian ethics and the concept of the *immemorial*—that which exceeds memory. Following the discussion of Levinas, Celan, and "Engführung", I turn to Primo Levi's "Shema", a paradigmatic text that likewise directly challenges us, calling us into question as readers during the moment of reading and demanding an attentiveness to the text that proves beyond our ability to deliver. Throughout, I aim to show how dialogical memory enables us to better comprehend the ethical burden we encounter in the literary texts of the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** memory; ethics; Holocaust; dialogue; poetry; Paul Celan; Emmanuel Levinas; responsibility; immemorial



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## 1. Introduction

Why do we read Holocaust literature? What is it that draws us to these texts that document the destruction of human beings and the very *idea* of human being? What value does this reading bring? In order to fashion an answer, I propose we consider that Holocaust literature operates by way of ethical imperatives that speak to and hold hostage those of us who chose to venture into its terrain. The texts directly challenge us, calling us into question as readers during the moment of reading and demanding an attentiveness that proves beyond our ability to deliver. To investigate this dilemma, I employ Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical ethics and Paul Celan's dialogical poetics. By attending to the imperative commands found in Paul Celan's longest poem, "Engführung" ("Stretto"), and Primo Levi's epigraphic poem "Shema", this article demonstrate how Holocaust literature memorializes the Shoah through an invocation of Levinasian ethics.

While scholarship on Celan, Levinas, and memory represents individually crowded fields, rarely are they brought together in one study (Hatley 2000; Kligerman 2007). Much of the formative work in memory studies was carried out under a political or sociological rubric, in which scholars dealt with the production of memory in national contexts in order to categorize and periodize shifts in "official" memorial policy (Nora 1996; Olick 2003; Levy and Sznajder 2005). But the field has been undergoing a shift. In 2009, Michael Rothberg published his groundbreaking *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, in which he sought to move beyond the stifling environment of "competitive memory" to open up a possibility of a "more just future of memory" (Rothberg 2009, p. 21). Similarly, Aleida Assmann extols the virtues of what she calls "dialogic memory" against the old, "monologic" memory policy: "Two countries engage in a dialogic memory", she writes, "if they face a shared history of mutual violence by mutually acknowledging their own guilt and empathy with the suffering they have

inflicted on others" (Assmann 2015, p. 208). Furthermore, literary and cultural critics such as Marianne Hirsch (1997) and Alison Landsberg (2004) have also brought an ethical dimension to the field with their respective theoretical constructs, "postmemory" and "prosthetic memory." However, in their insistence on exploring politically and ethically charged concepts (namely, "memories" that transcend both geopolitical borders and biophysiological constraints) the aforementioned scholars—not to mention the field of memory studies as a whole—fail to meaningfully engage with the radical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

"When I speak of first philosophy", Levinas explains in *Alterity and Transcendence*, "I am referring to a philosophy of dialogue that cannot not be an ethics. Even the philosophy that questions the meaning of being does so on the basis of the encounter with the other" (Levinas 1999, p. 97). This encounter with the other serves as the paradigmatic event for Levinas's philosophical project, which begins by asking: what is my relation to the other? Levinas wants us to think of the other not as an object to be consumed, contemplated, or understood. Each of these actions reveals a self-interested interest in the other. For Levinas, the face of the other interrupts my subjectivity, my sense of self, and puts my identity into question. The Levinasian "face-to-face" relation is a space of proximity and nearness, but also of difference and distance—and in this space the ethical concept of responsibility emerges (Levinas 1999, pp. 93–94). For Levinas, I am at every moment always responsible for the other person. Juxtaposing Emmanuel Levinas's ethics with Paul Celan's poetics provides us with a concept of Holocaust memory that is likewise rooted in the interruptive encounter with the other and therefore inherently dialogical.

What I call "dialogical memory", then, differs categorically from Assmann's framework for promoting shared understanding. Instead, dialogical memory describes the relation between reader and text, imbued with an ethical responsibility derived from Levinas's engagement with Paul Celan. While Levinas reveals our position as summoned to radical responsibility, Celan shows us how that responsibility plays out in the form of ethical reading. Thus, dialogical memory connects us, as readers, to the shared ethical space within which we are called, as individuals, to respond to the summons to responsibility—indeed, to the cries of the other. We are commanded, as it were, to speak, to "bear witness for the witness" (Celan 2001, p. 261).

## 2. Levinas, Celan, and Dialogical Memory

In 1960, a few months before he was to deliver his Georg-Büchner Preis acceptance speech (titled *The Meridian*) in the city of Darmstadt, the poet Paul Celan wrote to his friend Hans Bender: "Ich sehe keinen prinzipiellen Unterschied zwischen Händedruck und Gedicht" ("I see no principal difference between a handshake and a poem") (Celan 1983, vol. 3, p. 177). Twelve years later, in his only published writing on Celan, Levinas would call that image of a handshake the "gesture of recognition of the other" (Levinas 1996, p. 43). This description is remarkable for two reasons. First, for Levinas the encounter with the other is ethically charged with the pre-experiential and pre-ontological, bearing the mark of the "immemorial." Levinas calls responsibility the "trace of an immemorial past" (Levinas 1987, p. 136). Immemorial denotes that which precedes and exceeds memory. In other words, we cannot locate a moment in our own memory in which a contract was signed that requires such responsibility. Thus, the immemorial names the "origin" of responsibility—and it was precisely this call towards responsibility that the Nazis sought to destroy. Yet Celan's image focuses on the physical encounter of two hands reaching out for each other: a specific corporeal moment taking place within a specific temporal frame.

Second, Levinasian ethics is famously anti-representational, anti-metaphorical; indeed, Levinas's antipathy toward art is well documented (Robbins 1999; Williams 2009). Levinas believes that "art", in general, opposes ethics because "it does not allow the self to open itself to the call of the other" (Levinas 1991, p. 20). For the Levinas of *Existence and Existents*, "art" hides, covers, and renders invisible the face of the Other by its very physicality—its plasticity—precisely because of the transcendence of the Face (in other words, because of

its resistance to plasticity and thus totality). For the author of *Otherwise than Being*, “Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology” (Levinas 2009, p. 40). The literary language of metaphor, of rhythm, of beauty, distracts the reader from the Saying, drawing the eye to contemplate the text and thus to become lost in the materiality of the Said. Thus, the dialogical responsibility required by the ethical relation is impossible with art. However, in his essay on Celan, Levinas clarifies his position with regard to images—by appropriating Celan’s own hesitancy toward art, taken from *The Meridian*. Therefore, we must read the handshake in a Levinasian way: the movement of the hand that Celan’s image evokes is one of reaching out to enact a handshake, a reaching out towards the categorical Other. This movement is one of uncertainty: the reaching-out of the physical greeting—the extended, open hand—signifies for Levinas the corporeal movement of responsibility attending any encounter with the Other. And the risk of that encounter mirrors the risk involved in writing poems. Reading Celan’s handshake through Levinas suggests that the space occupied by the poetic greeting mirrors the Levinasian space that which opens up between the I and the Other.

As readers, then, we are greeted by the text and called to answer for what we have read. This version of greeting shatters the aforementioned—and indeed, all too facile—equation of poetry with greeting. The self is neither sovereign nor autonomous, for it is the interruption of the Other that causes the greeting, that demands the handshake. We notice the Other when we also notice the outstretched hand already suspended in the air before us: we are (always) already too late to greet the Other. Our greeting is rendered belated on account of the interruption of the Other, and it is this interruption, meridian-like, that draws Levinas to Celan. For, in the work of Celan, Levinas finds what in *Difficult Freedom* he called “the refusal of art’s bewitching rhythms” (Levinas 1990, p. 293). In “Being and The Other: On Paul Celan”—unfortunately his only essay that formally addresses the poet and his work—Levinas begins his interpretation of Celan’s *Meridian* by stating outright: “The poem goes toward the other” (Levinas 1996, p. 41). Levinas’s initial hermeneutical movement addresses movement itself, establishing the transition from the I to the other as not only the pathway implied by Celan’s trope (the meridian) but also as his poetry’s purpose. In *The Meridian*, Celan calls such a purpose *Aufmerksamkeit* (“attentiveness”) (Celan 1983, vol. 3, p. 198). Celan’s insistence on attentiveness thus pushes the reader out of the rhythmical trance of poetry—for, like Levinas, Celan views art as always posing this bewitching risk. Accepting that Celan’s poetry refuses the bewitching that Levinas so deeply rejects, we must then ask how we, as readers, properly respond to the encounter staged by Celanian poetics. And perhaps more pressing: how does this encounter help us to answer the questions raised earlier about the value of reading literary representations of the Holocaust?

In his “Bremen Address”, given on the occasion of receiving that city’s Literature Prize in January of 1958, Celan articulates his dialogical concept of poetry by relying on the metaphor of the *Flaschenpost*, or message in a bottle: “A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are under way: they are making toward something” (Celan 2001, p. 396). Because Celan asserts that a poem is “essentially dialogue”—made up of words, written in language—we must understand that for Celan, language itself is already dialogic. Here we begin to see a relation to the ethical encounter as described by Levinas, where every speaking is a speaking to, a speaking in the direction of someone who hears, some other human being. Thus, the image of the *Flaschenpost* draws attention away from the language of the poet and toward the receiver of the poem, the one who stands upon the shore and picks up the bottle. But what does it mean to claim that a poem is essentially dialogue?

Reading a text appears at first to be a singular, solitary experience. And yet, according to Celan, “The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs a vis-à-vis. It searches it out and addresses it” (Celan 2005, p. 181). This address means that each poem comes to me intended for me, which renders the poem always already dialogical. Hans-Georg Gadamer addresses this in his study of Celan’s poetry: “In the here and now of the poem—and the poem has only this one, unique, momentary present—even in this immediacy and nearness the work issues a challenge and requires an answer . . . the participant must belong to the play.” (Gadamer 1997, p. 182) In Holocaust literature, the reader must face the fact of the content’s absence, as well as the contingency of the content, which reflects a dependence on the reader’s own authentic movement toward the movement of the text. The reader’s quest for identification—self-identification—abnegates the authenticity of ethical reading. And yet, if the reader seeks the encounter with the Other, the seeking of the Other threatens to become an empathic search, one which nevertheless results in an edification of the self through a crossing of the boundaries bordering self and Other. Thus, attentiveness serves as the corrective to such self-seeking edification. Similar to this Gadamerian “belonging to”, Levinas will help us understand Celanian attentiveness in terms of an untiring wakefulness, or “insomnia in the bed of being” (Levinas 1996, p. 43). Here too we see a shift in emphasis from the self to the other—i.e., from the poem as product of an individual, authoritative I to the poem as the space of a Levinasian encounter, which demands from its reader a radical attentiveness. Radical attentiveness, however, requires a radical vulnerability; in order to properly “listen” to the literary texts of the Holocaust, we must first be claimed by the summons to responsibility.

### 3. Celan’s “Engführung”: An Immemorial Poetics

A year after delivering his “Bremen Address”, Celan published a volume of poetry titled *Sprachgitter*. Celan’s neologism, like his other book titles, takes advantage of the German language’s proclivity for complex compound nouns. The most straightforward English version of Celan’s new term is from Joachim Neugroschel’s 1971 translation: “speech-grille.” In 1981, Michael Hamburger opted for “Language Mesh”, foregoing the dash; Pierre Joris’s 2020 volume mimics the German with “Speechgrille.” Each translation renders the title’s nominal duality, a juxtaposition of an abstract concept (*Sprache*, “language”) with something much more material (*Gitter*, metal bars or a grid). Combining the two, we arrive at a physical barrier between people—similar to the screen between priest and confessant, or perhaps interlocutors on either side of prison bars. Marjorie Perloff draws our attention to Celan’s notes to *The Meridian*, in which he links the word *Sprachgitter* to *Sprechgitter*, which, she explains, “refers to an object to be found at hardware or electric stores: namely, the transom above or below the doorbell, used in apartment or office buildings to announce one’s arrival and desire to be buzzed in. As such, a *Sprechgitter* serves as the conduit from a speaker’s voice to that of an unseen (and perhaps unknown) addressee . . . ” (Perloff 2010, p. 293). This mediating object (the speech-grille) therefore emphasizes the two-way nature of communication and conversation. The title also foregrounds speaking and listening as central themes of this volume of Celan’s poetry, positing the possibility of dialogue despite the problems inherent in rendering communication across any kind of boundary. I suggest that we read “Engführung” (“Stretto”), the final poem in the volume, under the heading of this titular term.

“Engführung” should be read with Celan’s dialogical “message in a bottle” in mind, but he also wrote it in dialogue with another poem: “Todesfuge” (“Deathfuge”). The title word, *Engführung*, translates most easily into “straightening.” This straightening, or narrowness, recalls Celan’s earlier masterpiece in two ways. First, “Engführung” extends the musical connotation of the former “fuge” by incorporating a fugal element into its title. Justifying his own translation choice (“The Straightening”), Michael Hamburger acknowledges that the German word is indeed a musicological term (the Italian equivalent, *stretto*, denoting the point in a fugue where an imitation of a voice is introduced before the original voice is finished) but then argues that the word’s meaning, for Celan, “has at least

as much to do with the most literal sense of the root components of the German word—a reduction to the narrowest place or point—as with the writing of fugues” (Hamburger 2002, p. 349). If we miss the musical connotation, though, we fail to read “Engführung” as not only a musical extension or continuation of “Todesfuge” but also as a critical counterpoint: the former voices have been compacted, pressed through the narrows, reappearing in the later poem but layered in a terrifying polyphony. Indeed, the voices we encounter in “Engführung” are resistant to our comprehension yet simultaneously demanding. I read this resistance as a rejection of the former poem’s aesthetics. Second, the *eng* of *Engführung* echoes the line-ending hard consonance that recurs throughout “Todesfuge”: “Wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng” (“We shovel a grave in the air where you won’t lie too cramped”) (Celan 1983, vol. 3, p. 41; Celan 2001, p. 31). Thus, the poem’s title contains an implicit allusion to the “grave in the air” where the Jewish prisoners of “Deathfuge” will not be “straightened” or “compacted.”

But what do we gain if we acknowledge that “Engführung” can be read as a critical extension of “Todesfuge?” I argue that this acknowledgement relates to the broader question of the ethics of Holocaust literature, and this argument requires a return to the Levinasian immemorial. I read the shift between the two poems as a commentary on the relation between the merely memorial and the ethically immemorial. Applying Annabel Herzog’s formulation of “two kinds of pasts”, we can consider the memory of the Holocaust to incorporate both, at once: memorial (“the memorable past of narrated history”) and immemorial (“unmemorable”, Herzog says, similar to the “unique voice of God that can neither be remembered nor narrated”) (Herzog 2005, p. 333). In fact, the excess of the Shoah is that which cannot be narrated, nor remembered. If we read Celan’s poetry as a gesture of commemoration of the dead, we must also acknowledge that Celan gives no relief to his readers. As Celan says, the poem “searches” for and “addresses” its Other in the hopes of an encounter. Such an encounter, as a shattering of the self, should offer no succor. This might be why Celan refused to allow his “Deathfuge” to be reprinted in literary anthologies: the poem had begun to facilitate a thinking of “that which happened” as merely memorial, rather than immemorial. Thus, implicit in “Stretto” is a critique of Holocaust commemoration, of the memory work taking place in Germany in the fifties and sixties.

Focused on the task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or “coming to terms with the past”, Germany indeed took hold of Celan’s work but often appropriated it for mere pedagogical or political means. Shira Wolosky explains that the tendency to read Celan exclusively as a lyric poet “appears in grotesque form in once-existing classroom instructions to teachers to prevent discussion of Celan’s most famous poem, “Todesfuge” [Deathfuge], from digressing from formal considerations into discussions of concentration camps” (Wolosky 2001, p. 655). Almost thirty years after Celan delivered his Meridian speech, and eighteen years after his death by suicide, “Deathfuge” was recited in the Bundestag on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht (Felstiner 1995, p. 288). Rather than serving merely as a means to remember or recall an event that occurred, Celan’s poetry forces a confrontation with not only the physical traces of the dead but also the ethical summons that emerges at the site of our encounter with the past. In other words, his poetry remembers the immemorial. In heralding the failure of any mimetic conjuring of the dead to make way for an encounter with the Other, “Engführung” serves as a corrective to the tendency toward empty commemoration. Thus, when Celan wrote “Engführung”, the former text’s proper names (Margarete and Shulamith) and recognizable geography (Germany/Deutschland) were replaced with decidedly ambiguous pronouns and recondite landscape references. He frustrates the reader’s ability to cognitively comprehend the poem’s content, while at the same time requiring that the reader read on through the longest poem in his oeuvre. As a counterpoint to the former poem’s famous refrain (“Black milk of daybreak, we drink you at evening”), the rhythm of “Engführung” cannot be ascertained in two lines; simply put, the poem demands more attention.



#### 4. Celan's "Engführung": Attentiveness to the Text

From the opening line, Celan posits a physicality whereby the reader enters a physical landscape, but not on his or her own accord:

\*  
Verbracht ins  
Gelände  
mit der untrüglichen Spur:  
\*  
Taken off into  
the terrain  
with the unmistakable trace:

(Celan 1983, vol. 1, p. 197; 2001, p. 119)

The reader's act of scanning his or her eyes across the page reflects the poetic act of being "Taken off into/the terrain." At the moment of reading, we find ourselves already "taken off", or transported, into the text—rather than merely *reading about* a forced transportation. In his analysis of the poem, Peter Szondi says this is when the "reading subject" becomes the "subject of reading" (Szondi 2003, p. 29). The stark opening calls to mind the deportation trains that carried the Jews of Celan's Czernowitz and so many other cities "into the terrain." In the English translation there exists a homonym to train: "terrain." This is not merely coincidental, considering the poet's familiarity with English (his translations from English to German include Shakespearean sonnets as well as poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost). Aris Fioretos also links this scene of deportation to the act of reading the poem: "Celan's poem attempts to create in allegorical form a relation between the deportation which leads to the death camps and the deportation which carries the reader not only from the exterior to the interior of the text, but also allows him or her to experience this violent transition in an act of reading . . ." (Fioretos 1994, p. 322). But this reading renders each reader not into a witness but rather a victim. As I will show later, Primo Levi specifically speaks out against any facile collapse between these two categories. Thus, a word of caution must be added, before we continue reading this poem, about the sensitive nature of describing any act on the part of the reader as akin to the experience of the victims of the Shoah—as Fioretos does with the term "deported." The violent transition of the opening operates by way of an interruptive movement made at the level of the text. To where are we "taken off", then? The poem forcibly transports us into the space of witnessing.

In his study of Paul Celan, Eric Kligerman argues that reading can serve "as an act of secondary witnessing that helps transform a traumatic experience into memory" (Kligerman 2001, p. 51). But "secondary witnessing" does not equal understanding. In fact, the transformation Kligerman describes takes on an ethical significance by virtue of its fragmentary nature: the memory created by our exposure to trauma via a mediating text already distances us from the site of trauma, precluding our "comprehension" of such a site—in the sense of a complete grasping. The Levinasian immemorial—the excess of memory—becomes the product of the reader's encounter with the trace of the effaced Other. In this way, Celan simultaneously orients and disorients his reader; at this point, "Engführung" begins to articulate a call for attentiveness.

If we focus on the adjective *untrüglichen*, we can also begin to see how Celan's description of the "trace" (or "track") already makes a claim about memorialization. One possible translation of *untrüglichen* is "infallible" or "unerring"—this option is sometimes used by John Felstiner in *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (Felstiner 1995, p. 119). Either of these words suggests the connection to a memory that cannot be forgotten. But the other option would be to go the route of "unmistakable"—in the sense that this track cannot be mistaken for any other track. This translation might suggest, then, a specific track—or at least a specific *image* of a track: for example, the photograph of the train tracks and gate to the camp at

Birkenau. Here we begin to uncover a visual component of the poem. But from what specific poetic context can we derive “unmistakable” information about this “track” or “trace”? That Celan provides us with no *reason* to consider this trace unmistakable cannot occupy us; we are to move on.

Visualizing both corporeality and textuality, the opening of “Engführung” positions the reader in front of a blank stone (or perhaps a blank page):

Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. Die Steine, weiß,  
mit den Schatten der Halme:  
Grass, written asunder.  
The stones, white,  
With the grassblades’ shadows:

(Celan 1983, vol. 1, p. 197; 2001, p. 119)

The proximity of grass and stones calls to mind the Jewish cemeteries of Worms, Prague, and Warsaw. Yet it seems that all we can read are the shadows of the blades of grass. Already Celan has made this a poem *about* language—about reading, writing, and the relationships obtained among writer, reader, and text. As if on a train, we pass by images of this terrain, taking in the grass and the shadows, the white stones—but not long enough for them to register any meaning; for we continue past the colon and find a series of commands:

Lies nicht mehr—schau!  
Schau nicht mehr—geh!  
Read no more—look!  
Look no more—go!

(Celan 1983, vol. 1, p. 197; 2001, p. 119)

The two-line command heralds the breakdown of reading as such and looking as such; the poet commands us to cease both activities at once. Turning our heads or closing our eyes, we fail to even encounter the third verb, “go!” His final command therefore yields no real reward; the going that we are to do describes what we have *already been doing* via the act of reading, establishing the circumscription of the text that encircles us, like a meridian, affording us neither voluntary entry nor eventual exit. The command to “Go!” takes us to the very limits of poetic representation: the approach toward “nothing” can only approximate an encounter with the absent Other, through a presentation of the trace. In fact, this performativity, this emphasis on movement and the physicality of the encounter, renders Celan’s poetry “non-representational”, in the words of Peter Szondi: “Poetry is ceasing to be mimesis, representation; it is becoming reality. To be sure, this is a poetic reality: The text no longer stands in the service of a predetermined reality, but rather is projecting itself, constituting itself as reality” (Szondi 2003, pp. 31–32). The metaphors here in the poem’s opening serve as markers of this “poetic reality”; the terrain is likewise marked by, gravestones, etched only with the shadows of the windswept blades. But if what we are to read is the blank surface of the white stones, then how are we even to begin reading?

This poetic inscription of nothing serves as a call to remembrance. The blank stones are what we are to read, and this reading renders us witnesses: not to the Shoah itself, but to the *excess of memory*, to the immemorial. Celan demands that we traverse the space of the poem on the page with our eyes, yet he also commands us to stop reading. Once we reject reading and looking, we are no longer in the space of the poem. How do we reconcile such an inherent opposition? Celan’s imperatives provide some context for the connection between reading a poem and being transported to this terrain of grass and stones. In fact, Celan *reminds us* that we are engaged in the act of reading a poem by commanding us to stop. Thus, the poem addresses its readers *as readers*, forcing a confrontation with the materiality of the text. The command that comes next, however, can be neither understood

nor comprehended, not to mention obeyed, if our eyes never read it. In its ambivalent, ambiguous commands, “Engführung” calls for a vigilant, attentive mode of reading.

Eric Kligerman argues that “Engführung” operates by “way of an imperative that must be broken” (Kligerman 2007, p. 173). “These commands”, Kligerman writes, “do not so much order us to stop reading and looking as challenge us to read, see, and go towards nothing” (Kligerman 2007, p. 173). Thus, only by continuing to read can we obey Celan’s command; only by transgressing the boundary of the text, only by traversing the textual terrain—a landscape bereft of places yet filled with blank stones (for the nameless dead beneath the ground, perhaps)—only by going with our eyes across the page can we read, look, and go towards nothing. We can comprehend this seeming paradox of “Engführung” by paying attention to the entirety of the poem’s text—in other words, by reading not only the words on the page but also the spaces between the words, the surrounding marginal space, and the asterisks and line breaks that divide the poem into discrete segments.

### 5. Celan’s “Engführung”: The Materiality of the Text

If “Engführung” is a poem about nothing, directing its readers to read its own absent inscriptions, this absence is made all the more present in its emphatic use of punctuation. So far, this discussion of the opening of the poem has elided one key component: the asterisk that marks the beginning of the poem—appearing as it does between the title and the first word. But how are we to read an asterisk? It is, of course, not a word, but the symbol for a star. As Anne Carson points out, this symbol remains “a star in any language”; the mark does not need to be “translated” because it is empty of content (Carson 1999, p. 119). But it is nevertheless read, in the sense that our eyes pass over it. And therein lies the hermeneutical error: passing over the mark as meaningless, we fail to comprehend its meaning *as meaninglessness*. We must be careful here not to mistakenly imbue this star with overdetermined meaning. To read the asterisks of “Engführung” as allusions to specific stars, in other words, would be a mistake: the star of David, for example—or, for that matter, the yellow badge that Nazis required Jews to wear in German-occupied territories throughout Europe. In other words, we must not search for metaphor in a poem that dispenses with metaphor. In his notes to *The Meridian*, we find an anti-metaphoric stance that can help illuminate our reading of the asterisks of “Engführung”: “Metaphor, that is sometimes only a word in the mouth of those who look past the poem into the mirror; it is selftranslation, selftransport, selfpromotion” (Celan 2011, p. 157). However, in “Engführung”, the movement into the terrain of the text is not a “selftransport”; Celan destabilizes the self-serving self, disallowing our reading to replicate the act of gazing into a mirror. The reading of asterisks exposes the frailty of our own reading, our own comprehension. Positioned within the space of the poem’s echoing voice, the star reverberates in silence while simultaneously demanding the reader to hear its inaudible word. Nine times in the text of “Engführung” Celan uses this interstitial silent star. The mark therefore makes possible the progression, and, as I will show momentarily, the broken circularity of the poem.

In his discussion of the language of the Torah, David Patterson provides some vital insight for this reading of “Engführung”. suggesting yet another way for us, as readers, to hear the silences—to read more than merely the words on the page: “The Torah begins with the word *bereshit* . . . it signifies, in short, the first things. What precedes the beginning, however, is sealed off by the wall that forms the right side of the letter (ב) (*beit*) itself. In the margin, or what might be called the “twilight”, of creation—in the plan before the (ב)—there is only silence” (Patterson 2005, p. 16). Later in this same text, Patterson connects the silence that precedes the *beit* (ב) of *bereshit* (בְּרֵאשִׁית) to the immediately preceding letter in the Hebrew alphabet—the *alef* (א): “Thus signifying silence, the (א) imparts to silence an eloquence that surpasses utterance” (Patterson 2005, p. 18). Patterson’s materialist phenomenology as biblical hermeneutics helps us understand how Peter Szondi can claim that the text of Celan’s “Engführung” *is reality*—rather than a representation of reality. For Patterson, the right side of the *beit* of *bereshit* literally closes off the text, indicating a border,



yet also draws our attention to the line itself; all borders serve as separatrixes, delimiting the space between as contiguous with the line. Where the line ends, the space between also ends: we find ourselves on one side, or the other. Patterson asks us to recognize in the first word (“in the beginning”, or *bereshit*) that the word itself, by virtue of its orthography, announces itself as *otherwise than beginning*. One might suggest here that to carry out this kind of reading would lead us to conclude that *every* text, through its first word, constitutes a negation of origins in the form of text. But Patterson highlights the particularly an-archival nature of the Torah’s beginning by beginning with the very first word—a word whose meaning is “beginning.” Thus, the text itself thematizes origins, but Patterson rightly draws our attention to the very vulnerability located within the word that renders the beginning belated: the textual beginning comes *after* the immemorial beginning.

If we map this idea (that silences and gaps are *part of* the text, rather than something *other than* the text) onto the Levinasian immemorial through which we are commanded, the space preceding the poem then becomes the site of ethical responsibility. Phenomenologically, the space before the text is both temporal and physical. It contains all that I have experienced as a reader leading up to the moment of beginning the first word. It also points toward where I am, locationally—that is, geographically—as I read. The boundaries of the text itself make the materiality of the poem complicit in establishing this connection to place. We can identify many such boundaries: The end of the poetic line and the beginning of blank space afterward; the page number at the bottom or top, middle or corner, that signals where we are in that particular book; and so on. In the case of “Engführung”, as soon as I begin reading, I find myself “taken off” into the text. In this way, I am held captive by the text, unable to free myself from the demands it makes upon me, as reader. Depending on the text, these demands will shift in character, as in quantity, yet the Celanian imperatives and the Levinasian call to responsibility remain unchanged. The poem has always already exerted its claim on me, in a way that binds me to the poem and to the memory de-scribed therein.

The poem’s final section, which positions the poem itself as a meridian, ends in almost exactly the same way as it began:

\*

(— —taggrau  
der  
Grundwasserspuren—

Verbracht  
ins Gelände  
mit  
der untrüglichen  
Spur:  
Gras,  
Gras,  
auseinandergeschrieben.)

\*

(— —Day-grey,  
of  
groundwater traces—

Taken off  
into the terrain  
with  
the unmistakable

trace:  
 Grass.  
 Grass,  
 written asunder.)

(Celan 1983, vol. 1, p. 203; 2001, p. 131)

These final lines of the poem demand to be read differently than the previous lines. As an echo of the poem's opening, we hear in the closing not a narrowing but an elongation, a stretching. In fact, it is a poetic doubling: what occupies only four lines in the beginning now takes up eight. One word, "grass", is repeated. And for the first time in "Engführung", a section of text is bracketed off through the use of parentheses. The left parenthesis is followed immediately by two em dashes, which slowly and emphatically draw our reading eyes towards the adjective, *taggrau* ("day-grey"), yet suggest also the presence (as absence) of a preceding word. And what word has disappeared? We know from our structural reading of the poem that the opening of this parenthetical element must originate in the immediately preceding section. There, we find: *Gespräche* (conversations).

Dialogue has been cut off; there is no more speaking within this parenthetical finale. Or perhaps, through this use of parentheses, a new, separate voice is introduced to the text. If so, whose voice speaks these words? We are not told. The parentheses employed here—as well as the repeated phrase, *taggrau der Grundwasserspuren*, from the previous section—grammatically frustrate the argument that we at first wish to make: that the poem forms itself into a circle, returning simply to the scene witnessed by the reader at the opening of the text. Szondi emphatically rejects such a reading: "Let no one claim the poem is describing a circle and returning to its point of departure" (Szondi 2003, p. 79). While Szondi sensibly associates the "unmistakable trace" (*untrüglichen Spur*) with the "groundwater traces" (*Grundwasserspuren*), he wants us to read the final parenthetical section as merely a reminder of the reader's earlier movement into the text. However, the asterisk that we at first ignored—the mark that fills in the space between the poem's title and text—suggests instead a continuity with the poem's ending. Throughout "Engführung", each asterisk serves as the center of a caesura; for example, near the end of the poem's first section, we read:

braucht keine Sterne, nirgends  
 fragt es nach dir.  
 \*

Nirgends  
 fragt es nach dir—

needs no stars, nowhere  
 are you asked after.  
 \*

Nowhere  
 are you asked after—

(Celan 1983, vol. 1, p. 198; 2001, pp. 119–21)

The asterisk is framed on either side by nearly identical formulations. In the above example, the repeated words ("nowhere are you asked after") are set off on the right side of the page to indicate their contemporaneity with the text on the left side of the page. The asterisk marks the simultaneity of polyphony, of multiple voices speaking at once. Thus, the star that opens the text is likewise the star that closes it, forming the center of a caesura that links the poem's ending to its beginning.

Read in concert with Celan's impossible imperatives, then, the circularity of "Engführung" precludes any therapeutic, redemptive, cathartic, or teleological ending. "Engführung" issues the appropriate commands for those of us who encounter the Shoah:

we are to read, look at, and go toward nothing. This is a poetic injunction to confront inaccessibility itself, rendering Celan's poetic dilemma the structural equivalent of Levinas's ethical relation. Once the reader allows herself to enter the space of the poem, she undergoes a movement into the text that is never-ending and guarantees no resting place. As the poem comes to its conclusion, the reader returns, by way of another voice, to the opening moment of transport, set off on a memorial progression that can neither end nor ever be fully read. As Celan's attentive readers, we must acknowledge our responsibility to the text in that we are never let out of the text once we begin reading it. For the ethical burden of the poem exceeds our abilities as readers to grasp the poem's content. This phenomenological understanding of the Celanian poetic text informs how other literary responses to the Holocaust can be read. In the next section, I show how dialogical memory enables us to comprehend the ethical burden we encounter in the first few pages of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*.

### 6. Primo Levi's "Shema" and the Interruption of the Immemorial

The original Italian title of Primo Levi's memoir, *Se questo é un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*), has been preserved in the English translation only in the epigraph, consisting of one of Levi's earliest poems—written on 10 January 1946 (Cohen 2012, p. 42). Untitled in most English editions, the 23-line poem bears the title "Shema" in Levi's collected poems; in the memoir, it appears after a brief preface and before the first chapter. In his book *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable*, James Hatley argues that Levi's epigraphic poem serves as a textual example of the interruptive nature of Levinasian immemorial (Hatley 2000, pp. 11–22). Like Celan's "Engführung," Levi's "Shema" demands an attentiveness to the text that proves beyond the reader's ability to deliver. From the very first word, "You", the poem asserts itself with an aggressive direct address:

You who live safe  
In your warm houses,  
You who find, returning in the evening,  
Hot food and friendly faces:

The Italian word Levi uses here, *voi*, does not properly exist in English: it is the informal second person plural. Levi addresses, then, each individual reader while also addressing a community of readers. In fact, this *voi* bookends the poem. Thus, the entire poem operates from within the frame of an imperative. And what is the nature of this imperative? Continuing, we read:

Consider if this is a man  
Who works in the mud  
Who does not know peace  
Who fights for a scrap of bread  
Who dies because of a yes or a no.  
Consider if this is a woman,  
Without hair and without name  
With no more strength to remember,  
Her eyes empty and her womb cold  
Like a frog in winter.

Meditate that this came about:  
I commend these words to you.  
Carve them in your hearts  
At home, in the street,

Going to bed, rising;  
Repeat them to your children,

Or may your house fall apart,  
May illness impede you,  
May your children turn their faces from you.

(Levi 1996, p. 11)

We do not need the title, “Shema”, in order to recognize the poem as a revision of the foundational Hebrew prayer of the same name; the poem mimics the liturgical recitation of commands found in Deuteronomy: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut. 6: 6–7 NIV). The placement of this revised prayer *before* the text we are to carve into our hearts, though, adds an element of impossibility: we are commanded to speak about what we witness, but we have not yet witnessed it. As in Celan’s “Engführung”, we find ourselves trapped within the confines of a textual imperative to continue reading, stuck between the page we have read and pages we have not yet read. But we must read. Of this obligation there can be no question. Therefore, we should understand the material space between Levi’s epigraphic poem and the subsequent memoir as the site of the immemorial summons to responsibility. The poem requires its reader to turn the page, to proceed beyond the poem, in order to ascertain that which the reader has already been commanded to consider, meditate, and carve into his or her heart.

But first Levi commands his readers to listen to the words of his poem. He calls us out of our nonchalance, out of our peaceful slumber, into a confrontation with our own comfort in the face of suffering. Immediately, even in English, we know that his readers comprise the “you” the poem addresses; we are safe, we eat hot food, we find ourselves among friends. Robert Eaglestone claims that in the poem’s opening lines, Levi refuses to let an “identification take place.” Eaglestone adds, “a wall is erected—or rather, remains—between those in the camps and those outside” (Eaglestone 2004, p. 40). He is right, of course, but this “wall” is not only conceptual. The poem’s visual structure also delineates such a boundary, with the indented segment forcing our eyes to treat the descriptions of this “man” and “woman” differently than the rest of the text.

We are to consider, to pay attention, to meditate “that this came about.” But what is *not implicit* in this meditation is “understanding.” Levi already thematizes this epistemological problem in the two primary questions: “Is this a man?” and “Is this a woman?” Faced with the poem’s interrogative imperatives, we find ourselves ushered toward ethical reading: the contemplation we must undertake defies the Nazi logic that locates the value of human being in race and a will to power. In other words, Levi’s poem formalizes and at the same time ritualizes the resistance to the Nazi assault on the human that Levi’s memoir arduously articulates. *Survival in Auschwitz* bears witness not only to the physical, historical existence of the camp, but also to the gruesome efficiency with which the architects of the “final solution” achieved their demolition. Concurrent with the manufacturing of mass death in the Nazi camp system was a massive exercise in historical erasure that, due in part to the sheer immensity of the operation but also to systematic keeping of records, was always fated for failure. Levi concludes the fourth chapter of his memoir with his own version of the prohibition inherent in the Nazi effort to incinerate the bodies of their victims: “No one must leave here and so carry to the world, together with the sign impressed on his skin, the evil tidings of what man’s presumption made of man in Auschwitz” (Levi 1996, p. 55). Against this vicious proscription Levi does indeed carry to the world the evil tidings of his experience in the camps. But this nature of his memoir—its status as resistance—continues even after the camps have been liberated and the surviving prisoners have found hot food and, eventually, friendly faces. It is now no longer the Nazi proscription of memory that Levi must work against, but the fear of forgetfulness. For

Levi, as well as for other survivors of the Shoah, the imperative to remember serves as a corrective against the threat of intentional oblivion.

We can begin to properly understand the ethical force of the epigraphic poem's immemorial command by positioning the poem against this oblivion. The fear that his story will remain unheard, ignored, or—even more possible and therefore frightening—simply not believed, serves as a recurring trope in Levi's writing. Its first occurrence comes in an oft-cited passage of *Survival in Auschwitz* in which he describes surreal dream: "It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word" (Levi 1996, p. 60). Levi's dream from within the camps forecasts himself as the survivor-witness whose story is too harrowing to be heard. Here, in this oneiric scene of nonwitness, Levi's sister stands in for us, his eventual readers. Her response indicates the extent of Levi's fear: that his story will go unheard, and the only response engendered by such testimony will be deafening silence.

Levi's epigraphic poem resists this silence of the nonwitness by assigning responsibility to his readers not only to consider and meditate, but to carve these words on their hearts and *speak*: "Repeat them to your children." Thus, the obligation of the poem operates on both intellectual and dialogical levels: we are commanded towards contemplation and conversation. Levi's use of direct address, and his litany of imperatives (consider, meditate, carve, and speak) not only implicate us ethically but also call us out of our slumber into community and relationship with others: we are commanded towards dialogical memory, where remembrance of the past is not an individual task, an introspective moment shared only with oneself. To remember means to tell a story, to return to the Levinasian Face-to-Face, to conversation, dialogue, and human relation.

## 7. Conclusions

As a writer, Primo Levi privileges informational content over intentional opacity or any other flight of fancy that might gather under the banner of aesthetic form:

Writing serves to communicate, transmit information or feelings from mind to mind, from place to place, and from time to time. And he who is not understood by anyone does not transmit anything, he cries in the desert . . . It is up to the writer to make himself understood by those who wish to understand him: it is his trade, writing is a public service, and the willing reader must not be disappointed.

(Levi 1989, p. 171)

One might initially wish to oppose Levi's "poetics" to Celan's on this basis. Levi himself does exactly this later in the essay quoted above, critiquing Celan's poetry as a "flight from the world, of which the intentional death was the crown" (Levi 1989, p. 173). In his criticism of Celan, Levi identifies what many find to be so exhausting about the poet's work: we are indeed frustrated by his texts. But Levi goes too far, claiming that—specifically in Celan's later poems—a "darkness grows from page to page until the last inarticulate babble consternates like the rattle of a dying man, and this is just what it is. It attracts us as chasms attract us, but at the same time it also defrauds us of something that should have been said and was not, and so it frustrates and turns us away" (Levi 1989, p. 173). Indeed, Celan's "Engführung" serves as a prime example of this frustration. As readers, we are commanded to enter the terrain of a text that is itself never-ending and regularly exasperates our own readerly expectations regarding what we will find as we read. We never find the camps; we never find the corpses, the bodies. We happen upon a scene in the aftermath of trauma, unable to adequately or accurately piece together what remains. The voices we do hear are themselves fragmented, mere echoes of screams rather than screams themselves. What Levi wants to turn away from is precisely the failure of seeing that Celan's opening imperatives announce: "there is nothing to see here; therefore, you must look." In other words, what we are called to witness is the failure of witnessing, the failure



of representation. Thus, Celan's poem memorializes the Shoah through its invocation of the immemorial—that which exceeds memory.

What Celan's work implicitly "communicates", then, might not be categorically different from the explicit messages found in Levi's texts. Writing as survivors of the Shoah, each has expressed the personal and artistic necessity of writing-as-witness. We find in Levi's immediate postwar poem, "Shema", an insistence on carrying forward the content of witnessing in spite of the necessarily secondary nature of such carrying and such witnessing. Reading, as witnessing, here takes on the ethical register that renders each reader responsible to and for the text in question, whether a poem or a memoir. This responsibility is twofold: first, the reader must read the text—a task not as easy as it sounds, since reading necessitates an encounter with absence, and forces a confrontation that exposes both our inability to comprehend the text as an object and the ethical failure inherent in such a move. This inability leads to the second aspect of our responsibility as readers: the reading of the text must then become a perpetually incomplete task. In other words, each reader must acknowledge the gaps and fissures toward which Holocaust literature draws our attention. For Primo Levi (as for Celan), these gaps and fissures take shape through the verbal work of his texts. For example, early in *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi writes: "Then for the first time we become aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (Levi 1996, p. 26). This lack inherent in language signals to the reader that the content of the text does not adequately describe the experiences to which Levi's memoir testifies. This disparity between message and meaning pervades the reader's encounter with Holocaust literature. Thus, our reading becomes a dialogical performance of the immemorial, as a call to responsibility, as a summons that addresses us each individually at the moment of reading and asks us to respond.

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