

# Poets, Belief and Calamitous Times

. . . in calamitous times  
When old certainties lose their outlines,  
Virtues are negated, and faith fades.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, 'Huayna Capac', *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 35.



## Abstract

My research in this thesis covers the religious discourse of six contemporary poets who write belief from a position of calamity. Yehuda Amichai writes from the constant wars fought since the founding of the state of Israel; Anne Sexton from psychiatric illness; Seamus Heaney from the sectarian violence of Ireland; Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs from the twentieth century's greatest calamity, the Holocaust; and Yves Bonnefoy, from the language theories of post-modernism, which are calamitous for a poet.

My hypothesis is that under the pressures of calamity, in their resulting fragile subjectivity, poets will write an over-cohesive statement of belief, in which ambiguity and contradiction are suppressed, but that these qualities may be discernable through both traces and gaps in the discourse. In all except one of the poets, I have found this to be the case. Only Nelly Sachs avoids this pattern, and integrates evil and belief.

Yehuda Amichai's over-cohesive statement of belief asserts the absence of God and calls God to account. Breaking through this overt discourse however, and dominant by Amichai's final book, is evidence of a nurturing spiritual belief.

Anne Sexton repudiates her writing of Christ as Divine mother, companion, liberator and nourisher and reinscribes a patriarchal metanarrative in her 'Rowing' poems. She nevertheless unconsciously subverts this Divine figure.

Seamus Heaney's primary discourse of belief is of silenced Catholicism. Alternative discourses appear as traces and rise to dominance—a pagan sexuality, a Jungian discourse of water, the use of emblems and a discourse of silent Presence.

Paul Celan's overt religious statements are primarily an angry repudiation. He inscribes an absent God, and a bitter Jewish-Christian dialectic. Nevertheless, Celan finally writes a luminous, simple poetry in which an immanent spirituality wells through.

Nelly Sachs, alone among these poets, writes a religious discourse which integrates the existence of evil with belief and includes no over-cohesive statement. Sachs draws on the mystical writings of the Kabbalah, Jacob Boehme, and Christian mystics. Her beliefs include resurrection, rebirth, and the possibility of the containment and transformation of evil within the Divine.

Yves Bonnefoy writes religious Presence in a liquid and elusive language which hovers between form and formlessness, and in a discourse of the simple real. In his poetry the incompatibility between his two irreconcilable theories of language is suppressed. Unlike the other four poets who suppress ambiguity within their religious discourse, Bonnefoy's suppression occurs within his discourse of calamity.

## Declaration

*This is to certify that*

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,*
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,*
- (iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.*



## Acknowledgments

My thanks go to my principal supervisor, Professor Peter Steele SJ, whose brilliance and depth of knowledge have been an invaluable scholarly resource for me during the writing of this thesis, whose reputation as an outstanding academic has opened doors for me, and whose gentle wisdom and support have enabled me to work with delight and satisfaction within the scholarly enterprise. During our academic time together he has shared his own homilies and papers with me and has even written a sonnet about Cormac my cat; his enrichment of my life has gone far beyond a supervisor's duty. I thank, too, Professor Bernard Muir who supervised me during Professor Steele's sabbatical leave.

I wish to thank my lifetime friend and husband, Geoff Young. Over eleven years he has given me maximum support and assistance to pursue a student's and scholar's path which he does not share himself, and I thank him for his generosity.

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## Introduction

"The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you . . .' Gideon answered him, 'But, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us?' " (Judges 6:12–13).

The title of my thesis, *Poets, Belief and Calamitous Times* is drawn from the poetry of Primo Levi, in which he speaks of

. . . calamitous times  
When old certainties lose their outlines,  
Virtues are negated, and faith fades.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on Levi's concepts, I have chosen to research contemporary poets in whom religious belief is mapped against the discourses of calamity.

I have sought to trace in the work of each poet the influence of the drastic on her or his religious beliefs, to contrast and compare the poets with each other, and to identify the factors in the calamity which are significant in religious response.

I agree with Ben Belitt that, under conditions of calamity, poets will tend to discern an "apparent contradiction between a calamitous turn of events—tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, the sword—and the absence of an intervening God, [as] all evidence points to the removal of God from the riotous world of his creation."<sup>3</sup>

It is my hypothesis that under such conditions, poets will display a flight to metanarrative and religious closure and will tend to write over-coherent poetic worlds of belief, because the religious ambiguities which

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<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman & Brian Swann (London: Faber & Faber, 1988) 35.

are tolerable under less stressful situations will be suppressed. I have addressed these poets in order to test this theory. Critical writings in this broad territory determine the range of my field.

*Self/Same/Other*,<sup>4</sup> the collected papers from the 1996 Oxford conference on literature and theology, has proved invaluable for the formulation of my question. I am particularly indebted to Heather Walton, whose introductory essay "Re-visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology" extended my understanding of the possibilities of the suppression of alterity where subjectivity is fragile.

My selected poets are Yehuda Amichai, Seamus Heaney, Anne Sexton, Yves Bonnefoy, Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, all of whom are major poets of calamity whose statements of religious belief are significant in their work.

Although I am conscious that even superficially similar poets who are writing from the same situation of calamity experience it through different filters of language and ideology, and from differing past experiences and concepts of meaning, in choosing these poets I have sought diversity both in personal stance and in concepts of calamity; I have not wished to limit my thinking to war and its atrocities.

I have chosen three believers from a Christian background and three Jewish believers, two women and four men, two post-modern thinkers (Bonnefoy and Celan), three whose thinking is primarily modernist (Heaney, Sexton and Sachs), and one (Amichai) who combines elements of the two. On a continuum between high and popular culture, Celan occupies one pole and Amichai the other. The poets' calamities include

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Belitt, *Literature and Belief: Three "Spiritual Exercises"* (New York: Bennington College, 1985) 7.

constant warfare, sectarian violence, psychiatric illness, crises of language, meaning and mortality, and the Holocaust.

Several texts provide the basis for my thought. Alan Mintz's *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*,<sup>5</sup> David Roskies' *Against the Apocalypse*<sup>6</sup> and Robert Alter's *Defenses of the Imagination*<sup>7</sup> all explore paradigmatic religious responses to Jewish disaster; Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence*<sup>8</sup> is set against Northern Ireland's sectarianism.

Alan Mintz's *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*<sup>9</sup> reads the Holocaust literature of the Israeli interpretative community against the background of Jewish literary traditions in order to investigate the interplay of traditional responses as expressed in prophecy, liturgy, exegesis and poetry. Mintz's emphasis is on creative survival; he concludes that in the Jewish tradition "it is the story of the transcendence of catastrophe rather than of the catastrophe itself which is compelling."<sup>10</sup>

He defines the catastrophic element in events as that which has "the power to shatter the existing paradigms of meaning, especially as regards the bonds between God and the people of Israel" and finds that the literary imagination is paramount in the reconstruction of these paradigms.<sup>11</sup> Mintz stresses the Hebrew scriptures' book of Lamentations

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<sup>4</sup> Heather Walton and Andrew W. Hass, eds., *Self/Same/Other: Re-visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology*, vol. 5, *Playing the Texts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Alter, *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* x.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

as the archetypal literary response to catastrophe, and *Hurban*, the destruction of the Temple in the sixth century BCE, as the paradigmatic pre-Holocaust event.

David G. Roskies, in *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*,<sup>12</sup> also investigates the role of paradigmatic response in contemporary Jewish (but not necessarily Israeli) literature of calamity. But while Mintz concentrates on transcending calamity, Roskies reads Jewish experience as "a vale of tears through space and time."<sup>13</sup> While Mintz views traditional response as creating structures of continuity, Roskies' attitude to tradition is ambivalent.

The Holocaust, Roskies states,

was the most demonic of conspiracies between literature and life. Designed as such by the Nazis . . . it was perceived by the Jews as a return to the hoary past. This, of course, raises a host of painful questions as to the role that the memory of past destruction played and continues to play in the politics of Jewish survival. Would the Nazis have succeeded in deluding Jews into repeating past responses had it not been for a tradition that constantly rehearsed the destruction?<sup>14</sup>

Robert Alter describes *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* as "a book about the troubled encounter and the literary imagination and modern history as seen through the strong focus prism of a dozen or more Jewish literary figures."<sup>15</sup>

In this book Alter stresses the anti-apocalyptic tendency in modern writing, and concentrates on those writers who "have chosen to affirm through their work the prerogatives of the imagination . . . and the very possibilities of human wholeness that the realm of politics has often

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<sup>12</sup> Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 13-14.

seemed determined to destroy."<sup>16</sup> None of Alter's writers is specifically relevant to this study; the broad concepts within which he understands them, however, help to form the base on which my research stands.

Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence*<sup>17</sup> traces the cultural construction of violence, the body and history in urban Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1986 by concentrating on oral histories. Sections on the spatial formations of violence, on sexualized violence, and on the place of language in sectarianism have proved to be particularly helpful starting-points for my thinking.

Texts which address specific aspects of the writing of calamity form a second group of general texts which help to situate my thesis. David C. Jacobson's *Modern Midrash*<sup>18</sup> addresses the retelling of traditional Jewish narratives by twentieth century Hebrew writers, and has proved especially relevant to the study of Yehuda Amichai and Nelly Sachs, both of whom rewrite traditional Scriptural narratives. It is also of general significance for his exploration of the role of tradition in providing threads which help to orient the survivor of calamity.

Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning*<sup>19</sup> which is grounded in the psychoanalysis of mourning, explores one aspect of the poetry of calamity and situates particular poets within the generic history of elegy. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*<sup>20</sup> explores

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<sup>15</sup> Alter, *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* xiii-xiv.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*.

<sup>18</sup> David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

trauma through the lenses of psychoanalysis and literature; Kathryn Robson's *Writing Wounds*<sup>21</sup> builds on her argument.<sup>22</sup>

These writings determine the range of the field of my research; texts which form the foundations of my thinking on each of the six poets of my choice are discussed in the following section.

It is noticeable that the majority of the foundational writers, whom I have cited as addressing issues of calamity and of religious belief, address Jewish questions. This is not, I believe, because Jewish writers have received a different message from history, but, because, as Robert Alter suggests, "in many signal instances they have heard it at a higher decibel level."<sup>23</sup> In spite of the magnitude of the horror of the Holocaust, relevant issues for these writers may be applied to other calamities, both personal and collective.

This thesis is not a study of the problem of evil. I have therefore excluded texts of theodicy from those which situate my argument within its field. My concern here is not with the impossibility of reconciling the existence of a good and all-powerful God and the existence of evil by philosophical argument, but with the religious discourse which occurs under pressure of

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<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Robson, *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life-Writing, Gender in Modern Culture* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Although critics agree that Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, which was published within a short time of Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt*, makes a major contribution to trauma theory, Caruth has been criticised for both her "roaming focus" (Judy Z Segal, "Speaking Bodies," *Canadian Literature* 161/162, no. Summer/Autumn (1999): 203.) and, with more substance perhaps, for the way in which her defence of de Manian methods of interpretation blurs at the end into an implied apology for de Man's wartime writings, (James Berger, "Trauma and Literary Theory," *Contemporary Literature* 38, no. 3 (1997): 576.) Because Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* is primarily concerned with questions of reference and representation, or, as she states in her introduction, "how wound becomes voice", her theories shed invaluable light on the poetry of Nelly Sachs.

<sup>23</sup> Alter, *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* xiv.



calamity when a poet needs to stand her ground in spite of this impossibility, and with resultant ambiguities and contradictions of belief.

My position with regard to theodicy is summed up in the following quotation from Odo Marquard:

Experience of life seems to me to show that when one is up against suffering, under its immediate pressure, the problem is never theodicy; for what is important is simply the ability to hold up through one's suffering or one's sympathy. It is stamina in enduring, in helping and in comforting. How can I reach the next year, the next day, the next hour? In the face of this question, theodicy is not an issue, because a mouthful of bread, a breathing space, a slight abbreviation, a moment of sleep are all more important in these circumstances than the accusation and the defence of God.<sup>24</sup>

The stance which is behind the religious discourses of the six poets who are the object of my research may be summed up in the words from the text of the Hebrew scriptures' book of Judges which I have used as epigraph for this introduction. A more recent version of this response is seen at the end of Agnon's novel *Just Yesterday* when a pious woman cries out, "After all, we know the Holy One's mercies are many, but why doesn't he have mercy on us?"<sup>25</sup> While this human response to calamity is relevant to my study, the philosophical issues of theodicy nevertheless remain outside the parameters of my field.

Situating myself within this field of scholarship, and knowing the research which is on the board and the qualifications which I wish to make to it, I have tested my original hypothesis that, under conditions of calamity, poets will display a flight to metanarrative and religious closure and will tend to write an over-coherent discourse of belief. I have explored discrepancies between the overt and the latent in their depictions of

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<sup>24</sup>Odo Marquard, 'Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy' in *In Defence of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 11–12.

calamity and of belief, seeking for evidence of the suppression of ambiguity through cracks, palimpsest effects, traces, fragmentation and alterity. I have, of course, at every point in my argument, taken such account of existing research as is pertinent in the matter.

This study begins with the exploration of religious discourse by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. Writing in Hebrew, Amichai who migrated to Palestine from Bavaria in the 1930s with his extended family, took part in constant war from the time of his arrival in the country.

In this chapter I explore the formation of the poet's beliefs against a background of war and of erotic love, tracing the lyric "I" of Amichai's verse in his flight from war into the refuge of love, and his disillusionment with loves which themselves become battle zones.

Against this background, Amichai writes a pattern of belief which veers between assertions of the absence of God and poetry in which he calls God to account. Breaking through this overt discourse however, and dominant by Amichai's final book, is covert evidence of a nurturing spiritual belief.

I suggest that the factors which account for this situation include Amichai's use of the language of modern Hebrew, the positive memory of the religious persona of the father which is accessed through elegy, Amichai's continuing awareness of the Jewish liturgical cycle, and his use of the technique of deflating, ironic religious comment, which collapses discourses of religion and the everyday together to produce a space for spiritual immanence.

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<sup>25</sup> S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000) 638.

In my second chapter, a similar pattern emerges. In Anne Sexton's poetry, belief is written against her psychotic mental illness. In the face of this calamity, her primary religious discourse is fuelled by a totalising vision of a patriarchal God. For Sexton the uproar of the internal world of the mentally ill drowns out any awareness of Divine Presence, while the habit of struggle towards mental health through therapy suggests the need for a similar struggle to bring herself to God. With a strong death-wish and a Pelagian theology, she therefore sites the Divine past death; unable to reconcile a good and omnipotent God with the evil of her mental suffering she subverts the Divine figure she has sought to inscribe.

In inscribing this overbearing male patriarchal God however, Sexton overwrites a previous nurturing religious discourse of plenitude. In 'O Ye Tongues', Anne Sexton has written the Divine as companion, liberator and nourisher in a discourse of Christ as Divine mother, the One who satisfies the hungers of psychiatric illness.

In this chapter I suggest that Anne Sexton finally repudiates and replaces this nurturing religious discourse in a flight to orthodoxy. Rather than standing alone theologically, with her own status as coherent subject always vulnerable, at the end of her life Sexton forecloses on the revisioning of Christ as Mother seen in 'O Ye Tongues', and reinscribes a patriarchal metanarrative which carries the authority of scripture, patristic theology and the hierarchical church.

In my third chapter my hypothesis again proves true. Seamus Heaney, under the pressures of Ireland's sectarian violence, first writes a primary Catholic discourse, most noticeably in 'Station Island', then silences it and by doing so avoids placing himself within Northern Ireland's ideologically charged Protestant/Catholic sign systems.

At this point several alternative discourses of belief rise through his poetry—a pagan sexuality, a Jungian discourse of water, the use of emblems and a discourse of silent Presence; these increase in prominence until they become primary, while his Catholic discourse fades to traces, and ultimately to silence.

My fourth and fifth chapters, which address poets of the Holocaust, begin with an introduction which explores Theodore Adorno's statement that the writing of poetry after the Holocaust is an obscenity.

Paul Celan, a Romanian, writes in German from the calamity of the Holocaust. Many people believe his poem 'Death Fugue' to be the ultimate poetic testimony to the victims of the Holocaust; others see 'Stretto', a poem in which European Jewish culture is inscribed as absence, as his most ground-breaking work.

Celan's overt religious statements are primarily an angry repudiation. His discourses include the inscription of an absent God, and a bitter Jewish-Christian dialectic. He states in letters that he hopes to blaspheme until the end of his life. Nevertheless, under the influence of renewed cultural connections through the Kabbalah and with the country of Israel, Celan begins to write a luminous, simple poetry in which an immanent spirituality wells through; he too therefore proves my hypothesis.

So we see that in the first four of my chosen poets, my hypothesis that under conditions of calamity poets will lose tolerance for religious ambiguity, will display a flight to metanarrative and religious closure and will tend to write over-coherent poetic worlds of belief, proves to be true.

The single exception to this position is found in the Holocaust poetry of Nelly Sachs, my next poet, who writes complex religious discourses in which no suppression can be seen. From the start, she integrates the existence of evil with belief.

I attribute this capacity to a sophisticated mystical belief system, which contains no expectation of Divine intervention. Sachs has knowledge of the Kabbalah (which was made accessible to her through the texts of Gershom Sholem) and the philosophy of the seventeenth century mystic Jacob Boehme, as well as of Christian mystics. Her beliefs include resurrection, rebirth, and the possibility of the containment and eventually transformation of evil within the Divine. Sachs writes, "I have always endeavoured to raise the unspeakable onto the transcendental level to make it bearable . . . and to let a glow of the holy darkness fall into this night of nights."<sup>26</sup>

My final chapter concerns the crisis of language and of meaning which is associated with post-modernity and explored by the French poet Yves Bonnefoy. This crisis is relevant to all poets, and is of special interest to believers in Christianity, where the religious concept of the Word is of central significance. Bonnefoy accepts the concepts of the French theorists, and writes of the disjunctions between language and meaning; he sees as calamitous the loss of a sense of religious Presence as well as language's inability to mediate the Divine.

Bonnefoy responds to the crisis of post-modernity by writing in his first book of poetry, *Douve*, a liquid and elusive language which hovers between form and formlessness, and seeks to place meaning, and particularly religious presence, "in the tension between the saying and the unsaying". In later work, he seeks a space for presence in a discourse of the simple real, privileging such words as "tree" and "stone" and stressing the experience of particularity.

Superficially, ambiguity appears to remain overt in Bonnefoy's religious discourse. A closer examination of Bonnefoy's position however reveals

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<sup>26</sup> Nelly Sachs, in the appendix to her play, *Beryll Gazes into the Night, or the Lost and Refound Alphabet*. Cited Gertrude Schwebell, "Nelly Sachs," *Saturday Review* XLIX (10 December 1966): 46-7.

that his poetry, too, confirms my original hypothesis about the suppression of ambiguity and contradictions at the time of calamity, but that his suppression differs from that of the poets previously discussed.

Bonnefoy's suppresses not the ambiguity associated with his belief in religious presence, but an aspect of the calamity itself, the discrepancy between two theories of language. The view that language is the carrier of meaning and post-structuralism's belief in the disjunction between signifier and signified are irreconcilable theories, yet Bonnefoy at various times asserts both positions as his own and suppresses their incompatibility.

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It is noticeable that, in calamitous times, experience of an immanent God replaces belief in Divine transcendence. Even as a God who is utterly other is overtly denied or despaired of by the majority of poets, a welling-up of inner strengthening and wisdom is apparent in their religious discourses of poetry, and a refreshing spirituality, which breaks through the primary, over-emphatic discourse of belief, can be discerned.

And so I conclude that in calamitous times the religious discourse of a majority of poets displays a flight to metanarrative and religious closure and a tendency towards over-coherent poetic worlds of belief. In calamitous times the religious ambiguities which are tolerable under less stressful situations tend to be suppressed, but when this suppression occurs, a covert immanent spirituality can be discerned through traces and cracks within the overt primary discourse of belief.

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## Relevant Literature: a Critical Summary

I owe a debt to the scholars whose analyses of my six chosen poets provide the basis for my critical thinking.

Glenda Abramson's *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*<sup>27</sup> is the standard English monograph on the poetry of Yehuda Amichai. Although this text does not engage with contemporary literary theory, I found her understanding of Amichai's lyric "I" as derived from both life events and from mythic motifs<sup>28</sup> to be a useful concept, and the text to be helpful in its range.

Both Abramson and Chana Kronfeld, one of the translators of *Open Closed Open*, have expert knowledge of Jewish liturgical practice and texts. The journal articles of Chana Kronfeld<sup>29</sup> and Chana Bloch<sup>30</sup> provide details of choices made by them in translation. Kronfeld's "Reading Amichai Reading" provides a helpful analysis of the intricate intertextuality hidden under Amichai's "camouflage net of artlessness".<sup>31</sup>

Little critical attention has been paid to Anne Sexton in recent years.

Diana Hume George's monograph *Oedipus Anne*<sup>32</sup> is, as the title suggests,

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<sup>27</sup> Glenda Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1996), Chana Kronfeld, "Reading Amichai Reading," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 45, no. 3 (1996), Chana Kronfeld, "The Wisdom of Camouflage: Between Rhetoric and Philosophy in Amichai's Poetic System," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 10, no. 3 (1990).

<sup>30</sup> Chana Bloch, "Wrestling with the Angel of History: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 45, no. 3 (1996), Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, "On Translating Amichai's Open Closed Open," *American Poetry Review* 29, no. 2 (2000).

<sup>31</sup> Kronfeld, "Reading Amichai Reading."

<sup>32</sup> Diana Hume George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

a Freudian analysis of her poetry. Stephen Colbern<sup>33</sup> and Linda Wagner-Martin<sup>34</sup> have edited the best of the critical papers on Sexton which were written in the 1980s. Of the criticism which engages with Sexton's religious belief, Richard Morton's *Anne Sexton's Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage*<sup>35</sup> is the most significant text. Morton reads Sexton within the American literary tradition of the conversion narrative and discerns an overall movement towards grace within her poetry; this claim is not, I believe, substantiated by the poetry.

Much contemporary Freudian theory, however, has direct relevance to Anne Sexton's poetry. Relevant texts include Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject in *Powers of Horror*,<sup>36</sup> several essays on shame in Adamson and Clark's collection *Scenes of Shame*,<sup>37</sup> and Louis Marin's essay on the poetic 'I', "Topic and Figures of Enunciation: It is Myself that I Paint" in *Vision and Textuality*.<sup>38</sup> Other relevant single essays include a chapter on the sacred in Jeanne Foster's *a Music of Grace*,<sup>39</sup> and on elegy in Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning*.<sup>40</sup>

Of the overwhelming number of journal articles which have been written on Seamus Heaney, many are disappointing in their sameness. I consider the best secondary monograph on Heaney's poetry to be Helen Vendler's

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<sup>33</sup> Steven E. Colburn, ed., *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton* (Boston: G K Hall, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Richard E Morton, *Anne Sexton's Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage* (Lewiston Lampeter, Queenston: Edwin Meller, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>37</sup> Joseph and Hilary Clark Adamson, *Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame and Writing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Louis Marin, "Topic and Figures of Enunciation: It is Myself that I Paint," in *Vision and Textuality*, ed. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Jeanne Foster, *A Music of Grace: The Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry*, vol. 55, *American University Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*.



*Seamus Heaney*<sup>41</sup>, especially for her comments on the late poetry. Outstanding individual essays include the chapter on Heaney in Mary Kinzie's *The Cure of Poetry*<sup>42</sup> for its critical acumen, and Peter Steele's "Celebration and Its Enemies"<sup>43</sup> for Heaney's treatment of violence in the everyday. However the most significant prose works for the interpretation of Seamus Heaney's poetry, remain, in my opinion, Seamus Heaney's own; *Finders Keepers*<sup>44</sup> is particularly helpful for its autobiographical essays on Belfast and on Heaney's childhood home, while the Nobel Lecture, *Crediting Poetry*, provides a statement of Seamus Heaney's poetics.<sup>45</sup>

John T. Naughton's scholarly and lucid essays on Yves Bonnefoy include the foreword to Bonnefoy's *New and Selected Poems*<sup>46</sup> and the introduction to an invaluable collection of Bonnefoy's essays, *The Act and the Place of Poetry*.<sup>47</sup> Naughton's monograph, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy*,<sup>48</sup> is an invaluable resource for the interpretation of Bonnefoy's more obscure poetry. Timothy Mathews, the second Bonnefoy scholar to work on Bonnefoy in English, proves to be somewhat obfuscating in his introduction to *On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>42</sup> Mary Kinzie, "Deeper than Declared: On Seamus Heaney," in *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Peter Steele, "Seamus Heaney: Celebration and its Enemies," *Eureka Street* 8, no. 7 (1998).

<sup>44</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems*, ed. John Naughton & Anthony Rudolf, trans. Galway Kinnell & Richard Pevear (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> John T. Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>49</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*, ed. Timothy Mathews, trans. Galway Kinnell, *Bloodaxe Contemporary French Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992).

Of essential significance for the understanding of Bonnefoy's poetics are his own essays, collected as *The Lure and the Truth of Painting: Selected Essays on Art*,<sup>50</sup> and *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays*.<sup>51</sup> The title essay of *The Act and the Place of Poetry* had greatest relevance for the concepts of my thesis.

Hannah Arendt, (*Origins of Totalitarianism*,<sup>52</sup> *Men in Dark Times*<sup>53</sup> and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*),<sup>54</sup> because of her theoretical analysis of evil, and Inga Clendinnen, (*Reading the Holocaust*),<sup>55</sup> provide entry to the area of Holocaust studies. Clendinnen, an intellectual working outside her academic area of expertise, writes with the freshness and pain of new discovery and without assumptions of prior knowledge. Primo Levi's prose works, especially *If This is a Man*<sup>56</sup> and *If Not Now, When?*<sup>57</sup> remain classics of their kind.

Women's Holocaust memoirs written since 1980 seek to challenge the hegemony of male-centred Holocaust poetry and memoirs; of these Rena Kornreich Gelissen's *Rena's Promise*<sup>58</sup> is an exceptional example. *Women in the Holocaust*<sup>59</sup> and *Women and the Holocaust*<sup>60</sup> contain germinal

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<sup>50</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *The Lure and the Truth of Painting: Selected Essays on Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>51</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>52</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1976).

<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

<sup>54</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man / The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>57</sup> Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Summit, 1985).

<sup>58</sup> Rena Kornreich Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>60</sup> Esther Fuchs, ed., *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*, vol. XXII, *Studies in the Shoah* (Lanham, New York & Oxford: University Press of America, 1999).

papers of women's Holocaust theory; many explore the problematic identification of women survivors with sexuality and nurturing, and the tendency to present all women survivors as mothers. Esther Fuchs<sup>61</sup> and Susan Gubar<sup>62</sup> write the issues of second generation survivors.

John Felstiner's monograph on Paul Celan, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*,<sup>63</sup> combining biography with a critical assessment of Celan's poetry, is particularly helpful for issues of translation. Felstiner's collection of Celan's poetry<sup>64</sup> is the standard German/English edition, together with Michael Hamburger's *Poems of Paul Celan*.<sup>65</sup> I have chosen to use Felstiner's translations for their poetic beauty, although I feel some concern about his variations from the originals and his occasional choice of unidiomatic English words.

Many critical analyses of Paul Celan's poetry emphasize Heideggerian and Existential aspects of the poetry; these include Fioretos's *Word Traces*<sup>66</sup> and Clarise Samuels' *Holocaust Visions*.<sup>67</sup> Both Anne Carson's *Economy of the Unlost*<sup>68</sup> and the chapter on Celan in Michael André Bernstein's *Five*

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<sup>61</sup> Esther Fuchs, "Exile, Daughterhood and Writing: Representing the Shoah as a Personal Memory," in *Re-Presenting the Shoah for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ronit Lentin (2004).

<sup>62</sup> Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>63</sup> John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> John Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (New York & London: Norton, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan, Revised and Expanded*, ed. Michael Hamburger, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Perseus, 2002).

<sup>66</sup> Aris Fioretos, ed., *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994).

<sup>67</sup> Clarise Samuels, *Holocaust Visions: Surrealism and Existentialism in the Poetry of Paul Celan, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture* (Drawer, Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993).

<sup>68</sup> Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

*Portraits*<sup>69</sup> are valuable for their clarity of interpretation and the freshness of their categories.

Alan Unterman's *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend*<sup>70</sup> provides entry to the main features of mystical Kabbalah. Gershom Scholem's monographs<sup>71</sup> are the finest scholarly guide to Kabbalah and exclude those popular elements which verge on magic and fortune-telling. Harold Bloom's *Kabbalah and Criticism*<sup>72</sup> emphasises language aspects of Kabbalistic thought.

Ursula Rudnick's *Post-Shoah Religious Metaphors: The Image of God in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs*,<sup>73</sup> a doctoral dissertation, contains valuable quotations from Nelly Sachs's otherwise untranslated letters which throw light on Sachs's religious beliefs, as well as the fullest biographical information which was available to me. Kathrin M. Bower's *Ethics and Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer*<sup>74</sup> concentrates on elegiac and maternal themes in Sachs's poetry. Bower's failure to provide English translations of pivotal quotations from letters and poems not available in collections of Sachs's poetry reduces the value of this monograph.

The papers edited by Bahti and Fries in *Jewish Writers, German*

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<sup>69</sup> Michael André Bernstein, *Five Portraits: Modernity and the Imagination in Twentieth-Century Writing* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwest University Press, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Alan Unterman, ed., *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991).

<sup>71</sup> Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Jewish Publication Society Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>72</sup> Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>73</sup> Ursula Rudnick, *Post-Shoah Religious Metaphors: The Image of God in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

<sup>74</sup> Kathrin M. Bower, *Ethics and Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer* (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2000).

*Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*<sup>75</sup> include William West's "The Poetics of Inadequacy"<sup>76</sup>, in which West explores Sachs's poetry within concepts of the epitaph. Elisabeth Strenger's "Nelly Sachs and the Dance of Language",<sup>77</sup> which contains several relevant sections on language, is useful when read against Dorothee Ostmeier's discussion of Walter Benjamin's language concepts.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Timothy Bahti and Marilyn Sibley Fries, eds., *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>76</sup> William West, "The Poetics of Inadequacy: Nelly Sachs and the Resurrection of the Dead," in *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*, ed. Timothy Bahti and Marilyn Sibley Fries (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>77</sup> Elisabeth Strenger, "Nelly Sachs and the Dance of Language," in *Bridging the Abyss: Reflections n Jewish Suffering, Anti-Semitism and Exile*, ed. Strenger and Amy Colin (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994).

<sup>78</sup> Dorothee Ostmeier, "Approaches to a Theory of Language: Walter Benjamin's Early Essays and Nelly Sachs's Dramatic Scenes," in *Jewish Writers, German Literature: the Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*, ed. Timothy Bahti and Marilyn Sibley Fries (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

The *Zohar*, and the mystical and philosophical writings of Jacob Boehme are significant for interpretation of Nelly Sachs's poetry. All translations of the massive *Zohar* are drastically abridged; the three volume *Wisdom of the Zohar*<sup>79</sup> contains extracts grouped under themes, and Daniel Chanan Matt provides as accessible introduction to the abridged Classics of Western Spirituality version of the text.<sup>80</sup> Although described as "an intellectual biography", Andrew Weeks's study of Boehme provides an excellent elucidation of Boehme's ideas.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Fischer Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, eds., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 vols., *Littman Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>80</sup> Daniel Chanan Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, Classics of Western Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1983).

<sup>81</sup> Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

## Yehuda Amichai: The Calamity of War

"In November 1973, a few weeks after the Yom Kippur War, so traumatic for many Israelis, [Amichai] wrote me: 'Again, all of a sudden, my poetry has come back into fashion. Alas for the times when my poetry is in fashion.'"<sup>82</sup>

"The relentless warfare of living vulnerable lives under the shadow of death."<sup>83</sup>

"I paint my life in war  
And in love, in clamor and in silence." ('I am a Poor Prophet')<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Robert Alter, "A Portrait of Yehuda Amichai," in *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 124.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>84</sup> Yehuda Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994*, trans. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995) 425.

## 1. CALAMITOUS TIMES

### INTRODUCTION

Yehuda Amichai lived in embattled Israel from the mid-1930s, when he migrated with his extended family from Würzburg, Bavaria at the age of twelve, until his death in 2000 at the age of 76. He fought in five wars, four of them Israel's, and war is the principle calamity against which Amichai writes religious belief.

Historically, Amichai belongs to the Palmach Generation, Zionist idealists who believed that European Jewry's problems would be solved with the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and a society based on the Marxist principles of the kibbutz. Amichai fought with the Palmach in the War of Independence.

Emotionally, however, he should be placed with the post-independence Statehood Generation, for he shares their disillusionment that the land of Israel has not proved a "final solution" to Jewish conflict, and a great weariness of the constant warfare which seems to be the price to be paid for the country's continuing existence.

In this chapter I will explore the formation of the poet's beliefs against a background of war and of erotic love, tracing the lyric "I" of Amichai's verse in his flight from war into the refuge of love, and his disillusionment with loves which themselves become battle zones subject to change and to loss.

Amichai's secondary areas of calamity include the personal spaces of a poetic speaker who is violently exposed, uncomfortable, lacking in meaning, and unsatisfied. I will explore these areas in Amichai's early and middle poetry.



Against the background of war and of erotic love, Amichai writes a pattern of belief which veers between assertions of the absence of God, and poetry in which he calls God to account. By *Open Close Open*, Amichai's final book, this pattern has given way to the presentation of a nurturing spiritual belief.

The factors which account for this change include, I suggest, Amichai's use of the language of modern Hebrew, the positive memory of the religious persona of his father which is accessed through elegy, Amichai's continuing awareness of the Jewish liturgical cycle, and his use of the technique of deflating, ironic religious comment, which collapses discourses of religion and the everyday together to produce a space for spiritual immanence.

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#### A. THE CALAMITY OF WAR

Out of three or four people in a room  
 One always stands at the window.  
 Has to see the evil among thorns  
 And the fires on the hill.  
 And how people who went out whole,  
 Are returned in the evening  
 Like small change to their homes. ('Out of Three or Four People in a Room')<sup>85</sup>

A young soldier lies in the springtime, cut off from his name.  
 His body is budding and flowering. From artery and vein  
 his blood babbles on, uncomprehending and small.  
 God boils the flesh of the lamb in its mother's pain.  
 ('In a Right Angle: A Cycle of Quatrains' #45)<sup>86</sup>

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"I never got a war in a cool green forest / Or a wavy sea battle," writes Yehuda Amichai ('Time' #74).<sup>87</sup> Amichai did, however, see a number of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>86</sup> Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1996) 29.

wars in the deserts of Israel. He fought for the British in World War II in the Jewish Brigade in Egypt, as an infantryman in Israel's War of Independence, in the 1956 War, in the Six Day War of 1967, and in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.<sup>88</sup> It is little wonder that Amichai was to state, "I have never written a love poem without an echo of war."<sup>89</sup>

'Since Then' explores war, the primary calamity against which Amichai writes belief.

### Since Then

I fell in the battle of Ashdod  
 In the war of Independence.  
 My mother said then, He's twenty-four years old,  
 And now she says, He's fifty-four,  
 And lights a memorial candle  
 Like birthday candles  
 On a cake, to blow out.

Since then, my father died of pain and sorrow,  
 And my sisters got married  
 And named their kids after me,  
 And since then my home is my grave, and my grave—my home.  
 For I fell in the pale sands  
 Of Ashdod.

And since then all the cypresses and all the orchard trees  
 Between Negba and Yad Mordekhay  
 Walk in a slow funeral procession,  
 And since then all my children and all my forefathers  
 Are orphans and bereaved parents,  
 And since then all my children and all my forefathers  
 Walk together arm in arm  
 In a demonstration against death.  
 For I fell in the war  
 In the soft sands of Ashdod.

I carried my comrade on my back.

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<sup>87</sup> Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994* 303.

<sup>88</sup> David Biespiel, "A Final Hard Amen: Yehuda Amichai 1923-2000," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 25, no. 1-2 (2001): 127.

<sup>89</sup> Yehuda Amichai, "'My Nation Lives': Reflections on Israel at 50," *New Republic*, 11 May 1998, 16.

And since then I feel his dead body always  
 Like a sky weighing heavy upon me,  
 And he feels my bent back beneath  
 Like a convex segment of the globe.  
 For in the terrible sands of Ashdod, I fell  
 Not just he.

And since then I compensate myself for my death  
 With love and dark feasts,  
 And since then I am of-blessed-memory,  
 And I don't want God to revenge my blood.  
 And I do not want my mother to cry over me  
 With her beautiful precise face.  
 And since then I fight the pain,  
 And I walk against my memories  
 As a man walks against the wind,  
 And since then I mourn my memories,  
 As a man mourns his own death,  
 And since then I extinguish my memories,  
 As a man puts out a fire,  
 And I'm quiet.  
 For I fell in Ashdod  
 In the War of Independence.

"The feelings raged!" they used to say then, "The hopes  
 Ebbed," they used to say, but no more,  
 "The arts flourished," said the history books,  
 "Science prospered," they said,  
 "The evening wind chilled their hot foreheads,"  
 They said then,  
 "The morning wind swayed their forelocks,"  
 So they said.  
 And since then the winds do different things  
 And the words say different things  
 (Do not see me as if I were alive),  
 For I fell in the soft, pale sands  
 Of Ashdod in the War of Independence.<sup>90</sup>

'Since Then', gently repetitious, displays the conversational register which made Amichai Israel's most popular poet but tends to disguise his complex ambiguity. Amichai's use of intertextuality may be just glimpsed in the line "(Do not see me as if I were alive)," patterned on the Song of

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<sup>90</sup> Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994* 310.

Songs 1:6, "Do not gaze on me as dark"<sup>91</sup> or "Do not define me by my darkness." But in this poem complexity primarily resides in Amichai's theme, which is not, as the first three stanzas suggest, lament for a dead soldier written in the first person, but an exploration of the qualities which die in a soldier who survives.

When the theme emerges in the fifth stanza following the words "For in the terrible sands of Ashdod, I fell / Not just he", the complexity of earlier stanzas emerges. The conflated images of birthday and memorial candles which are lit and extinguished for the man who might have "lived", form an ambiguous trope in which the meaning of celebration and memorialisation are called into question.

The speaker's war damage remains unspecified, its extent apparent only in the response of others—the depth of grief for a man damaged beyond the capacity to live which is shown in the father's death "of pain and sorrow" and the sisters' choice to name their children after the speaker, (in a gesture typically made to memorialise the dead). The poet prompts the reader to ponder the nature of the potential which dies in a man when others are killed in his presence. Amichai provides no answer, but brings to consciousness the poet's belief that the calamity of war is the calamity of the damaged survivor.

Although named as one of the living dead, the speaker is neither an alienated figure nor in stasis, for he experiences nature as empathic, and is able to place himself within the context of the ancestors and descendents who "walk together arm in arm / In a demonstration against death" in solidarity with him. He is free from the need for revenge and aware of those around him, especially his mother "With her beautiful precise face".

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<sup>91</sup> Identified by Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* 32.

The fifth stanza records the speaker's movement towards healing, from compensation by self-destructive "dark feasts" and an attempt to battle pain, through a steady movement forward "As a man walks against the wind", to the mourning of memories and their extinguishment "As a man puts out a fire". The final line "And I'm quiet" describes a state of grief's completion, but the reader is left to reflect on whether this is the quietness of despair. Certainly it is a quietness which precludes rhetorical gesticulation.

'Since Then', written in the quiet register of the accessibly every-day, is a war poem notable for the absence of any macho rhetoric of war, of inflamed nationalist sentiment, of guns and tanks and bombardment, of noise and killing and blood. The quiet assertion that the poetic "I", as a result of war, now identifies himself as one of the living dead, avoids what Robert Alter has called "a kind of pornography of horror"<sup>92</sup> and carries more power than a high rhetoric of war.

Much of this power is found in the striking image of the poem's speaker as he carries his dead companion on his back. Amichai has been named as a successor to metaphysical poets in his use of the dramatic conceit, but the statuesque and spare portrayal of these silent, linked figures has none of the extravagance of tropes used elsewhere.

"I carried my comrade on my back" evokes memories of load-carriers in pagan and Christian legend. As Atlas bore the weight of the heavens on his shoulders, this lyric "I", bears the weight of the sky and in doing so himself becomes the world. As St Christopher carrying the Christ child carried too the world's weight, so this speaker, no saint and feeling no Divine assistance, carries the immense burden which causes him to place himself among the dead.

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Alter, "Vistas of Annihilation," in *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 104.

The weight of the burden stands in contrast with the sensuous quality of the "soft, pale sands / Of Ashdod". In falling towards the sands, the poetic "I" falls towards the feminised. Later poems will present a speaker who, in war and in life, will seek comfort in erotic love. It is perhaps significant that in the soft, pale sands of Ashdod towards which the speaker falls, death and the feminised are conflated. For in seeking refuge from war in erotic love, Amichai's poetic "I" encounters love's battleground and a further site of loss and of death.

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### B. THE FLIGHT TO THE FEMINISED: EROTIC LOVE AS BATTLEGROUND

" . . . grasping at love in a landscape of bunkers and barbed wire"<sup>93</sup>

"The wailings of  
labor pains and rattle of death-agony already in a first night of love." ('Travels of  
the Last Benjamin of Tuleda')<sup>94</sup>

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Amichai's poetic "I" retreats from battle into the soft intimacies of erotic love. Early love poems like 'Six Poems for Tamar'<sup>95</sup> depict an idyllic, empowering love in a harmonious world, tempered only by the shadows of future parting and knowledge of the war outside:

You had a laughter of grapes:  
many round green laughs.

Your body is full of lizards.  
All of them love the sun.

Flowers grew in the field, grass grew on my cheeks,  
everything was possible.

Soon, however, Amichai's erotic poetry depicts the potential for loss and for conflict.

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<sup>93</sup> Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity*, (Bloomington Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 124.

<sup>94</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 79.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

"History's Wings Beating," They Used to Say

Not far from the railway tracks, near the painful Post Office,  
I saw a tile plaque on an old house, and recognized the name of  
The son of a man whose girl friend I took from him  
Many years ago: she left him and came to me,  
And this young man was born to another woman and didn't  
Know about all that.

Those were days of great love and great destiny,  
The foreign power imposed a curfew on the city and closed  
Us for a sweet coupling in the room,  
Guarded by well-armed soldiers.

For five shillings I changed the name of my forefathers  
Of the Diaspora into a proud Hebrew name matching hers.

That bitch ran off to America, got married to  
A dealer in spices, pepper, cinnamon, cardamon,  
And left me behind with my new name and the war.

"History's wings beating," as they used to say then, which  
Almost killed me on the battlefield, blew  
A pleasant breeze on her face in her safe place.

And in the wisdom of war they told me to put  
My personal bandages above my heart,  
The silly heart that still loved her  
And the wise heart that will forget.<sup>96</sup>

This poem presents many of the issues which are significant for one context within which the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai writes belief, the battle-zone of love in time of war.

First, I note the ironic deflation of the title. Amichai will have no part in the high rhetoric of destiny; but even as the "great love" of those days is written in its wry detail, the young man whose birth is a result of these events is slipped into the apparently artless opening stanza. However underwritten, the facts of history have their effects.

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<sup>96</sup> Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994* 321.

The first stanza, apparently an ambling justification for the ensuing narrative, contains seemingly inconsequential details of place. Together, however, they form a locus of concepts of departure, painful distant communication, the changes of urban life, and identification through name: Amichai means "My people lives".

The doubling of the woman's two departures provides the hinge on which the poem's bitterness and humour swings. The prosaic "she left him and came to me", with its lack of awareness of consequential pain and complexity as the woman arrives in the life of the poetic speaker, compares with the moral judgement of "That bitch ran off to America" and the resulting exploration of issues of abandonment and of unwanted continuing love, as she leaves.

A second doubling is more subtle. "For five shillings I changed the name of my forefathers / Of the Diaspora into a proud Hebrew name matching hers." Amichai's forefathers were left behind in his migration from Bavarian to Israel as he was to be left behind by the woman, but they are present intermittently in memory, and inscribed in the poem, together with the trace of their superseded name, as the woman is remembered and inscribed. The poetic speaker's migration hovers behind the poem's other relocation, inviting comparison of relinquishments and tenacities, enrichment and pain—in short, the complex morality of changes made in life—and of the significance of names.

The poem's humour in part derives from gender role reversals; to be left with an unwanted name following relationship failure would be unremarkable in a woman. Part is the result of displacement of anger not simply onto the male rival but onto his products, the "spices, pepper, cinnamon, cardamon" which have become no less exotic but overlaid with venom.



Love, war and the ironies and pain of the end of "a sweet coupling in the room, / Guarded by well-armed soldiers" give way in 'Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tuleda'<sup>97</sup> to violence in love. The poetic "I" is imaged as a drunken Roman emperor putting down revolt in the erotic relationship by force:

Gourmand and glutton,  
guzzling and swilling like the last Roman emperors  
in the second-hand history books, scrawls of demented painting  
and the writing on the wall in bathrooms,  
chronicles of heroism and conquest and decline  
and vain life and vain death.  
Coups and revolts and the suppression of revolts  
during the banquet. In a nightgown, transparent  
and waving, you rose in revolt against me, hair  
flying like a flag above and hair bristling below.  
Ta-da, ta-daaaaaa! Broken pieces of a bottle  
and a shofar's long blast. Suppression of the revolt with  
a garter belt, strangulation with sheer stockings,  
stoning with the sharp heels of evening shoes.  
Battles of a gladiator armed with a broken bottle neck  
against a net of delicate petticoats, shoes  
against treacherous organdy, tongue against prong,  
half a fish against half a woman. Straps and buttons,  
the tangle of bud-decorated bras with buckles  
and military gear. Shofar-blast and the suppression of it.  
Soccer shouts from the nearby field,  
and I was placed upon you, heavy and quiet  
like a paperweight, so that time and the wind  
wouldn't be able to blow you away from here  
and scatter you like scraps of paper, like hours.<sup>98</sup>

Here the primary image of the poetic "I" is that of a debauched Roman emperor violently suppressing revolt. With transparent gown and flying hair his woman is reminiscent of a Delacroix heroine leading her people into revolution.

The poem, however, is dense with multiple depictions of violence. The emperor becomes a street-fighter armed with broken bottle and boots, a

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<sup>97</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 70.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

sex murderer strangling with intimate clothing, a Jewish soldier responding to the shofar-blast. Finally, to sounds of soccer outside the house, the scene is reduced to the aftermath of domestic violence with the male fighter depicted lying on top of his crushed victim.

And what of the woman in this battle? Throughout she is faceless, unnamed and disembodied. If she is a resistance warrior with flying hair, her bristling pubic hair and the final petrification of the attacker suggests her as a Medusa figure too, her head of snakes hair representing the horrifying female genitals. Freud states:

If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself.<sup>99</sup>

The woman is depicted as a collection of ultra-feminine clothing, (lacking the body to be injured by male weapons of bottle and boots), and finally as sheets of paper, the site of male inscription, and, even more nebulously, as a stretch of time. She survives the battle reduced but elusive, in better condition than the petrified male, but the last vestiges of the relationship as sanctuary have been lost. For Amichai, erotic love is now a site of war, and the woman is the enemy.

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In Amichai's late poetry, all images of erotic love as violence will disappear, and one enriching love relationship will remain. The sensuous softness of "the soft, pale sands / Of Ashdod" will recur throughout Amichai's poetry until the end of his life, when the poet will request, in defiance of Jewish funeral traditions, that his body be handled only by

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<sup>99</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1953-66), 274 cited Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

women.<sup>100</sup> I will complete the discussion of Amichai's use of the femininised below, but first I wish to explore Amichai's depiction of the results of life as a war-zone.

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### C. IN THE BATTLE-ZONE OF LIFE

"And I stand without camouflage before the enemy's eyes,  
with outdated maps in my hand,  
in the resistance that is gathering strength and between towers,  
and alone, without recommendations

in the vast desert." ('For My Birthday')<sup>101</sup>

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When war becomes the primary calamity of life, the result is damage to a poetic "I" which has become violently exposed, uncomfortable, lacking in meaning, and unsatisfied. In 'Like the Inner Wall of a House'<sup>102</sup> Amichai depicts the result of exposure, the loss of interiority, through an image of a war-damaged house.

Just as the man who has sought refuge from public conflict in the private cocoon of erotic love finds that he is torn from security and thrust into war, so here the private self is left violated and exposed when what protects the poem's speaker is ripped away in the battle-ground of life.

Although this image could represent the dangers of poetic self-revelation, here the damage to the vulnerable self which is depicted seems to be the result of injuries inflicted in the intimacy of erotic love:

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<sup>100</sup> See 'In My Life, on My Life #13: "When I die, I want only women to handle me in the Chevra Kadisha." Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open*, trans. Chana Bloch & Chana Kronfeld (New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt, 2000) 113.

<sup>101</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 16.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

Like the Inner Wall of a House

Like the inner wall of a house  
 that after wars and destruction becomes  
 an outer one—  
 that's how I found myself suddenly  
 too soon in life. I've almost forgotten what it means  
 to be inside. It no longer hurts;  
 I no longer love. Far or near—  
 they're both very far from me,  
 equally far.<sup>103</sup>

Exposure results in a deadly forgetting which precludes entry to the interior worlds of both the poetic imagination— "I've almost forgotten what it means / to be inside"—and of the intimacies of love. The numbness which brings freedom from pain makes love impossible—"It no longer hurts; / I no longer love"—and what remains is a distancing detachment—"Far or near— / they're both very far from me, / equally far."

The self, calamitously, is turned "toward the outside without intimacy, without place, without rest."<sup>104</sup> Within the understanding of intimacy explored by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, the house of the self is no longer a felicitous space, "a nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining."<sup>105</sup> It has been permanently damaged in the battles of life.

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In 'For My Birthday', a poem which was written by Amichai at the age of thirty-two, life's war-damage results in both discomfort and lack of meaning:

Thirty-two times I have put on the world  
 and still it doesn't fit me.  
 It weighs me down,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 244.

<sup>105</sup> John R. Stilgoe, "Foreword to the 1994 Edition," in *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), viii.

unlike the coat that now takes the shape of my body  
and is comfortable  
and will gradually wear out.<sup>106</sup>

The speaker is an Atlas-figure who not only endures the weight of the carried heavens but feels the discomfort of the world's rigidity and permanence in his body. He no longer fits into his world, which lacks any sense of comforting familiarity.

In this burdened state he confronts the tedium and meaninglessness of life:

Thirty-two times I went over the account  
without finding the mistake,  
began the story  
but wasn't allowed to finish it . . .  
And my good deeds grow smaller

and smaller. But  
the interpretations around them have grown huge, as in  
an obscure passage of the Talmud  
where the text takes up less and less of the page  
and Rashi and the other commentators  
close in on it from every side.

And now, after thirty-two times,  
I am still a parable  
with no chance to become its meaning.

Here the text of the poet's life is interpreted as repetitious—"Thirty-two times I went over the account / without finding the mistake"—lacking closure—"began the story / but wasn't allowed to finish it"—and diminished—"And my good deeds grow smaller / and smaller". But the primary calamity of the poetic "I" is to experience his life in terms of the endless deferral of meaning postulated by post-structuralism, a double calamity for one whose identity is bound up with his poet's capacity for language. The poem's speaker, as "a parable / with no chance to become its meaning" is a signifier without a signified, empty of significance.

There is nothing here of the elusiveness and playfulness which is characteristic of Norman O. Brown's concept of meaning. Citing Brown, in *Love's Body* Mark C. Taylor writes:

Since perspectives are radically relational, meaning is irreducibly relative. There is no such thing as semantic automism, intrinsic meaning, or meaning-in-itself. "Meaning is not in things but in between; in . . . the interplay; in the interconnections; at the intersections, at the crossroads."<sup>107</sup>

War-damaged, Amichai's poetic "I" finds meaning not elusive but absent, and with its absence the speaker enters a state of dreary stasis.

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"Sometimes I feel my soul rolling  
as if it were inside an empty barrel." ('Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tuleda')<sup>108</sup>

In 'The Last Benjamin of Toleda',<sup>109</sup> Amichai writes the results of life's battles as lack of satisfaction. The poem carries a refrain which is taken from variations on Deuteronomy 6: 10ff, translated by Glenda Abramson as "When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which he hath given thee".<sup>110</sup>

This *leitmotif* alters in different contexts within the poem but is never unequivocal: "You ate and were filled, you came / in your twelfth year, in the Thirties of the world . . . in the sweltering land", "You ate and were filled and recited the blessing / alone and in company and alone", "You didn't eat, weren't filled", "I haven't said the last word yet. / I haven't / eaten yet and already I'm filled", and finally "I ate and wasn't filled and didn't say the blessing".

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<sup>106</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 15.

<sup>107</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 173, citing Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body*, (New York: Random House, 1968), 247.

<sup>108</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 79.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 60.

<sup>110</sup> Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* 98.

The calamity of a diffused lack of satisfaction is a distressing result of life's battles. Embattlement itself may not be constant, but where even intervals of peace contain a gnawing hunger, there is little hope of the contentment which both accepts and speaks a blessing.

This is the state of Amichai's poetic "I" In 1989, when Glenda Abramson completes her major study of his work, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: a Thematic Approach*, and writes: "Over the years Amichai's lyric 'I' has become increasingly bitter and isolated."<sup>111</sup> War, the battles of life and the ironies and pain of the end of "a sweet coupling in the room, / Guarded by well-armed soldiers" provide the context for Amichai's bitter railing against a God who fails to prevent such events.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

## 2. BELIEF: THE REJECTION OF THE CONVENTIONAL ALTERNATIVE

### A. THE HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Standing within a situation of constant warfare, Amichai takes his place within Jewish traditions of response to calamity. The earliest of these is the scriptural belief that the God who fights on Israel's side will guarantee a victory, the religious triumphalism which finds strongest expression in scriptural battle songs of victory such as 'The Song of Miriam':

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. (Ex 15:21)

This response became untenable when Jerusalem fell and the first temple was destroyed in the sixth century BCE. From that time Jewish interpreters began to take comfort in the concept of a chastising God who incorporates calamity into a higher plan. Alan Mintz's *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew*<sup>112</sup> and David Roskies' *Against the Apocalypse*<sup>113</sup> uncover a pattern of writers drawing on previous responses to catastrophe in order to establish meaning, searching sacred texts for figurations, placing the destruction of synagogues within the context of the destruction of Solomon's Temple in the sixth century BCE, "canonizing, codifying, rearranging and ritualizing historical meaning".<sup>114</sup>

Robert Alter states that Lamentations, written immediately after the fall of Jerusalem, is the most potent Jewish paradigm of lament after disaster, and forms the basis of the *kinah* (dirges) written after every major persecution from the time of the first crusade.<sup>115</sup> Alter suggests, however,

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<sup>112</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*.

<sup>113</sup> Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>115</sup> Alter, *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* 103.



that for a post-Holocaust poet to continue this tradition and assume the burden of the prophetic voice, he will need to accept the possibility of meaning being derived from a higher Divine plan, and to be prepared to "speak for the whole people in its historical anguish".<sup>116</sup>

To some extent Zionist philosophy revives what Mintz calls "Supernatural eschatology . . . translated into . . . fantasies of political and military triumph and vindication",<sup>117</sup> but Amichai's experience of war precludes his participation in such theoretical idealism. He accepts no Divine plan (although he is outraged that such an assumption is not available to him) and refuses the role of the bearer of the prophetic voice. He therefore breaks with the past by responding to Israel's embattled condition with the voice of the personal and is unable to place himself within the Jewish tradition of consolation and of meaning.

While making vehement claims of disbelief, Amichai rails against the God who fails to keep his promises to Israel, so placing himself within the tradition of Job and many of the Psalms. He writes God as a damaged human being, and asserts the absence of God. In all cases, in his early and middle poetry, (approximately until the publication of *Selected Poetry* in 1986), Amichai repudiates religious belief.

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#### B. AMICHAH'S ANTHROPOMORPHIC AND ABSENT GOD

For Amichai, absence of the Divine is not "the negation of human projections into the emptiness of the sacred".<sup>118</sup> Neither is it part of a Hegelian dialectic process, a Kierkegaardian contempt for a godless external world, nor an expression of Nietzsche's belief that humankind

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>117</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* 11.

<sup>118</sup> J. Heath Atchley, "Charles Simic's *Insomnia*: Presence, Emptiness, and the Secular Divine," *Literature & Theology* 17, no. 1 (2003): 50.

has killed God and must now become superhuman in order to fill the void.<sup>119</sup>

Rather Amichai's statements of God's absence rise from a sense that God has deserted all encounter, is the

*Deus Absconditus*, the Hidden God, the God who, having spoken to Adam and to Moses, having appeared to the prophets and debated with Abraham, became increasingly veiled until, in Micah 3, it is declared that all prophets are now benighted, and "they shall all cover their lips: for there is no answer of God".<sup>120</sup>

Amichai describes his childhood encounter with the descendents of priestly families as an experience of absence:

And on holy-days *Kohanim* blessed me  
from inside the white caves of their prayer-shawls with fingers  
twisted like epileptics. I looked at them  
and God didn't thunder: and since then his thunder has grown  
more and more remote and become a huge  
silence. ('Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tuleda')<sup>121</sup>

From this sense of absence Amichai writes an ineffectual anthropomorphic God in striking images which are empty of emotional weight. God is a mother gutting a fowl in preparation for the Sabbath meal or a mechanic fixing a broken-down car:

God's hand in the world  
Like my mother's hand in the entrails of the slaughtered fowl  
On the Sabbath eve.  
What does God see through the window  
While his hand is in the world?  
What does my mother see? ('God's Hand in the World')<sup>122</sup>

Underneath the world, God lies stretched on his back,  
always repairing, always things get out of whack.  
I wanted to see him all, but I see no more

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<sup>119</sup> Alan Richardson and John Bowden, "Death of God Theology," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983), 146.

<sup>120</sup> Anthony Hecht, *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 2003) 186.

<sup>121</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 62.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

than the soles of his shoes and I'm sadder than I was before.  
('And That is your Glory')<sup>123</sup>

With their emotional lightness, Amichai's anthropomorphic images of God become a second representation of absence, but they are significant for the later development of his spirituality. In these light images of God, Amichai collapses the discourse of transcendental religious belief into the register of the every-day. Later this technique will construct the space for the depiction of religious immanence.

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### C. RAILING AGAINST GOD: AMICHAJ AND THE JOBIAN TRADITION

While Amichai's representations of the anthropomorphic construct a space for immanence, his railing against the God who fails to save his people from war inscribe the passionate religious connection which in the end will make unbelief impossible for him.

Carol A. Newsom states of "Job the rebel, who debunks the piety of his friends and boldly accuses God of injustice":

In contrast to the majority of Jewish and Christian interpreters over the centuries, who have often seemed somewhat embarrassed by Job's unrestrained blasphemies, many twentieth-century readers, reeling from a century of unparalleled horror, have been drawn to Job's anger as a voice of moral outrage against a God who could permit such atrocities.<sup>124</sup>

Amichai stands in Jobian shoes, raging against God, "a God more obsolete even than my body" ('What Kind of Man'),<sup>125</sup> "like a smoking, terrible factory"—surely a Holocaust image—('At right Angles'),<sup>126</sup> a God who, in a reversal of Jobian image blasphemes against humankind: " 'Go to hell, Job. Cursed be the day / when you were created in my image. Go fuck

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>124</sup> Carol A. Newsom, "Job," in *New Interpreter's Bible Volume 4* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1996), 319.

<sup>125</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 171.

<sup>126</sup> Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994* 43.

your mother, Job' "(Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tuleda')<sup>127</sup>

Glenda Abramson discerns a pattern of the representation of a primitive, anthropomorphic deity in the early poetry, a capricious and cruel projection of the negative aspects of Amichai's father up to 1962, and "the Lord of the Universe worshipped by the Jews throughout the dispersal" from 1962 to 1968,<sup>128</sup> but I fail to find so clear a pattern. What is certain is the searing pain behind the poet's words and its connection with embattlement.

'Seven Laments for the War Dead'<sup>129</sup> contains short sections of simple, moving elegy. The final one, a description of Memorial Day, is a pain-filled, enraged repudiation of religious belief and religion's facile consolations:

#1

Mr Beringer, whose son  
fell at the Canal that strangers dug  
so ships could cross the desert,  
crosses my path at Jaffa Gate.

He has grown very thin, has lost  
the weight of his son.  
That's why he floats so lightly in the alleys  
and gets caught in my heart like little twigs  
that drift away.<sup>130</sup>

The site of death of Mr Beringer's son, the Suez Canal, is presented in the odd visual image of a ship sailing on sand, one which carries traces of stereotypical desert scenes depicted with more traditional ships-of-the-desert, camels. Death is therefore linked with technology, with strangers, strangeness and estrangement. In the violent death of a young man, death is an unnatural imposition.

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<sup>127</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 72.

<sup>128</sup> Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* 59.

<sup>129</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 92.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

The loss through death is depicted physically in his father's body, Mr Beringer no doubt literally losing weight through the loss of appetite which accompanies grief, but losing too the solidity of meaning. Weightlessness is linked with a drifter's loss of purpose, but, movingly, linked too with the speaker's capacity for empathetic response to the forlorn figure of the grieving father.

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#5

Dicky was hit.

Like the water tower at Yad Mordechai.

Hit. A hole in the belly. Everything  
came flooding out.

But he has remained standing like that  
in the landscape of my memory  
like the water tower at Yad Mordechai.

He fell not far from there,  
a little to the north, near Huleikat.<sup>131</sup>

This section is an elegy whose power depends on images of standing in spite of death—as the tower remains standing in spite of being hit, so Dicky stands in memory and stands inscribed in this poem. In spite of the abject image of "everything" flooding out through the hole in his belly, he remains in memory a source of refreshment and renewal, like the water tower.

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#7

Memorial Day for the war-dead: go tack on  
the grief of all your losses—  
including a woman who left you—  
to the grief of losing them; go mix  
one sorrow with another, like history,  
that in its economical way  
heaps pain and feast and sacrifice

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 94.

onto a single day for easy reference.

Oh sweet world, soaked like bread  
in sweet milk for the terrible  
toothless God. "Behind all this,  
some great happiness is hiding." No use  
crying inside and screaming outside.  
Behind all this, some great happiness may be hiding.<sup>132</sup>

Following the moving elegies above, this final section in an enraged repudiation of a senile old God who, in his infantilised state, must be fed the bread of the sweet world soaked in milk. He not only devours the good bread of life, but requires that it be soaked in the milk of pain? loss? violence? death? blood? grief?—perhaps of all of these. The poetic "I", crying inside and screaming outside, rejects, together with this terrible image of a cruel and powerless God feeding on the world, religion's facile consolations that war might conceal a greater good. This is perhaps Amichai's strongest statement of repudiation of religious belief in the face of war.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 95.

### 3. THE SURVIVING STRUCTURES OF BELIEF

#### INTRODUCTION

Having repudiated his father's Jewish beliefs and practice, the poetic speaker in Amichai's last book, *Open Closed Open*, returns to a nurturing spirituality. For Amichai, "emotions seem to reconfigure themselves, where the meaning of things is altered, almost without your consent."<sup>133</sup>

The factors which account for this change, I suggest, include the following: Amichai's use of the language of modern Hebrew, which is imbued with religious associations; his technique of deflating, ironic religious comment, which reduces the sacred to the register of the commonplace and collapses discourses of religion and the everyday together to produce a space for spiritual immanence; the positive religious persona of the father which is accessed through elegiac remembrance; and Amichai's continuing awareness of the Jewish liturgical cycle (a structure which he fills with secular content at first, but which finally becomes a vessel for the genuinely sacred).

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#### A. MODERN HEBREW AND ALLUSION

In 'National Thoughts', Amichai discusses Israel's use of modern Hebrew, for millennia the language only of liturgical celebration and of scripture, now the language of the vernacular:

to speak now in this weary language,  
a language that was torn from its sleep in the Bible: dazzled,  
it wobbles from mouth to mouth. In a language that once  
described  
miracles and God, to say car, bomb, God.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Kathy Rudy, "Subjectivity and Belief," *Literature & Theology* 15, no. 3 (2001): 225.

Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld describe modern Hebrew as "an echo chamber that preserves, even in everyday speech, the resonance of all its historical layers; the simplest words are charged with ancient, often sacred meanings". It is impossible for any person writing in modern Hebrew to limit his poetry entirely to the secular, they state, for the most commonplace Hebrew words carry traces of religious usage.

They continue:

As common a word as *davar*, "word, thing" can also refer to a prophetic vision, and its plural *dvarim* is the Hebrew title of Deuteronomy. *Makom*, "place," and *shem*, "name," are familiar designations for God; the plural *shemot* refers to the worn pages of sacred texts that require a reverent burial, and the genitive form *shmot* is the Hebrew title of the book of Exodus. The theological overtones of words like these are present everywhere in Amichai's poetry, often serving as grist for his irony.<sup>135</sup>

Moreover, Amichai does not wish to use modern Hebrew to write secular poetry devoid of religious association, even if he could. His aim is to plunder the store of religious culture available to him, and to subject it to an ironic re-evaluation. Amichai writes his religious evaluations in the register of the every-day.

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## B. IRONY: THE COLLAPSING REGISTER OF TRANSCENDENCE

"We begged / for the knowledge of good and evil, and you gave us / all kinds of rules and regulations / like the rules of soccer", Amichai writes in 'The Course of a Life',<sup>136</sup> in a fine example of ironic undercutting of the religious register. Amichai mistrusts the high rhetoric of religion just as he mistrusts the rhetoric of war.<sup>137</sup> He believes that religious hope in the

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<sup>134</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 57.

<sup>135</sup> Bloch and Kronfeld, "On Translating Amichai's Open Closed Open," 17.

<sup>136</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 170.

<sup>137</sup> A modernist position. "The Anglo-Saxon modernist bias is also unkind to expressions of sentimentality. Ironic understatement is considered the better part



transcendent is a destructive illusion, and that Israel's future lies with the significance of the individual.

Robert Alter writes of attending a poetry reading where Amichai was challenged by a young man:

[H]e had been told that Amichai was Israel's leading poet, and if that were true, Jewish historical destiny had declined to a sorry condition. For where was the perspective of eternity, the grand vision of Moses and the Prophets, the sense of divine purpose pulsating in the movements of history.

Amichai replied in the following words:

What you are insisting on, what you are looking for in poetry, is exactly the sort of phoney phraseology with which all the generals and ideologues and politicians pollute our verbal atmosphere. It's precisely against this that a poet has to take a stand, for the job of a poet is to name each thing, each feeling, each experience, plainly and accurately.<sup>138</sup>

Whether he writes an anthropomorphic god who seems no more than a damaged human being or undercuts what is more recognizably the God of Judaism, Amichai's deflating, ironic religious comment draws on the rich tradition of Jewish culture. Glenda Abramson, citing Ted Hughes' notes in his introduction to Amichai's *Amen*, states: "It is as if the whole ancient spiritual investment had been suddenly cashed, in modern coinage, flooding [Amichai's] poetry with an inexhaustible currency of precise and weighty metaphors."<sup>139</sup>

A section of 'To the Mother', a poem from the late fifties which is included in *Poems 1948–1962*, demonstrates Amichai's grasp of the rich allusions of both Jewish and secular culture as he writes religion in the register of the everyday. The poem centres visually on the chiastic image of a four-

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of valour, and high rhetoric is tolerated only in politicians and evangelists." David G. Roskies, ed., *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia, New York & Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1988/5748) 7.

<sup>138</sup> Alter, "A Portrait of Yehuda Amichai," 132-3.

<sup>139</sup> Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* 35.

armed mother-as-windmill. God appears only as a finger, drawn down into the human world for evaluation:

Like an old windmill,  
Always two arms raised to yell at the heavens  
And two lowered to make sandwiches.

Her eyes clean and polished  
Like Passover eve.

At night she lines up all the letters  
And the photographs in a row,

To measure with them  
The length of God's finger.<sup>140</sup>

Kronfeld notes that both "hand" and "finger" are *yad* in Hebrew, a theological emblem of divine power in *yad chazaka* (Exodus 13:9), and inspiration in *yad h' + preposition al* in the prophetic books,<sup>141</sup> and that the finger of God is associated with "the western visual emblematics of a life-giving divine finger, from Michelangelo to E. T." She suggests that the windmill mother grafts the Hebrew and Yiddish proverb "a mother needs four hands" to the quixotic concept of tilting at windmills.<sup>142</sup>

The photographs and letters are a site where memories are visited, icons of the absent. In measuring God's finger with letters and photographs, the mother assesses God against the memory of human love.

Perhaps the clearest examples of what Chana Kronfeld names as Amichai's "iconoclastic allusive poetry of antitradition"<sup>143</sup> is found in his writing of modern *midrashim*, the reworking of traditional Jewish religious narratives. In *midrash* Amichai reduces traditional register and critiques the transcendental. 'The Real Hero' is based on the biblical narrative of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, found in Gen 22: 1–19.

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<sup>140</sup> This poem is included in neither *Selected Poetry* nor *A Life of Poetry*, but is translated in Kronfeld, "Reading Amichai Reading," 313.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*: 322.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*: 314.

This is a text which many Jewish believers have found helpful for drawing meaning from the Holocaust. Traditional Jewish interpretation stresses Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son as a burnt offering if this should be the will of God. Amichai rewrites this narrative in the following way:

The Real Hero

The real hero of The Binding of Isaac was the ram,  
 who didn't know of the collusion between the others.  
 He was volunteered to die instead of Isaac.  
 I want to sing a memorial song about him—  
 about his curly wool and his human eyes,  
 about the horns that were so silent on his living head,  
 and how they made those horns into *shofars* when he was  
 slaughtered  
 to sound their battle cries  
 or to blare out their obscene joy.

I want to remember the last frame  
 like a photo in an elegant fashion magazine:  
 the young man tanned and pampered in his jazzy suit  
 and beside him the angel, dressed for a formal reception  
 in a long silk gown,  
 both of them looking with empty eyes  
 at two empty places,

and behind them, like a coloured backdrop, the ram,  
 caught in a thicket before the slaughter,  
 the thicket his last friend.

The angel went home.  
 Isaac went home.  
 Abraham and God had gone long before.

But the real hero of The Binding of Isaac  
 is the ram.<sup>144</sup>

Containing no trace of the register of religion, Amichai's poem may be read simply as an ironic critique of contemporary Israeli society. This is

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<sup>143</sup> Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* 138.

<sup>144</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 156.

the discourse of the press's social pages, a description of guests and their clothing at a formal gathering of the young and affluent.

The space is empty of the presence of God and of the patriarch Abraham. Power here is in the hands of successful young men who collude in self-interested decision-making. The Zionist principles of Israel's formation have been replaced by capitalism, and traces of Israel's army policy of conscription may be seen in the army terminology of "being volunteered". The powerful are depicted as they plan the sacrifice of the disempowered, the ram.

A richer interpretation results, however, if Amichai's text and the scriptural narrative which it evokes are read according to Ziva Ben-Porat's definition of allusion as "a device for simultaneous activation of two texts."<sup>145</sup>

In Amichai's reinterpretation, the removal of both God and the patriarch Abraham from Amichai's narrative, the "two empty spaces" which are linked to the emptiness of the eyes (and lives) of the surviving Isaac and the angel, removes the possibility of interpreting the narrative as part of a Divine plan which might lend meaning to human slaughter.

If the two texts are activated together however, it is seen that the power dynamics depicted in the alluding text are unchanged from those of the original. Two male figures continue to make decisions which will result in the death of a powerless other, decisions which are interpreted in Amichai's text as expedient and based on collusion.

Read as allusion, the poem not only passes ironic judgement on both the self-serving actions of the powerful, spoilt young men of Israel and the

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<sup>145</sup> Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Allusion" (University of California, 1973) 108., cited Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* 114.

self-deception made possible by their use of euphemistic "volunteering", it invites deflection of this judgement onto the evoked original text where the powerful God and patriarch also determine life or death while remaining safe themselves. By this reading, Amichai's alluding text becomes a religious critique.

Evident here are both Amichai's horror of the obscene high rhetoric of victory which deflects attention from the pain, fear and death of those who fight, and Amichai's capacity for affectionate empathetic identification with the victim of the narrative, the ram whose "curly wool and . . . human eyes" are seen in the "thicket before the slaughter, / the thicket his last friend".

If it were not for Amichai's ironic critique of the original text, use of this every-day register and the technique of *midrash* would result in the construction of poetry which integrates religious values into a depiction of contemporary Israeli life. In *Open Closed Open*, which is discussed below, Amichai writes *midrashim* without critiquing irony, but with the affectionate identification with scriptural characters which he demonstrates here in his writing of the ram. By doing so he writes religious poetry in the register of the every-day.

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### C. LITURGY: ELEGY FOR THE FATHER

As Amichai's use of modern Hebrew and his ironic undercutting of the religious register create a poetic tradition which will later make immanent spirituality possible, so do Amichai's remembrance of the father and the connections between this memory and liturgical celebration.

#### Forgetting Someone

Forgetting someone is like  
forgetting to turn off the light in the back yard  
so it stays lit all the next day.

But then it's the light  
that makes you remember.<sup>146</sup>

This poem's interesting conjunction of concepts of absence, presence and memory is particularly apt in relation to Amichai's memory of his father. As the light shining in daylight reminds the speaker that he has forgotten to turn off the switch, so the cycle of the Jewish religious year around Amichai in Jerusalem evokes the memory of his believer father. In 'Jerusalem 1967 #5', Amichai's unbeliever poetic "I" spends the day of Yom Kippur in secular remembrance:

On Yom Kippur in 1967, the Year of Forgetting, I put on  
my dark holiday clothes and walked to the Old City of Jerusalem.  
For a long time I stood in front of an Arab's hole-in-the-wall shop,  
not far from the Damascus Gate, a shop with  
buttons and zippers and spools of thread  
in every colour and snaps and buckles.  
A rare light and many colors, like an open Ark.

I told him in my heart that my father too  
had a shop like this, with thread and buttons.  
I explained to him in my heart about all the decades  
and the causes and the events, why I am now here  
and my father's shop was burned there and he is buried here.

When I finished, it was time for the Closing of the Gates prayer.  
He too lowered the shutters and locked the gate  
and I returned, with the worshipers, home.  
(‘Jerusalem 1967 #5’)<sup>147</sup>

This poem might have described a day spent in secular activities by an unbeliever while the orthodox are in synagogue taking part in the liturgy of Yom Kippur. Instead, the poem's speaker here constructs his own secular liturgy of remembrance, it proves in many ways to redouble the Yom Kippur liturgical pattern, and it is filled with significance through the richness of memory. The secular ritual of the poetic "I", which is filled

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<sup>146</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 128.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 49.

with memory evoked by once-shared religious celebrations, becomes itself a type of religious ritual.

The secular day takes on ritual form through both time and place. From the time that the poetic speaker walks to his place of reflection in holiday clothes to his departure as the worshippers are praying the final prayer, the day is shaped around the timing of the liturgy of Yom Kippur. The shop which doubles for the memory of his father's is in the Old City of Jerusalem, space of the Western Wall of the Temple, which became accessible to Jerusalem Jews only in 1967 through the Six Day War. The poetic "I", seeking a site for his father's remembrance, stands in a place of continuity not only with his father's memory but with his ancestors' religious past.

While the shape of Amichai's secular liturgy comes from time and place, its contents are formed from meaningful memory. Ritualisation occurs here, as in religious liturgy, through the meaning imputed to the objects of every-day. "The buttons and zippers and spools of thread / in every colour and snaps and buckles" because of their "rare light and many colors", are identified not only with the father but with an open Ark.

In 'Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tuleda',<sup>148</sup> Amichai had previously written a child's identification of the Torah scrolls with angels in silky fabric:

Angels looked like Torah scrolls in velvet dresses and petticoats  
of white silk, with crowns and little silver bells, angels  
fluttered around me and sniffed at my heart and cried ah! ah!

This clustering of fabrics, the feminine and the holy ensures that the spools of thread, objects of memory of the speaker's father's shop, gather meaning from religious association as well as from nostalgia.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 62.

One of Amichai's richest memories of his father involves shared religious ritual in what Bachelard has named as "felicitous space";<sup>149</sup> he remembers being wrapped in his father's *tallis*. "I kiss the hem of my fate, as my father would kiss the side / of his prayer-shawl before I would wrap myself deep inside." ('In a Right Angle')<sup>150</sup>

This memory of secure, sensuous intimacy will return in the longings of Amichai's poetic "I" throughout his poetry. Because it gathers together the father, the Jewish liturgical cycle and a sensuous delight in intimacy and in feminised fabrics into a constellation of satisfaction, the recurrence of any element will tend in future to evoke the others.

1967 may ironically be literally "the Year of Forgetting"—1967, 5728 in the Jewish calendar, is expressed in Hebrew letters that form the word "forget". The memory of the speaker's father, however, proves not only to be durable, but to be so connected with religious meaning through liturgy shared, that although Amichai has repudiated religious belief, in each elegiac remembrance of his father he tends to construct a religious space.

The image of the prayer-shawl resurfaces in a long, satisfied section of *Open Closed Open* which is filled with the sensuous touch of fabric on skin, delight in felicitous space and images of flying freedom. The *tallis* becomes a towel, and both secular and holy are encompassed within a response of blessing. With this blessing, Amichai's poetic speaker once more takes part in an act of worship:

Whoever put on a *tallis* when he was young will never forget: taking it out of the soft velvet bag, opening the folded shawl, spreading it out, kissing the length of the neckband (embroidered or trimmed in gold). Then swinging it in a great swoop overhead like a sky, a wedding canopy, a parachute. And then winding it around his head as in hide-and-seek, wrapping

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<sup>149</sup> For Bachelard, the enclosed, cocooning space which provides the safety to dream. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

<sup>150</sup> Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* 28.



his whole body in it, close and slow, snuggling into it like the  
cocoon  
of a butterfly, then opening would-be wings to fly.  
And why is the *tallis* striped and not checkered black-and-white  
like a chessboard? Because squares are finite and hopeless,  
Stripes come to infinity and to infinity they go  
like airport runways where angels land and take off.  
Whoever has put on a *tallis* will never forget.  
When he comes out of a swimming pool or the sea,  
he wraps himself in a large towel, spreads it out again  
over the head, and again snuggles into it close and slow,  
still shivering a little, and he laughs and blesses. ('Gods Change,  
Prayers Are Here to Stay' 16)<sup>151</sup>

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#### 4. AN IMMANENT SPIRITUALITY<sup>152</sup>

" . . . the living God at her closest to the world, pervading the whole and each creature to awaken life and mutual kinship."<sup>153</sup>

"God in our midst, closer to us than we are to ourselves . . ." <sup>154</sup>

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The affectionate identification which is evident in Amichai's 'The Real Hero' which is discussed above remains in the poetry of Amichai's final book without ironic critique. The many poems of allusion in *Open Closed Open*, filled with religious reference and written in the register of the every-day, activate the evoked original text to form intertextual patterning with Amichai's alluding poetry.

In 'The Language of Love and Tea with Roasted Almonds' #12, nothing remains of Amichai's early depictions of love as battleground. This mature erotic poem calmly places contemporary Jewish life within the Scriptural cultural tradition:

Every woman in love is like our mother Sarah,  
 lying in wait behind the door while the men inside  
 discuss the beauty of her body and the future.  
 She laughs into her palm, her hollow palm, as into a womb,  
 ocarina of a future, like the light cough of a clever fox.  
 Every woman making love is Rachel and Leah trading off  
 body and soul between them, seasons and dresses, kohl and  
     perfumes,  
 the tastes of day flavoured with the spices of night,  
 night stirrings with day sounds, thighs and breasts, to become one  
     body,  
 Rachel and Leah, Racheleah. It's as if Jacob were in bed with two  
 women,

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<sup>151</sup> Amichai, *Open Closed Open* 44.

<sup>152</sup> Immanence is God's indwelling nearness. Theologically, immanence is often compared with transcendence as one of the qualities of God, but the two concepts cannot be separated. The Divine, absolute Other and shrouded in mystery (transcendent), nevertheless draws near to humankind. In immanence, transcendence is not lost. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 59ff.

<sup>153</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 147.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* 186.

one stormy and fiery, knowing she will die soon in childbirth,  
 the other placid and soft and heavy, down the generations  
 till me. And the face of every woman when she's loving  
 is like the face of the moon in its cycle.  
 full-face in the door as it opens and half-face by the window.  
 And every loving woman is like Rebecca at the well, saying  
 "Drink, and thy camels also." But in our day Rebecca says:  
 "The towels are on the top shelf in the white closet  
 across from the front door."<sup>155</sup>

Throughout *Open Closed Open* Amichai continues to assert his non-belief in the transcendental male God of traditional Judaism, while now affirming his hold on belief. The Divine is located by Amichai first in natural cycles and the constructed religious cycles of liturgy, then within his psyche, and finally, in the body of the poem's speaker which is written as a garden.

In 'Jewish Travel' #10, a description of a ruined ritual bath, the Divine is located within both the cycles of life's change and mortality, and in ritual and liturgical cycles:

. . . And where vapors rose from the pools of water  
 and from the skin of the women immersing themselves, the nettle  
 grows  
 and the ivy, the vapors become witnesses of death, the women  
 died in the cycle of impurity and purity and fire, in the cycle of  
 change  
 and Otherness. Speak O my soul, Change is God.  
 The cycle is all: the cycle of blood in the body, the cycle of water,  
 of prayers for the holy days.<sup>156</sup>

In 'I Wasn't One of the Six Million' # 6, the poetic "I" asserts that both what signifies the presence of the Divine and the longing to seek the Divine are located within him:

. . . though I still have the fire and the smoke  
 within me, pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me  
 by night and by day. I still have inside me the mad search  
 for emergency exits, for soft places, for the nakedness

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<sup>155</sup> Amichai, *Open Closed Open* 97.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* 122.

of the land, for the escape into weakness and hope,  
 I still have within me the lust to search for living water  
 with quiet talk to the rock or with frenzied blows.  
 Afterwards, silence: no questions, no answers.<sup>157</sup>

A Moses-figure, the poem's speaker searches within himself first in the lacunae of the psyche, where vulnerability and hope coexist, then in his harder self, (the traditional place of the rock of Horeb), as he seeks to be given refreshment during his personal Exodus journey of life.<sup>158</sup> While he searches, however, the Divine within is a constant guiding presence.

In 'My life is the gardener of my body' the geography of the psyche is written in the body as garden. As gardens evoke images of Eden, and the marker of "in our image, after our likeness" activates the link to the evoked text of Genesis 2, this poem prompts the question of where, if anywhere, God is placed, and whether this garden of the body is Edenic:

My life is the gardener of my body. The brain—a hothouse closed  
 tight  
 with its flowers and plants, alien and odd  
 in their sensitivity, their terror of becoming extinct.  
 The face—a formal French garden of symmetrical contours  
 and circular paths of marble with statues and places to rest,  
 places to touch and smell, to look out from, to lose yourself  
 in a green maze, and Keep Off and Don't Pick the Flowers.  
 The upper body above the navel—an English park  
 pretending to be free, no angles, no paving stones, naturelike,  
 humanlike, in our image, after our likeness.  
 its arms linking up with the big night all around.  
 And my lower body, beneath the navel—sometimes a nature  
 preserve,  
 wild, frightening, amazing, an unpreserved preserve,  
 and sometimes a Japanese garden, concentrated, full of  
 forethought. And the penis and testes are smooth  
 polished stones with dark vegetation between them,  
 precise paths fraught with meaning  
 and calm reflection. And the teachings of my father  
 and the commandments of my mother

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>158</sup> See Exodus 13: 21; 17:6.

are birds of chirp and song. And the woman I love  
is seasons and changing weather, and the children at play  
are my children. And the life my life.<sup>159</sup>

Larry Levis traces the change in the concept of Eden from a lost and longed-for place in public myth, through the Romantic poet's naming of particular and personal sanctified landscapes of experience, to generalised theorizing about loss and exile.<sup>160</sup> On the heritage of the Romantic poets he cites Donald Hall:

Wordsworth's "Nature"; the Welsh farms of Dylan Thomas; T. S. Eliot's St Louis and Dry Salvages; Wallace Stevens' Florida; Walt Whitman and Paumanok; architectural Italy for Ezra Pound; Gloucester for Charles Olson . . . I am thinking of places which to the poets embody or recall a spiritual state.<sup>161</sup>

"I may not believe in the myth of The Fall but it is still possible for me to feel *fallen*," states Levis.<sup>162</sup> If Eden is always a lost and longed-for site viewed from a place of exile, Amichai's garden of the body is either a realised Eden, (a Paradise regained), or not Edenic at all.

Amichai's poetic speaker, I suggest, exhibits no sign of falling away from home. His acceptance of the various gardens in their paradoxical cultivated naturalness includes the acceptance of mortality and acceptance of the fear of death—the "terror of becoming extinct". He accepts otherness in the mind—thoughts "alien and odd / in their sensitivity" and the cultural influences which produce a cosmopolitan self-in-process—the hothouse of the mind, formal French garden of the face, English garden of the chest and alternating Zen garden and wilderness of the sexuality.

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<sup>159</sup> Amichai, *Open Closed Open* 5.

<sup>160</sup> Larry Levis, "Eden and My Generation," in *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Stuart Friebert et al (Oberlin: Oberlin College Press, 1997), 223.

<sup>161</sup> Donald Hall, *Goatfoot Milktongue Twinbird* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978) 205-7.

<sup>162</sup> Levis, "Eden and My Generation," 227.

This Eden is not "oceanic"<sup>163</sup> in Levis's words. Amichai provides no description of oneness with the universe. Amichai's speaker's sense of fitness is with "my life". If "the poet wants to locate himself somewhere"<sup>164</sup>, Amichai's somewhere is in the body with its vulnerability to damage and certainty of death.

Parents are integrated into this world. Memory of parental instruction from the speaker's childhood need neither be resisted nor obeyed, but can be accepted as part of the body's music. Significant loves of the present, partner and children, imaged in terms of seasons, weather and play, provide integrated enhancement. Above all, life, once a war-zone, is "the gardener of my body", and tends the self. So where in this poem is the Divine placed? In the body, in the now, in cultural history, in relationship, in "the natural", in the calm acceptance of maturity.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon writes the following:

I reflected on my inability to sit with dissonance, the terrible abrasiveness of life . . .  
Now I would say that mature faith is one that has enough certainty about the melody of life to allow us to stay with the hard questions, the pain, the grief, the fear—to shout our angers into the universe confident that our God is strong and loving enough to cope with that.<sup>165</sup>

Yehuda Amichai, after the terrible abrasiveness of war, "the pain, the grief, the fear" and the shouting, in *Open Closed Open* arrives at peace in the garden of the body, a realised Eden.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>165</sup> Dorothy McRae-McMahon, "Withstanding the Dissonance of Life," *Age Insight*, 18 October 2003, 2.

## 5. CONCLUSION

We see in Yehuda Amichai's poetry then, the calamity of Israel's many wars, the poetic speaker's flight from war to erotic love, and the battleground which love becomes. In the face of such calamitous times, the speaker repudiates traditional Jewish religious belief.

We see too, in the emergence of what will be a continuing pattern among poets in the face of calamity, that this discourse of religious unbelief is over-emphatically stated. Traces of an immanent spirituality begin to appear within the poetry and increase in prominence until, by Yehuda Amichai's final book, *Open, Closed, Open*, an immanent spirituality forms the dominant discourse of belief. In this, Yehuda Amichai's final poetic statement, the spiritual is near, feminized, embodied and integrated into Jewish culture.





## Anne Sexton: the Calamity of Psychiatric Illness

"O little mother,  
I am in my own mind.  
I am locked in the wrong house." ('For the Year of the Insane')<sup>166</sup>

". . . her poor, shy, driven life, the blind terror behind her bravado, her deadly increasing pace . . . her bravery while she lasted."<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) 132.

<sup>167</sup> Robert Lowell, 'Anne Sexton' in Colburn, ed., *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* 24.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Anne Sexton was born in 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts. She suffered all her life from psychiatric illness and began to write poetry at the suggestion of her therapist.

A psychiatric disability has considerable complexity because the altered moods, deranged behaviours, illogical beliefs and damaged and damaging relationships which occur in psychosis tend to form an inseparable cluster of complex cause and effect. Anne Sexton's daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, writes her memories of Sexton's illness in *Searching for Mercy Street*.<sup>168</sup>

She remembers Sexton's mood swings, her inappropriate sexual behaviour, insatiable hungers and vulnerability, her addiction to prescribed medication and alcohol, her violence towards her husband, her obsession with self-revelation and sense of physical contamination, her self-absorption and histrionics, her catatonic states and the relentless progression towards the suicide which ended her life in 1974 at the age of forty-five. Anne Sexton appears in her daughter's book as suffering, gifted, loving and destructive.

The experience of her mental illness fuels Anne Sexton's poetry. Woven through the poetry is evidence of her religious beliefs, sometimes touching, sometimes bizarre; her religious belief will be the focus of my approach to the poetry of Anne Sexton.

Sexton's final religious discourse may best be described as the search for a totalising vision of a patriarchal God. For Sexton the uproar of the internal world of the mentally ill drowns any awareness of Divine presence, while the habit of struggle towards mental health through

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<sup>168</sup> Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston.: Little, Brown & Co, 1994).

therapy suggests the need for a similar struggle to bring herself to God. With a strong death-wish and a Pelagian theology, she sites the Divine past death; unable to reconcile a good and omnipotent God with the evil of her mental suffering she subverts the Divine figure she has sought to inscribe.

So, while the calamities of Yehuda Amichai results in a primary discourse of religious repudiation, Anne Sexton's primary religious discourse is a writing of God as patriarchal Other, separated from the self and accessible only through struggle and at death. A second religious discourse, the writing of an immanent and human Christ figure, is also to be found in her poetry.

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## 2. ANNE SEXTON AND BELIEF: THE VIEWS OF RICHARD MORTON

Richard E. Morton has written a major religious analysis of Sexton's poetry in *Anne Sexton's Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage*.<sup>169</sup> Morton considers Sexton's books of poetry as a single body of work and detects there a pattern and progression of religious belief, "a pilgrimage to Grace".<sup>170</sup> Morton writes:

If the writing of poetry was, for Anne Sexton, a healing art, the cure seems to have directed the explicit, conscious statement of the poetry from youthful doubt, bewilderment and isolation to a middle-aged assurance of belonging to a universe filled with the praiseworthy manifestations of a Deity.<sup>171</sup>

Morton places Sexton's poetry within the American literary tradition of the conversion narrative, and aligns her beliefs within his understanding of "the Congregationalist theology of Grace established by the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century", which contains what he calls "the emotional power of the traditional New England questions about redemption and sin."<sup>172</sup>

Morton goes on:

The Calvinist assumption that salvation is granted to the elect and damnation unavoidable to those out of Grace . . . means that for the spiritually insecure person the crucial question is whether or not Grace is granted, and how faith can be strengthened so as to confirm Grace abounding . . . The fear is of judgement rather than of sin, the overwhelming sensation is of guilt rather than of remorse. Doubt as to one's election, stimulated by a sense of one's worthlessness and the wretchedness of the world around, is the central psychic distress, as existential uncertainty illuminates the horrors of damnation.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Morton, *Anne Sexton's Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage*.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

It is understandable that anyone discerning such a frightening theological position in Sexton's earlier poetry would be anxious to find its resolution, and Richard Morton reads the poems in Sexton's final book, *The Awful Rowing to God*, as a triumphant repudiation of doubt, a final stage of "the sense of salvation as the divine spirit within informs and rejoices the writer."<sup>174</sup>

I suggest that the writing of religious belief which informs Anne's Sexton's poetry actually forms a pattern far less clear than the one which Richard E. Morton discerns, that authentic moments of grace are found in early poetry and that the last book's final poem is an example of strained unauthenticity rather than of delight and freedom.

Anne Sexton's theological position in *The Awful Rowing to God* develops understandably from the suffering of her mental illness, and from her lifetime struggle to overcome her illness through the insights which psychotherapy may bring; but it is a theology of desperate, self-lacerating struggle, which cannot in the end bring her to the peace which she so desperately needs. At the end of her life, Sexton writes the Divine as a distant over-bearing patriarchal male who is overtly affirmed, but covertly subverted, in the rowing poems.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 7-8.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 115.

### 3. THE PURSUIT OF THE DIVINE AS OTHER: THE SEA VOYAGE TO GOD

"This loneliness is just an exile from God." ('Words for Dr. Y.')

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In 'Rowing'<sup>176</sup> and 'The Rowing Endeth',<sup>177</sup> Anne Sexton writes the journey to God through the trope of the sea voyage. This concept had appeared earlier within her work in an article which was published in *Ms. magazine*.

#### A. A SMALL DOG IN A BOAT

In 1971 Anne Sexton heard on the radio the translation of a traditional French prayer: "*Protegez-moi, mon Seigneur; mon navire est si petit, et votre mer est si grande.*" ("Protect me Lord; my boat is so small and your sea is so big").<sup>178</sup> Sexton misheard the words of the prayer as "My dog is so small". In *Ms. magazine*, Sexton explores this Freudian slip:

The sea is mother-death and she is a mighty female, the one who wins, the one who sucks us all up . . . But we dogs are small and the sun will burn us down and the sea has our number. Oh Lord, the sea is so mighty and my dog is so small, my dog whom I sail with into the west. The sea is mother, larger than Asia, both lowering their large breasts onto the coastline. Thus we ride on her praying for good moods and a smile in the heavens. She is mighty, oh Lord, but I with my little puppy, Daisy, remain a child."<sup>179</sup>

In poems such as 'Hurry Up Please It's Time',<sup>180</sup> Sexton names herself as Ms Dog. The dog in this extract is both the poetic speaker's self—"we dogs are small" and the other, a friendly companion of the journey—"my dog whom I sail with".

<sup>175</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 565.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* 417.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* 473.

<sup>178</sup> Cecil Hunt, ed., *Uncommon Prayers* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963) 23.

<sup>179</sup> Anne Sexton, "All God's Children Need Radios," in *No Evil Star*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 29.

<sup>180</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 384.

Concepts of the mother and of death are conflated in the sea; the life-journey which this poem depicts takes place upon a landscape of death. The sea is a devouring winner— "the one who sucks us all up", and threateningly omniscient— "the sea has our number".

The sailor who is "praying for good moods and a smile in the heavens" may be verbally placating the sea. Or the Divine may be placed traditionally outside and above the water, which in Jewish religious culture is equated with chaos and placed over and against the power of Yahweh.<sup>181</sup>

The trope works most successfully if it is seen to be based on the image of a child carried in the arms of her mother, hoping to find a smiling face above her head. If read in this way, a second conflation of meanings occurs here; the death-mother is collapsed together with the Divine, who becomes an unpredictable figure who must be placated in order to obtain good-will.

What is certain is the fragile sense of subjectivity here, and the hugeness of the menace which confronts it; there is no sense that the sea beneath the boat is safely bearing the voyager up. The mother/death sea may engulf the self at any time, loss is certain, and it is unclear where God may be found.

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'Rowing' and 'The Rowing Endeth' are the first and last poems of the final book which Anne Sexton prepared for publication before her death, *The Awful Rowing to God*. These poems operate within the same trope as the one in the prose extract above, but this time, in both cases, the Divine is

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<sup>181</sup> This concept carries over into Christian scripture in such verses as Revelation's description of the New Jerusalem: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." (Revelation 21: 1).

clearly located outside the speaker and the experience of sailing. God is now placed as the island destination of the boat, and the speaker, who may be sailing in the prose extract above, is now rowing, in a strenuous effort to reach the safety of the island of God.

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B: THE TERRIBLE ROWING TO GOD: 'ROWING'

Rowing

A story, a story!

(Let it go. Let it come.)

I was stamped out like a Plymouth fender  
into this world.

First came the crib  
with its glacial bars.

Then dolls  
and the devotion to their plastic mouths.

Then there was school,  
the little straight rows of chairs,  
blotting my name over and over,  
but undersea all the time,  
a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work.

Then there was life  
with its cruel houses  
and people who seldom touched—  
though touch is all—  
but I grew,

like a pig in a trenchcoat I grew,  
and then there were many strange apparitions,  
the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison  
and all of that, saws working through my heart,  
but I grew, I grew,  
and God was there like an island I had not rowed to,  
still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked,  
and I grew, I grew,

I wore rubies and bought tomatoes  
and now, in my middle age,  
about nineteen in the head I'd say,  
I am rowing, I am rowing  
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty  
and the sea blinks and rolls  
like a worried eyeball,  
but I am rowing, I am rowing,  
though the wind pushes me back  
and I know that that island will not be perfect,



it will have the flaws of life,  
 the absurdities of the dinner table,  
 but there will be a door  
 and I will open it  
 and I will get rid of the rat inside me,  
 the gnawing pestilential rat.  
 God will take it with his two hands  
 and embrace it.

As the African says:  
 This is my tale which I have told,  
 if it be sweet, if it be not sweet,  
 take somewhere else and let some return to me.  
 This story ends with me still rowing.<sup>182</sup>

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In 'Rowing', Anne Sexton writes subjectivity by conflating the human, animal and mechanical into monster figures written through the body. In addition to becoming the nexus of human/animal and human/mechanical characteristics, the body becomes the signifier of fragmentation/wholeness, and meaning/meaninglessness. Sexton writes the quest for God through location and scale.

Through the mechanical and the animal, Anne Sexton writes the alien other of the poetic "I". The early childhood self is written as sterile and mechanical with its assembly-line production of identical metal automobile parts, the imprisoning crib bars and regimented chairs in houses of isolated individuals.

With the introduction of animality in conjunction with human clothing, subjectivity becomes bizarre —"a pig in a trenchcoat". The "rat inside me, / the gnawing pestilential rat" appears to be the contaminated mentally-ill self which is seen in 'Cripples and Other Stories'<sup>183</sup> where concepts of the rat and faeces are collapsed together: "I see dead rats in the toilet. / I'm one of the lunatics."

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<sup>182</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 417.

The rower responds to the inhuman mouths of dolls, and the body is etymologically "without ease", the site of unworking elbows. The Oxford English Dictionary Online traces the first example of the word ease (from the French *aïse*) to an eleventh-century text involving "elbow-room"; to have unworking elbows is therefore etymologically to be dis-eased.<sup>184</sup>

Sexton writes the rower's body as a disjunction of parts, primarily as hands and elbows. The arms become a synecdoche of the self, fragmented here, written with agency when the rowing begins, and holding the poker "hand" in 'The Rowing Endeth'.

The alien body/self grows relentlessly, suffering from a caustic environment— "the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison"— and from internal dismemberment—"saws working through my heart". Even the social rituals of dressing and shopping, which are both dismissed as purely conventional events, are written through blood-red emblems.

At the mid-point of the poem, as the focus is concentrated on the activity of rowing to the island of God, the fragmented body becomes sufficiently integrated for the task— "my arms and my legs worked"—and unified by purpose. Now relentless growth is replaced with ceaseless strained activity—the repetitious "I am rowing, I am rowing" signifies the repetitive action which propels the boat.

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While the subjectivity of the alien self is written in 'Rowing' through collapsing categories and fragmentation of the body, the speaker's relationship with God is written through location and through scale. God is placed as a distant island Other; neither near nor within, neither impetus,

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>184</sup> "Ease N", *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2004 [cited 5 July 2004]).

passageway nor companion, God is written purely as the journey's destination.

The speaker/rower on the ocean voyage is dwarfed, isolated and unsupported, without the resources of engine or sail, with purely the effort of her body/self to propel her towards God. Her rowing, an activity suited to the flat water of rivers and lakes, takes place on the rolling ocean. The ocean site is written as obstacle: "the oarlocks stick and are rusty / and the sea blinks and rolls / . . . [and] the wind pushes me back".

The precarious balance between powerfulness/powerlessness and effort/resistance changes in this poem when subjectivity is written as knowledge, *gnosis*. While the narration achieves closure within the frame of the African story-teller's addressing her audience, the open-ended action of rowing continues— "This story ends with me still rowing"— as if the rowing woman is propelled through the narrative frame.

The assertion of the poetic "I" that "there will be a door / and I will open it", and that the alien rat/self will be integrated in acceptance, in the end indicates that the impetus behind the self-lacerating effort of the rowing subject is intuitive knowledge or faith. Anne Sexton, who until now has written the body as signifier of subjectivity, at this point integrates both mind and heart.

The rowing journey to God is therefore one in which to travel hopefully ensures that one will arrive. In 'Rowing' the destination is all, and the believer, who has appeared alone and divested of resources, making a wrenching super-human effort to achieve her goal and reach the Divine, is propelled by belief as well as by determination.

In beginning to row, the poetic speaker undertakes a journey from provisionality, fragmentation, fragility and pain towards an authoritative male Other. As we will see below, the end of this journey is disappointing,

but the rower's newly-integrated subjectivity, knowledge written in the body, proves a significant gain.

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If we are to ask why God is placed as so distant an Other in this poem, the destination of the journey of life and not its companion, the answer must surely lie in the perilous inner life of the mentally ill. Just as we as readers are unable to place the Divine with any certainty in the prose extract of the small dog in a boat discussed above, so Anne Sexton seems too overwhelmed by the instabilities and clamour of mental illness to locate God with any certainty within her own life, and to write the presence of God within the inner world of her poetry. The presence of God becomes certain for her therefore only at death when mental illness will end, and is blotted out in life by the terrors and the clamour of the mind.

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#### 4. CLAMOUR, EFFORT AND OTHERING: THE ROWING POEMS AND THE CALAMITY OF PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS

##### INTRODUCTION

In 'Rowing', Anne Sexton places God as a distant Other, whose presence can be attained only by super-human effort at death. I suggest that the calamity of psychiatric illness accounts for this positioning of the Divine in several ways.

First, the clamour of mental illness drowns the awareness of Divine presence, and the patient's sense of contaminated unworthiness and her delusional ideas preclude an acceptance of the possibility that God is already present to her. Second, acceptance of the need for self-lacerating effort is established in her life; she has spent a life-time undertaking the efforts of psychotherapy. In making strenuous efforts to reach God, Sexton places herself within a theological tradition of Pelagian belief. Third, her death-wish is strong; she longs to be released from the suffering of her mental condition, and she has found little peace during life.

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##### A. CLAMOUR: PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS OBLITERATES THE PRESENCE OF GOD

"Of course only one who can be still and pray; only one who is patient and does not drown out the frightening silence in which God dwells, and which often comes over us, with the racket of everyday life and the shouts coming from the amusement park of the world, can already hear with ease and already discretely appreciate something of the eternal life that is already inwardly given to us as the indwelling of God in us."<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Advent of the World and Our Advent," in *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons and Meditations*, ed. Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 10.

"I am walled in solid by their noise." ('Self in 1958')<sup>186</sup>

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"The racket of everyday life and the shouts coming from it", which, Karl Rahner warns in the quotation above, can drown out the awareness of the presence of God, are insignificant when compared with the obliterating effect of psychiatric illness. In 'Angel of Hope and Calendars',<sup>187</sup> Anne Sexton's poetic "I" is so uncomfortably self-aware that a sense of Divine presence is lost in the discomfort. In 'The Sickness Unto Death',<sup>188</sup> in addition, she anathematizes herself; she judges herself as unworthy of God and condemns herself to separation from the presence of the Divine.

The clamour of psychiatric illness is written in 'Angel of Hope and Calendars' as despair, which takes the form of both abject contamination and the fragmentation and alienation of subjectivity and the body:

### Angels of the Love Affair

#### 4. Angel of Hope and Calendars

Angel of hope and calendars, do you know despair?  
That hole I crawl into with a box of Kleenex,  
that hole where the fire woman is tied to her chair,  
that hole where leather men are wringing their necks,  
where the sea has turned into a pond of urine.  
There is no place to wash and no marine beings to stir in.

In this hole your mother is crying out each day.  
Your father is eating cake and digging her grave.  
In this hole your baby is strangling. Your mouth is clay.  
Your eyes are made of glass. They break. You are not brave.  
You are alone like a dog in a kennel. Your hands  
break out in boils. Your arms are cut and bound by bands

of wire. Your voice is out there. Your voice is strange.  
There are no prayers here. Here there is no change.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 155.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* 334.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* 441.

The landscape of the speaker's world is both unnaturally static and stagnant; she is placed in a metaphorical hole and the ever-moving, antiseptic sea is now an abject "pond of urine", unable to sustain life. It is impossible for the speaker to separate herself from this space of abjection, in spite of the fact that, as Julia Kristeva states in *Powers of Horror*,<sup>190</sup> the body must separate itself from bodily wastes in order to maintain both physical and psychological health.

Barbara Creed summarises Kristeva's position as follows:

The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these things from the body just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body ejects these substances, at the same time extricating itself from them, and from the place where they fall, *so that it might continue to live* (emphasis mine).<sup>191</sup>

In 'The Sickness Unto Death' discussed below, Sexton writes a sense of personal contamination not in terms of urine but, more characteristically, as pollution by faeces.

In 'Angel of Hope and Calendars', the poetic "I" encounters herself as fragmented and alien within that space of abject stasis. The volatility and entrapment of mental illness is represented in the self-combusting woman, and both a thick-skinned lack of affect and suicidal tendencies may be seen in the leather man.

These aspects of subjectivity are encountered as strange, but other facets of the fragmented "I" can be more closely identified with; the suffering self who is "crying out each day" in psychological pain (the mother), the immature self who is in danger of (possibly psychological) death (the baby), and, callous in lack of empathy, the self who is, giving a nod to

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid. 334.

<sup>190</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* passim.

<sup>191</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993) 9.

Marie Antoinette, "eating cake" while digging the grave of others (the father).

Finally psychiatric illness is written through the speaker's body, in its difference from healthy flesh. The body is written as ill as, like Job, the poetic speaker's hands break out in boils; as dead, as her mouth is seen as clay; as prosthetic, in the glass eye; as in bondage and injured, in the wire bands on the arms; and, as with the multiple subjects discussed above, as fragmented and alienated from the self, with a voice which is both "out there" and "strange". As always in Sexton, the body is the signifier of subjectivity.

In 'Angel of Hope and Calendars' Anne Sexton writes the psychiatric patient as so aware of her contaminated world, so fragmented in her suffering and bizarre subjectivity, and so damaged in her sense of embodiment that any awareness of Divine presence, (or indeed, any consciousness of anybody beyond the self) is screened out. In 'The Sickness Unto Death',<sup>192</sup> however, the poetic "I" judges herself unworthy of God and exiles herself from awareness of the Divine.

#### The Sickness Unto Death

God went out of me  
 as if the sea dried up like sandpaper,  
 as if the sun became a latrine.  
 God went out of my fingers.  
 They became stone.  
 My body became a side of mutton  
 and despair roamed the slaughterhouse.

Someone brought me oranges in my despair  
 but I could not eat a one  
 for God was in that orange.  
 I could not touch what did not belong to me.  
 The priest came,  
 he said God was even in Hitler.

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<sup>192</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 441.



I did not believe him  
 for if God were in Hitler  
 then God would be in me.  
 I did not hear the bird sounds.  
 They had left.

I did not see the speechless clouds,  
 I saw only the little white dish of my faith  
 breaking in the crater.  
 I kept saying:  
 I've got to have something to hold on to.  
 People gave me bibles, crucifixes,  
 a yellow daisy,  
 but I could not touch them,  
 I who was a house full of bowel movement,  
 I who was a defaced altar,  
 I who wanted to crawl toward God could not move nor eat  
 bread . . . <sup>193</sup>

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In 'The Sickness Unto Death', the symptoms of psychiatric illness are interpreted as the withdrawal of God, and once that meaning is assumed, other behaviour follows logically from the delusion.

The illness is written through tropes which are similar to those in 'Angel of Hope and Calendars' which is discussed above; the subject interprets the world of her mind as desiccated, "as if the sea dried up like sandpaper"; as contaminated, "as if the sun became a latrine", "I who was a house full of bowel movement, / I who was a defaced altar"; and as petrified, "God went out of my fingers. / They became stone, / My body became a side of mutton". As a result, the surrounding world is obliterated—"I did not hear the bird sounds. / They had left. / I did not see the speechless clouds".

What is new here is the delusional interpretations upon which further actions are based, and their unshakeable but self-destructive logic. The priest has the expectation that his statement that "God was even in Hitler" will reassure the speaker that God is still present to her, but the

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

poetic speaker's belief that God has abandoned her is the basis on which she assesses his statement to be untrue.

Similarly, the given oranges, which are for the poetic speaker the sun-like symbols of God's sweetness, of fecundity,<sup>194</sup> and of poetic language,<sup>195</sup> must be abandoned by her as inappropriate to her Godless state. Here the speaker's self-exile is a poignant reminder of the terrors of delusional thinking as the logical basis for action. In this poem the poetic "I" verbalises the assumptions on which the poems of rowing to God are based; "God went out of me", the speaker states.

So we see that the clamour of psychiatric illness tends to mask the presence of God, accounting for both the tendency to site God as Other and the longing for death's release from mental illness's distress which is demonstrated in 'Rowing' and 'The Rowing Endeth'. The false logic of psychiatric delusions in 'The Sickness Unto Death', reinforced by the patient's sense of contaminated unworthiness, confirms her belief that God has withdrawn. The tenacity with which she holds to false logic in 'The Sickness Unto Death' is a mirror of the patient's determination to undertake the self-lacerating journey in pursuit of an absent God in 'The Rowing Endeth'.

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#### B i. EFFORT: PSYCHOTHERAPY AS SELF-LACERATING JOURNEY

Anne Sexton writes psychiatric illness as a clamour which may well drown out the awareness of the presence of God. Within her wider writing of

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<sup>194</sup> See for instance 'Hurry Up Please It's Time' (*CP* 385): "I have swallowed an orange, being woman. / You have swallowed a ruler, being man," and "O Ye Tongues—Eighth Psalm' (*CP* 408): "She has swallowed a bagful of oranges and she is well pleased. / For she has come through the voyage fit and her room [womb] carries the little people."

<sup>195</sup> See "O Ye Tongues—Tenth Psalm' (*CP* 412): "For that daughter must build her own city and fill it with her own oranges, her own words."

psychiatry however, a discourse of the process of psychotherapy may be seen. The poet/patient's effort to bring herself to insight and health through therapy is written through the body. In effort and bodily inscription the discourses of psychotherapy and of rowing to God are identical.

In therapy the patient's body is stretched and burnt, beaten, rendered mechanical, and cut. The process of psychotherapy, like the process of rowing to God, is violence to the body/subject:

Dr Y.  
 I need a thin hot wire,  
 Your Rescue Inc. voice  
 to stretch me out,  
 to keep me from going underfoot  
 and growing stiff  
 as a yardstick.<sup>196</sup>

Although the trope is confusing, and the position of the stretched patient is visually uncertain—it is hard to know whether she is held upright, perhaps with wrists and arms above her and tied by wire, or whether she is horizontal, as on a rack or couch—the writing of the therapist's voice as thin *hot* wire equates the therapeutic process with mutilation.

Whether it is read as branding or as torture, this therapy, voluntarily undertaken as an alternative to death, burns the body. And while overtly psychotherapy is written as a process which prevents death, the state of the body within the two processes seems almost identical; the body which is "stiff / as a yardstick" in death is "stretched" in therapy. Therapy is written here as a mutilating form of death itself.

In 'Flee on your Donkey', Sexton writes the therapeutic process as an effort to remember dreams:

Dreams came into the ring

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<sup>196</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 561.

like third string fighters,  
 each one a bad bet  
 who might win  
 because there is no other.

I stared at them,  
 concentrating on the abyss  
 the way one looks down into a rock quarry,  
 uncountable miles down,  
 my hands swinging down like hooks  
 to pull dreams up out of their cage.<sup>197</sup>

Psychotherapy is here a process requiring such violence of effort that it is appropriately written within tropes of boxing and quarrying; as a result the body is subject to beatings, and it acts as if it were mechanical.

The most horrifying inscription of the patient's violent therapeutic search for insight occurs in the trope of the eye and the knife. In 'Flee on your Donkey' Sexton writes:

I was the one  
 who opened the warm eyelid  
 like a surgeon  
 and brought forth young girls  
 to grunt like fish.<sup>198</sup>

Even if we ignore the grotesque result of the patient's actions, the surgical procedure on the vulnerable eyelid evokes horror. The trope of the knife so close to the eye induces fear of the abject in the reader, who imagines the possibility of the mutilated eye leaking fluid. The knife is the tool of the castrator;<sup>199</sup> the process of gaining insight surgically is perilously close to Oedipal self-mutilation by blinding.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> "Knives" states Carol J. Clover, discussing slasher films, "like teeth, beaks, fangs and claws are personal, extensions of the body that bring the attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace." Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," in *The Dread Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas, 1996), 79.

<sup>200</sup> Sigmund Freud in "The Uncanny" states, "A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated . . . We may try on

Here the poetic speaker, apparently rejecting the possibility of simply lifting the eyelid to gain understanding of the "eye/I", demonstrates her determination to risk blindness in order to gain (in)sight; in this she is similar to the oarswoman in 'Rowing', who, apparently rejecting the possibility that the Divine may already be present to her, risks death as she makes her strenuous journey to God.

The discourse of psychotherapy in Sexton's poetry is virtually identical with the self-lacerating rowing to God. In both cases the body is written as signifier of effort. In both cases the body is inscribed with the marks of the function, whether rendered burnt, beaten or mechanised, whether mutilated or simply exhausted.

What is eliminated in the rowing poems is the blurring of categories. The body in 'Rowing' may be compared with the body in psychotherapy in 'Flee on your Donkey':

I spent most of my time,  
a stranger,  
damned and in trance—that little hut,  
that naked blue-veined place,  
my eyes shut on the confusing office,  
eyes circling into my childhood,  
eyes newly cut.<sup>201</sup>

Here, vulnerable, estranged, confused and exposed in the "hut" of her body, the patient seeks refuge in catatonic trance; the boundary between vulnerability and safety is blurred in the writing of the "hut" and the office, and subjectivity is written in layers of protection/exposure.

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rationalistic grounds to deny that fears about the eye are derived from the fear of castration . . . But this view does not account adequately for the substitutive relation between the eye and the male organ which is seen to exist in dreams and myths and phantasies." Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Collected Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 17, 231-3.

<sup>201</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 97.

Such blurring of categories is observed in neither the other inscriptions of the psychotherapeutic process discussed above, nor in 'Rowing'; there the confusion and vulnerability of the patient who is depicted here in the extract from 'Flee on Your Donkey' give way to a unified subjectivity. The writing of effort through the body results in similar inscriptions of damage, but while the effort is being expended, in both psychotherapy and 'Rowing', the task is uncomplicated by ambivalence. For Anne Sexton, effort unifies the body even as it mutilates; in these areas the discourses of rowing to God and of psychotherapy are identical.

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#### B ii. THE THEOLOGY OF THE SELF-LACERATING JOURNEY

Anne Sexton's writing of the journey to God in 'Rowing' places her within a theological discourse of Pelagianism, which was one of the heterodox theologies of the early centuries of Christian thought. As Augustinian theology, with its doctrine of original sin, became established as orthodoxy by the fifth century, Pelagianism and other minority theologies were marginalised, were named as heretical and faded from official Christian discourse, although their traces can be discerned operating covertly throughout the history of the Christian church.<sup>202</sup>

Pelagian theology stresses the need to move in freedom towards God, aided by grace. The drawback of this theology is evident if we ask ourselves how much the speaker in 'Rowing' is motivated by freedom in the poem discussed above, and how much she is driven by desperation and the need to force herself forward in spite of her entrapment.

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<sup>202</sup> Primary Pelagian documents include Augustine's description of the heresy in *De Haeresibus* 88, Pelagius's doctrine of human freedom as it is described in Augustine's *De gratia Christi* 5, Pelagius's letter to Demetrias of 414 a.d., Pope Innocent I's *Ep.* 29 and the details of the appeal of Caelestius, Pelagius's disciple, to Pope Zosimus after Pelagianism was condemned as heretical. All may be found in J Stevenson, ed., *Creeeds, Councils and Controversy*. (London: SPCK, 1976) 215ff.

Pelagianism is an attractive theology and particularly compatible with modernism, unless the believer feels himself to be too confined to respond to its demands; it becomes then a doctrine of guilt, despair and self-destruction.

Augustinian orthodoxy on the other hand is superficially less attractive in its emphasis on sin, not as wrong-doing, but as entrapment, distortion and opacity. For Augustine, human beings are good, they come from God, but their hearts are radically divided, their minds are darkened and they lack freedom within themselves. They need healing (within a trope of illness) or freedom (within a trope of guilt).<sup>203</sup>

God's grace, states Augustine, is freely given to humankind in this condition, unearned and poured onto the unacceptable, now freely accepted. Within Augustinian theology, the mentally ill are no longer placed as other in a world of freedom; their entrapments are simply a manifestation of what all humankind endures.

In the end, orthodox thought proves more life-enhancing than Pelagianism for those who, like the poetic "I" of Sexton's poetry, lack the freedom to respond unrestrainedly to God. For the orthodox believer, no desperate journey to the Divine need be undertaken, for God has already made the journey to humankind.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> See for example Augustine, *Confessions*, F. J. Sheed ed. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1987) 29. Here, in book 2, x, the human condition is described as "that complex twisted knottedness," and Augustine states, "I went away from Thee, my God, in my youth I strayed too far from Thy sustaining power, and I became to myself a barren land."

<sup>204</sup> Semi-Pelagianism was an attempt, mainly by French theologians including John Cassian, Prosper of Aquitaine, Faustus of Riez and Caesarius of Arles, to reconcile Augustine's doctrine of grace with Pelagianism, and is found from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century until its condemnation by the Council of Orange in 531. Semi-Pelagianism states that a human being begins salvation by her unaided powers, and God then responds by granting the grace to complete the work of salvation. This doctrine cannot be applied to the interpretation of Anne Sexton's rowing poems, which contain no indication of the rower's assistance by Divine grace. See Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-*

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### C. PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS AND THE DEATH-WISH

" . . . take off your life like trousers,  
your shoes, your underwear,  
then take off your flesh,  
unpick the lock of your bones.  
In other words  
take off the wall  
that separates you from God." ('The Wall')<sup>205</sup>

"Maybe I'm dead now  
and have found Him.  
Maybe my evil body is done with." ('Is It True?')<sup>206</sup>

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We have seen that the placement of God as a distant Other who is the goal of the rowing journey of the poetic "I" can be accounted for by the obliteration of the sense of the presence of God which accompanies psychiatric illness, and that the effort needed to row towards God is understandable in the light of the similarity between the discourse of psychotherapy and 'Rowing', both of which include effort and damage to the body/subject. We have seen that Sexton's discourse of 'Rowing' involves a Pelagian theology. The poetic speaker's strong death-wish is an equally valid motivation for this journey towards an encounter with God at death.

Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* asserts the existence of a death instinct which seeks to lead all humankind towards death, to "restore the inanimate state" as the erotic instincts seek to renew life.<sup>207</sup> Although Freud postulates the death-instinct as universal, only Kleinian theory, which interprets aggression towards others as a projection of the death-

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*Pelagian Controversy, North American Patristic Society Patristic Monograph Series* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996).

<sup>205</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 445.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. 454.

<sup>207</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), 44.



instinct in the "normal", has taken up this idea.<sup>208</sup> The desire for death can be traced in Sexton's poetry, but it cannot be extricated there from the complexities of the speaker's psychiatric illness, her low self-esteem and sense of contamination and the delusional voices which urge her towards death.

Sexton's many poems which assert the poetic speaker's attraction to death include 'The Starry Night',<sup>209</sup> the unpleasant 'Sylvia's Death'<sup>210</sup> (where Sexton writes a peevish envy of Sylvia Plath's successful suicide), 'The Death Baby'<sup>211</sup> and a number of the 'Letters to Dr Y'.<sup>212</sup> 'Suicide Note'<sup>213</sup> is unique in its placement of Jesus Christ as a suicide who "rode calmly into Jerusalem / in search of death".

Diana Hume George in *Oedipus Anne* states that the "conviction or desperate hope that the moment of death will coincide with a moment of wholeness is one Sexton returned to repeatedly in her predicament."<sup>214</sup> This hope for wholeness appears to be the primary motivation of the poetic "I" in 'Rowing'. Perhaps it is most clearly shown in the last stanza of the first 'Letter to Dr Y', dated February 16, 1960.

This stanza demonstrates the death-drive in the sane and present Venus-figure, "all woman, all there" who nevertheless hears voices which urge death. This is followed immediately by a trope in which the speaker, more clearly mentally-ill, through the lens of mania, interprets her response to the death-dealing voices as like the courage of the fearless circus trapeze-artist of popular culture:

Death,

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<sup>208</sup> See Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1968) 27.

<sup>209</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 53.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.* 126.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.* 354.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.* 561.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

<sup>214</sup> George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* 150.

I need my little addiction to you.  
 I need that tiny voice who,  
 even as I rise from the sea,  
 all woman, all there,  
 says kill me, kill me.  
 My manic eye  
 sees only the trapeze artist  
 who flies without a net.  
 Bravo, I cry,  
 swallowing the pills,  
 the do die pills.<sup>215</sup>

The moment of wholeness which George describes, which coincides with the moment of death, occurs in the final lines of this stanza:

To die whole,  
 riddled with nothing  
 but desire for it,  
 is like breakfast  
 after love.

Here the death-wish and sexuality are conflated in an image of the wholesome, domestic sharing which follows sexual satisfaction. In Freudian terms, *thanatos* is written within the trope of the life-force, *eros*. Death by suicide is depicted here as both normal and positive.

While the first section of 'Letters to Dr Y' culminates in the writing of death as life-giving, in 'Wanting to Die' Anne Sexton writes the whole world of the poem within this reversal. Diana Hume George has written a superb exposition of the way in which Sexton leads the reader to an understanding of suicide as a creative act in 'Wanting to Die'.<sup>216</sup>

Sexton writes the first two lines of this poem as a precarious discourse of life which is lived forgetfully, indeed automatically:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.  
 I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage,

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<sup>215</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 561.

<sup>216</sup> George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* 126ff.

Then the almost unnameable lust returns.<sup>217</sup>

Writing the death-wish as lust, Sexton evokes associations with forbidden sexual attraction.

By contrast with the opening lines, the sexual energy of the third is so strong that the pastoral images of outdoor life which follow appear shadowy by contrast. As depictions of otherness which are written within reported speech, they are accorded only a powerless recognition:

Even then I have nothing against life,  
I know well the grass blades you mention,  
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

The poetic "I" now claims the language of suicide as her own and sites the poem with death as a valuable goal. With this reversal of the convention that life is valuable and death is life's annihilation, the reader is placed within a discourse of death as literally constructive:

But suicides have a special language.  
Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*.  
They never ask *why build*.

This reversal is confirmed within the remainder of the poem where death becomes "a drug so sweet / that even children would look on and smile", and as the speaker determines to empty her breath from "the prison of the body". Death here is not merely what George calls "a moment of wholeness"; the world of death is written as positive, and life is its reversal.

Such an attitude throws light on the motivation of the journeying speaker in 'Rowing'; it seems that there, for Sexton's poetic "I", the hope of shedding the body, and the calamities of psychiatric illness along with it, proves a significant impetus in the rowing towards a God who is seen to inhabit the positive world of death.

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<sup>217</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 142.

## 5. THE PURSUIT OF THE DIVINE AS OTHER: THE SEA VOYAGE TO GOD CONCLUDES

### A. THE HAND WHICH GOD DEALS US: 'THE ROWING ENDETH'

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"RANK OF POKER HANDS. The following combinations of cards have value in every form of poker. They are listed in order from highest to lowest.

1. *Straight flush*—five cards in sequence in the same suit. As between two straight flushes, the one headed by the highest-ranking card wins: A-K-Q-J-10 (called a *royal flush*) beats K-Q-J-10-9, and 6-5-4-3-2 beats 5-4-3-2-A. The royal flush is the highest standard hand, but when wild cards are used "five of a kind is the highest."<sup>218</sup>

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We return now to the second of Anne Sexton's rowing poems, 'The Rowing Endeth' the final poem of *The Awful Rowing to God*.

#### The Rowing Endeth

I'm mooring my rowboat  
 at the dock of the island called God.  
 This dock is made in the shape of a fish  
 and there are many boats moored  
 at many different docks.  
 "It's okay," I say to myself,  
 with blisters that broke and healed  
 and broke and healed—  
 saving themselves over and over.  
 And salt sticking to my face  
 and arms like  
 a glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca.  
 I empty myself from my wooden boat  
 and onto the flesh of The Island.

"On with it!" He says and thus  
 we squat on the rocks by the sea  
 and play—can it be true—  
 a game of poker.  
 He calls me.

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<sup>218</sup> Alfred H. & Geoffrey Mott-Smith Morehead, *Hoyle's Rules of Games* (New York: New American Library, 1963) 76.

I win because I hold a royal straight flush.  
 He wins because he holds five aces.  
 A wild card had been announced  
 but I had not heard it  
 being in such a state of awe  
 when He took out the cards and dealt.  
 As he plunks down His five aces  
 and I sit grinning at my royal flush,  
 He starts to laugh,  
 the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth  
 and into mine,  
 and such laughter that He doubles right over me  
 laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.  
 Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs  
 the sea laughs. The Island laughs.  
 The Absurd laughs.

Dearest dealer,  
 I with my royal straight flush,  
 love you so for your wild card,  
 that untameable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha*  
 and lucky love.<sup>219</sup>

In the final poem of *The Awful Rowing to God* the poetic speaker arrives at her Divine destination. God is at first "the flesh of The Island" onto which the salt-caked poet empties herself; he then becomes, in an image of startling freedom and originality, her poker partner.

Who, we must ask, is this God at whom the rowing ends? Although the fish was an early Christian symbol, the dock in the shape of a fish<sup>220</sup> does not designate the God/man founder of Christianity, the one who submitted himself to a criminal's execution and died abandoned. Neither is he the one whom Jesus Christ called his beloved Father.

This God is a powerful, literally over-bearing, patriarchal male, who, when the exhausted rower finds herself with poker's winning hand, calls a wild-

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<sup>219</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 473.

<sup>220</sup> The fish was an early symbol of Christianity, because the letters of Ἰησοῦς (ichthys) could be read as the first letters of the words Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.

card and defeats her, then roars with laughter. The speaker may tell this God that she loves him for his wild card, and for "that untameable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha* / and lucky love" but many readers find the God depicted here to be less than loveable. In negotiating power and powerlessness, Anne Sexton repudiates autonomy and affirms her domination by an authoritative male God.

Joyce Carol Oates writes, "The chilling *ha-ha* of Sexton's last poem is not, as she thought, blissful and all-forgiving."<sup>221</sup> Jeanne Foster speculates that the poem's "ecstatic even manic" tone is likely to be followed by breakdown and despair.<sup>222</sup> Diana Hume George regrets that Sexton has written an "imaginatively small and fraudulent God." She compares the denouement of 'The Rowing Endeth' with 'Oysters',<sup>223</sup> a rite-of-passage poem in which the speaker's father laughs as she gags on the food. In both poems the speaker is dominated and defeated; in both poems she claims defeat as a kind of victory.<sup>224</sup>

The submission which has always been a mark of the Christian journey, the handing over of all that is most cherished in life to a trusted God in faith, brings victory for the individual only if the life with which this is replaced is one of flourishing freedom and growth. In this sense Christian losing may be interpreted paradoxically, but there is no evidence of a final flourishing here.

Indeed, the trope which Sexton has chosen for writing the human-Divine interaction precludes this possibility. "I win because I hold a royal straight flush. / He wins because he holds five aces" states the poetic speaker. But it is impossible to have two winners in a two-handed game of poker.

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<sup>221</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "Anne Sexton: Self-Portrait in Poetry and Letters," in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G K Hall, 1989), 60.

<sup>222</sup> Foster, *A Music of Grace: The Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry* 52.

<sup>223</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 322.

<sup>224</sup> George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* 49.

The forced laughter of the speaker's response is what Karl Rahner calls "a tortured pretence of joy".<sup>225</sup> Sexton's God is "a child's desperate fantasy, a violent projection that is both stern father and cruel lover, as well as the "body of fate" that cannot be assimilated."<sup>226</sup> Anne Sexton's God deals her, at last, a good hand, then snatches victory for himself when she appears finally to be a winner.

This God, the one whom Diana Hume George regrets, is both imaginatively small and fraudulent. With a wild card called and five aces beating a royal straight flush, we must ask how many aces are in this poker pack. A royal straight flush is an ace-high run, A K Q J 10, so there are six aces in this deck of cards, and even with a wild card, the largest number of aces an honest dealer can deal is five. It is possible to call a number of wild cards in a poker game, but this poem speaks of only one. Anne Sexton's God is not only competitive; he is a charlatan card-cheat as well, playing with a loaded deck.

A similar writing of God as fraud occurs in 'Jesus Cooks'.<sup>227</sup> There, in a depiction of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (Matt. 14:13–21, Mark 6: 32–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–15), when Jesus takes the fish in his hand and prays, God replies: "Work on the sly / opening boxes of sardine cans."

The direct message of 'The Rowing Endeth' may be a positive one of happy arrival, but the covert message of the poem is that all of life's cards are in the hands of an untrustworthy God. This is an understandable message from a woman who has suffered deeply from psychiatric illness, but interpreters who see Sexton's final poetry as a vindication of her

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<sup>225</sup> Karl Rahner, *Opportunities for Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality*, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Catholic Book Club, 1974) 36.

<sup>226</sup> Oates, "Anne Sexton: Self-Portrait in Poetry and Letters," 59.

<sup>227</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 340.

religious quest should, I suggest, pay closer attention to the sub-text of the poems.

Sexton's subversion of the poem's overt positive religious message through the number of aces which she writes into the poker deal is comparable to the covert subversion written into 'The Touch'. In this poem the touch of two hands becomes a metaphor for the erotic love which transforms life. Sexton writes:

Oh, my carpenter,  
the fingers are rebuilt.  
They dance with yours.  
They dance in the attic in Vienna.<sup>228</sup>

The poem continues:

Your hand found mine.  
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.

As Joyce Carol Oates points out, we all know the role of blood clots in the body's history.<sup>229</sup> The subtext of this poem asserts the unhealthy nature of the speaker's relationship even as the speaker overtly rejoices in it. The comparable subversion of overt meaning in 'The Rowing Endeth' stems, I believe, from issues of theodicy.

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#### B. 'THE ROWING ENDETH': A QUESTION OF THEODICY

Theodicy, compounded of two Greek works, *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice)<sup>230</sup> is the branch of theological philosophy which addresses the problem of evil, both natural (like illness and suffering) and moral (like cruelty). In discussion of the problem of evil, three incompatible beliefs are held in tension, because it proves impossible to reconcile logically a

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid. 174.

<sup>229</sup> Oates, "Anne Sexton: Self-Portrait in Poetry and Letters," 52.

<sup>230</sup> James F. Childress, "Theodicy," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie and James Childress (London: SCM, 1995), 623.



God who is both loving and omnipotent and the existence of evil in the world.

Believer philosophers therefore who are unable to tolerate the unresolvable question of evil repudiate one of these three beliefs. They either relinquish belief in a good God, diminish the concept of the power of God, or undermine the concept of evil by placing responsibility for it on its victims, reinterpreting evil as pain and pleasure (like Spinoza) or claiming that evil becomes good in the context of a broader perspective (like Hegel and Marx).<sup>231</sup>

Anne Sexton has first-hand knowledge and cannot repudiate the power of evil in psychiatric illness. Unlike Yehuda Amichai, she attempts in addition to hold to a concept of a personal, good and powerful God. The result in 'The Rowing Endeth' is that she unconsciously undermines her overt beliefs; as written by her, the goodness of God is suspect, and God, whose power is written as unpleasantly overbearing and exercised at the poetic speaker's expense, is actually powerless and needs to cheat at cards in order to remain in control.

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is depicted elsewhere in Sexton's poetry as purely human, (not the God/man of orthodox Christian belief) and therefore powerless. He is, however, unambiguously good.

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<sup>231</sup> These issues were addressed during the 2004 Melbourne University Dean's Lecture series. Moshe Halbertal, "The Problem of Evil in our Time: A Philosopher Revisits Job" (paper presented at the Richard Pratt Ovation, Melbourne, 28 July 2004).

## 6. THE DIVINE AS SAME. CHRIST/CHRISTOPHER AS NURTURING BROTHER: 'O YE TONGUES'

"[Ultimately] the world of 'being' can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for mother—provided that there is something of the maternal . . ."  
—Helene Cixous, *Sorties*

"Sexton's art celebrates word-magic, buffoonery, regression, 'milking the unconscious' . . ." <sup>232</sup>

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While Anne Sexton's primary religious discourse in the rowing poems sites God as distant Other, a second discourse of belief may be found in Sexton's poetry. In the ten psalms of 'O Ye Tongues', <sup>233</sup> Sexton writes Christopher as an imaginary twin.

In Christopher, Sexton appears to conflate the identities of Jesus Christ, St. Christopher and of Christopher Smart, the eighteenth century mentally ill poet whose 'Julilate Agno' is the model for the structure of 'O Ye Tongues'. <sup>234</sup> Smart wrote most of this poem between 1758 and 1763 while confined to a mental asylum; entrapment and interior freedom form a major theme of 'O Ye Tongues'.

A similar conflation of the identities of Christ and a Christopher figure may be seen in 'Jesus Walking'. <sup>235</sup> In legend, St. Christopher carries the Christ child across a river; the child becomes increasingly heavy because he carries the burdens of all humankind. In 'Jesus Walking', Christ becomes the St. Christopher figure, who carries a man who represents humankind on his back.

<sup>232</sup> Diane Wood Middlebrook, "Poet of Weird Abundance," in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), 79.

<sup>233</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 396.

<sup>234</sup> Christopher Smart, *The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart*, ed. Norman Callan, 2 vols., vol. 1, *The Muses' Library* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949) 249.

<sup>235</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 383.

It is my contention that Christopher as complete and nurturing brother is a writing of the Divine who is experienced within. When Anne Sexton writes the attempt to row through the calamity of mental illness to God the Father at death, she subverts overt religious affirmation; Christ, who is companion and support in spite of external confinement, is written only as grace, comfort and freedom. In the Christopher-figure of 'O Ye Tongues', Sexton asserts companionship and hope of liberation in the calamity of confinement, and affirms the nurturing Divine as immanent.

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#### A. CONFINEMENT / FREEDOM

"For the mother remembers the baby she was and never locks and twists or puts lonely into a foreign place." ('Eighth Psalm')

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In 'Fourth Psalm' of 'O Ye Tongues',<sup>236</sup> Anne Sexton revises the world of early childhood. The poem's major discourses of confinement/freedom and hunger/satisfaction which will recur throughout the Psalms are introduced here; these will be conflated in tropes of being swallowed and ejected. Within childhood's confines, the Divine Christopher figure both provides nurturing companionship in solitude and becomes a facilitator of freedom.

The child of these psalms has not yet entered the symbolic order as a speaking subject and inhabits an oral and anal world; here the parent figures are written merely as "balloons", faces which appear spasmodically and change her "bandage". Within this world the poetic "I" lives in idyllic harmony with her imaginary twin, Christopher:

For I became a *we* and this imaginary *we* became a kind company  
when the big balloons did not bend over us.

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid. 396.

Sexton writes the children's room as a place of containment. The walled secret garden of the room (created with rose wall-paper), although a re-inscription of the Muslim walled garden of Paradise, is itself a space of entrapment; it becomes a symbolic Paradise only as the site of Christopher's birth:

For Anne and Christopher were born in my head as I howled at the grave of the roses, the ninety-four rose crèches of my bedroom.<sup>237</sup>

The physical confinement within walls and cot is interpreted as punitive:

For the room itself was a box. Four thick walls of roses. A ceiling Christopher found low and menacing. . .  
For I was in a boundary of wool and painted boards. Where are we Christopher? Jail, he said.

To the confinement within cot and nursery is added developmental constraints:

For I could not read or speak and on the long nights I could not turn the moon off or count the lights of cars across the ceiling . . .  
For I wiggled my fingers but they would not stay. I could not put them in place. They broke out of my mouth.

In this confinement, Christopher is both companion and wise interpreter, who comments on and affirms the processes of the body:

For I wet my pants and Christopher told the clock and it ticked like a July cricket and silently moved its spoons.  
For I shat and Christopher smiled and said let the air be sweet with your soil.

This affirmation of faeces and the processes of elimination stands in marked contrast to the distaste for bodily processes which is expressed by the poetic speaker throughout the rest of Sexton's poetry.

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<sup>237</sup> This garden-room gives a nod to the walled gardens of children's literature, to Phillippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* as well as to the 'Song of Songs'.

As the poetic "I" grows to maturity through the psalms, the Christ-figure of the inner world of imagination, although often forgotten, continues to provide comfort in solitude when his presence is recalled:

The Republicans have never tweaked her chin for she is not there.  
Anne hides inside folding and unfolding rose after rose. She has no  
one. She has Christopher. ('Sixth Psalm')

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In 'Fifth Psalm' Christopher facilitates an exit into freedom. Whereas in 'Fourth Psalm' "birth was a disease" but "Christopher and I invented the cure", here that cure is spelt out as birth is reinscribed as liberation and the source of gifts.

Following the pattern of Christopher Smart's 'Jubilate Agno' the lines of each psalm begin with the same word(s). In 'Fourth Psalm' each line commences with "For"; the repeated phrase of the 'Fifth Psalm' is a variation of "Let Christopher and Anne come forth".

The children are called forth from the death of birth in an echo of Christ's words to Lazarus (John 11:43) who was called forth from the grave to life. They emerge with a riot of natural gifts, all to be delighted in for their natural characteristics; with "a pig as bold as an assistant professor", "a leopard who seeps like oil across a branch and has cotton batten for paws", and even "a squid who will come bringing his poison to wash over the Lord like melted licorice." Calling Anne and Christopher to life, Sexton participates in the hallowing of all creation.

The confinement from which the children are called out is written here primarily as anal; the pig emerges from "soil and the subway" and the mole "from the artificial anus into the light to swallow the sun". In these tropes anus and grave are conflated; the final verse of the psalms will concern "the death hole". Womb and tomb, anus and grave are similarly sites of death. Only "coming forth" contrasts with the stasis and confinement of these sites as a process of life.

Sexton writes liberation as a movement towards light, warmth and flourishing: "Come forth with a daisy who opens like a hand and wants to be counted for *he loves me*. / Come forth like an orange who will turn its flashlight on and glow in the dark like something holy". From anus/grave, liberation may be interpreted as both a resurrection and a flourishing to maturity through developmental stages. The baby of 'Fourth Psalm' matures through childhood ('Sixth Psalm') to pregnancy and motherhood ('Eighth Psalm') and finally to old age and death ('Tenth Psalm')

The sense of joy overwhelms the negative in 'Fifth Psalm', but reality is not written as utopian; the cauliflower which is brought forth "worries like a white brain", the dalmatian holds up his paw "to the awful stars" and the carp is "two-thirds too large to fit anywhere happy". By affirming the possibility of liberation and delight therefore in spite of and within circumstances which are less than ideal, Sexton writes hope for herself in the calamity of her psychiatric illness, and affirms the authenticity of her own gift for poetry while she celebrates human gifts.

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#### B. CONFINEMENT AND ORALITY: SWALLOWED BY GOD

Together with anal images, Sexton writes the problematic trope of Divine ingestion and expulsion:

The Lord is my shepherd, He will swallow me. The Lord is my shepherd, he will allow me back out. ('Fifth Psalm')

Classical mythology contains legends of gods who swallow their children. Cronus, father of Zeus for instance, swallowed each of his babies until his wife Rhea concealed Zeus at birth; as an adult Zeus forced Cronus to disgorge his other children, who emerged alive.<sup>238</sup> The source of Sexton's line appears however to be the Hebrew scripture book of Jonah, in which

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<sup>238</sup> Felix Guidands, *Greek Mythology*, trans. Delano Ames (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965) 14.

Jonah is swallowed and ejected by a whale. Because Jonah's ingestion by the whale saves him from drowning when he is thrown overboard in a storm, the whale is a trope of both refuge and trap.

Being swallowed by a whale is a nightmare image of a return to the mother's body, to what Lacan names as the "abyss of the female organ from which all life comes forth."<sup>239</sup> Barbara Creed discusses the film *Alien*, in which astronauts enter "the gigantic, cavernous, malevolent womb of the mother"<sup>240</sup> as a representation of "the fecund mother-as-abyss" who is "a source of deepest terror".<sup>241</sup>

To be swallowed alive into the all-devouring stomach/womb is to experience the horror of death by suffocation. Creed cites George Bataille, who argues in *Death and Sensuality* that as the desire to return to the body of the mother occurs after the development of autonomy, this fantasy is also associated with the psychological terrors of self-disintegration.<sup>242</sup> The possibility of being swallowed by God is therefore different in quality from the experience of the uterus as the place of original confinement.

Sexton here appears to toy with a fantasy of fear, perhaps the fear of death and annihilation. By the end of the line, however, this terror is transformed into a trope of liberation.

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### C. ORALITY: THE DIVINE MOTHER AS NOURISHER

For we swallow magic and we deliver Anne. ('Fourth Psalm')

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<sup>239</sup> Jacques Lacan, cited in Stephen Heath, "Difference," *Screen* 19, no. 3 (1978): 54.

<sup>240</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* 19.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

For there are many worlds of milk to walk through under the moon. ('Eighth Psalm')

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While the trope of the swallowing God links entrapment and eating, the divine Christ/Christopher figure is less problematically written as both nurturing mother and liberator within Sexton's 'Psalms', where milk is the sacramental source of nourishment and nurture:

For the baby suckles and there is a people made of milk for her to use. There are milk trees to hiss her on. There are milk beds in which to lie and dream of a warm room. There are milk fingers to fold and unfold. There are milk bottoms that are wet and caressed and put into their cotton. ('Eighth Psalm')

In this trope, milk becomes the source of all comfort and satisfaction for the baby, as feeding is conflated with dreaming sleep and with gentle touch in dressing and washing; in Demetrakopoulos's words milk is "the connective tissue, the flow, the indisputable plenitude of a loving ground of being".<sup>243</sup> For the contented baby, the world is filled with milk.

The plenitude of Sexton's milk trope spills over in the psalms to a delight in many types of food, whether eaten playfully—"Rejoice with the anchovy who darts in and out of salads" ('Seventh Psalm') or eaten with greed—"For I pray that I may continue to stuff cheese potatoes in my mouth" ('Second Psalm'); whether children's food—"Let there be bananas, cucumbers, prunes, mangoes, beans, rice and candy canes" ('First Psalm') or adults'—"For I pray that Jack Daniels will go down as easily as a kiss" ('Second Psalm').

Orality is expanded to include touch—"For she prays that her touch will be milk" ('Second Psalm'), breathing—"Let the ark of salvation have many windows so the creatures of the Lord will marry mouthfuls of oxygen"

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<sup>243</sup> Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, "From 'The Nursing Mother and Feminine Metaphysics'," in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 358.



('Third Psalm'), song—"Come forth with an opera singer so that each concert she may let the moon out of her mouth" ('Ninth Psalm'), and is associated with sexual play—"Give praise for the grape for lovers will wear them on their toes." ('Seventh Psalm')

Most significantly, orality now includes language. Oranges, trope of Divine sweetness, become words as Anne's child enters the symbolic order as speaking subject in 'Tenth Psalm'—"For that daughter must build her own city and fill it with her own oranges, her own words". The nourishment and nurture of the in-dwelling Christopher/Christ in this way passes down the generations. Christopher here represents a Logos figure as a facilitator of language, but without the construction of a dichotomy of mind/body which privileges the mind.

In her purely positive inscription of woman's orality, Sexton revises a tradition of mistrust which begins with the second origins myth of Genesis 2 and 3 and is verbalised in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Leigh Gilmore notes that "the orality of female action which leads to the Fall (speaking with the serpent, eating the fruit, enticing the man to eat)"<sup>244</sup> underscores for Paul the danger of female speech:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent (I Timothy 2: 11–12).

In contrast with much adult literature, food is always in these psalms associated with a nurturing love rather than with sexuality. Heather Scutter states that "Children's literature has a long history of representing good mothers by the quality and quantity of food they bestow on family, friends and strangers,"<sup>245</sup> and Sexton's psalms share this characteristic. In 'O Ye Tongues' Christ/Christopher is God the Mother and the food

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<sup>244</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994) 169.

<sup>245</sup> Heather Scutter, *Displaced Fictions: Contemporary Australian Fiction for Teenagers and Young Adults* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999) 71.

which (s)he provides is varied, beautiful, nourishing and the source of delight.

"O my hunger! My hunger!" is more than simply a refrain in 'Flee on Your Donkey';<sup>246</sup> a rhetoric of hunger occurs throughout Sexton's discourse of psychiatric illness. Helen Vendler summarises the reproach which runs through Sexton's poetry as "I need food / and you walk away reading the paper."<sup>247</sup> This is overturned by the writing of Christopher in 'O Ye Tongues'. "People who feed upon themselves in order to nourish their art eventually dish up pretty thin fare," states Rosemary Johnson of Anne Sexton.<sup>248</sup> I doubt that this is true of Sexton's poetry as a whole; it is certainly not true of 'O Ye Tongues'.

In the Divine figure of Christ/Christopher, the Divine presence first seen in childhood imagination becomes a source of nourishment in adulthood. Finally, as in 'The Rowing Endeth', even the rat, Sexton's personal image of the unacceptable self, is baptised by milk:

For they hung up a picture of a rat and the rat smiled and held out  
his hand.  
For the rat was blessed on that mountain. He was given a white  
bath.  
For the milk in the skies sank down upon them and tucked them in.

The rat's picture gives a nod to the problematic representations of self and mother which are written by Sexton in 'The Double Image',<sup>249</sup> where representation replaces relationship between mother and daughter. Here, however, the picture is an indication of belonging.

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<sup>246</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 97.

<sup>247</sup> Helen Vendler, "Malevolent Flippancy," in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 437.

<sup>248</sup> Rosemary Johnson, "The Woman of Private (but Published) Hungers," in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 393.

<sup>249</sup> Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 35.

The rat's milk bath is both baptismal font and a hedonistic image of the pampered self. Finally, while the skies rain milk in a trope of excess, food and nurturing are conflated in an image of tender mothering. Here Sexton writes the security of a nurtured child safe at night; Paradise is written as a site of raining milk and, in one of the primary tropes of childhood nurturing, the comfort of being tucked into bed.

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## 7. CONCLUSION: ADOPTING THE METANARRATIVE

"Thus in our Father, God almighty, we have our being, and in our Mother of mercy we have our reforming and our restoring, in whom our parts are united and all made perfect [hu]man . . . So Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother." (Julian of Norwich, *Showings* chapter 58, 59).

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In 'O Ye Tongues', the final poem of *The Death Notebooks* (1974), Anne Sexton writes the Divine as companion, liberator and nourisher in a discourse of Christ as Divine mother, the One who satisfies the hungers of psychiatric illness. Why then, in *The Awful Rowing to God* (1975) does she revert to writing a discourse of an over-bearing patriarchal God?

We have touched on theodicy above and the impossibility of reconciling a good and all-powerful God with the evil of the suffering of psychiatric illness. We have accounted for the God of the rowing poems by the clamour of psychiatric illness which blocks awareness of Presence, by a Freudian death-wish and a Pelagian theology. But none of these facts explains Sexton's final repudiation of the Christ/Christopher figure.

In writing Christ as Mother in her 1974 psalms, Anne Sexton has as literary precursors only the idiosyncratic mediaeval mystics (little-known before second-wave feminism) like Juliana of Norwich whose *Showings* contain the aphorism "As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother",<sup>250</sup> and Mechthild of Magdeburg—"God is not only fatherly. God is also mother who lifts her loved child from the ground to her knee".<sup>251</sup>

While Anne Sexton's 'O Ye Tongues' will later be seen as compatible with the feminist theology which will write God as woman as second-wave feminism gains strength, and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* has just

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<sup>250</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge & James Walsh, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978) 293-99. Chapters 58-60.

<sup>251</sup> Cited Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Co, 1983) 220.

been published in Boston,<sup>252</sup> at the time of publication of *The Death Notebooks* Sexton is unsupported in her theological position within the literary world.

Rather than standing alone theologically, with her own status as coherent subject always vulnerable, at the end of her life Sexton forecloses on the revisioning of Christ as Mother seen in 'O Ye Tongues', and reinscribes a patriarchal metanarrative which carries the authority of scripture, patristic theology and the hierarchical church. Anne Sexton consciously affirms this over-bearing patriarchal God with his chilling laugh and compulsion to win while she unconsciously subverts him into charlatanism.

The awful God of the awful rowing in Sexton's final discourse of the Divine is a defensive response to the calamity of psychiatric illness. Anne Sexton seeks the security of an authoritative metanarrative in a wish to counter the subject's vulnerability in calamitous times.

Where Yehuda Amichai overtly repudiates belief in the face of calamity, Anne Sexton flees to institutional orthodoxy. Fortunately, her previous discourse of Christ the Mother which was written in 'O Ye Tongues' remains within her body of poetry.

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<sup>252</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).



## 1. Seamus Heaney: the Sectarian Violence of The Troubles

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"I am fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice, swung at one moment by the long tale of race and resentment, at another by the more acceptable feelings of pity and terror . . . We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart . . ." ('Belfast')<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980) 30.

## 1. LIFE WASTE AND SPIRIT WASTE: THE TROUBLES

"It is difficult at times to repress the thought that history is about as instructive as an abattoir; that Tacitus was right and that peace is merely the desolation left behind after the decisive operations of merciless power."<sup>254</sup>

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Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 at 'Mossbawn', the family farm, in County Derry, Northern Ireland, the eldest son of a Catholic family with nine children. Until 1972, the year of 'Bloody Sunday', when British paratroopers killed thirteen unarmed civilians in a civil right march, Heaney lived within the tensions, divided loyalties and fears of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. Later that year he moved with his family to Glanmore Cottage, County Wicklow, south of Dublin in the Republic of Ireland, and from there to Dublin.

The Troubles form more than a background against which Heaney writes religious belief, and the calamity of The Troubles is a more complex issue than surviving a situation of sectarian violence. Until the publication of *Seeing Things* in 1991, Heaney's primary poetic preoccupation was his role in the relationship between the north's political situation and cultural life. He describes himself in *Crediting Poetry*, the Nobel lecture, as

bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture.<sup>255</sup>

Something of the complex destructiveness of a Catholic's life in Northern Ireland may be seen in the following statement, also from the Nobel lecture:

After 1974, however, for the twenty long years between then and the cease-fires of August 1994, such a hope proved impossible. The violence from below was then productive of nothing but a

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<sup>254</sup> Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* 27.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* 30.



retaliatory violence from above, the dream of justice became subsumed into the callousness of reality, and people settled in to a quarter century of life waste and spirit waste, of hardening attitudes and narrowing possibilities that were the natural result of political solidarity, traumatic suffering, and sheer emotional self-protectiveness.<sup>256</sup>

Yehuda Amichai, to the end of his poetry, asserts his unbelief in the Yahweh of Jewish tradition, while unspoken evidence of an immanent spirituality grows steadily stronger in his poetry. A similar pattern can be discerned in the poetry of Seamus Heaney between spoken and unspoken belief. Overtly, perhaps through the "sheer emotional self-protectiveness" which Heaney mentions above, Catholic religious belief is suppressed in Heaney's poetry.

Yet while Catholicism is silenced in Heaney's poetry, several other discourses of belief, at first present only in traces, rise to dominance. These include pagan sexual harvest, Jungian water, iconic emblems, and, most significant, the contemplative tradition of silent presence.

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid. 24.

## 2. THE POETRY OF THE TROUBLES—'KEEPING GOING'

In 'Keeping Going', Seamus Heaney writes the sectarian violence of The Troubles against the focal memories of his Northern Ireland's childhood home. 'Keeping Going' centres on a whitewash brush. Hanging on the back of the byre door, it is taken down each spring to coat the farmhouse in lime, and was once a prop in a masquerade as Heaney's brother Hugh, to whom the poem is dedicated, played the part of a piper.

The whitewash brush draws round itself the concept of whitewash and other potent liquids with transformative powers. 'Keeping Going' is about the ability of focal memory and its objects to empower and transform those who, like Hugh, persist in living in the Northern Ireland of The Troubles, in spite of continuing violence.

### Keeping Going for Hugh

The piper coming from far away is you  
With a whitewash brush for a sporran  
Wobbling round you, a kitchen chair  
Upside down on your shoulder, your right arm  
Pretending to tuck the bag beneath your elbow,  
Your pop-eyes and big cheeks nearly bursting  
With laughter, but keeping the drone going on  
Interminably, between catches of breath.

The whitewash brush. An old blanched skirted thing  
On the back of the byre door, biding its time  
Until spring airs spelled lime in a work-bucket  
And a potstick to mix it in with water.  
Those smells brought tears to the eyes, we inhaled  
A kind of greeny burning and thought of brimstone.  
But the slop of the actual job  
Of brushing walls, the watery grey  
Being lashed on in broad swatches, then drying out  
Whiter and whiter, all that worked like magic.  
Where had we come from, what was this kingdom  
We knew we'd been restored to? Our shadows  
Moved on the wall and a tar border glittered

The full length of the house, a black divide  
Like a freshly-opened, pungent, reeking trench.<sup>257</sup>

Mixing and applying the lime is a type of magic ritual in which the grey liquid turns to a pristine white on the wall. The application of the whitewash is written as almost completely wholesome here, an Edenic restoration to "this kingdom / We knew we'd been restored to", and the message of the whitewash, in spite of the complexities which will gather round it in the poem, is of the possibility of restoration to goodness, even in the "life waste and spirit waste" of *The Troubles*.

Although there is a hint of the demonic in the process as the speaker and his brothers "inhaled / A kind of greeny burning and thought of brimstone", the poem's primary concern is with the transformation which results from the painting. What must be noted however is the ever-present possibility of interpreting life through the lens of violence in this situation; here the glittering tar border, as pristine as the whitewashed wall, is suddenly seen in its similarity to a "freshly-opened, pungent, reeking trench."

One of the poem's major themes, persistence, reflected in the poem's title, is introduced in "the drone going on / Interminably, between catches of breath". This will be picked up in the poem's final stanza, where the concept of the Diamond is explored.

Play and work interweave in this poem, prompting reflection on their connections in an adult life of work, routine and violence, and the importance of the ability to play. The child Hugh is shown in play as a piper and working as a painter of whitewash, the adult Hugh in the tedium of milking and vital in community. The reservist is killed on his way to work.

In play, the poet's brother Hugh, magically transformed into a piper as the whitewash brush is changed into a sporran by the power of the imagination, enters a world "joyous and unbuttoned . . . full of pagan elements that [have] lost their sacred significance and been transformed into jesting and buffoonery."<sup>258</sup> This space is a parallel universe of theatre and music, a place for retreat and refreshment in a world of violence. Hugh's capacity to enter it will be seen again in adulthood in his ability to "laugh and shout above the revs."

'Keeping Going' is beautifully shaped in its doubling and pairing of concepts— the killer's car and the tractor, the shot reservist and Hugh as people who have "not moved", tarred strips. Just as the "tar border" was interpreted as a "trench" with its World War I associations in the purely domestic setting, so a "tarred strip" will form part of the setting for sectarian murder.

The most significant doubling for Heaney's writing of the calamity of The Troubles is the alignment of the grey whitewash being applied to the house wall with the "Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood / In spatters on the whitewash" as the reservist is shot in the head, and the pairing of the white of the new whitewash with the place "where his head had been". As Goodby and Phillips state, "the stains of violence—the spatters on the whitewash"—are a persuasive emblem of cultural damage,"<sup>259</sup> but it is part of the poem's message that, for Hugh to "keep going" in the place of The Troubles, he must draw strength from focal memory and associations and let go of those connected with violence.

Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood  
 In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot  
 Where his head had been, other stains subsumed  
 In the parched wall he leant his back against

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<sup>257</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1996) 10.

<sup>258</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1955) 179.

<sup>259</sup> John and Ivan Phillips Goodby, "Not Bad: The Spirit Level," in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend Wales: Poetry Wales, 2001), 253.

That morning like any other morning,  
 Part-time reservist, toting his lunch-box.  
 A car came slow down Castle Street, made the halt,  
 Crossed the Diamond, slowed again and stopped  
 Level with him, although it was not his lift.  
 And then he saw an ordinary face.  
 His right leg was hooked back, his sole and heel  
 Against the wall, his right knee propped up steady,  
 So he never moved, just pushed with all his might  
 Against himself, then fell past the tarred strip,  
 Feeding the gutter with his copious blood.

The final stanza of 'Keeping Going' draws all themes together, and expands on the concept of the diamond:

My dear brother, you have good stamina.  
 You stay on where it happens. Your big tractor  
 Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,  
 You shout and laugh above the revs, you keep  
 Old roads open by driving on the new ones.  
 You called the piper's sporrans whitewash brushes  
 And then dressed up and marched us through the kitchen,  
 But you cannot make the dead walk or right wrong.  
 I see you at the end of your tether sometimes,  
 In the milking parlour, holding yourself up  
 Between two cows until your turn goes past,  
 Then coming to in the smell of dung again  
 And wondering, is this all? As it was  
 In the beginning, is now and shall be?  
 Then rubbing your eyes and seeing our old brush  
 Up on the byre door, and keeping going.

Double Diamond is an Irish beer, so the Diamond may be a tied public house as well as the space in front of it. Perhaps the Diamond gives a nod to the last line of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection' in which "This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond."<sup>260</sup> Certainly a diamond is the consequence of a massive "keeping going" under literal pressure.

The speaker's brother is not able to "make the dead walk and right wrong"—he cannot transform the greys of life into a dazzling whiteness. In this sense it is true, as John Goodby and Ivan Phillips state, that the theme of this poem is imperfect renewal.<sup>261</sup> But in driving his tractor in a recapitulation of the action of the gunman's car, he keeps open the old road of moral values, good humour and community as he drives. Persistence, and drawing on the cultural memory of childhood masquerade and family strength, ensure that continuity with the past in the present of *The Troubles* carries the promise of transformation and of hope.

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This is a primary reading of 'Keeping Going'. A more complex interpretation of the poem is possible however, once we include the third and fourth stanzas of the poem which I have not so far discussed.

The masquerade of the piper with the whitewash brush is shadowed by an altogether less sunny form of play in the third stanza, and the fourth presents the mother as witch. Now the potential for evil is no longer confined to those depicted as other, the killers of the reservist. The figure of Hugh remains clearly delineated against those who resort to violence, but he is now seen as a figure capable of interaction with evil himself. In introducing these elements, Heaney avoids a simplistic presentation of good and evil.

The third stanza reads as follows:

Piss at the gable, the dead will congregate.  
But separately. The women after dark,  
Hunkering there a moment before bedtime,  
The only time the soul was let alone,  
The only time that face and body calmed  
In the eye of heaven.

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<sup>260</sup> W. H. Gardner, ed., *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Selection of his Poems and Prose, Penguin Poets* (Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin, 1963) 65.

<sup>261</sup> Goodby, "Not Bad: The Spirit Level," 252.

Buttermilk and urine,  
 The pantry, the housed beasts, the listening bedroom.  
 We were all together there in a foretime,  
 In a knowledge that might not translate beyond  
 Those wind-heaved midnights we still cannot be sure  
 Happened or not. It smelled of hill-fort clay  
 And cattle dung. When the thorn tree was cut down  
 You broke your arm. I shared the dread  
 When a strange bird perched for days on the byre roof.

The play depicted in the masquerade of the piper has been enacted in the domestic daylight of the kitchen; in it one can imagine the piper's parents smiling fondly at his enthusiasms. Pissing at the gable is also a form of play however, a secret, sullyng, twilight form, a ritual of black magic designed to call up the dead, enacted presumably by Hugh and by his poet brother.

This ritual is sited by the poet on the threshold between denial and acceptance, between memory and the forgetfulness of repudiation, at the time of "Those wind-heaved midnights we still cannot be sure / Happened or not." The shared dread of the strange bird is dread that the magic ritual may have had efficacy. In this description Seamus Heaney writes religious belief, but a pagan belief in the power of ritual magic. Hugh the cheerful persister is written here shadowed by necromancy.

Of equal significance, the depiction of witchcraft extends to the only representation of the mother in the poem. She is written as a hag, a mother figure outside the traditional representations of the virgin, the mother or the virgin-mother, the good women who are so often set in moral opposition to the whore in Catholic discourse. The witch-mother is introduced in stanza four:

That scene, with Macbeth helpless and desperate  
 In his nightmare—when he meets the hags again  
 And sees the apparition in the pot—  
 I felt at home with that one all right. Hearth,  
 Steam and ululation, the smoky hair  
 Curtaining a cheek. 'Don't go near bad boys  
 In that college that you're bound for. Do you hear me?

Do you hear me speaking to you? Don't forget!  
And then the potstick quickening the gruel,  
The steam crown swirling, everything intimate  
And fear-swathed brightening for a moment,  
Then going dull and fatal and away.

Here the hearth, the home's focus, becomes the place where the witch-mother prepares her brew. Heaney's placement of the witch-mother at this very significant site therefore introduces considerable ambiguity into this stanza.

The poet's genuine affection for his brother Hugh and for the strength of his persistence—"My dear brother, you have good stamina"— is not diminished by the traces of potential evil and witchcraft which linger into the final stanzas, but the sense of slight unease which they evoke in the reader serve to unsettle what might have been an over-coherent representation of cheerful persistence in the face of The Troubles. In these stanzas, Heaney introduces the ever-present possibility that the peace-makers and builders in the place of The Troubles will begin to take part in the evil of violence themselves.

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### 3. REVENANTS AND PENITENCE: TRACES OF THE OTHER WITHIN CATHOLIC BELIEF

I at least was young and unaware  
that what I thought was chosen was convention ('Station Island')<sup>262</sup>

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'Station Island'<sup>263</sup> contains Seamus Heaney's most open statement of the Catholic culture of belief. The revenants which abound in Heaney's poetry, (crowding up the ladder for a lick of blood in 'Damson',<sup>264</sup> appearing with a shopping bag full of ashes in 'Two Lorries' after the Magherafelt bus station is bombed,<sup>265</sup> or calling the poet into speech in 'Clonmany to Ahascragh'<sup>266</sup> which I will discuss below), are the major characters in 'Station Island'.

Station Island in Lough Derg is a pilgrimage site traditionally believed to be the site of St Patrick's cave. For three days, fasting, bare-footed and silent penitents circle the island; here they encounter their own interiority which is inscribed with significant memories of the past.<sup>267</sup>

Modelling his poem on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and siting it on the island and within Catholic traditions of penitence, Heaney writes encounters with people from his past and from Irish literary history. Helen Vendler asserts that in 'Station Island' Seamus Heaney encounters his *alter egos*.<sup>268</sup> I suggest rather that the ghosts of 'Station Island' add to the complexity of the poetic speaker's sense of self because he places himself in opposition

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<sup>262</sup> Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1990) 172.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid. 163.

<sup>264</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 15.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>266</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001) 75.

<sup>267</sup> Details of the traditional pilgrimage at Lough Derg can be found at *Lough Derg* [Web-site] (2004 [cited 23 April 2004]); available from [www.wellsprings.org.uk/wellspring\\_of\\_pilgrimage/lough.htm](http://www.wellsprings.org.uk/wellspring_of_pilgrimage/lough.htm). and at *Lough Derg* ([cited]).

<sup>268</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* 92ff.

to each. As the shades are identified, the speaker defines himself by what they are not.

Through these encounters the poetic speaker's sense of subjectivity is modified, and other discourses of belief arise within the dialogues. By the end of 'Station Island' he has redefined his religious position, and the Catholic penitential culture within which he stands at the beginning of the poem has faded from his poetry, to be replaced by the beliefs which were originally secondary.

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The world of Catholicism is introduced in the poem's opening stanzas as, on a Sunday following his First Communion, the speaker child is placed within a culture of permissible observance and written against Simon Sweeney, both "an old Sabbath-breaker" and a muse who carries a bow-saw as if it were a lyre:

A hurry of bell-notes  
flew over morning hush  
and water-blistered cornfields,  
an escaped ringing  
that stopped as quickly

as it started. *Sunday*,  
the silence breathed . . .<sup>269</sup>

The Catholic world within which the child stands forms the poem's primary religious site. In Section iv, an encounter with a priest, the language of pious Catholicism is added, the naming ("Father" pronounced with a fawning relish), the liturgical clothing ("his purple stole / and cincture tied loosely") and the Latin and the liturgical objects of the mass ("I raised the chalice above headdresses. / *In Hoc signo*"). In Section ix the speaker himself participates in a Catholic act of repentance:

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<sup>269</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* 163.

And I cried among night waters, 'I repent  
My unweaned life that kept me competent  
To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust.'

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In section iii of 'Station Island' the traditional practices of Catholic piety recede. The "bead clicks and the murmurs / from inside confessionals" which rush into memory when the poet kneels, (the bodily posture evoking the religious practices with which it was associated), give way in this section to a contemplative religious language which is based on presence within silence:

I knelt. Hiatus. Habit's afterlife . . .  
I was back among bead clicks and the murmurs  
from inside confessionals, side altars  
where candles died insinuating slight

inanimate smells of wax at body heat.  
There was an active wind-stilled hush, as if  
in a shell the listened-for ocean stopped  
and a tide rested and sustained the roof.

A seaside trinket floated then and idled  
in vision, like phosphorescent weed,  
a toy grotto with seedling mussel shells  
and cockles glued in patterns over it,

pearls condensed from a child invalid's breath  
into a shimmering ark, my house of gold  
that housed the snowdrop weather of her death  
long ago. I would stow away in the hold

of our big oak sideboard and forage for it  
laid past in its tissue paper for good.  
It was like touching birds' eggs, robbing the nest  
of the word *wreath*, as kept and dry and secret

as her name which they hardly ever spoke  
but was a white bird trapped inside me  
beating scared wings when *Health of the Sick*  
fluttered its *pray for us* in the litany.

Kneeling out of doors, the speaker experiences a silence which is written in terms of the water which is often central to Seamus Heaney's poetry in

conjunction with stilled wind, a traditional image of the Holy Spirit who is *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek, in the image of the shell:

There was an active wind-stilled hush, as if  
in a shell the listened-for ocean stopped  
and a tide rested and sustained the roof.

The quality of this dynamic stillness corresponds with Rudolph Otto's description of the numinous, "a non-rational category of human experience which is grasped by intuitive feeling."<sup>270</sup> Silence fills the interior space and both supports and nourishes the sheltering canopy which is above it.

Gaston Bachelard states that "an empty shell, like an empty nest, invites day-dreams of refuge."<sup>271</sup> Both images appear as tropes of secure retreat in this section, together with the refuge of "our big oak sideboard" where the poetic "I" uncovers "the shimmering ark" of a dead child's toy grotto, the rich heart within layers of protection, written within the trope of the nest:

It was like touching birds' eggs, robbing the nest  
of the word *wreath*, as kept and dry and secret

as her name which they hardly ever spoke  
but was a white bird trapped inside me  
beating scared wings when *Health of the Sick*  
fluttered its *pray for us* in the litany.

This image of the poet touching the secret centre of the language of memory and ritual is almost sexual in its connotations of intimacy. Many of the associations with sin and penitence of the original memory of the confessional have been shed, leaving a positive and nearly secular experience of refuge and nourishing silence.

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<sup>270</sup> J W Rogerson, "The Holy," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. and J. L. Houlden Coggins (London: SCM, 1990), 295.

<sup>271</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* 107.

In section vi the poet writes a space of childhood secrecy into Catholicism, the space of two children in sexual play:

Freckle-face, fox-head, pod of the broom,  
 Catkin-pixie, little fern-swish:  
 Where did she arrive from?  
 Like a wish wished  
 And gone, her I chose at 'secrets'  
 And whispered to. When we were playing houses.  
 I was sunstruck at the basilica door—  
 A stillness far away, a space, a dish,  
 A blackened tin and knocked over stool—  
 Like a tramped Neolithic floor  
 Uncovered among dunes where the bent grass  
 Whispers on like reeds about Midas's  
*Secrets, secrets*. I shut my ears to the bell.  
 Head hugged. Eyes shut. Leaf ears. *Don't tell. Don't tell.*

The poet's language is sibilant— "fern-swish, a wish wished, whispered"— filled with the hush of silenced speech. The child speaker's sexual space is internal. The basilica door and bell are marginalised from the site of knowledge, but the setting remains a Catholic world in which guilt and punishment threaten: "*Secrets, secrets*. I shut my ears to the bell. / Head hugged. Eyes shut. Leaf ears. *Don't tell. Don't tell.*"

Unlike the child who "shut his ears to the bell", the poet leaves this space of childhood memory and returns immediately to the task of Catholic pilgrimage when the bell summons:

A stream of pilgrims answering the bell  
 Trailed up the steps as I went down them  
 Towards the bottle-green, still  
 Shade of an oak.

But with the emergence of childhood sexual memory, the poet begins to move against the tide of pilgrims, and he enters the memory of adolescent sexuality.

Now the language of Catholicism begins to fade, and a classical discourse of golden sexual harvest appears; the Station Island oak tree triggers memories of adolescent sexual fulfilment and associations with Horace's description of the Sabine farm:

Shade of an oak. Shades of the Sabine farm  
 On the beds of St Patrick's Purgatory.  
 Late summer, country distance, not an air;  
 Loosen the toga for wine and poetry  
*Till Phoebus returning routs the morning star.*

Just as in the classical, Apollonian celebration the sun obliterates the fading star, classical sexual harvest is now written over a fading discourse of Catholic virginity, and amplitude is written over asceticism.

At first there is disjunction between desire and destination; sexual longing is shadowy and separate from the harvest and its phallic tools, and, in spite of the urgency of the speaker's interest—"mad for it"—leads only to arrival at the religious site of repudiation, the confessional:

As a somnolent hymn to Mary rose<sup>272</sup>  
 I felt an old pang that bags of grain  
 And the sloped shafts of forks and hoes  
 Once mocked me with, at my own long virgin  
 Fasts and thirsts, my nightly shadow feasts,  
 Haunting the granaries of words like *breasts*.  
 As if I knelt for years at a keyhole  
 Mad for it, and all that ever opened  
 Was the breathed-on grille of a confessional . . .

But in the section's final lines the golden sexual language rises to prominence and the Catholic discourse of repentance disappears without a trace:

Until that night I saw her honey-skinned  
 Shoulder-blades and the wheatlands of her back  
 Through the wide keyhole of her keyhole dress  
 And a window facing the deep south of luck  
 Opened and I inhaled the land of kindness.

The trope of sexual harvest here rapidly increases in complexity; as both grain and honey are written as the golden skin of the speaker's partner, the poet gives a nod to Jewish scripture's description of the promised land

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<sup>272</sup> I assume that the Marian hymn which is referred to here is 'Mary, Queen of Heaven' whose second line is "Hail Queen of Heaven, the morning star".

as "a land flowing with milk and honey", adding traces from the Old Testament to the pagan imagery of the section. The keyhole dress has obvious Freudian sexual connotations as the speaker gains entry to the site of sexual expression, and the space of the keyhole widens to become a window; sexual fulfilment is conflated with luck and kindness and becomes a landscape breathed into interiority in the warm south wind.

In Heaney's poetry of married love, such as *The Glanmore Sonnets*,<sup>273</sup> he will continue to write sexuality as a site of generosity and kindness; similarly 'The Harvest Bow'<sup>274</sup> and 'The Sharping Stone',<sup>275</sup> which are both analysed below, with their depictions of couples happily entering the daily landscape, can be seen as a development of this concept.

As fulfilled sexuality becomes the site inhabited by the poetic "I", in a quotation from canto ii of Dante's *Inferno*, which duplicates the dominance of sunlight over the night which was seen in Horace, fragile flowers rise with the touch of the sun:

*As little flowers that were all bowed and shut  
By the night chills rise on their stems and open  
As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight,  
So I revived in my own wilting powers  
And my heart flushed, like somebody set free.*<sup>276</sup>  
Translated, given, under the oak tree.

Like the watchman in the tenderness of his dawn vision in 'Mycenae Lookout'<sup>277</sup> whose "whole being" rains down on himself as a vision of violets expands to become an image of wider hope, the poetic speaker is here freed from Catholic guilt; images of sexual potency—"I revived in my own wilting powers"—and of personal freedom—"like somebody set free"—are compressed within the trope of flowers.

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<sup>273</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* 109.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.* 128.

<sup>275</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 57.

<sup>276</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, *Temple Classics* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1962) 23.

The stanza's final line combines the oak tree, (site of the sexual experience and the link with Horace), sexuality as gift and the various meanings of "translation"—rewriting from one language to another, changing from one form to another, exalting in spiritual ecstasy or rapture and moving to heaven without going through death—in a rich conclusion.

Sexuality, once written as language of the other, is now the language of the self, and is sited within golden classicism rather than Catholic repentance; the speaker's self-definition changes from virgin to sexually-fulfilled man; his delight in sexuality is written within a classicism which lacks the taint of Catholic sexual guilt; and ironically in the face of the "little death" of sexual orgasm, he is transported to a state of sexual bliss without passing through death.

The classical golden sexual harvest which comes to prominence here in 'Station Island' will become one of Seamus Heaney's primary tropes of belief in such poems as 'Thatcher'<sup>278</sup> and 'The Harvest Bow'<sup>279</sup> which I will discuss below.

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Heaney believes that it is the voice of James Joyce which challenges the Catholic discourse which underpins this poem:

Yet the choice of Lough Derg as the locus for the poem did, in fact, represent a solidarity with orthodox ways and obedient attitudes, and that very solidarity and obedience were what had to be challenged. And who better to offer the challenge than the shade of Joyce himself?<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 29.

<sup>278</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* 10.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.* 128.

<sup>280</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet," in *The Poets' Dante: Twentieth-Century Responses* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 257.



The shade of James Joyce in section xii condemns "that subject people stuff" as infantile "like this peasant pilgrimage", thus negating together Catholic politics and culture; he advises the poetic speaker to

'fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency,  
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver gleams in the dark of the whole sea.'

I feel however that the framework of Catholic penitence shatters most completely when adolescent sexuality is presented, not in terms of morality and its transgressions, but as the entrance to "the land of kindness". This description is not a negation of traditional Catholicism; rather it sites sexuality within other parameters, and writes it into a trope of golden harvest, devoid of guilt.

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#### 4. AN END TO STATEMENTS OF CATHOLICISM

To speak with what Tom Sleight calls "a Catholic coded intelligence"<sup>281</sup> in the face of The Troubles is to risk being judged either a propagandist or a traitor, while silence may be seen as cowardice. In 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', Seamus Heaney critiques the constraints imposed on a poet by Protestant/Catholic language codes.

##### Whatever You Say Say Nothing

##### III

'Religion's never mentioned here,' of course.  
 'You know them by their eyes,' and hold your tongue.  
 'One side's as bad as the other,' never worse.  
 Christ, it's near time that some small leak was sprung

In the great dykes the Dutchman made  
 To dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus.<sup>282</sup>

The poet's bitterness at the restrictions imposed on language and society's fear-filled over-reaction to his words is apparent in these lines, which are, ironically, written within the Protestant trope of the Dutch folktale of The Hole in the Dyke.<sup>283</sup>

The poem concludes as follows:

Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us:  
 Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,  
 Subtle discrimination by addresses  
 With barely an exception to the rule

That Norma, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod  
 And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape.  
 O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,

<sup>281</sup> Tom Sleight, 'To Credit Marvels' in Stratis Haviaras, ed., *Seamus Heaney: A Celebration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Review, 1996) 99.

<sup>282</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* 78.

<sup>283</sup> In this folktale, a small hole appears in one of the dykes constructed to hold back the sea from the reclaimed land which is below sea-level. A boy tries to plug the hole with his finger, a dog with his nose, a woman with her elbow and a man by sitting in the hole.

Of open minds as open as a trap,

Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,  
Where half of us, as in a wooden horse  
Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,  
Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.

What is stressed here is the impossibility of "saying nothing" in the ironic terms of the poem's title, where language is the tribal sign system which reflects a culture and ideology, and where even to state one's name and address, as required by police request, is to place oneself on one side of the sectarian conflict.

Evident here too is the impossibility of avoiding manipulations— ("Manoeuvrings to find out name and school"), suppressions ("Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us"), discrimination ("by addresses / With barely an exception to the rule"), serpent-like tempting and a sense of acting under siege ("cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks").

Allen Feldman designates the reading of sign systems under the sectarian divisions of Northern Ireland as "telling":

'Telling' constructs a conjuncture of clothing, linguistic dialect, facial appearance, corporal comportment, political religious insignia, generalized spatial movements, and inferred residential linkages. These sign systems cohere into an iconography of the ethnic Other that regulates informal encounters with particular others.<sup>284</sup>

In an alarming alignment with the concepts which underpinned the Holocaust, Feldman states that 'telling' is "organized around paradigms of ethnic purity and impurity."<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* 57.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.* 57.

Seamus Heaney takes two steps to free himself from the ideological constraints of the Protestant/Catholic divide. In 1972 he moves with his family to Glanmore Cottage, County Wicklow, south of Dublin in the Republic of Ireland, and from there to Dublin; and following 'Station Island' he begins to write belief within other less ideologically-loaded parameters.

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## 5. REGENERATING THE PAGAN: SEAMUS HEANEY AND THE TROPE OF GOLDEN HARVEST

" . . . among European peoples it is a common custom to keep the plaited corn-stalks of the last sheaf, or the puppet which is formed out of them, in the farmhouse from harvest to harvest. The intention no doubt is, or rather originally was, by preserving the representative of the corn-spirit to maintain the spirit itself in life and activity throughout the year, in order that the corn may grow and the crops be good."<sup>286</sup>

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'The Harvest Bow' continues the secular and sexual discourse which displaces that of Catholic penitence in section vi of 'Station Island' which was discussed above. The young woman's "honey-skinned / Shoulder-blades and the wheatlands of her back" written in 'Station Island' match 'The Harvest Bow' in mellow celebration of fertile sexuality.

### 'The Harvest Bow'

As you plaited the harvest bow  
 You implicated the mellowed silence in you  
 In wheat that does not rust  
 But brightens as it tightens twist by twist  
 Into a knowable corona,  
 A throwaway love-knot of straw.

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks  
 And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks  
 Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent  
 Until your fingers moved somnambulant:  
 I tell and finger it like Braille,  
 Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable.

And if I spy into its golden loops  
 I see us walk between the railway slopes  
 Into an evening of long grass and midges,  
 Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,  
 An auction notice on an outhouse wall—  
 You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick  
 For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick

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<sup>286</sup> Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1959) 412.

Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes  
 Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes  
 Nothing: that original townland  
 Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.

*The end of art is peace*  
 Could be the motto of this frail device  
 That I have pinned up on our deal dresser—  
 Like a drawn snare  
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn  
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.<sup>287</sup>

'The Harvest Bow' is based on the pagan European harvest rituals in which the last sheaf of the harvest is preserved and plaited. Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* traces this custom to the myth of Demeter and Persephone which formed the basis of the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>288</sup>

Although they vary in different countries, all corn symbols and rituals are concerned with ensuring the continuing fertility of the land, and are linked with human sexuality. In many cases the completed harvest is personified as an old woman, the corn-mother, and the next year's crop as the young and fertile corn-maiden. So although the mother figure is revered, the hope for continued fertility in the land lies with the maiden daughter.<sup>289</sup>

In writing himself and his father, each carrying phallic objects, into this poem, the poet regenders the pagan myth which lie behind the harvest bow, writing himself into the traditional role of the corn maiden, and his father as the corn-mother who, at harvest end, with her fertility ended, will yield her place to the next generation.

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<sup>287</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* 128.

<sup>288</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* 393-412.

Persephone, captured by Pluto and taken to the underworld, caused a famine in the land as her mother Demeter grieved for her, but Zeus negotiated her return to the upper world for all seasons of the year except winter when the fields were barren. The Eleusinian mysteries celebrated Persephone's return to the upper-world in a golden car; central to the ritual was the moment when the initiated were shown a reaped ear of corn.

<sup>289</sup> See Frazer, chapter xlv, 'The Corn-Mother and the Corn-Maiden in Northern Europe', 399-412.

The poetic "I", the representative of the younger generation, is associated with the phallic fishing rod and "big lift", while the father's phallic stick flounders and beats unproductively, "Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes / Nothing." As the new season's corn maiden will replace the no-longer-fertile woman of last season's harvest, so the poet here is positioned to replace the father in an overt writing of successful Oedipal competition.

The delicate harvest bow, which is associated with the masculine figure of the poet's father, is a feminised article supplanting the phallic objects of the father's younger life. Ashplants, cane sticks and game cocks are replaced by straw plaiting as active sexual masculinity recedes and the father's moving fingers become somnambulant.

Although the poet places positive value on the father's activity of corn plaiting, which he aligns with "the mellowed silence in you", his praise is for an activity which is associated with his father's impotent old age.<sup>290</sup> It seems therefore that the value of the father's activity to his poet/son is directly related to his waning masculinity.

Nevertheless, this poem writes both the sexual and the beauty of the harvest bow into a trope of spirituality— the mellowed silence of interiority, the corona of light, the unsaid which is gleaned off the palpable, the plait warmed and burnished by the spirit of the corn. Into this golden pagan spirituality, Heaney writes a trace of the Christian; the "wheat that does not rust" gives a nod to the treasure laid up in Heaven

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<sup>290</sup> Nancy Jay in 'Gender and Dichotomy' discusses Aristotelian dichotomy in which rather than men and women being considered as A and B, men are considered to be A and women not-A, (Nancy Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy," *Feminist Studies* 1981, passim.). Under these categories, where men are considered the norm from which others deviate, everyone who is not a male heterosexual becomes a "not-A": – male homosexuals, the ill and deformed and coloured males, as well as women. It seems that Heaney is working within this logic, and that his father as an old male is relegated to this feminised category as "other".

of Matthew 6:19 "where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in to steal."<sup>291</sup>

If this writing of pagan, sexualised spirituality appears to be more ambivalent than the golden section vi of 'Station Island' which is discussed above, probably this ambivalence stems from traces of the poet's hostility towards his father. The poet may "tell and finger" the love-knot "like Braille, / Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable" and pin it up on his deal dresser, but he still describes it as a "*throw-away* love-knot of straw", and the articulate poet/son refers here with perhaps a trace of exasperation to his father's lack of articulacy in "that original townland / Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand."

I suggest that both the writing of sexual harvest and the replacement of the corn-goddess by the virile figure of the poet himself are significant in the context of The Troubles. Christopher Burdon states:

Our own status as coherent and achieving subjects is vulnerable, and the hero may be the answer to that fragmentation of experience and incompleteness of the subject. Contemporary real-life heroes can disappoint . . . but the mythic hero, the character clearly delineated against the enemy or other, the subject of a story that moves to closure, he (occasionally she) it is who can construct or restore our own identity as subjects.<sup>292</sup>

The poet becomes something of a mythic hero within this poem, not only victorious in the inter-generational struggle but generous in affirming his vanquished father's activities. Within the sectarian violence of The Troubles, the poet provides a model of behaviour even as he writes a

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<sup>291</sup>European corn rituals also show Christian traces. Frazer states of German customs that "The [corn-]wreath is dedicated in church on the following Sunday; and on Easter Eve the grain is rubbed out of it by a seven-year-old girl . . . At Christmas the straw of the wreath is placed in the manger to make the cattle thrive." Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* 400.

<sup>292</sup> Christopher Burdon, "Jacob, Esau and the Strife of Meanings," in *Self/Same/Other: Re-visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology*, ed. Heather Walton & Andrew W. Hass (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 161.



pagan celebration of sexual fertility which may serve as a substitute for Catholic belief.

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## 6. A JUNGIAN DISCOURSE OF WATER

"The guidebook told me I was standing on ground sacred to the Romano-Celtic goddess Coventina, she who is represented over and over again on the many votive panels and little altars found in and around the location, holding a waterweed in her right hand and in her left a pitcher from which a river flows and flows and flows unstoppable. Suddenly, it was if the Irish Catholic child of the 1940s recognized that from the start he had been in possession of a Romano-Celtic soul . . ." <sup>293</sup>

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From his earliest poetry, Seamus Heaney has written the power of water—water from the pump and the well, in rain and in marsh.<sup>294</sup> By the time of the publication of *Electric Light* in 2001 however, Heaney begins to write a discourse of water which is more subtle and free from childhood memories of the farm:

Clonmany to Ahascragh  
in memory of Rory Kavanagh

Now that the rest of us have no weeping left  
These things will do it for you:  
Willows standing out on Leitrim Moss,  
Wounds that 'wept' in the talk of those before you,  
Rained-on statues from Clonmany to Ahascragh,  
Condensation on the big windows  
And walls of a school corridor in Derry  
Where I drew with warm fingers once upon a time  
To make a face that wept itself away  
Down cold black glass.

Compose yourself again. And listen to me,  
You were never up here in my attic study  
Beyond the landing, up the second stairwell,  
Step-ladder steep, and deep, and leading back  
Down to the life going on.

Even so, appear  
Till I tell you my good dream.  
Be at the door

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<sup>293</sup> Robert Faggen, "Milosz and World Poetry," *Partisan Review* 66, no. 1 (1999): 20-21. Part of Seamus Heaney's speech in a discussion of the work of Czeslaw Milosz.

<sup>294</sup> See for instance 'Personal Helicon', (*NSP* 9), ('Mossbawn' *FK* 3), ('Anahorish', *NSP* 21).

I opened in the sleepwall when a green  
 Hurl of flood overwhelmed me and poured out  
 Lithe seaweed and a tumult of immense  
 Green cabbage roses into the downstairs.  
 No feeling of drowning panicked me, no let-up  
 In the attic downpour happened, no  
 Fullness could ever equal it, so flown  
 And sealed I feared it would be lost  
 If I put it into words.

But with you there at the door  
 I can tell it and can weep.

And if ever tears are to be wiped away,  
 It will be in river country,  
 In that confluence of unmarked bridge-rumped roads  
 Beyond the Shannon, between the River Suck  
 And the Corrib River, where a plentiful  
 Solitude floods everyone who drives  
 In the unseasonable warmth of a January afternoon  
 Into places battened down under oyster light,  
 Under names unknown to most, but available  
 To you and proclaimable by you  
 Like a man speaking in tongues, brought to his senses  
 By a sudden plout on the road into Ahascragh.<sup>295</sup>

In the first stanza of this elegy, Heaney writes water as a signifier of grief, while the second stanza is a Jungian exploration of water as poetic inspiration, pouring from the unconscious mind in dream. Rory Kavanagh, grieved in stanza one, is invoked in the second stanza as a revenant-listener whose presence at the door of the upper room, the space of poetic creation, permits the poetic speaker to disclose his dream of water.

Poetic inspiration is written as the relentless and overwhelming flood of water from the study door into the world beneath, water both fresh and salt, carrying the greenness of both land and sea in cabbage roses and seaweed, and so filled—"flown and sealed"—that it seems likely to be in excess of the poetic signifier as it moves from the poet's unconscious dreaming mind into consciousness. But mediated by Rory Kavanagh, the

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<sup>295</sup> Heaney, *Electric Light* 75.

dream's excess fullness is released through both tears and words and becomes the source of poetry.

In this stanza water has positive Jungian characteristics; it issues from the trustworthy subconscious in dream, filling and fructifying, source of poetic life. In the third stanza the Jungian discourse blends with Christian theology as Irish river country becomes the site of the Heavenly Jerusalem where tears will be wiped away, echoing Revelation 21:4:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.

Fulfilment is written here not in terms of water as in the second stanza but through a flooding "plentiful solitude". This other site, the New Jerusalem, is invoked by Kavanagh's esoteric language of place, by "names unknown to most, but available / To you and proclaimable by you / Like a man speaking in tongues". The strangeness of language's incantation speaks the New Jerusalem into being; water's role is to bring Kavanagh out of his trancelike state "to his senses", water written here as a heavy downpour, a "sudden plout".

Presumably Kavanagh's return to reality leaves the river country still as the potential place of the Heavenly Jerusalem where tears may be wiped away; water therefore becomes in this stanza, in addition to the Jungian source of poetic inspiration in stanza two, the obliterator of differentness, and the integrator of the eschatological into the beautiful "oyster light" of the everyday.

## 7. "BEFITTING EMBLEMS": A DISCOURSE OF MATERIAL EQUIVALENTS

"Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable" ('The Harvest Bow')<sup>296</sup>

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We have seen that Seamus Heaney writes a pagan discourse of golden harvest and a Jungian discourse of water as alternatives to his primary Catholic statements. A third recognisable religious discourse in Heaney's poetry involves the writing of emblematic objects which "make something transparent which is beyond expression,"<sup>297</sup> and become "befitting emblems of adversity."<sup>298</sup>

Helen Vendler speaks of "Heaney's discovery of material equivalents for his virtual realms—the electric light of the unmannerly intelligence, the wooden ark of indicative integrity."<sup>299</sup> James Booth writes of Heaney in the language of emblems, defining an emblem as "a description of precise physical exactitude which at the same time sustains a transparent spiritual allegory."<sup>300</sup>

Whether we speak in the language of material equivalents, of emblematic objects or of icons, readers are aware that in Seamus Heaney's poetry

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<sup>296</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* 128.

<sup>297</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941) 27.

<sup>298</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words," in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 24. Here Heaney states: "The question as ever is, 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?' And my answer is, by offering 'befitting emblems of adversity.'" The quotations are from William Shakespeare, Sonnet LXV, "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea" in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957) 1115. and W. B. Yeats, 'Meditations in the time of Civil War, II My House' in W B Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1962) 114.

<sup>299</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* 125. See 'Electric Light' (*EL* 80) and 'From the Canton of Expectation' (*NSP* 236).

<sup>300</sup> James Booth, *The Turf Cutter and the Nine-to-Five Man: Heaney, Larkin, and 'The Spiritual Intellect's Great Work'* (43/4) [Electronic journal through Proquest] (1997 [cited 19 Feb 2004]).

memorable tangible objects can carry metaphysical weight. In his use of objects with transparency, Heaney stands in the poetic tradition of the seventeenth century emblematisers, George Herbert ('The Pulley', 'The Collar'), Thomas Traherne, Andrew Marvell ('The Coronet', 'On a Drop of Dew'), and Henry Vaughan. ('The Waterfall')<sup>301</sup>

'The Harvest Bow', discussed above, is a special example of Heaney's poetry of material equivalents, one with pagan associations. In 'The Sharping Stone', the emblematic object is the stone itself, opening to a world of meaning. In this case, the meaning lies in the stone's similarity to both a coffin and a corpse, and the world is the world of death.

### The Sharping Stone

In an apothecary's chest of drawers,  
Sweet cedar that we'd purchased second hand,  
In one of its weighty deep-sliding recesses  
I found the sharpening stone that was to be  
Our gift to him. Still in its wrapping paper.  
Like a baton of black light I'd failed to pass.

Airless cinder-depths. But all the same,  
The way it lay there, it wakened something too . . .  
I thought of us that evening on the logs,  
Flat on our backs, the pair of us, parallel,  
Supported head to heel, arms straight, eyes front,  
Listening to the rain drip off the trees  
And saying nothing, braced to the damp bark.  
What possessed us? The bare, lopped loveliness  
Of those two winter trunks, the way they seemed  
Prepared for launching, at right angles across  
A causeway of short fence-posts set like rollers.  
Neither of us spoke. The puddles waited.  
The workers had gone home, saws fallen silent.  
And next thing down we lay, babes in the wood,  
Gazing up at the flood-face of the sky  
Until it seemed a flood was carrying us  
Out of the forest park, feet first, eyes front,  
Out of November, out of middle age,

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<sup>301</sup> All poems are found in Alexander W Allison and others, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd ed. (New York & London: Norton, 1970).

Together, out, across the Sea of Moyle.

*Sacrophage des époux*. In terra cotta.  
 Etruscan couple shown side by side,  
 Recumbent on left elbows, husband pointing  
 With his right arm and watching where he points,  
 Wife in front, her earrings in, her braids  
 Down to her waist, taking her sexual ease.  
 He is all eyes, she is all brow and dream,  
 Her right forearm and hand held out as if  
 Some bird she sees in her deep inward gaze  
 Might be about to roost there. Domestic  
 Love, the artist thought, warm tones and property,  
 The fragibility of terra cotta . . .  
 Which is how they figured on the colour postcard  
 (*Louvre, Département des Antiquités*)  
 That we'd sent him once, then found among his things.

He loved inspired mistakes: his Spanish grandson's  
 English transliteration, thanking him  
 For a boat trip: 'That was a marvellous  
 Walk on the water, granddad.' And indeed  
 He walked on air himself, never more so  
 Than when he had been widowed and the youth  
 In him, the athlete who had wooed her—  
 Breasting tapes and clearing the high bars—  
 Grew lightsome once again. Going at eighty  
 On the bendiest roads, going for broke  
 At every point-to-point and poker-school,  
 'He commenced his wild career' a second time  
 And not a bother in him. Smoked like a train  
 And took the power mower in his stride.  
 Flirted and vaunted. Set fire to his bed.  
 Fell from a ladder. Learned to microwave.

So set the drawer on freshets of thaw water  
 And place the unused sharpening stone inside it:  
 To be found next summer on a riverbank  
 Where scythes once hung all night in alder trees  
 And mowers played dawn scherzos on the blades,  
 Their arms like harpists' arms, one drawing towards,  
 One sweeping the bright rim of the extreme.<sup>302</sup>

Heavy, inert and found in the wooden box of a drawer, the "airless cinder depths" of the stone evokes the burnt-out image of the dead poetic

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<sup>302</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 59.

speaker's father in his coffin. The confined body is absent from the poem, but the absence draws around it comparable images—first the poet and his wife "feet first, eyes front" in the traditional position of the dead arranged and carried with respect, backs flat against wood.<sup>303</sup>

Second, the emblem draws in an image of dead marriage partners from another culture and time. The couple, following the little death of sexual release which prefigures death, lie at rest, represented on the terracotta sarcophagus which is represented on the postcard represented in this poem.

As a gift ungiven the stone is a site of regret for what was withheld in the poet's relationship with his father. It shares the stasis of a gravestone, yet it acts to sharpen memory. Inert, it nevertheless evokes an imaginative response. Although both heavy and dark, the stone has "wakened something too". Antithetically it is described as "like . . . black light". Static, the stone may resemble an unpassed baton, but it is placed in an on-going race.

The tangible object opens transparently to images of renewal as the widower, following the death of his wife, grows "lightsome," reclaiming the qualities of his youth. His freedom is seen in multiple acts of fearlessness, vitality and verve.

In the final verse a ritual is enacted which is equivalent to the incidents in folktales where the dead are carried away by water, out to sea, down-river or across the River Jordan to a homecoming on the other side. This rite has been prefigured in the second stanza of the poem as it seems a

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<sup>303</sup> Reputable funeral directors in all countries still adhere to traditional practices which show respect for the bodies of the dead. The dead are laid straight and on their backs and their eyes and mouths are closed. They are always carried feet first, so that if their coffins were to be placed upright, they would be in a standing position.



flood is carrying the poet and his wife out of place and time, "Out of the forest park . . . / Out of November, out of middle age", into eternity.

Here, floating on water, in a ritual of funerary remembrance, the stone becomes the site of integration of the remembered and the actual, the present and the past. The transparent icon of the sharpening stone opens to transcendental images of music, morning, circles and harvest. The scythes of the past, often symbols of death when they appear alone, have here become tools of harvest and instruments of music as mowers play dawn scherzos on their blades.

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## 8. SILENCE, PRESENCE AND POETRY: SEAMUS HEANEY'S MOST SIGNIFICANT DISCOURSE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Together with discourses of pagan sexuality, Jungian water and emblematic objects, Seamus Heaney writes belief through silence and through presence. The "active, wind-stilled hush" of section iii of 'Station Island' fuses poetics and religious belief; it seems that Seamus Heaney always filters the experience of the numinous through language, and especially the language of poetry, in spite of the fact that silence may perhaps be considered the only human experience not read through language's net. In 'Station Island' we have seen that Heaney speaks of an experience "like touching birds' eggs, robbing the nest / of the word *wreath*" in a trope within which the tangible object blends into the sign.

Speaking here of the space of silent presence in Heaney's work, I find myself writing of poetry when I intend to speak of silence—the reader may be left speechless, the poetic speaker may have been rendered speechless by presence in the past, but in the present his experience is entirely mediated by poetic language.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Tom Sleigh sees Seamus Heaney's Catholic childhood belief as replaced in adulthood by a belief in the power of poetry:

It's as if [Heaney's parents'] deaths, which haunt both *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*, had liberated the poet from the troubled legacy of their social world, but also enjoined him to seek redress for his losses in the only place available to a secular, if Catholic coded, intelligence: his own imaginative faith in the power of poetry to confirm and keep alive that parallel world of light which their absent presences imply.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Tom Sleigh, 'To Credit Marvels' in Haviaras, ed., *Seamus Heaney: A Celebration* 99.

"In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank," states Seamus Heaney in 'The Government of the Tongue.' But he goes on: "In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed."<sup>305</sup>

When poetry outstrips observed conditions, this power lies in the space constructed beyond observed reality by poetic vision. Heaney's belief therefore is in a space of the presence of creative absence. Speaking within a Christian scriptural discourse and basing his imagery on the encounter between Jesus and the woman taken in adultery in John 8: 1–11, Heaney states:

Poetry . . . does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, 'Now a solution will take place', it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. ('The Government of the Tongue')<sup>306</sup>

However, others who are not poets experience this space of creative presence which is "pure concentration and focus"; this space is the site of meditation in the contemplative traditions of all religions. It is a space, for instance, which every exponent of meditative yoga knows.

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The second stanza of 'On His Work in the English Tongue' is an example of presence. Here poetry acts on the poet speaker as "pure concentration" and "focus"; when he writes this experience into his own poem in the trope of a bridge, the reader shares in an experience of the numinous:

I read it quickly, then stood looking back  
As if it were a bridge I had passed under—

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<sup>305</sup> Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* 189.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.* 190.

The single span and bull's eye of the one  
 Over the railway lines at Anahorish—  
 So intimate in there, the tremor-drip  
 And cranial acoustic of the stone  
 With its arch-ear to the ground, a listening post  
 Open to the light, to the limen world  
 Of soul on its lonely path, the rails on either side  
 Shining in silence, the fretful part of me  
 So steadied by their cogged and bolted stillness  
 I felt like one come out of an upper room  
 To fret no more and walk abroad confirmed.<sup>307</sup>

This space under the stone bridge over the railway line at Anahorish moves beyond Gaston Bachelard's concept of felicitous space as the enclosed space which permits inward-turning and dreaming,<sup>308</sup> to include concepts of solidity, simplicity and of the centre. Most notable is the vibrancy of the silence depicted here; the space is alive through the depiction of the bridge as an ear attuned to the ground, and humming with the "tremor-drip".

"The single span and bull's eye" of the bridge, while an accurate description of shape and simplicity, carries traces of the concept of centring through the archery trope. The bridge is at the crossing of rail and road, as an altar is at the crossing of a cathedral; it is centred and has parallel lines reaching from it in four directions.<sup>309</sup>

This dark space is open to the light of the transcendental; as the soul is introduced in the threshold, the rails provide shining direction-lines for her lonely journey home. The poetic speaker is stationary here and focusing close attention on the rails, steadied by their tool-like quality,

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<sup>307</sup> Heaney, *Electric Light* 61.

<sup>308</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* passim.

<sup>309</sup> In the architecture of a cruciform church or cathedral, the nave and apse make up the vertical bar of the Latin cross, and the transepts provide the cross-bar. The central space, which is part of both bars, the crux of the building as it were, is known as the crossing. Since the 1960's, following the Second Vatican Council, the altar is placed in the crossing.

their attachments and their stillness, as if he has "come out of an upper room".

The upper room is the site of the poet's upstairs study as we have seen above in 'Clonmany to Ahascragh'.<sup>310</sup> In addition it has Christian connotations as the site of the disciples' final Passover meal and the space where the sacrament of the Eucharist is instituted.<sup>311</sup>

The space of silence, of epiphany, which is seen in Heaney's description of the bridge at Anahorish in 'On His Work in the English Tongue', therefore carries traces of specifically Christian discourse, and is linked with the poetic through the power of inspiration. As part of a discourse of silence and presence however, this writing of the numinous has meaning to all who stand within contemplative traditions of belief, whether they are Christian, New Age or other religious traditions. Seamus Heaney's discourse of silent presence in the end, following the silencing of Catholicism, is his primary religious discourse in the face of The Troubles; among the many traces in his poetry, here we find a trace of the Divine.

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Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis speak of the child's admission to the symbolic order of language as a permanent loss of the sense of wholeness associated with the experience of the mother's body in breast-feeding. Terry Eagleton describes the symbolic as follows:

The child must now resign itself to the fact that it can never have any *direct* access to reality, in particular to the now prohibited body of the mother. It has been banished from this 'full', imaginary possession into the 'empty' world of language. Language is 'empty' because it is just an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite . . . This potentially

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<sup>310</sup> Heaney, *Electric Light* 75.

<sup>311</sup> See Mt 26: 17–25, Mark 14: 12–25, Lk 22: 7–13, Jn 13: 21–30. The room is specifically described as being upstairs in Luke 22: 12.

endless movement from one signifier to another is what Lacan means by desire.<sup>312</sup>

Lacanian psychoanalysis therefore allows no space for an experience like that written by the poetic speaker in 'On His Work in the English Tongue'.

The psycho-analytic theory of Julia Kristeva however, with its concepts of the semiotic and the chora, permits a psychoanalytic explanation of this experience, which is one which Christian theology names as grace. For Kristeva the semiotic is a "residue of the pre-Oedipal phase",<sup>313</sup> and "the 'other' of language"<sup>314</sup> which "questions and transgresses " the limits of conventional sign-systems.<sup>315</sup>

Within Kristevan theory therefore the thick silence of religious presence, which Heaney ascribes only to the poetic, may be understood as the semiotic breaking into the realm of the symbolic, wholeness breaking into separation and meaning entering into (at worst) the endless deferral of meaning which Eagleton associates with language, or (at best) the language disjunction between signifier and signified.

I suggest therefore that the experience of renewing silence at the bridge which is written in 'On His Work in the English Tongue' may be interpreted within a discourse of poetic inspiration, or within psycho-analytic discourse as the concept of the Kristevan semiotic. Most significant for the purpose of this thesis however, this is the space of religious contemplation in the traditions of many religions and as such it forms a significant part of the discourse of belief.

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<sup>312</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford U.K. & Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997) 145.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. 163.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

## 9. CONCLUSION

We saw in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai a statement of religious repudiation through which a nourishing spirituality appeared and increased in strength. We saw that Anne Sexton's primary discourse of immanence was replaced with one which was patriarchal and institutional, but that this was unconsciously subverted.

We see that Seamus Heaney's discourse of Catholicism places him on one side of the sectarian violence within his homeland of Ireland. In 'Station Island', alternate religious discourses, of emblems, of pagan sexuality and of contemplative silence, rise through gaps in the primary Catholic discourse and increase in prominence until they are dominant, while Catholicism finally disappears from sight.

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We turn now to consideration of two poets of the Holocaust, and reflection on that most extreme of twentieth century calamities.

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid. 164.





## Poets of the Holocaust

"All on earth that I loved and held sacred I lost in the Holocaust, including nearly six precious years of my life. All on earth that I had left after liberation from Malchow, Germany, was my skeletal body minus all my hair, minus my monthly cycle, a tattered concentration camp shift dress without undergarments, a pair of beaten up unmatched wooden clogs, plus my 'badge of honour', a large blue number 25673 that the Nazis tattooed on my left forearm on the day of my initiation to the Auschwitz inferno. I was homeless, stateless, penniless, jobless, orphaned, and bereaved . . . I had no marketable skills . . . Jewish homes, Jewish families and Jewish communities were destroyed. I was a displaced person, a stranger; alive, but with no home to live in. I had no one to love me, to miss me, to comfort me or to guide me."<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Itka Frajman Zygmuntowicz and Sara Horowitz, "Survival and Memory," in *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: a Sourcebook*, ed. Ellen M Umansky and Dianne Ashton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 290.



## Poets of the Holocaust: An Introduction to the Issues

### 'The Inn of the Sun' by Yehuda Amichai

The Inn of the Sun in the Mountains. We stayed there  
 a day or two. People talked by great windows  
 toward the darkness.  
 The high grass wanted us to cry  
 and in the hazy valley elegant tennis players  
 silently played, as if with no ball.  
 And the sad-eyed ones came to the clear-voiced ones  
 and said: you are living in my house that was  
 my house. A big tree grew here. What did you do to it?

The Inn of the Sun. We stayed there  
 two or three days.  
 And in the white rooms remembrance and hope,  
 night and eternal salvation  
 for those who will never return,  
 the pallor of death on the great curtains  
 and a golden giggle behind the walls.

Planes passed overhead  
 and above them a camouflage net made of stars  
 so we won't see no God is there.

But below; at the heavy table  
 Amid the smoke and alcohol fumes,  
 a heavy Christian and a light Jew  
 work together on a new faith.

The Inn of the Sun. "A light rain then fell."  
 That's all that remains of the Inn of the Sun.<sup>317</sup>

This poem, a rare engagement by Yehuda Amichai with the theme of the Holocaust, serves as a window opening onto the issues explored by those who write belief against the background of this most calamitous of times.

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<sup>317</sup> From *The Hour of Grace*. This poem is included in neither Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994*, nor in Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. This translation is found in Alter, "Vistas of Annihilation," pp. 115-6.

The setting, a European mountain guest-house, can be considered as an image of the space of the nation's—indeed, humankind's— post-Holocaust psyche, a space haunted by the memory of a lost world that is intermittently present in hazy darkness, inexplicable silences and shadow. In this eerie world even the tennis-players, probably observed through glass in the gathering darkness, appear to be silent miming their play.

There is no enrichment in this inn. The "remembrance and hope, / night and eternal salvation" which exist there cannot be accessed by those who will never return, a deathly pallor hangs over the rooms, sexual vitality is represented only by the brassy, shallow sound of "a golden giggle behind the walls" and those who attempt the hopeless task of constructing a new religion in the face of the absence of God do so in a fug of tobacco smoke and alcohol fumes. This flickering vision will vanish as the phrase "A light rain then fell" comes to memory, washed away by the remembered words as if by the rain itself.

Second, the setting can be considered as the haunted guest-house of the survivor's life, a space appropriated by his victimizers and made so much their own that he will forever feel like their paying guest, robbed of the capacity to feel at home within himself and reduced to a sad-eyed shadow. Poets of calamitous times will explore the permanent place of the persecutors in the psyche of survivors.

"A big tree grew here. What did you do to it?" asks the survivor of the Nazi murderers. The felled tree may represent the flourishing tree of European Jewry. It may stand for cultural resources, for all that was firmly-rooted and expected to provide future shelter and beauty in the lives of Holocaust victims. It may represent the Jesse tree of the family continuity which is now impossible for survivors, who cannot reach past the void of the Holocaust to identify themselves with their ancestors. The psychological damage done by survivors' inability to retain continuity between the present and past will be an issue for poets of calamity, who

will deal variously with issues of continuity and disjunction, identification and elegy. The tree may represent the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the failed moral imperative. The tree may be the Tree of Life—of six million lives.

What is certain is that God is absent in this space:

Planes passed overhead  
and above them a camouflage net made of stars  
so we won't see no God is there.

The absence or presence of God (or the presence of absence) will be an issue for all who explore belief within the context of calamitous times. Here this absence is written through a reversal of one of Judaism's strongest cultural signifiers of hope, the star-filled night sky which images the descendents promised to Abraham: "[God] brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendents be' "(Gen 15: 5).

Nelly Sachs will use this signifier positively, but here Yehuda Amichai, in the Jewish Midrash tradition which rewrites archetypal scriptural narratives, writes the stars as no more than a camouflage curtain designed to hide God's absence from the people.

This poem, like all poems about the Holocaust, prompts interrogation of the role of the poet and reader in the act of remembrance and lament. Robert Alter suggests that the sense of uneasiness which 'The Inn of the Sun' evokes in its readers is an appropriate response to this unfathomable event. It is important for Alter that we do not rush to a conclusion. We will discuss his statement further below.



## Poets of the Holocaust: Writing Poetry after Auschwitz

"—this page  
I write and  
the silent  
who couldn't cannot  
whom silence  
and I  
cannot what nevertheless  
I nevertheless  
how can I  
write"<sup>318</sup>

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In 1949, Theodor Adorno, in 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', stated that to write a poem after Auschwitz was a barbaric act.<sup>319</sup> When in December 1961 the poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote that Nelly Sachs had disproved Adorno's statement,<sup>320</sup> Adorno replied that he did not wish to modify his original words and elaborated on the reasons for his famous dictum: "Through the aesthetic principle of stylisation . . . an unimaginable fate still seems as if it had some meaning: it becomes transfigured, something of the horror is removed."<sup>321</sup>

It was not until 1966 that Adorno revised his opinion. "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream," he

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<sup>318</sup> 'Outrage is Anointed by Levity, or Two Laureates A-Lunching'. Irving Feldman, *The Life and Letters* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 48–50.

<sup>319</sup> Adorno's statement was made in 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' written in 1949 in the United States, published singly in 1951, and collected in *Prismen* (Berlin, 1955).

<sup>320</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Die Steine der Freiheit," in *Nelly Sachs zu Ehren* (1961), 47.

<sup>321</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Zur Dialektik des Engagements," *Neue Rundschau* 73, no. 1 (1962): 103.

wrote then; "hence it may have been wrong to say that no poem could be written after Auschwitz."<sup>322</sup>

Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs have written poetry, and in writing have opened the event of the Holocaust to those who live after it. But before we turn to their poetry, it seems important to understand the issues involved in writing poetry after the Holocaust and the reasons for Adorno's disquiet.

For the issue remains a vexed one. First person prose testimonies by concentration camp survivors were once considered essential historical records, but poetry, like statements by those who have no first-hand knowledge of the camps, was considered an imaginative "fiction" in this context, and therefore problematic.

Holocaust theory has gained in complexity and sophistication however; now Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer speak, in relation to first person accounts, of "representations . . . that present what exceeds writing and representation—some kernel of the event as it makes itself present to the witness that cannot be transmitted because it is not knowledge."<sup>323</sup> Eye-witness/fiction distinctions no longer hold, because we understand that all accounts involve selection and are shaped by the speaker, whether consciously or unconsciously.

There is agreement about the central moral-aesthetic taboo arising from the Holocaust, an injunction against anyone but a concentration camp survivor presuming to represent the thoughts of camp inmates. This taboo over-rides the Jewish tradition of representing the cultural past by speaking in the first person.

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<sup>322</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 232. Citing Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Kegan Paul, 1973) 362.



Anne Michaels expands on this idea:

It's Hebrew tradition that forefathers are referred to as "we", not "they." "When we were delivered from Egypt . . ." This encourages empathy and a responsibility to the past but, more important, it collapses time. The Jew is forever leaving Egypt. A good way to teach ethics. If moral choices are eternal, individual acts take on immense significance no matter how small: not for this life only.<sup>324</sup>

"The Jew is forever leaving Egypt," into a state of liberation; however to avoid the possibility that "the Jew is forever being exterminated in the Holocaust", and from respect for the unspeakable suffering of concentration camp survivors, this Jewish tradition gives way before the primary Holocaust taboo.

Yet even the taboo against presuming to reconstruct the thoughts of camp inmates has been broken, and by no less a poet than Paul Celan. His 'Deathfugue' (*Todesfugue*)<sup>325</sup> begins "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening" and continues in the first person.

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Against Adorno's dictum against a poetic representation of the Holocaust stand those who believe in the moral imperative to witness to this disaster, to give a voice to those who can no longer speak. Heather Walton speaks of

. . . what Helene Cixous describes as the imperative to locate the metaphor in the place of suffering: this becomes the literary compulsion to transform unspeakable things into poetry. This work is necessary to ensure both that the awful smoking silence retains its sacred place and that what is strangely alive can be recovered from destruction.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, eds., *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representing the Holocaust* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) 8.

<sup>324</sup> Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1997) 159-60. Cited Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* 256.

<sup>325</sup> Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York & London: Norton, 2001) 31.

<sup>326</sup> Heather Walton, "Re-Visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology," in *Self/Same/Other: Re-visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology*, ed.

Those who argue the moral imperative for Holocaust witness state that "ignorance about those who have disappeared undermines the reality of the world".<sup>327</sup> The Torah, in Leviticus 5: 1, states, "And [he] is a witness whether he hath seen or known of it; if he does not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity." Behind the Jewish requirement to witness lies the moral imperative to speak the truth about what is real.

Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, speaks of the Nazi certainty that no witness will be made:

Many survivors remember that the SS militiamen enjoyed cynically admonishing the prisoners: 'However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, and even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you.'<sup>328</sup>

In writing the Holocaust, Jewish survivors and their descendants defy Hitler's certainty of silence. Emil Fackenheim, in what has become known as the "614<sup>th</sup> commandment", states: "The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler another, posthumous victory."<sup>329</sup>

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Heather Walton & Andrew W. Hass (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 11. Susan Gubar provides a fuller, if more mundane, list of reasons to write the Holocaust: "To respond to or analyse pre-existent literature; to fill in lacunae in the historical record; to curse evil or praise good; to witness against wrongdoing; to caution against ignorance and amnesia, which result in unteachability; and to understand the central significance of what is deemed to be a decisive convulsion in culture." Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* 11.

<sup>327</sup> Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1994) 42. Citing Zbigniew Herbert, "Mr Cogito on the Need for Precision". No publication details given.

<sup>328</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York & London: Summit, 1988) 11.

<sup>329</sup> Emil Fackenheim, "The 614th Commandment," *Judaism* 16, no. 3 (1967): 269-73. Cited Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* 44.

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These are convincing arguments for the moral imperative to speak of the Holocaust, but they are not specific arguments for poetry as the discourse of choice. There are two cogent arguments against a poetic discourse of the Holocaust; the first involves its impossibility, and the second concerns its lack of wisdom. One persuasive argument against poetry after Auschwitz involves the eclipse of the possibilities of language which Paul Celan refers to in his Bremen speech:

Language . . . had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened . . . <sup>330</sup>

This is not an early post-modern statement about the disjunction between words and meaning; rather it is, as Ulrich Baer makes clear in *Remnants of Song*, a moral statement about "the moments when the use of language failed to institute an obligation which it engenders under ordinary conditions to the addressee." In relation to the Holocaust, language could

suffer the fate of losing its moral grounding and drift away from the unspoken possibility of human exchange and address; what had been compromised and damaged was language's ability to institute a common, shared world for its users, . . . snuffed out by the din of rhetoric. <sup>331</sup>

Celan's and Ulrich Baer's beliefs about the damage to language within the discourse of the Holocaust are reinforced by Dori Laub, psychoanalyst and co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, who considers that the Holocaust is an event which eliminates its own witness. Laub states that most outsiders failed to occupy their

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<sup>330</sup> Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (1958)," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, ed. Paul Felstiner (New York & London: Norton, 2001), 395.

<sup>331</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000) 196-7.

witness position, while insiders could not remove themselves sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event to speak.

He states that the perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of the destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness.<sup>332</sup>

Laud compares the discourse of the Holocaust with the collective delusion described in the children's story, 'The Emperor's New Clothes':

The emperor, though naked, is deluded, duped into believing that he is seated before his audience in his splendid new clothes. The entire audience participates in this delusion by expressing wonderment at his spectacular new suit. There is no one in the audience who dares remove himself from the crowd and become an outcast, by pointing out that the new clothes are nonexistent.<sup>333</sup>

In the same way, Laub states, those who were able to separate themselves sufficiently from the Holocaust to issue warnings were dismissed as traitors or madmen, and discredited because they did not remain within the confines of the delusion. There was no possibility that witness could be heard.<sup>334</sup>

Even if the writing of poetic discourse of the Holocaust is not impossible, a persuasive reason for avoiding poetry after Auschwitz concerns the importance of avoiding closure. This argument is stated by Robert Alter as follows:

Poetry's special power simultaneously to dislodge and intensify inherited texts, terms, concepts, and values reminds us that all

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<sup>332</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub MB, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992) 81.

<sup>333</sup> Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 83.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

projects for fathoming [the Holocaust] presume to conclude where, for a long time to come, we need to question and to brood.<sup>335</sup>

It is, of course, possible for poetry which witnesses to the Holocaust to be written without closure; poetry then becomes a "kaleidoscope of gaps and traces,"<sup>336</sup> what Lawrence L. Langer describes as

not a series of links in a chain whose pattern of connections can be easily traced, but a cycle of sparks erupting unpredictably from a darkened landscape, teasing the imagination toward illumination without ever offering it the steady ray of stable insight."<sup>337</sup>

The late poetry of Paul Celan resists closure in this way. Yet even Celan's poetry has been absorbed to some extent by what Michael André Bernstein, citing Leo Bersani, calls "the culture of redemption".<sup>338</sup> Certainly Celan himself came to feel that this was true of his poem 'Death Fugue'.

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Paul Celan states that attention is the natural prayer of the soul.<sup>339</sup> To question, to brood, to be attentive; these actions seem to be imperatives for all of humankind in the face of the Holocaust. Whether poetry should be written is a decision for Jewish poets alone. Where it is written, the reader has a responsibility for an empathetic identification which avoids appropriation as she questions, broods and attends.

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<sup>335</sup> Alter, "Vistas of Annihilation." p. 119.

<sup>336</sup> Daniel Libeskind, *Jewish Museum Berlin*, (Berlin: G + B Arts International, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>337</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, "Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), 360.

<sup>338</sup> Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* 43.

<sup>339</sup> This statement has a long history. " 'Attention', if you allow me to quote from Malebranche via Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka," states Celan, " 'attention is the natural prayer of the soul.'" From 'The Meridian'. Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999) 50.

Susan David Bernstein reminds readers that identification which slants into appropriation is a form of colonization, a reckless transgression of textual, historical and psychic boundaries, and a championing of an uncomplicated resemblance, where non-resemblance, though vexed, is more productive.<sup>340</sup>

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For Paul Celan, poetry is "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."<sup>341</sup> The message of Celan's '*Todesfuge*', 'Death Fugue', has reached many heartlands, among them that of the great Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi. Perhaps the most telling argument for poetry after Auschwitz lies in his words. Knowing that Paul Celan is not a camp survivor, and finding much of his other poetry to be problematically obscure,<sup>342</sup> Levi nevertheless states of '*Todesfuge*', "I read that Celan repudiated the poem; . . . that does not matter to me, I wear it inside me like a graft."<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Susan David Bernstein, "Promiscuous Reading: The Problem of Identification and Anne Frank's Diary," in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 146, 50, 55, 58.

<sup>341</sup> Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (1958)," 396.

<sup>342</sup> Levi writes: "I feel distrust for whoever is a poet for a few, or for himself alone. To write is to transmit; what can one say if the message is coded and no one has the key? You can say that to transmit this particular message, in this specific way, was necessary to the author, but with the rider that it is also useless to the rest of the world. I think that this is the case with Paul Celan . . ." Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots: A Personal Anthology* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2001) 198.

## Paul Celan: Writing the Holocaust through a Fractured Discourse of Absence

"With a changing key you unlock the house where  
the snow of what is silenced drifts."<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Beda Allemann, Stefan Reichert, and Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983) 1:112. Cited Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* xix.

## 1. CALAMITOUS TIMES: THE HOLOCAUST

### INTRODUCTION

Paul Celan was born Paul Anschel to a family of High German-speaking Jews in Czernowitz, capital of the Bukovina region of the Austrian Empire, which passed to Romania just before Celan's birth in 1920.<sup>345</sup> Czernowitz was occupied by Russia in 1940 and then by Germany in 1941.

Many people believe that Celan's poem '*Todesfuge*'<sup>346</sup> remains the ultimate poetic testimony to the victims of the Holocaust. It has often been assumed from the evidence of this poem that Paul Celan is a concentration camp survivor, but this is not the case.<sup>347</sup>

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Reich in June 1941, Celan was called up for forced labour and put to work. After several months he returned to Czernowitz and went into hiding; when he returned home, he found that his mother and father had been deported to the camps in Transnistria. His father died of typhus in 1942; a few months later his mother was shot. Celan blamed himself for their deaths until the end of his life, believing that he could have saved them if he had accompanied them.

Celan again worked in a forced labour camp from the summer of 1942 until winter 1944, where he shovelled dirt, stones and rocks. Following

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<sup>345</sup> Biographical details are taken from Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew passim*. See also David Patterson, Alan L Berger, and Sarito Cargas, eds., *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature* (Westport, Connecticut & London: Oryx Press, 2002) 27-30.

<sup>346</sup> Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 30-33.

<sup>347</sup> A number of biographers perpetuate this mistake. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, for instance, write: "Paul Celan (pseud. Paul Anschel) (1920–70) was a poet, born in Romania, deported to the camps, who wrote his extraordinary and difficult poetry in German while living in France." Primo Levi, *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-87*, ed. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, trans. Robert Gordon (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) 44 n. 8.



the Russians' return to Czernowitz, he escaped to Bucharest where he changed his name; from there he moved to Vienna, and finally, in 1948, he settled in Paris, where in 1952 he married Gisèle de LeStrange, a graphic artist. Their first son, Francois, died shortly after birth in 1953. Their second, Eric, named after Celan's mother Friederika, was born in 1955.

Celan became an intermittent patient in mental institutions during the 1960s; he visited Israel in 1969. Following the end of his marriage, he committed suicide by drowning in the Seine at the age of forty-nine in 1970. On the day of his death he left opened on his desk a biography of Hölderlin with an underlined passage: "Sometimes this genius goes dark and sinks down into the bitter well of his heart."<sup>348</sup>

Written in German, Celan's poetry speaks of a people nearly lost to the "thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech."<sup>349</sup> Memories of his mother provide a haunting refrain throughout his poetic works. Paul Celan's poetry is not easily accessible; John Felstiner states: "To grow attentive . . . is to activate these poems. Their truth, after all, may consist in obscurity or ambiguity, as also in occasional radiance."<sup>350</sup>

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#### A. THE CALAMITY OF THE HOLOCAUST: A TRADITIONAL WRITING

##### 'Todesfuge'

*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends  
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts  
wir trinken und trinken  
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng  
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der  
schreibt*

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<sup>348</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 287.

<sup>349</sup> Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* 3:186.

<sup>350</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* xvii.

*der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes  
 Haar Margarete  
 er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er  
 pfeift seine Rüden herbei  
 er pfeift seine Juden hervor lässt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde  
 er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz*

*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts  
 wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends  
 wir trinken und trinken  
 Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt  
 der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar  
 Margarete  
 Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften  
 da liegt man nicht eng*

*Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und  
 spielt  
 er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind  
 blau  
 stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz  
 auf*

*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts  
 wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends  
 wir trinken und trinken  
 ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen*

*Er ruft spielt süsser den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus  
 Deutschland  
 er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die  
 Luft  
 dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng*

*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts  
 wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland  
 wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken  
 der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau  
 er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau  
 ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
 er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft  
 er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus  
 Deutschland*

*dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith*

'Death Fugue'

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
 we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
 we drink and we drink it  
 we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined  
 A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
 he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete  
 he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he  
     whistles his pack out  
 he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave  
 he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown  
 we drink and we drink you  
 A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
 he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there one  
     lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now  
     and play  
 he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are so blue  
 jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the  
     dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown  
 we drink and we drink you  
 a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

he calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from  
     Germany  
 he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you  
     will rise into air  
 then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany  
 we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink  
     you  
 death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue  
 he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true  
 a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
 he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air  
 he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from  
     Germany

your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith<sup>351</sup>

'Death Fugue' has been much anthologised and analysed; and yet it is impossible to omit this germinal poem from discussion of the poetry of the Holocaust and of Paul Celan. Here Paul Celan writes the blighting of human and cultural ideals.

A proverbial symbol of whiteness, milk, when written as black, becomes a trope of insidious evil through the association between blackness and darkness; the evil is here repeatedly ingested, in a perversion of Judeo-Christian rituals of eating and drinking as sacraments of life. Israel was, in Jewish scriptures, the land of abundance, "flowing with milk and honey" (Joshua 5:6); Germany is a land of starvation, a Fatherland which murders its citizens with a perversion of a mother's food.

We may note the relentless rhythm of 'Death Fugue' with its lack of punctuation, and the variation and repetition of themes which allow no escape from the unrelenting presence of the death camp. Celan's title fuses death with the most sophisticated form of contrapuntal music.

"Death is a master from Germany"; the culture within which the master Johann Sebastian Bach composed "the apex of the mastery of contrapuntal style in its most varied and sophisticated forms"<sup>352</sup> is now renowned for a new area of expertise.

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<sup>351</sup> Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan, Revised and Expanded* 60-61.

<sup>352</sup> Karl Haas, *Inside Music: How to Understand, Listen to and Enjoy Good Music* (South Melbourne & Crows Nest: Sun Books-Macmillan, 1984) 228. Haas writes that ". . . noteworthy [fugues] are found as concluding parts of . . . Bach's toccata and Fugue in D Minor, Prelude and Fugue in C Minor, the forty-eight preludes and fugues that constitute *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and Beethoven's fugal treatment of his late piano sonatas and quartets, specifically No. 29 in B-flat Major ("Hammerklavier") and No. 31 in A-flat Major, and the Grosse Fugue in B-flat Major for string quartet." Haas, *Inside Music: How to Understand, Listen to and Enjoy Good Music* 227-8.

Celan writes the perversion of German culture in camp musicians forced to play classical music as graves are dug for the dance of death—"he commands us strike up for the dance".<sup>353</sup> John Felstiner notes that Celan's 'Death Fugue' is a blighted addition to the profound tradition in German and Austrian culture which associates music with death.<sup>354</sup>

The writing of the contamination of German culture continues in Celan's naming of the recipient of the Nazi's love-letter:

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete.

This woman, who represents the Aryan ideal of beauty, (which is shared with the Nazi commander whose "eyes are blue"), is the namesake of the eternal feminine heroine of Goethe's *Faust*.

Goethe was revered in Germany as the epitome of the Enlightenment; his heroine's name associates him with Faust's sale of the soul to the devil, while the serpents, by their proximity to it, contaminate the Nazi's act of letter-writing with connotations of the deathly and of temptation.

Beside the golden-haired Margarete, Celan places the Jewish ideal of feminine erotic beauty, the "black and beautiful" Shulamith of the Song of Songs (1:5). Her hair, in this representation, is bleached of all colour. Shulamith's "ashen" hair speaks of both the smoke-filled and ash-laden air of the concentration camps and of the bodies of Jewish women reduced to ash in the camp ovens.

Ash-laden air has become an iconic emblem of the death camps. Of the smoke and ash, Elie Wiesel writes:

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<sup>353</sup> For documentation of Jewish musician compelled to play during grave-digging, torture and executions, see Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 26-30.

<sup>354</sup> This tradition includes Schubert's "Der Tod und das Mädchen," Wagner's "Liebestod", Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, and Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. Ibid. 33.

Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whole bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my Faith forever.<sup>355</sup>

Rena Kornreich Gelissen writes of the dead mothers "who are now mere memories in the ashen air."<sup>356</sup>

In this poem Celan approaches the concept of "the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech"<sup>357</sup> and writes his own situation as precariously close to the perverted culture of Nazi Germany. For Celan's poem is, in a different sense, a death-fugue, a complex elegy for the Jewish dead; and the master-poet Celan, as he writes, places himself, with Bach, as part of the culture of the German language.

Paul Celan became uncomfortable about the German response to this germinal Holocaust poem. John Felstiner discusses an article in a German journal which includes statements by students who assert that they read 'Death Fugue' as a statement of forgiveness and reconciliation;<sup>358</sup> possibly Celan was aware of similar misinterpretations. Certainly in later life he refused to include 'Death Fugue' in public readings and stated, "In my first book I was still transfiguring things—I'll never do that again."<sup>359</sup>

In 1959, in *Sprachgitter (Speechgrill)*, Paul Celan published '*Engführung*' ('Stretto'),<sup>360</sup> again taking up the concept of the fugue,<sup>361</sup> but this time

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<sup>355</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (London: Penguin, 1981) 9.

<sup>356</sup> Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* 169.

<sup>357</sup> Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (1958)," 395.

<sup>358</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 118. Citing Charlotte Rumpf, "Die 'Todesfugue' von Paul Celan: Ein Unterrichts Beispiel," *Gesellschaft—Staat—Erziehung* 2/5 (1957): 232–41.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

<sup>360</sup> Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 118.

<sup>361</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary on-line gives a primary definition of "stretto" as "A direction to perform a passage, esp. a final passage, in quicker time" but that has no relevance here. The second meaning, citing Ouseley's *Counterpoint* xxi, states: "In a fugue the stretto is an artifice by which the subject and answer are, as it were, bound close together, by being made to overlap." Although John

writing the catastrophe of the Holocaust through a fractured discourse of absence. I will discuss this poem in relation to Rena Kornreich Gelissen's Holocaust memoir, *Rena's Promise*, and to the concept of the void, which Daniel Libeskind has incorporated into the architecture of the Jewish Museum of Berlin.

\*

B. UNCOVERING ABSENCE IN THE CALAMITY OF THE HOLOCAUST:  
'STRETTO'

" . . . the kind of topography which was created by the devastation of humanity."<sup>362</sup>

\*

'Engführung'

\*

*VERBRACHT ins  
Gelände  
mit der untrüglichen Spur:*

*Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. Die Steine, weiss,  
mit den Schatten der Halme:  
Lies nicht mehr—schau!  
Schau nicht mehr—geh!*

*Geh, deine Stunde  
hat keine Schwestern, du bist—  
bist zuhause. Ein Rad, langsam,  
rollt aus sich selber, die Speichen  
klettern,  
klettern auf schwärzlichem Feld, die Nacht  
braucht keine Sterne, nirgends  
fragt es nach dir.*

---

Felstiner translates this title as 'Stretto', others translate *'Engführung'* as 'The Straitening'. See for instance Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan, Revised and Expanded* 115. Peter Szondi identifies as "stretto passages" those which are placed on the right side of the page, which "merge with the entrance of the next voice." Peter Szondi, "Reading 'Engführung': An Essay on the Poetry of Paul Celan," *Boundary 2* xi, no. 3 (1983): 236.

<sup>362</sup> Daniel Libeskind, *Jewish Museum Berlin*, (Berlin: G + B Arts International, 1999), p. 25.

\*

*Nirgends  
fragt es nach dir—*

*Der Ort, wo sie lagen, er hat  
einen Namen—er hat  
keinen. Sie lagen nicht dort. Etwas  
lag zwischen ihnen. Sie  
sahn nicht hindurch.*

*Sahn nicht, nein,  
redeten von  
Worten. Keines  
erwachte, der  
Schlaf  
kam über sie.*

\*

*Kam, kam. Nirgends  
fragt es—*

*Ich bins, ich,  
ich lag zwischen euch, ich war  
offen, war  
hörbar, ich tickte euch zu, euer Atem  
gehorchte, ich  
bin es noch immer, ihr  
schlaft ja.*

\*

*Bin es noch immer—*

*Jahre.  
Jahre, Jahre, ein Finger  
tastet hinab und hinan, tastet  
umher:  
Nahtstellen, fühlbar, hier  
klafft es weit auseinander, hier  
wuchs es wieder zusammen—wer  
deckte es zu?*

\*

*Deckte es  
zu—wer?*



*Kam, kam.  
 Kam ein Wort, kam,  
 kam durch die Nacht,  
 wollt leuchten, wollt leuchten.*

*Asche.  
 Asche, Asche.  
 Nacht.  
 Nacht-und-Nacht.—Zum  
 Aug geh, zum feuchten.*

\*

*Zum  
 Aug geh,  
 zum feuchten—*

*Orkane.  
 Orkane, von je,  
 Partikelgestöber, das andre,  
 du  
 weisst ja, wir  
 lasens im Buche, war  
 Meinung.*

*War, war  
 Meinung. Wie  
 fassten wir uns  
 an—an mit  
 diesen  
 Händen?*

*Es stand auch geschrieben, dass.  
 Wo? Wir  
 taten ein Schweigen darüber,  
 giftgestillt, gross,  
 ein  
 grünes  
 Schweigen, ein Kelchblatt, es  
 hing ein Gedanke an Pflanzliches dran—  
 grün, ja,  
 hing, ja,  
 unter hämischem  
 Himmel.*

*An, ja,  
 Pflanzliches.*

*Ja.*

Orkane, Par-  
 tikelgestöber, es blieb  
 Zeit, blieb,  
 es beim Stein zu versuchen—er  
 war gastlich, er  
 fiel nicht ins Wort. Wie  
 gut wir es hatten:

Körnig,  
 körnig und faserig. Stengelig,  
 dicht;  
 traubig und strahlig: nierig,  
 plattig und  
 klumpig: locker, ver-  
 ästelt—: er, es  
 fiel nicht ins Wort, es  
 sprach,  
 sprach gerne zu trockenen Augen, eh es sie schloss.

Sprach, sprach.  
 War, war.

Wir  
 liessen nicht locker, standen  
 inmitten, ein  
 Porenbau, und  
 es kam.

Kam auf uns zu, kam  
 hindurch, flickte  
 unsichtbar, flickte  
 an der letzten Membran,  
 und  
 die Welt, ein Tausendkristall,  
 schoss an, schoss an.

\*

Schoss an, schoss an.  
 Dann—

Nächte, entmischt. Kreise,  
 grün oder blau, rote  
 Quadrate: die  
 Welt setzt ihr Innerstes ein  
 im Spiel mit den neuen  
 Stunden.—Kreise,  
 rot oder schwarz, helle  
 Quadrate, kein

*Flugschatten,  
kein  
Messtisch, keine  
Rauchseele steigt und spielt mit.*

*Steigt und  
spielt mit—*

*In der Eulenflucht, beim  
versteinerten Aussatz,  
bei  
unsern geflohenen Händen, in  
der jüngsten Verwerfung,  
überm  
Kugelfang an  
der verschütteten Mauer:*

*sichtbar, aufs  
neue: die  
Rillen, die*

*Chöre, damals, die  
Psalmten. Ho, ho-  
sianna.*

*Also  
stehen noch Tempel. Ein  
Stern  
hat wohl noch Licht.  
Nichts,  
nichts ist verloren.*

*Ho-  
sianna.*

*In der Eulenflucht, hier,  
die Gespräche, taggrau,  
der Grundwasserspuren.*

\*

*(—taggrau,  
der  
Grundwasserspuren—*

*Verbracht  
ins Gelände  
mit  
der untrüglichen*

*Spur:*

*Gras.*  
*Gras,*  
*auseinandergeschrieben.)*

\*

'Stretto'

\*

Taken off into  
 the terrain  
 with the unmistakable trace:

Grass, written asunder. The stones, white  
 with the grassblades' shadows:  
 Read no more—look!  
 Look no more—go!

Go, your hour  
 has no sisters, you are—  
 are at home. Slowly a wheel  
 rolls out of itself, the spokes  
 clamber,  
 clamber on the blackened field, night  
 needs no stars, nowhere  
 are you asked after.

\*

Nowhere  
 are you asked after—

The place where they lay, it has  
 a name—it has  
 none. They did not lie there. Something  
 lay between them. They  
 did not see through it.

Did not see, no,  
 spoke of  
 words. Not one  
 awoke,  
 sleep  
 came over them.

\*

Came, came. Nowhere  
asked—

I'm the one. I,  
I lay between you, I was  
open, was  
audible, I ticked toward you, your breath  
obeyed, I  
am still the one, and  
you're sleeping.

\*

Am still the one—

Years.  
Years, years, a finger  
gropes down and up, gropes  
all around:  
sutures, palpable, here  
it gapes wide open, here  
it grew back together—who  
covered it up?

\*

Covered it  
up—who?

Came, came.  
Came a word, came,  
came through the night,  
would glisten, would glisten.

Ashes.  
Ashes, ashes.  
Night.  
Night-and-night—Go  
to the eye, to the moist one.

\*

Go  
to the eye,  
to the moist one—

Hurricanes.  
Hurricanes, from all time,

particle flurry, the other thing,  
 you  
 know this, we  
 read it in the book, was  
 opinion.

Was, was  
 opinion. How  
 did we take  
 hold—hold with  
 these  
 hands?

It was also written that.  
 Where? We  
 decked it in silence,  
 poison-hushed, huge,  
 a  
 green  
 silence, a sepal, a  
 thought of something plantlike hung there—  
 green, yes,  
 hung, yes,  
 under spiteful  
 skies.

Of, yes,  
 plantlike.

Yes.  
 Hurricanes, par-  
 ticle flurry, there was still  
 time, still,  
 to try with the stone—it  
 was welcoming, it  
 did not interrupt. How  
 good we had it:

Grainy,  
 grainy and stringy. Stalky,  
 thick;  
 bunched and radiate; knobby,  
 level and  
 lumpy; crumbling, out-  
 branching—: the stone, it  
 did not interrupt, it  
 spoke,  
 spoke gladly to dry eyes, before it shut them.

Spoke, spoke.  
Was, was.

We  
would not let go, stood firm  
in the midst, a  
framework of pores, and  
it came.

Came up to us, came  
on through, it mended  
invisibly, mended  
on the final membrane,  
and  
the world, thousandfaced crystal,  
shot out, shot out.

\*

Shot out, shot out.  
Then—

Nights, demixed. Circles,  
green or blue, red  
squares: the  
world set its inmost  
at stake with the new  
hours. —Circles,  
red or black, bright  
squares, no  
flight shadow,  
no  
plane table, no  
chimney soul rises and joins in.

\*

Rises and  
joins in—

At owls' flight, near the  
petrified lepra,  
near  
our fugitive hands, at  
the latest rejection,  
above the  
bullet trap on  
the ruined wall:

visible, once  
again: the  
grooves, the

choirs, back then, the  
Psalms. Ho, ho-  
sannah.

Therefore  
temples still stand. A  
star  
may still give light.  
Nothing.  
nothing is lost.

Ho-  
sannah.

At owls' flight, here,  
the conversations, daygrey,  
of groundwater traces.

\*

(—daygrey,  
of  
groundwater traces—

Taken off  
into the terrain  
with  
the unmistakable  
trace:

Grass.  
Grass,  
written asunder.)<sup>363</sup>

\*

In 'Stretto', Paul Celan again writes the Holocaust, but this poem no longer includes representations of the atrocity. Instead, he constructs here a wintry landscape of the mind, which contains an absence, the

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<sup>363</sup> Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 118.



absence of six million European Jews and of their culture. This is humankind's post-Holocaust landscape and it is a representation of the mind of the Holocaust survivor.

For most of the poem the reader struggles to identify the space and to orient herself; the landscape is devoid of human representation until the end. With his landscape, and his fractured and ambiguous language, in 'Stretto', Paul Celan moves deeper into inaccessible terrain.<sup>364</sup>

In 'Stretto' Celan uncovers a landscape of absence which is threatened with obliteration by the grass of time and by the fetid plant of silence. The sparsely placed motifs which delineate this topos include stones, grass and dismembered body parts— a finger, hands and an eye. In this discourse, Celan writes in order to resist the erasure of history.

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In the first section of 'Stretto', the inscription on stones is merely the shadows of the grass which the poetic speaker parts to reveal them:

Grass, written asunder. The stones, white  
with the grassblades' shadows:  
Read no more—look!  
Look no more—go!

Grass represents the transient in Hebrew scriptures, compared with the permanent stone —"The grass withers, the flower fades" (Isaiah 40:7); "My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass" (Ps 103:11). The inscription of the Holocaust dead is merely a shadow of such transience; they are therefore at risk of becoming those who are lost to memory, who

. . . have perished as though they have never existed;  
they have become as though they have never been born,  
they and their children after them. (Sirach 44:9).

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<sup>364</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 118.

Both stones and grass carry Holocaust intertextual associations. In concentration camp memoirs, grass is the only supplement to a starvation diet:

We work in the spring dirt, turning over the soil the same as we did the year before. The fresh young sprigs of new grass stick their white tips out of the soil, tempting us to gather them for a midday snack. The succulent, sweet juice of these grasses is a pleasant sensation to our tired taste buds.<sup>365</sup>

Human beings who are forced to eat grass have been brutalized to the point of animality. Death camp prisoners have been shaved in humiliating circumstances—"We are shaved and disinfected for lice. We huddle together closely for warmth, while stamping our bare feet"<sup>366</sup>—transported in cattle cars, and branded with identification numbers like cattle."<sup>367</sup> Grass carries echoes, too, of contemporary Auschwitz, and "the four metres of human bonemeal that makes the grass the greenest in Poland."<sup>368</sup>

The fragile inscription of grass-shadow gives way in the sixth section of 'Stretto' to a fetid, lush vegetation of silence, which threatens to blanket the memory of the event, blotting out both the traces of inscription and the stones themselves. In the face of this uncontained growth, the poet's task of "writing asunder" the grass of forgetfulness becomes more urgent.

At the start of 'Stretto', stones are merely anonymous markers. It is only by reading back from the Holocaust references at the end of the poem that we associate them with the Holocaust dead. These stones may be the uninscribed tombstones in the Weissensee cemetery of Berlin which are

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<sup>365</sup> Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* 147.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid. 133.

<sup>367</sup> Lidia Rosenfeld Vago, "The Black Hole of our Planet Earth," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), 277.

<sup>368</sup> Allan Hall, "Auschwitz, Where Survivors and Ghosts Meet," *Age*, 29 January 2005, 18.

described by Daniel Libeskind in "Trauma": they were erected by wealthy families for the future, with the expectation that they would be inscribed as future generations of the family died, but they remain empty, for no family survives.<sup>369</sup>

The stones may represent an absence; they may mark the graves which are denied to the Holocaust dead. These may be the stones of the hard ground dug by camp inmates,<sup>370</sup> or they may be survivors' hearts which have been turned to stone by the experience of the camps: "We hug each other, crying. 'We are free!' My heart is a stone in a river of tears."<sup>371</sup>

They echo the stone eyes elsewhere in Paul Celan's poetry; in 'Confidence', the eye is "a strange one, next to / ours: mute / under a stone lid"<sup>372</sup> and in 'Flower', the eye is "as blind as the stone".<sup>373</sup> Stones carry mythical associations of the Gorgon. In Greek mythology, those who look upon the Gorgon are turned to stone; these eyes have looked upon the evil of the Nazi regime and been similarly petrified. In 'Stretto' the eye is clogged by the ashes of the crematorium and by lives turned to dust:

Ashes.  
Ashes, ashes.  
Night.  
Night-and-night.—Go  
to the eye, to the moist one.

The final stone markers in this landscape of the mind, clearly inscribed but deeply ambivalent, will be discussed below.

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<sup>369</sup> Daniel Libeskind, "Trauma," in *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. Shelley Horstein and Florence Jacobowitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>370</sup> See, for instance, Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* 259ff. "I thrust my shovel into the soil. It's rock-hard."

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.* 266.

<sup>372</sup> Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 95.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

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The body in 'Stretto' is dismembered, written as a dissociated finger which points towards the Holocaust wound, "gropes down and up, gropes / all around: / sutures, palpable, here / it gapes wide open, here / it grew back together". Such fragmentation echoes the dissociation which is the response to trauma in Holocaust survivors. Splitting is found in *Rena's Promise* as the narrator responds to the shaving of body hair under the dehumanising gaze of German officers:

It is the body that finds its clothes, shivering uncontrollably from cold and fear and anger, quaking from unshed tears of shame. It is the body that waits for its sister. The feet stand in line until they are told to march. The hand takes her hand and together they return to the women's camp.<sup>374</sup>

This fragmentation of the body duplicates the poem's broken landscape as Paul Celan uncovers and points to the partly healed wound of the Holocaust. Both stone and body bear the marks of the death camp experience; the wounds inscribe the past on the human body, as the grass and the cracks in the final section form inscriptions on stone.

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Absence in 'Stretto' is written not only through the emptiness of the landscape, but by the sudden undermining of what appear to be spaces of hope:

Go, your hour  
has no sisters, you are—  
are at home. Slowly a wheel  
rolls out of itself, the spokes  
clamber,  
clamber on the blackened field, night  
needs no stars . . .

These lines appear to be a home-coming, an impression which is reinforced by the velvety, starless darkness, and the dignified, rolling

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<sup>374</sup> Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* 140.

movement of the wheel of the sky. Only when the final line is reached does hope collapse:

" . . . nowhere / are you asked after."

Reading back, we understand that to live in this space, with all carers dead, is to be bereft of all positive human connection. "Your hour has no sisters" literally, not only because of its unique depravity. As Rena Kornreich Gelissen states in the last line of *Rena's Promise*, "There is no one to go home to any more."<sup>375</sup>

The starless night is then read as an undoing of the covenant which promises the survival of Yahweh's people—" [The Lord] brought [Abram] outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendents be'." (Gen 15:4). "Night needs no stars" because the covenantal promise has not been kept.

\*

The many negatives in 'Stretto' reinforce the absence which Paul Celan has written into the reflective landscape of the poem, while adding a significant ambiguity. Seven negatives are written in the following short section: "none", "did not lie", "did not see", "Did not see", "no", "Not one", "nowhere".

The place where they lay, it has  
a name—it has  
none. They did not lie there. Something  
lay between them. They  
did not see through it.

Did not see, no,  
spoke of  
words. Not one  
awoke,  
sleep  
came over them.

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid. 266.

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Came, came. Nowhere  
asked—

I'm the one. I,  
I lay between you, I was  
open, was  
audible, I ticked toward you, your breath  
obeyed, I  
am still the one, and  
you're sleeping.

Who, in the face of such negation, is the "I", repeated six times, with which this section ends? Memoirs of the death camps speak of the fear of death overtaking people in the night, of inmates so crowded on sleeping shelves that they fear waking next to a corpse.<sup>376</sup> The "I" in these circumstances could be Death, ticking nearer each day.

But the overwhelming number of negatives suggest that the "I" should be read as annihilation, the obliteration and unmaking of people into non-persons until even the memory of them is denied. "We are nothing in their eyes . . ." <sup>377</sup> states the narrator in *Rena's Promise*; "They destroy the evidence so there will be no proof, no records, nothing but our memories, if we survive, and they will try to obliterate those, too." <sup>378</sup>

Celan's negatives are neither a Heideggerian primordial negation of being,<sup>379</sup> nor the abyss which informs Existential angst.<sup>380</sup> In the words

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid. 143.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid. 246.

<sup>379</sup> See, for instance, Heidegger's statement in "What is Metaphysics?", his inaugural address at Freiburg, "Dasein means being held out into the nothing." Martin Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik? Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967) 18.

<sup>380</sup> For discussion of other possible readings of the concept of the void, see Jacques Derrida, "Response to Daniel Libeskind: Ecole des Hautes-Études en Sciences Sociales," in *Radix-Matrix*, ed. Daniel Libeskind (Munich & New York: Prestel, 1997), 110ff. In this conversation, Derrida proposes a correspondence

of Michael Bernstein, "European Jewry had been reduced only to 'a nothing,' without Heideggerian metaphysical attributes or redemptive significance."<sup>381</sup> Because absence is written in part through a heavy use of negatives, this absence, like the concept of "nothing" wherever it is found, becomes deeply ambiguous.

Thomas Mautner, in the entry, "Nothing" in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, considers the sentence "Nothing requires more space than is available here". This sentence both means that there is enough space, and, in another sense, that there is not. This ambiguity of the negative is exploited when Ulysses gives his name to the man-eating Cyclops Polyphemus as *Outis*, Nobody; when Polyphemus is asked who has injured him, he replies, "Nobody did it".<sup>382</sup> We will consider below the ambiguity of the final lines of 'Stretto', which contain the words, "Nothing, / nothing is lost," and the religious inscription of Yahweh as No One in 'Psalm'.

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Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum of Berlin is organised around "a centre which is not, around what is not visible"<sup>383</sup> through the incorporation of the concept of the void. The void, like the absence in Paul Celan's wintry topos of the mind, is a space of tangible emptiness in which Daniel Libeskind constructs the annihilation of a culture, and of the people who carried it.<sup>384</sup>

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between Libeskind's void and Plato's concept of the *chora*, but this suggestion is not accepted by Daniel Libeskind.

<sup>381</sup> Bernstein, *Five Portraits: Modernity and the Imagination in Twentieth-Century Writing* 102.

<sup>382</sup> Thomas Mautner, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996) 295.

<sup>383</sup> Daniel Libeskind, "Between the Lines," in *Radix-Matrix: Architecture and Writings*. (Munich & New York: Prestel, 1997), 34.

<sup>384</sup> Libeskind, "Trauma," 46.

Libeskind's voids are sudden chasms, architectural spaces, concrete on the inside and graphite on the outside, which cut through the museum and divide the building; three of them are accessible, but two are impenetrable and can be seen only from small vertical windows in the sixty bridges which connect the museum galleries. Grey light falls down the shafts. All areas of the void are designed to remain empty.

Libeskind's voids, like Celan's absence, inscribes "an emptiness which will never be eliminated from this city"<sup>385</sup> or from human culture. Like Celan, Libeskind constructs "a kaleidoscope of gaps and traces"; the voids are both the spaces of the missing dead and the traces of the unborn.<sup>386</sup> Visually interpreted, the void signifies an unbridgeable abyss between pre- and post-Holocaust worlds.

In constructing his space of emptiness, Libeskind, like Celan, also builds a link,

an imaginable treaty: one between an irreducible void, in time and in space . . . and an uncertain but at least receptive subject whose being is tied to the void, but who has need of a few walls for shelter and guidance.<sup>387</sup>

Like Libeskind, in the final section of 'Stretto', Paul Celan provides shelter and guidance to the disoriented reader with the stone markers which again appear in his landscape of absence. This time they are heavily inscribed, neither anonymous nor disorienting. This is now "the terrain / with / the unmistakable trace".

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Stone appears now in 'Stretto' as both the Black Wall of Auschwitz "above the / bullet trap on / the ruined wall", and the Western wall of the Temple

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<sup>385</sup> Daniel Libeskind, *Jewish Museum Berlin* (Berlin: G + B Arts International, 1999) 37.

<sup>386</sup> Libeskind, "Trauma," 47.

<sup>387</sup> Anthony Vidler, "Afterword," in *The Space of Encounter*, ed. Daniel Libeskind (New York: Universe, 2000), 224.



of Jerusalem with the cracks which are used to hold the written prayers of the world's remaining Jews— "Therefore / temples still stand". These stones now site the reader within the discourses of the Holocaust and of Jewish religious belief.

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The space of these stones is written beside the creation of a stone world of crystalline beauty which " . . . thousandfaced crystal / shot out, shot out". Pristine and beautiful this world may be, geometric and colourful against the black night, but because of the number of facets of the crystal it carries traces of the "Thousand Year Reich" and of Crystal-night. It is chillingly inorganic and inhospitable and is a space where "no / chimney soul rises and joins in."

By contrast, both the ruined Black Wall of Auschwitz and the Temple wall, which stand in water in the grey half-light, form a refuge for "the chimney soul" which is as shadowy as the grass-blade shadows on stone which open the poem. A sound which is both mocking Nazi soldier song<sup>388</sup> and stammered Psalm of praise, ". . . Ho, ho- / sannah," steadies and is clarified, "Ho- / sannah."

So "nothing, / nothing is lost"; the risk of nothingness is no longer a possibility, and the stones remain in memory. Annihilation from cultural memory cannot take place while what is absent is written in this poem, where smoke-souls remain as traces on broken stones of walls in the landscape of the mind. Daniel Libeskind's fear, that the void will be obliterated and will then "generate in itself an even greater emptiness in the posthistorical world,"<sup>389</sup> has been averted. Everything remains where, ironically, nearly everything is lost—everything except an absence with a trace of inscription or an inscription of a trace.

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<sup>388</sup> A Nazi marching song included the words "For we are Hitler's brown-clad host—Huzza, ho-ho". See Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 123.

<sup>389</sup> Libeskind, "Trauma," 43.

This poem acts as a collector or anchor of historical memory and testifies to it. In writing absence in 'Stretto', Paul Celan writes asunder the grass-blades of forgetfulness which are written in the second stanza of the poem.

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Alan Mintz, in *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, defines catastrophe as "a destructive event whose horror derives from its bursting of the available paradigms of explanation."<sup>390</sup> The paradigmatic Jewish calamity, until the twentieth century, was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE; the classic responses to this calamity are found in the Old Testament books of Lamentations, Second Isaiah and Daniel, which are examples respectively of lamentation, consolation and apocalypse.<sup>391</sup>

The Holocaust, after the destruction of the Temple, forms a second catastrophic event. Bent on avoiding the received motifs of evil, wishing to write neither lamentation, consolation nor apocalypse, Paul Celan, like Libeskind, chooses to write the Holocaust as a void. By doing so he avoids the risk of effacing forgetting with what Jean Baudrillard calls "an artificial memory . . . the restaging of extermination."<sup>392</sup>

As he writes a wintry, disorienting landscape in 'Stretto', devoid of human life, and a convoluted tangle of negatives which are nearly impossible to read, Paul Celan inscribes the Holocaust as absence on the hearts of humankind. In 'Psalm'<sup>393</sup> he will again visit the catastrophe of the Holocaust; here he will write his pain at the absence of an intervening God.

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<sup>390</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* 21.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981) 49.

## 2A. BELIEF: INSCRIBING AN ABSENT GOD

### Psalm

*Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,  
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.  
Niemand.*

*Gelobt seist du, Niemand.  
Dir zulieb wollen  
wir blühen.  
Dir  
entgegen.*

*Ein Nichts  
waren wir, sind wir, werden  
wir bleiben, blühend:  
die Nichts-, die  
Niemandrose.*

*Mit  
dem Griffel seelenhell,  
dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,  
der Krone rot  
vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen  
über, o über  
dem Dorn.*

### Psalm

No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,  
No one incants our dust.  
No one.

Blessed art thou, No One.  
In thy sight would  
we bloom.  
In thy  
spite.

A Nothing  
we were, are now and ever  
shall be, blooming:  
the Nothing-, the  
No One's Rose.

With  
 our pistil soul-bright,  
 our stamen heaven-waste,  
 our corona red  
 from the purpleword we sang  
 over, O over  
 the thorn.<sup>394</sup>

John Felstiner states that the psalm, benediction, doxology and prayer forms of this poem "are undercut in breath-turnings,<sup>395</sup> abysses opened beneath those ritual forms."<sup>396</sup> Many of the Psalms in Jewish scriptures, although essentially hymns of lament and praise, contain expressions of rage, doubt and enmity,<sup>397</sup> but the anger and bitterness of Paul Celan's 'Psalm' is of a different order.

The opening lines of 'Psalm' reinscribe the second creation narrative of Jewish scriptural tradition, where the Lord God forms all creatures from the dust of the ground in Genesis 2:7,19 and they are named by the man.

These lines are an inscription of emptiness, and an unmaking of creation, a response to the undoing of Jewish life and the absence of Divine intervention in the Holocaust. For while within the creation myth Yahweh both creates and sustains the created life, in the Holocaust it appears that God has abandoned his people: "No one kneads us again out of earth and clay, / No one incants our dust. / No one."

The fourth line, "Blessed art thou, No One", increases the complexity of this concept of negation and is a reworking of Ulysses' self-naming in his

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid. 156-57.

<sup>395</sup> "Breath-turn" is one of Paul Celan's most striking word coinages, and a translation of the title of his 1967 book of poetry, *Atemwende*.

<sup>396</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 167.

<sup>397</sup> See, for instance, Psalm 13:1, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" and Psalm 35:17, "How long, O Lord, will you look on?" and "Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence" (v. 23). See also Psalm 22, around which gospel accounts of Christ's crucifixion were probably shaped: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (22:1), "My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws: you lay me in the dust of death" (22:15).

encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus which was discussed above. Here Celan makes ironic comment on the Kabbalah, where the mystical Nought, in the doctrine of the thirteenth century's Azriel of Genoa, is that from which everything creative proceeds: "The Nought is that which is present in everything that arises as the medium of its transformation," Gershom Scholem states.<sup>398</sup> "The Righteous stands in the Nothing . . . The nothing is the Nothing of God."<sup>399</sup> We will discuss the Kabbala further below.

Michael Hamburger's translates "*Dir / entgegen*" neutrally as "Towards / you";<sup>400</sup> John Felstiner's translation of the line as "In thy / spite" underlines the bitterness of the Jewish sense of abandonment as Yahweh's people bloom only into the absence of a wasted heaven, in a trope which subverts the fertility associated with floral pistil and stamens.<sup>401</sup>

The "soul-bright" pistil, an image of shining hopefulness, adds additional poignancy to the speaker's sense of the empty heavens—"our stamen heaven-waste". The motif of the blood-red corona forms a part of the Jewish-Christian dialectic which Paul Celan continues in 'Late And Deep', 'Benedicta', 'Mandorla' and 'Tenebrae'.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* 420-26.

<sup>399</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Die Lehre vom 'Gerechtem' in dem Jüdischen Mystik," in *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (Zurich: 1959), 290. Cited Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 181. Publisher not cited.

<sup>400</sup> Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan, Revised and Expanded* 152-3.

<sup>401</sup> Although not really correct English, John Felstiner's "In thy / spite" is an attempt to capture in translation both meanings of "entgegen", which, as a preposition following the dative, means both "towards" and "against". See Harold T. Betteridge, ed., *Cassell's German-English, English-German Dictionary* (London & New York: Cassell & Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>402</sup> Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 27, 175, 73, 03.

## 2B. BELIEF: A BITTER JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALECTIC

In the last lines of 'Psalm', the corona of the flower is "red / from the purpleword we sang / over, O over / the thorn," a reference to the crowd's acceptance of responsibility for the death of Jesus Christ in Matthew 27:25, "His blood be on us and on our children", a textual reference which has been used as justification for the centuries of Christian blame and persecution of Jews which culminate in the Holocaust.

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John Felstiner, in *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, responds to what he sees as the appropriation of Paul Celan's poetry by Christian interpreters; he insists that Celan should be read as critiquing Christianity from within a Jewish discourse.<sup>403</sup> If we accept his point of view, we must ask why, in 'Tenebrae' and 'Benedicta' especially, Paul Celan writes from within the Christian discourse itself. It is possible that in these poems he seeks to subvert the discourse within which he stands, but this does not seem to be an adequate explanation of his position.

I suggest that these poems demonstrate Celan's acceptance of the philosophies of Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin, the scholars who met regularly in Ansona Switzerland from 1922 until 1976, where they formulated the discourse of the history of religions.<sup>404</sup>

Their scholarship addresses the plurality of religions; their belief that there are many revelations from one source of truth blurs the traditional boundaries between Christianity and Judaism. As Steven Wasserstrom states, this thinking

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<sup>403</sup> See, for instance, Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 104-5.

<sup>404</sup> See Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999) 48-9.

starts from the fact of being religiously numerous—and goes from there to defend against that fact. This *dédoublement*, in which the thinker imaginatively projects into a unifying perfection outside pluralistic social conditions, into a singular theophany accessible as symbols, disrupts an unproblematic relation to everyday belief and practice. It thus seeks, out of this imaginative rupture, a religion resistant to rupture.<sup>405</sup>

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Until 1971, *Tenebrae* was the office of Matins and Lauds in the last three days of Holy Week in the Roman Catholic liturgy. During this act of worship, candles are gradually extinguished until the church becomes dark; this darkness symbolises the darkness which came over the land at the time of Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>406</sup> The Lamentations of Jeremiah, Judaism's lament for the fall of Jerusalem and for all more recent calamities, form part of this office. François Couperin's cantata of the Lamentations was known to Paul Celan.

'Tenebrae'

*Nah sind wir, Herr,  
nahe und greifbar.*

*Gegriffen schon, Herr,  
ineinander verkrallt, als wär  
der Leib eines jeden von uns  
dein Leib, Herr.*

*Bete, Herr,  
bete zu uns,  
wir sind nah.*

*Windschief gingen wir hin,  
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken  
nach Mulde und Maar.*

*Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.*

*Es war Blut, es war,*

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>406</sup> See Matthew 27: 45, Mark 15: 33, Luke 23: 44.

*was du vergossen, Herr.*

*Es glänzte.*

*Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.  
Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.  
Wir haben getrunken, Herr.  
Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.*

*Bete, Herr.  
Wir sind nah.*

'Tenebrae'

Near are we, Lord,  
near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,  
clawed into each other, as if  
each of our bodies were  
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,  
pray to us,  
we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,  
went there to bend  
over pit and crater.

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

It was blood, it was  
what you shed, Lord.

It shined.<sup>407</sup>

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.  
Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.  
We have drunk, Lord.  
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.  
We are near.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> In correct English, "It shone." Another example of Felstiner's small failures with the English language.

<sup>408</sup> Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 102-03.



'Tenebrae' carries echoes of and challenges to Hölderlin's poem, 'Patmos'.<sup>409</sup> Michael André Bernstein suggests in addition that Celan's coinage of the Holocaust dead as "wind-skewed" into smoke and ashes, echoes the description of Christ as "pliant as a wind-blown sleeve" in Gottfried van Strassburg's thirteenth-century version of *Tristram*.<sup>410</sup>

In 'Tenebrae' we see an example of "the dialectics of continuity and revolt";<sup>411</sup> Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, is addressed as "Lord" but is urged to pray to the poem's speakers rather than they to him. Yet a continuity exists, because, like the Holocaust victims, Jesus was a Jew who was unjustly killed and not rescued by the God whom he believed in.

"Near are we, Lord, / Near and graspable" the poem begins. Nearness, in the Psalms and in the prophetic books of the Jewish scriptures, carries the potential for both human damage and Divine-human connection and nurturing, as in Psalm 119:150-151:

Those who persecute me with evil purpose draw near;  
they are far from your law.  
Yet you are near O Lord,  
and all your commandments are true.

In this poem, the nearness to God recalls images of the dead as they are removed from the gas chambers entwined; they are "Grasped already, Lord, / clawed into each other" in their shared death-agony.

In 'Tenebrae', the speaking subjects drink blood, as they drank black milk in 'Death Fugue'. They drink not from a chalice, but from the feeding trough used by animals. The image of the literal, rather than of the sacramental, drinking of Christ's blood is sickening, and is made more so by the writing of the drinkers as empty people with vacant minds: "Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord."

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<sup>409</sup> See, for instance, Bernstein, *Five Portraits: Modernity and the Imagination in Twentieth-Century Writing* 108.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*

This is a depiction of what the death camps knew as "*Muselmänner*", the living dead who still walked although their minds were gone. Theirs is the image which haunts humankind following films of the liberation of the death camps; the camera turned to piles of corpses, but it is the defenceless living skeletons with huge eyes nearby who remain with humankind as the indelible image of the camps.

As in 'Psalm', blood is a principle motif in 'Tenebrae'. With the introduction of this concept into the poem, Celan introduces associations with accusations of Jews drinking the blood of Christian babies in the demonising that has formed part of anti-Semitism,<sup>412</sup> with Jewish dietary laws, and with blood as the symbol of guilt and responsibility following death or murder.

As the subjects drink the blood in 'Tenebrae', they consume the reflected image of Jesus Christ; here we have the writing of blood as mirror, and what is mirrored is the founder of the religion of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

That the figure other than the drinker is reflected in the unstable mirror of blood opens a space for investigation of self and other. Jacques Lacan states that the self is experienced as autonomous only when reflected in the mirror of another's eyes, and notes too the contrast between the wholeness of the reflected image and the self-doubting fragmentation experienced by the viewer within.<sup>413</sup> To look into any mirror and see a reflection of someone other than the self is to experience the terror of the loss of subjectivity.

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<sup>411</sup> Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of my Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1980) 166.

<sup>412</sup> On this issue, see, for instance, R Po-Chia Hsia, *Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>413</sup> Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York & London: Norton, 2001) 1285ff.

In writing this image Paul Celan constructs the space to question the part which the Jewish founder of the murderers' religion plays in the fragmented, unstable and reflected identity of the poem's speakers, those who went "wind-skewed" into the "pit and crater" of Holocaust death. Perhaps something of the unjustly suffering Jew is part of the drinker's self-knowledge; worse, perhaps the self, even if a self-in-process, has been entirely consumed by the otherness imposed on the Jews by the Christian perpetrators of the Holocaust.

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In the trope of the poem's speakers who drink from the blood-filled animal trough, Paul Celan writes a new blood ritual, and it is instructive to compare this with the Jewish institution of the Passover, where blood is sprinkled on the doorposts of the Israelites' houses in Egypt,<sup>414</sup> and with the place of blood in the Christian Eucharist.

In all blood rituals, blood is the vital fluid which is equated with life at its most serious level. Deuteronomy 12: 23, for instance, states, "Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat." Blood, the substance of life, becomes in reversal a sign of violent death when spilled. In the institution of the Passover, blood on the threshold marks the boundary between life and death as it marks the residences of those who will be saved.

In the Passover rite, the blood which is sprinkled is that of a young lamb; it therefore signifies the violence of a premature death, and the innocence of the victim. This association is carried over, through the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, where Jesus Christ is associated with the sacrificial lamb, into Celan's blood-ritual.

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<sup>414</sup> Exodus 12: 21-3.

"By placing the blood of the innocent lamb on the doorpost, [the people] have identified themselves with those whom God calls a special people," states Robert J. Schreiter of the Passover blood.<sup>415</sup> In Exodus this identification was with a God who would lead his people to safety; in the Holocaust no rescue took place, and Celan's blood ritual is an act of defiance rather than of solidarity.

In inflating the symbolism of the Christian Eucharist, where a sip of wine represents a symbolic sharing in the blood of life, to the literal drinking from a trough filled with blood, Celan violates the Jewish scriptures' absolute prohibition against the consumption of blood, one of the few Jewish laws enjoined on all humankind in Leviticus 17:12, and the basis of the soaking, salting and rinsing which is part of Kosher preparation of meat.<sup>416</sup> This is an act of defiance against both Yahweh who no longer rescues his people, and against the founder of Christianity.

"It was blood, it was / what you shed, Lord" sounds like a repetition of a Christian statement of the meaning of the Eucharist, where Christians believe that Christ's blood was shed to redeem humankind, until we realise that shed blood can be taken rather than given. In this case, the blood in the trough is not Jesus Christ's but the blood which the followers of Christianity shed in the slaughter of the Jews of the Holocaust.

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<sup>415</sup> Robert J Schreiter, *In Water and in Blood: A Spirituality of Solidarity and Hope* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 8.

<sup>416</sup> By contrast, it should be noted that in the blood covenant made between Yahweh and the freed Israelites in the desert, (Exodus 24:6-8), the people are sprinkled with blood. This ritual contains the three elements of sacrifice: - an offering (usually an animal), its transformation into the realm of the Divine (usually by slaughter), and communion between the Divine and human realms through its return (usually by shared eating). But here, with respect for the dietary taboos of the law, following slaughter, the blood is merely sprinkled on the people. See Schreiter, *In Water and Blood*, 10-18.

In only one place in Jewish scriptures is reference made to the drinking of blood. This occurs in Ezekiel 39:17-20, where the birds and wild animals are invited to a feast in celebration of the end-time, the eschatological fullness of the reign of

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The concept of blood justice, blood as the symbol of guilt and responsibility, which is applied within this poem to Jesus Christ and to Christians, is based on Genesis 9:4, where it is stated that

for your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning . . . Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

We noted in 'Psalm' a reference to Matthew 27:25, "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children'," where responsibility for the death of Jesus Christ is placed on the Jews; in 'Tenebrae', Celan places responsibility for the death of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust squarely onto Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, and onto his followers.

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In the two discourses of belief discussed above, we have seen Celan's inscription of an absent God, his bitter sense of abandonment and his anger with the Christian perpetrators of the murder of his people. At his meeting with Nelly Sachs in Zurich, on 26 May 1960, Sachs speaks of her positive religious belief. Paul Celan replies that he, by contrast, hopes "to be able to blaspheme up till the end."<sup>417</sup>

Yet before the end of his life, Paul Celan's religious discourse of bitter unbelief is fractured, and a luminous discourse of Jewish mysticism emerges through Celan's poetry. Celan's interest in the concepts of the Kabbalah, esoteric Jewish mysticism, which he accesses through the scholarship of Gershom Scholem, is evident in 'Psalm', which was discussed above. The Kabbalah now becomes Celan's major religious influence, one particularly apparent in the poems which follow his 1969

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God. In this context, Celan's blood ritual can be seen as a ritual undoing of the fullness of time, as the Holocaust was the undoing of European Jewry.

<sup>417</sup> Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, *Correspondence*, trans. Christopher Clark (New York: Sheep Meadow, 1995) 41.

visit to Jerusalem, and in 'Mandorla', 'Benedicta' and 'Tabernacle Window',<sup>418</sup> which are published in *The No-One's Rose* in 1963.

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<sup>418</sup> Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 172, 75 and 97.

### 3. BELIEF: THE KABBALAH AND DIVINE PRESENCE

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#### A. THE TABERNACLE

"And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with humankind, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God . . ." <sup>419</sup>

" . . . Kabbalah is a collective, psychic defence of the most imaginative medieval Jews against exile and persecution pressing on them inwardly." <sup>420</sup>

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In 'Tabernacle Window', Paul Celan overcomes the void of the Holocaust to write a reconnection to Jewish culture and the return of the Divine presence.

#### Hüttenfenster

*Das Aug, dunkel:  
als Hüttenfenster. Es sammelt,  
was Welt war, Welt bleibt: den Wander-  
Osten, die  
Schwebenden, die  
Menschen-und-Juden,  
das Volk-vom-Gewölk, magnetisch  
ziehts, mit Herzfingern, an  
dir, Erde:  
du kommst, du kommst,  
wohnen werden wir, wohnen, etwas*

*—ein Atem? ein Name?—*

*geht im Verwaisten umher,  
tänzerisch, klobig,  
die Engels-  
schwinge, schwer von Unsichtbarem, am  
wundgeschundenen Fuss, kopf-  
lastig getrimmt  
vom Schwarzhagel, der  
auch dort fiel, in Witebsk,*

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<sup>419</sup> Revelations 21: 3.

<sup>420</sup> Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* 53.

—und sie, die ihn säten, sie  
schrieben ihn weg  
mit mimetischer Panzerfaustklaue!—

geht, geht umher,  
sucht,  
sucht unten,  
sucht droben, fern, sucht  
mit dem Auge, holt  
Alpha Centauri herunter, Arktur, holt  
den Strahl hinzu, aus den Gräbern,

geht zu Ghetto und Eden, pflückt  
das Sternbild zusammen, das er,  
der Mensch, zum Wohnen braucht, hier,  
unter Menschen,

schreitet  
die Buchstaben ab und der Buchstaben sterblich-  
unsterbliche Seele,  
geht zu Aleph und Jud und geht weiter,

baut ihn, den Davidsschild, lässt ihn  
aufflammen, einmal,

lässt ihn erlöschen—da steht er,  
unsichtbar, steht  
bei Alpha und Aleph, bei Jud,  
bei den andern, bei  
allen: in  
dir,

Beth, —das ist  
das Haus, wo der Tisch steht mit

dem Licht und dem Licht.

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### Tabernacle Window

The eye, dark:  
as a tabernacle window. It gathers  
what was a world and still is: the wander-  
East, the  
Hovering Ones, the  
Humans-and-Jews,  
the Cloud Crowd, it pulls  
magnetically on you, Earth, with



heart fingers:  
 you come and you come,  
 dwell, we shall dwell, something

—a breath? a name?—

goes around orphanhood,  
 dancierish, clumsy,  
 an angel's  
 wing with invisibles weighting its  
 skinstripped foot, trimmed  
 topheavy with  
 the black hail that  
 fell there too, in Vitebsk,

—and those who sowed it, they  
 write it away  
 with mimetic antitank claws!—

goes, goes around,  
 looks about,  
 looks down below,  
 looks up above, far away, looks  
 with its eye, fetches  
 Alpha Centaurus,<sup>421</sup> Arcturus, fetches  
 a ray of light from the graves,

goes to ghetto and Eden, plucks  
 the constellation that he,  
 a human, needs as to dwell here  
 among humankind,

paces off  
 the letters and the letters' mortal-  
 immortal soul,  
 goes to Aleph and Yud and goes farther,

builds it, the Star of David, lets it  
 flare up once,

lets it die down—it stands there  
 invisible, stands  
 with Alpha and Aleph, with Yud,  
 with the others, with  
 them all: in

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<sup>421</sup> A translator's error. Alpha Centauri, the brightest component of the triple star which is nearest to the sun.

you,

Beth,—which is  
the house where the table stands with

the light and the Light.<sup>422</sup>

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In 'Tabernacle Window', the Divine is no longer written as an absence, but as a luminous dancing presence which is gathered in by the glance of the mind as it skims over the memory of Jewish history. The void, the terrible emptiness between the present and the European Jewish past which was the result of the Holocaust, is bridged in this poem, as the eye skims over both time and space. This is a poem of connection which is written from Paul Celan's belief in the Kabbala, the Jewish mystical belief system which acknowledges the experience of evil and writes a Jewish future with hope.

Lurianic Kabbalah, which was founded by Isaac Luria in Safed in the sixteenth century, teaches that at creation God withdrew into the Godhead and created in the space which was formed *kelim*, vessels, of which the culminating was primal Man, the figure of light seen in the visions of Ezekiel. This space still contained traces of Divine light, and when God sent the Yod, the first letter of YHWH, the Tetragrammaton, into it in order to create, the collision of lights causes six of the vessels to shatter, and God's qualities of stern judgement to become separated from love and fall away into evil.

These broken vessels of evil nevertheless contain sparks of light, which signify the presence of the Shekhinah, the Divine presence, even in situations of the greatest evil such as the Holocaust. It is the mission of Jewish humankind to gather this light back into God by religious acts of

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<sup>422</sup> Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan 196-7*.

law-keeping and compassion, known as *tikkun*; when this task is complete the Messiah will come.<sup>423</sup>

'Tabernacle Window' depicts the gathering in of the sparks, not by religious observance, but through the eye of poetic insight. The "wander- / East, the / Hovering Ones, the / Humans-and-Jews, / the Cloud Crowd," are Jews from the time of the nomadic patriarchs, through the Holocaust, where a culture was reduced to smoke and Hitler excluded the Jewish people from his definition of humanness, to the Jews of the Exodus, a people following a pillar of cloud by day.

As the poetic mind skims, connections are made with the earth and from the heart as the visionary eye " . . . pulls / magnetically on you, Earth, with / heart fingers." In writing a reconnection with aspects of Jewish history in this poem, Paul Celan writes, in addition, a healed and unified subjectivity, emotionally engaged, embodied, and connected with the environment.

The poetic "I" is supported in this task by Divine presence, accompanied as it skims by "something / —a breath? a name?—" as it "goes around orphanhood," the spaces of Jewish exile and evil. *Ruach* is the breath of God which brings about life for humankind in the second creation myth of Genesis 2: 7–8, where "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

The visionary eye briefly becomes angelic—" an angel's / wing with invisibles weighting its / skinstripped foot"; in the Jewish scriptures, angels, which are sometimes defined as "messengers of God" are more

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<sup>423</sup> For a brief summary of Luria's theory of the divine sparks, see Unterman, ed., *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend* 122. A longer account can be found in Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* 39ff.

accurately seen as aspects of the presence of God himself.<sup>424</sup> When the eye takes angel-shape, it is weighed down, not only by the "black hail" of the liquidation of the Jewish inhabitants of Vitebsk, Chagall's birthplace, but by the written distortions in accounts of the atrocity: yet it continues to move on.

The light returns to a dwelling-place which is symbolised by the poem's final letter "Beth,—which is / the house where the table stands with / the light and the Light". This is a recognisable description of the biblical tabernacle, the tent which was the site of God's holy Presence with the people during their forty-year wandering through the wilderness between the Exodus from Egypt and their arrival at the promised land of Canaan.<sup>425</sup> The tabernacle contains, together with the golden ark, a table for the Bread of the Presence and a lamp-stand whose cups are shaped like almond blossoms.<sup>426</sup>

This is a description, too, of any Jewish table set with candles to welcome the Sabbath, and a space which realises humankind's archetypal dream of homecoming, perhaps used here as a symbol of the fulfilment of the messianic hope.<sup>427</sup> Most significant, the identification of the poetic "eye/I" with the (imagined) window of the tabernacle in the poem's title aligns the tabernacle dwelling-place of God with the poet's embodied self. In

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<sup>424</sup> See especially Genesis 32:22–32, where Jacob wrestles with what is described as "a man" (v. 24), but has his name changed in v. 28 because "you have striven with God . . . and have prevailed", and the appearance to Abraham in Genesis 18:1–2 where "The Lord appeared to Abraham . . . and he looked up and saw three men standing near him." Abraham speaks with God, and in chapter 19:1, "The two angels came to Sodom." Commentators have spent much time in discussion of the placing of God and the angels in this narrative.

<sup>425</sup> See Exodus 25–27, 35–38 and part of chapter 40.

<sup>426</sup> See Exodus 25:23–40.

<sup>427</sup> There is a notable similarity between this poem and Yves Bonnefoy's untitled poem, 'Let a place be made': "Let a place be made for the one who approaches, / He who is cold and has no home. / He who is tempted by the sound of a lamp, / By the bright threshold of only this house." Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 23.

'Tabernacle Window', at home-coming, the sparks of Divine presence are finally gathered in to the subjectivity of the poetic speaker himself.

The Kabbala forms an esoteric set of religious beliefs which, when popularised, are close to magic and to fortune-telling. But Isaac Luria's belief in the existence of sparks of the Divine presence, even in situations of evil, places him with the orthodox Rabbi Akiba in belief in the Shekhinah, the luminous presence of God in the world.

At the time of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, one strand of rabbinic Judaism, which is drawn from the Deuteronomic code of rewards and punishments, stated that the destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem was God's just retribution for the sins of Israel and that consequently the Shekhinah had departed from Israel.<sup>428</sup> Rabbi Akiba taught, however, that the Shekhinah had never departed from God's people, and that the Shekhinah went with them into exile and evil, sharing their suffering.<sup>429</sup> In 'Tabernacle Window', the visionary eye/"I" gathers light from ghetto and grave, places of Jewish destruction, as well as from bright stars.

There is a considerable distance between the glowing discourse of flickering light and homecoming written by Paul Celan in 'Tabernacle Window' and the bitter discourse of religious absence which we considered in 'Psalm' above. "Dwell, we shall dwell," are words written of the Jewish people's longing for home-coming in their many exiles, by a poet in an exile of his own. In travelling to Jerusalem, Paul Celan was to find another home-coming, and to write further poems about the presence of the Divine.

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<sup>428</sup> See Norman J. Cohen, "Shekhinta Ba-Galuta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* XIII, no. 1-2 (Year not cited): 148. Cited Michael E. Lodahl, *Shekinah Spirit: Divine Presence in Jewish and Christian Religion*, ed. Helga Croner, *Studies in Judaism and Christianity* (New York & Mahwah: Paulist Press- A Stimulus Book, 1992) 53.

<sup>429</sup> Lodahl, *Shekinah Spirit: Divine Presence in Jewish and Christian Religion* 53.

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B. JERUSALEM

The fragmentation of language increases through Paul Celan's poetry, and so, in the final Jerusalem poems, interpretation is uncertain.

Nevertheless, Paul Celan's visit to Jerusalem in 1969 prompts words of renewal from him; he speaks of "a thankful pride in every green thing planted here that stands ready to refresh anyone who comes by" and in "every newly earned, self-discovered, fulfilled word that rushes up to strengthen those who turn towards it."<sup>430</sup>

As the calamity of the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE was the paradigmatic Jewish catastrophe until the Holocaust, the retaking of the Old City of Jerusalem with its fragment of the Western Wall in the Six Day War in June 1967 was a symbol of hope in the homeland of Israel for Jews throughout the world.

Paul Celan's Jerusalem cycle, ten tiny poems, was published in *Zeitgehöft, Homestead of Time*, in 1978. For our purpose, the most significant of these is 'The Shofar Place'. In 'Tabernacle Window' Paul Celan wrote the Shekhinah. In 'The Shofar Place' (sometimes translated as 'The Trumpet Place'), he now writes the shofar, the ceremonial ram's horn which has traditionally been blown at Israel's holiest moments.

*DIE POSAUNSTELLE  
tief im glühenden  
Leertext,  
in Fackelhöhe,  
im Zeitloch:*

*hör dich ein  
mit dem Mund.  
THE SHOFAR PLACE  
deep in the glowing*

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<sup>430</sup> Paul Celan, talk to Hebrew Writers Association, Tel Aviv, 14 October 1969, translated and cited Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 265.

text-void,  
at torch height,  
in the timehole:

hear deep in  
with your mouth.<sup>431</sup>

Otto Pöggeler notes that on the occasion of the recapture of the Temple's Western Wall, the senior rabbi of the army, General Shlomo Goren, sounded the shofar.<sup>432</sup> Then shortly before Paul Celan's visit to Jerusalem, the archaeologist Benjamin Mazar uncovered a large stone which had toppled from the parapet when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. On it were inscribed the words "to the place of the shofar blast".<sup>433</sup> It seemed that General Goren had sounded the shofar from the traditional site.

The shofar was blown in Temple ceremonies, and continues to be blown in the world's synagogues to signify a break in time; at the beginning and the end of the Sabbath, at New Year and on the Day of Atonement. It is said that the shofar will usher in the messianic age.<sup>434</sup> In writing the shofar here, therefore, Paul Celan writes a triumphant future fulfilment for Judaism.

Even more significantly, the shofar or trumpet is associated with the awe-inspiring presence of God in the text of Moses' encounter with God on Mt Sinai:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled . . .

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<sup>431</sup> Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 360-61.

<sup>432</sup> Otto Pöggeler, "Mystical Elements in Heidegger's Thought and Celan's Poetry," in *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>433</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 272. Citing Benjamin Mazar, *The Mountain of the Lord: Excavating Jerusalem* (New York: Publisher not cited, 1975) 138.

<sup>434</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 273.

Now Mt Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire: the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder (Exodus 19:16, 18–19).

In writing echoes of this text, Paul Celan references the most profound experience of Divine encounter in the text of Hebrew scriptures.

Where Paul Celan's 'Stretto' was a remarkable writing of absence, 'The Shofar Place' writes Presence in an equally significant fashion. For here, within the inscription of depth, height, light, time and space in only six short lines and sixteen words, Paul Celan writes the experience of the shofar's note in the mouth, a sound which vibrates through the head until sounding and hearing become one single experience in the shofar's blast of triumph, and the reader is urged to "hear deep in / with your mouth." The shofar is a symbol of holy triumph and Divine in-dwelling, written as a reverberating presence in the body.

The void of the absence of Jewish culture since the Holocaust, which was crossed in 'Tabernacle Window' by the skimming eye which linked sparks of light, is here written as "glowing", filled with light, as the void of the poetic "I" is filled with the reverberations of sounding presence. Paul Celan's 'The Shofar Place' contains his richest inscription of the presence of the Divine.



#### 4. CONCLUSION: THE VOID

In 'Stretto' Paul Celan writes the void, "the terrible smoking silence"<sup>435</sup> of the destruction of European Jewry, the gaping space which makes any connection with the past impossible for the survivor-descendants of integrated German Jews, because to turn to the past in search of continuity is to encounter the German culture and language of the Nazi murderers. But another gaping void is also found in the poetry of Paul Celan, the space of the apparently absent God who made no move to save his chosen, covenanted people.

Richard Elliott Friedman, in *The Disappearance of God*,<sup>436</sup> has traced the withdrawal of God in the texts of Jewish scriptures. From walking with humankind in the garden in the first chapters of Genesis, God's appearance becomes limited to fire and thunder in the burning bush and on Sinai, then to appearances to the prophets, until finally only the Temple rites in Jerusalem mediate God's presence with his people. The Temple is then destroyed. Yahweh may be encountered still in the faithful human heart, but there is no further intervention in the affairs of humankind.

This book is a convincing tracing of the pattern of Yahweh's withdrawal, a reasonable and reasoned representation which might permit a scholar who is analysing it in the peace of his study to agree with the hypothesis presented. But what, we must ask, is the point of holding a religious belief if in the extremity of her distress, a believer calls upon God and the only response is silence? Would a human parent choose to stand in mute non-intervention beside a distressed child? In Martin Buber's words, in the absence of God in the Holocaust, "the estrangement has become too

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<sup>435</sup> Walton, "Re-Visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology," 11.

<sup>436</sup> Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston New York Toronto & London: Little Brown & Co, 1995).

cruel, the hiddenness too deep."<sup>437</sup> Surely the pain and bitterness of Jewish poets in the face of a God who is silent during the Holocaust is the only reasonable response.

We have considered Paul Celan's poetic response to an absent God in 'Psalm'; this is paralleled by the statement of Eli Wiesel in *Night*. Wiesel writes of "those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust":

Why, but why should I bless him? Every fibre in me revolted. Because he had thousands of children burned in his furnaces? Because he set in motion six crematoria, working day and night, Sabbath and holidays? Because in His great might He created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna and such death factories? How could I say to him: Blessed art Thou, among the nations to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, end up in the crematorium? Blessed be Thy Holy Name, Thou who chose us to be engorged upon Thine altar?<sup>438</sup>

A God who created such evil would be monstrous; a God who is inactive in the face of it seems equally culpable unless, as Arthur Cohen suggests in *The Tremendum*, evil has the power to block the power of God, and humankind "can obscure, eclipse, burn out the divine filament".<sup>439</sup> As Nelly Sachs stated in conversation with Paul Celan, "We just don't know . . ."<sup>440</sup> And as Robert Alter insists, ". . . for a long time to come, we need to question and to brood."<sup>441</sup>

It would be obscene to flee to the reassurance of a personal strengthening and spirituality in the face of such an apparent absence of consolation, of such loss, and of such horrific damage and despair among

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<sup>437</sup> Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 224.

<sup>438</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Hill & Wang, 1960) 76. Cited Sara R Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness And Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) 123.

<sup>439</sup> Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: a Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 98.

<sup>440</sup> See final lines of Paul Celan's 'Zurich, at the Stork'. Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 141.

<sup>441</sup> Alter, "Vistas of Annihilation," 119.

survivors of the Holocaust. Yet such evidence does exist, as we have seen in the late mystical poetry of Paul Celan.

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I conclude this chapter on Paul Celan by placing for consideration two quotations from *Rena's Promise*, the memoir of Auschwitz which we considered above when discussing 'Stretto'. Neither statement by the author negates the other, and each has a truth. In the face of appalling evil, God was silent. And there was consolation, even in Auschwitz.

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## 5. A SPACE IN WHICH TO QUESTION AND TO BROOD

In the distance I can see a column coming toward us. I have never seen anyone on this road before . . . There is a whisper through our ranks: "They've emptied a Jewish orphanage" . . .

The SS march them toward the gas chamber. Clutching dolls and stuffed animals close to their hearts, they shuffle past on rows of five guarded by SS men with their dogs and rifles. What do they think these children are going to do—escape? revolt? But it is a rule, always to the gas chamber the SS are posted every fifth row on each side of the column, and they always follow rules . . .

I am standing there just like a ghost. Their little angelic faces, the white knuckles of their tiny hands haunt me. I fight back my tears, my rage. My heart screams, Stop! Stop this madness! They are babies! Clenching my jaw, I shut my eyes.

God? I rarely say *God* anymore, but seeing their faces reflected in my heart I must try to pray one last time: God, you are my God and I believe in you. Won't you strike just one of these monsters down? Smite just one SS for these children, your children. You, whom I obey and believe in so much with all my heart? I have never held so much as a penny in my hand on the Sabbath and since I was old enough to fast I have always fasted on Yom Kippur. Don't allow this to happen. Give us a sign that you have not forsaken these children, the children of Israel. Never mind my suffering. It does not matter the time I have been in this place. Never mind all the things I've heard about people being burned and gassed, all the things I've seen for myself, not wanting to believe any of it is true. Never mind about me. What about these sweet children? For them, show them you are our God and kill just one of these Nazis.

My hands are fists of fury tight against my thighs. My eyes squeeze shut, holding a vision of lightning striking the guards in their neat and orderly tracks. Not one adult can move to save these toddlers, only divine intervention can supersede now: Please, God . . .

They fade in the distance, nearing the gas chambers. My heart screams for them to stop. Someone passes by me, then halts. Her feet crunch against the gravel road as she steps back to look at our stricken faces. Her hot breath hits my cheek. I open my eyes warily into the cool cruelty of Hasse's stare. Her clean boots, her polished and shiny skin, stand before us in full Aryan superiority. She has seen our agony; she has read my mind.

I know from the moment I hear her voice that religion will never be the same. I will still pray, I will try to believe and have faith, but it will never be as pure and sincere as it once was. Her lips pull back onto a grimace which I am sure is meant to be a smile. Her words are harsh and staccato, like machine-gun fire; they shoot us down.

"Where is your God now?" The life drains out of me.

There is no answer.<sup>442</sup>

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We get in late one night, after the bread has been handed out, and there is nothing left for those of us who have worked all day. I volunteer to get a bucket of coals for the block elder to put in the stove. Danka and Dina send me a warning glance. I ignore them both. At the pile of coal I check the vicinity, grab two potatoes, and thrust them under the coal in the bucket. Head forward, eyes down, I walk slowly across the compound.

"Let me see you empty that bucket on the ground." I freeze. Turning slowly around, I come face to face with the camp elder herself. "Well?"

Trembling, I spill the contents out, hoping the potatoes are covered by enough coal dust to be masked amidst the odd-shaped lumps of coal.

"You stole potatoes!" She hits me in the left eye before I can even think to duck. She throws me to the ground, kicking me, stomping on me with her boots, trying to tear the flesh from my bones with her finger-nails. I cannot see anything but the blazing hatred in her face; it is the face of Death itself. She loses her grasp on me for a second. I scramble away, fleeing across the camp . . .

[My sister and I] hold each other all night, sobbing, both of us shaking in terror. This is it. I am done for. That is all I know and all either of us can think about. There is nothing we can do but cling to each other for the last time. I will never survive roll call with this black eye . . .

*"Raus! Raus!"*

Danka and I line up in the very back of the rows. The camp elder stalks across the front rows, screaming and cursing us.

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<sup>442</sup> Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* 136.

"Anyone who knows who stole the potatoes last night should turn the prisoner in immediately. If I find out you are withholding information from me I will kill you instead. Who knows who stole the potatoes?" No one moves, no one makes a sound. The SS women walk up and down the rows counting each prisoner, looking for me. Surely the camp elder saw my face and recognized me as the one from the *leichenkommando*. She'll see me and kill me. I stand in the back trying not to tremble, trying to be brave . . .

Suddenly I feel very calm and warm. There is the slightest tingle on my cheek as if someone has touched my face. *Mama?*

She is just a few prisoners away. I am warm and comforted. *Remember how you escaped Mengele.* I remember—I told Danka we were invisible and we were. All of my fear drains through the heels of my feet into the earth and I stand confident that I am imperceptible. *Mama is here, standing next to me, holding her hand over my eye.* The SS woman looks at me, counts me, and turns away. Danka sighs . . .

*Protect me through the gate, Mama,* I pray. I still have to march out with the bodies, and the camp elder is always standing there, counting the bodies, checking our numbers. I pretend to be rearranging the bodies in the back of the cart, making sure there is an arm obscuring my eye so she can't see my face and won't recognize me.

Every morning I feel a warm tingle on my cheeks as the SS walk right past my black-and-blue, swollen eye. Every morning I fumble with the bodies while we take them out the gate, and every morning I pass unseen under the nose of the camp elder.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid. 263-5.

## Nelly Sachs: Wounds from the Holocaust

"Death was my teacher . . . my metaphors are my wounds. Only through this can my work be understood."<sup>444</sup>

". . . and no one goes back unscathed to his God—"<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Nelly Sachs, *Briefe der Nelly Sachs (Letters of Nelly Sachs)*, ed. Ruth Dineson and Helmut Müssener (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984) 201.

<sup>445</sup> 'Jacob was Smitten out of a Dark Conflagration.' Nelly Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems*, trans. Ruth Mead, Matthew Mead, and Michael Hamburger (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1970) 209.

## INTRODUCTION

Nelly Sachs was born in Berlin on December 10, 1891, the only daughter of a prosperous industrialist. The family were assimilated Jews who belonged to a synagogue but did not attend worship there; Nellie Sachs received only basic Jewish instruction. At the age of seventeen Sachs fell in love with an older, divorced man whom she was not permitted to marry; his death at Nazi hands is explored in her first volume of poetry, *In the Habitations of Death*.

At this time she began to write romantic sonnets and lyrical poetic celebrations of nature. In 1921, Sachs published her first book, *Legenden und Erzählungen (Legends and Tales)*, a collection of short stories which are filled with Christian motifs, which she dedicated to the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf.

After 1929 a number of her poems appeared in newspapers such as the *Berliner Tageblatt*.<sup>446</sup> In Berlin Nelly Sachs lived at home, caring for her parents, and had neither a profession nor contact with the avant garde world of the Bohemian German poets and artists.

When Hitler came to power in 1933 and restrictions were placed on German Jews, Nelly Sachs began to study Christian and Hassidic mysticism. In 1939 the Gestapo ordered her to appear at an interrogation which caused a paralysis of the larynx which prevented speech for several days. Critics trace Nelly Sachs's preoccupation with the voiceless and the need to speak on behalf of those who have been silenced, which is particularly apparent in the "chorus" poems from *In the Dwellings of*

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<sup>446</sup> Nelly Sachs did not want the poetry written before 1940, the year of her migration, to be included in collections of her work. For an example of an early poem, see however Rudnick, *Post-Shoah Religious Metaphors: The Image of God in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs* 44.



*Death*, to this event.<sup>447</sup> A silent scream is the principal motif in 'Landscape of Screams', which we will discuss below.

In May 1940, at the age of forty-nine, Sachs escaped to Stockholm with her widowed mother, following the intervention of Selma Lagerlöf. Here, while working as a washerwoman and translator to support herself and her mother, in a tiny studio where she would live for the rest of her life, Nellie Sachs began to write her powerful poetry of the Holocaust.

Writing in the German language like Paul Celan, in 1944 Nelly Sachs completed her first volume of Holocaust Poetry, *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (*In the Habitations of Death*) and her verse play *Eli: Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels* (*Eli: a Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel*), the first of fourteen plays.<sup>448</sup> These works were published in Berlin in 1947 and 1951 respectively.

*In den Wohnungen des Todes* (*In the Habitations of Death*) contains fifty Holocaust poems about the death camps and the murder of the man whom Sachs loved, elegies for murdered individuals who are identified by their initials and professions, and choruses of the rescued, the orphans and the stars which comment on the Holocaust.

In 1949, Nelly Sachs's second volume of poetry, *Sternverdunkelung* (*Eclipse of the Stars*), was published. Poetic themes in this book include the death and murder of the Holocaust, persecution, (which is now set in a larger human context), and biblical figures seen as archetypes of the

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<sup>447</sup> This event, too, appears to be the origin of Sachs's metaphors which involve a gasping fish with bleeding gills. In 'Glowing Enigmas I' she writes: "When the great terror came / I fell dumb— / Fish with its deadly side / turned upward / air bubbles paid for the grappling breath". Nelly Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli*, trans. Michael Hamburger, et al. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) 277.

<sup>448</sup> See Nelly Sachs, *Zeichen im Sand: Die szenischen Dichtung der Nelly Sachs* (*Sketches in Sand: The Plays of Nelly Sachs*) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962).

human struggle for transformation. The fourth cycle, *Land Israel* (The Land of Israel), explores the return of Jews to their homeland.

In 1957 Sachs published *Und Niemand weiß weiter* (*And No-one Knows How to Go On*), which contains poems of flight and persecution, poems about biblical figures and about the author of *The Zohar*, the exegesis of the Pentateuch which became the central document of the Kabbalah. One cycle concerns the madness of Saul.

*Flucht und Verwandlung* (*Flight and Metamorphosis*), Sachs's fourth book of poetry, was published in 1959. This volume contains Sachs's most factual statements of faith. A small collection of nine poems, *Fahrt ins Staublose* (*Journey into a Dustless Realm*) followed, and *Noch feiert Tod das Leben*, (*Death Still Celebrates Life*). By this time Nelly Sachs was suffering from paranoia and writing from hospital. Both volumes, together with selections from her first four books of poetry, were published in the collection *Fahrt ins Staublose: Die Gedichte der Nelly Sachs* (*Journey into a Dustless Realm*), in 1961.

*Ausgewählte Gedichte*, Nelly Sach's selected poems, was published in 1963. *Glühende Rätsel* (*Glowing Enigmas*) which was published in 1964, was followed by *Die Suchende* (*The Seeker*).

Nelly Sachs was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966, an award which she shared with the Israeli novelist S. Y. Agnon. *O the Chimneys: Selected Poems Including the Verse Play, Eli* was published in USA in 1967 and republished as *Selected Poems Including the Verse Play, Eli* in Britain in 1968. A second collection, *The Seeker and Other Poems*, appeared in 1970.

Sachs died in Sweden in 1970 on the day of Paul Celan's Paris funeral. Her final collection of poetry, *Teile dich Nicht* (*Night Split Open*), was

published posthumously in 1971. This volume contains simple enigmatic poems which are comparable with the late poetry of Paul Celan.

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Nelly Sachs, like Paul Celan, writes the atrocity of the Holocaust in the German language. Witnessing in the first instance to the loss of European Jewry, Sachs later speaks of all human suffering as she describes the fragility of the damaged survivor, and calls humankind to account for evil acts.<sup>449</sup>

One feature of Nelly Sachs's Holocaust poetry is what she chooses not to represent:

Everything having to do with what the French call the concentrationary universe—the transports, the camps, the *Einsatzgruppen*, the fascination with the Nazis and the paraphernalia of evil, that is to say the entire stock-in-trade of conventional Holocaust literature—all this is left out.<sup>450</sup>

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The knowledge of evil is integrated into Nelly Sachs's belief system from the start. As a result of this, the events of the Holocaust cause neither a shattering of Sachs's pre-existing structure of belief, nor the writing of an over-emphatic discourse. From the beginning, Sachs sees her poetic task as one of transformation.

Sachs seeks through the literary imagination to reconstruct Israel's understanding of the Jewish relationship with God. She states her philosophy in the appendix to the play, *Beryll Gazes into the Night, or the Lost and Refound Alphabet*: "I have always endeavoured to raise the

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<sup>449</sup> See especially 'If the Prophets Broke In'. Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 59.

<sup>450</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* 206. Mintz is speaking here of A. Appelfeld's writing of the Holocaust.

unspeakable onto the transcendental level to make it bearable . . .  
and to let a glow of the holy darkness fall into this night of nights."<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Nelly Sachs, in the appendix to her play, *Beryll Gazes into the Night, or the Lost and Refound Alphabet*. Cited Schwebell, "Nelly Sachs," 46-7.

## 1. CALAMITOUS TIMES: THE HOLOCAUST

"When all helping angels  
with bleeding wings  
hung tattered  
in the barbed wire of time!"<sup>452</sup>

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Like Paul Celan, who writes the Holocaust traditionally in 'Death Fugue' and constructs in 'Stretto' an original discourse of absence, Nelly Sachs has written two iconic Holocaust poems. In '*O Die Schornsteine*' ('O the Chimneys'),<sup>453</sup> Sachs writes from within the topos of the death camps, and inscribes contained and disciplined grief. In '*Landschaft aus Schreien*', 'Landscape of Screams',<sup>454</sup> Nelly Sachs uses apocalyptic images to form a nightmare landscape of horror and pain.

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### 1A. MOURNING LOSS: A TRADITIONAL WRITING OF THE HOLOCAUST

" . . . her usual threat: 'I will send you out of here through the chimney.' "<sup>455</sup>

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#### *O die Schornsteine*

*Und wenn diese meine Haut zerschlagen sein wird, so werde ich ohne  
mein Fleisch Gott schauen.—Hiob.*

*O die Schornsteine  
Auf den sinnreich erdachten Wohnungen des Todes,  
Als Israels Leib zog aufgelöst in Rauch  
Durch die Luft—  
Als Essenkehrer ihn ein Stern empfing  
Der schwarz wurde  
Oder war es ein Sonnenstrahl?*

*O die Schornsteine!  
Freiheitswege für Jeremias und Hiobs Staub—  
Wer erdachte euch und baute Stein auf Stein  
Den Weg für Flüchtlinge aus Rauch?*

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<sup>452</sup> 'Why the black answer of hate', Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 67.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid. 127.

<sup>455</sup> Vago, "The Black Hole of our Planet Earth," 279.

*O die Wohnungen des Todes,  
Einladend hergerichtet  
Für den Wirt des Hauses, der sonst Gast war—  
O ihr Finger,  
Die Eingangsschwelle legend  
Wie ein Messer zwischen Leben und Tod—*

*O ihr Schornsteine,  
O ihr Finger,  
Und Israels Leib im Rauch durch die Luft!*

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### O the Chimneys

And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.—Job 19:26.

O the chimneys  
On the ingeniously devised habitations of death  
When Israel's body drifted as smoke  
Through the air—  
Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,  
A star that turned black  
Or was it a ray of sun?

O the chimneys!  
Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job's dust—  
Who devised you and laid stone upon stone  
The road for refugees of smoke?

O the habitations of death,  
Invitingly appointed  
For the host who used to be a guest—  
O you fingers  
Laying the threshold  
Like a knife between life and death—

O you chimneys,  
O you fingers  
And Israel's body as smoke through the air.<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli 3.*

The epigraph to this poem is Martin Luther's version of the verse from Job which the New English Bible translates as "and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God." This is a depiction of a flayed man approaching the Divine and it is a variation of the main trope of this poem. Here the wounded body of Israel, which will be a recurring image throughout Nelly Sachs's poetry, is written in its most extreme manifestation, as smoke.

With the epigraph Sachs sites the Holocaust from the start within the context of belief; within the poem a single iconic star remains visible as all others are obliterated by smoke from the Nazi crematorium, by "Israel's body as smoke through the air".

Stars have traditionally signified for humankind the presence of the Divine, as the place of God's dwelling has been located in the heavens. "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man that thou are mindful of him and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels . . ." writes the Psalmist in Psalm 8: 3–4. In this poem the single, nearly obliterated star signals the presence of God.

For Nellie Sachs, there will be no hyperbole; her capacity for confronting evil and writing it without the obscenity of over-statement is apparent throughout this highly-disciplined poem. We may note her restrained use of imagery; the chimney and the Nazi finger which points towards life or death and therefore lays the threshold between them are both synecdochical, the chimney standing for the gas chambers and crematoria, and the finger for the whole selection process. The chimney, finger and the knife of the threshold are linked by their similarities of shape.

The horror of Nazi evil is here written only as a quietly worded statement of a violation of hospitality: those who were once guests in Poland, the

invading Germans, are now the hosts, and, in a terrible irony, they welcome their victims.

Beside the star as an image of Divine presence, Sachs writes the chimney stones as road, a path into the air which leads to God. Those who in the past have taken the road to the Divine are Jeremiah, a prophet whose name has traditionally been associated with the Hebrew scriptures' book of Lamentations with which Judaism has mourned its many calamities, and Job, the archetypal sufferer, one who confronts God about the problem of evil, but refuses to curse God, and holds tenaciously to faith.

At the end of the book of Job, God will not answer Job's question about the unjust suffering of the righteous, but instead, will overwhelm Job with poetry, using, like Sachs, the image of stars:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth . . .  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38: 4, 7).

By writing Jeremiah and Job in "O the Chimneys", Sachs places the Holocaust within a continuity of Jewish calamity and a tested Jewish paradigm of response, what Alan Mintz names as "the acknowledgement of loss, the experience of loss, and the mourning of loss."<sup>457</sup> Sachs's quiet grief for the fate of Israel is apparent in her tone. In this disciplined elegiac poem, the pornography of horror<sup>458</sup> of the Holocaust is contained.

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<sup>457</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* 14.

<sup>458</sup> Robert Alter's phrase. See 'Vistas of Annihilation', Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 71.



1B. THE CALAMITY OF THE HOLOCAUST: A COSMIC VISION OF EVIL  
AND OF PAIN

"The latter-day apocalyptists, meanwhile, worked in much the same way as their forebears. [Their] apocalypses obeyed the logic of a nightmare."<sup>459</sup>

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"Every century has done its best to convey the evilness of evil and painfulness of pain," states Alan Mintz.<sup>460</sup> In contrast with the quiet grief expressed in 'O the Chimneys', Nelly Sachs's 'Landscape of Screams' is a surreal representation of evil and of the agonised conscious and unconscious mind of the one who is its witness.

No longer intent on containment of the horror of the Holocaust in order to permit mourning of Israel's loss, Sachs turns to the representation of the cosmic scope of the event, and constructs in this poem a nightmare, blood-drenched world of madness and of pain. The repeated motif of the poem is a repressed scream, from which no sound is heard.

Edvard Munch's *The Scream*<sup>461</sup> is an example of Expressionist painting. Expressionist artists seek to represent emotion or a state of mind, rather than to represent visually the details of an event. As in Munch's *The Scream*, pain is translated in this poem through the motif of the silent scream into visual representations of horror. As for Munch, the transgressive poetics of Expressionism prove an adequate vehicle for Nelly Sachs's nightmare vision.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* 226.

<sup>460</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* 22.

<sup>461</sup> See, for instance, H. W. Janson, *A History of Art: A Survey of the Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962) 509.

<sup>462</sup> Judith Herman, writing from knowledge of the trauma theory which grew to prominence in the 1970's, states that traumatic memories "are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative." Instead they are imprinted on the brain in "the form of vivid sensations and images." Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Harper, 1992) 37-38. Cited Suzette A

Within this poem we see the historical narratives which are Nelly Sachs's sources, traces of covenantal promises, and the genre of the apocalyptic which links her poetry with Jewish tradition. We note distortions of scale, and images of constriction, containment and repression; we see Sachs write pain and horror through the body.

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Landschaft aus Schreien

*In der Nacht, wo Sterben Genähtes zu trennen beginnt,  
reißt die Landschaft aus Schreien  
den schwarzen Verband auf,*

*Über Moria, dem Klippenabsturz zu Gott,  
schwebt des Opfermessers Fahne  
Abrahams Herz-Sohn-Schrei,  
am grossen Ohr der Bibel liegt er bewahrt.*

*O die Hieroglyphen aus Schreien,  
an die Tod-Eingangstür gezeichnet.*

*Wundkorallen aus zerbrochenen Kehlenflöten.*

*O, o Hände mit Angstpflanzenfinger,  
eingegraben in wildbäumende Mähnen Opferblutes—*

*Schreie, mit zerfetzten Kiefern der Fische verschlossen,  
Weheranke der kleinsten Kinder  
und der schluckenden Atemschleppe der Greise,*

*eingerrissen in versengtes Azur mit brennenden Schweifen.  
Zellen der Gefangenen, der Heiligen,  
mit Albtraummuster der Kehlen tapezierte,  
fiebernde Hölle in der Hundehütte des Wahnsinns  
aus gefesselten Sprüngen—*

*Dies is die Landschaft aus Schreien!  
Himmelfahrt aus Schreien,  
empor aus des Leibes Knochengittern,*

*Pfeile aus Schrein, erlöste  
aus blutigen Köchern.*

*Hiobs Vier-Winde-Schrei  
und der Schrei verborgen im Ölberg  
wie ein von Ohnmacht übermanntes Insekt im Kristall.*

*O Messer aus Abendrot, in die Kehlen geworfen,  
wo die Schlafbäume blutleckend aus der Erde fahren,  
wo die Zeit wegfällt  
an den Gerippen in Maidanek und Hiroshima.*

*Ascheschrei aus blindgequältem Seherauge—*

*O du blutendes Auge  
in der zerfetzten Sonnenfinsternis  
zum Gott-Trocknen aufgehängt  
im Weltall—*

### Landscape of Screams

At night when dying proceeds to sever all seams  
the landscape of screams  
tears open the black bandage,

Above Moria, the falling off cliffs to God,  
there hovers the flag of the sacrificial knife  
Abraham's scream for the son of his heart,  
at the great ear of the Bible it lies preserved.

O hieroglyphs of screams  
engraved at the entrance gate to death.

Wounded coral of shattered throat flutes.

O, O hands with finger vines of fear,  
dug into wildly rearing manes of sacrificial blood—

Screams, shut tight with the shredded mandibles of fish,  
woe tendril of the smallest children  
and the gulping train of breath of the very old,

slashed into seared azure with burning tails.  
Cells of prisoners, of saints,  
tapestried with the nightmare pattern of throats,  
seething hell in the doghouse of madness  
of shackled leaps—

This is the landscape of screams!  
Ascension made of screams  
out of the bodies [sic] grate of bones,

arrows of scream, released  
from bloody quivers.

Job's scream to the four winds  
and the scream concealed in Mount Olive  
like a crystal-bound insect overwhelmed by impotence.

O knife of evening red, flung into the throats  
where trees of sleep rear blood-licking from the ground,  
where time is shed  
from the skeletons in Hiroshima and Maidanek.

Ashen scream from visionary eye tortured blind—

O you bleeding eye  
in the tattered eclipse of the sun  
hung up to be dried by God  
in the cosmos—<sup>463</sup>

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The first stanza of this poem represents the night terrors of those who have fled from the Holocaust. In the night, death splits the seams of the fragile fabric of the mind which has been stitched together in daylight—death will "sever all seams"—and the nightmare landscape of screams (which is not yet written in the poem) rips off the daytime bandage, black with gangrene, dried blood or evil, to reopen the wounds which the Holocaust has inflicted—it "tears open the black bandage".<sup>464</sup>

Tropes of fabric link the first and final stanzas within this poem. In the first, as pain fills the world of an individual mind, Nellie Sachs uses the tendency of fabric to fray and to stick to a partly-healed wound to write the unravelling of the mind suffering alone in the dark, and the reopening of areas of pain.

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<sup>463</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 127.

<sup>464</sup> Nelly Sachs wrote of her early days in Sweden, "My mother experienced the terror again every night." See Sachs, *Briefe der Nelly Sachs (Letters of Nelly Sachs)* 157. Cited Rudnick, *Post-Shoah Religious Metaphors: The Image of God in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs* 32.

In the poem's final stanza, Nelly Sachs depicts the blinded seer; it is not clear whether he is an Oedipal figure, blinded following self-knowledge, or, like Tiresias, has become prophetic in compensation for his physical disability. The seer's mutilated eye expands to become a cosmic image of the eclipsed sun as the bleeding eye of the universe<sup>465</sup>—"O you bleeding eye / in the tattered eclipse of the sun"—and the trope of fabric again appears. The sun is "hung up to be dried by God / in the cosmos"—hung out to dry like God's washing, in a remarkable conjunction of the apocalyptic and the domestic, as Sachs's cosmic vision of evil and pain is linked with the individual in a specifically female trope.

Between these two stanzas Sachs constructs a nightmare montage. Some images are based on scriptural narrative, such as the Akedah (the binding of Isaac), the suffering of Job, and Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane; some are derived from specific moments in history, such as the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima by America and the Nazi concentration camp at Maidanek (examples from both sides of the conflict of the Second World War).

Some, like the hieroglyphics on the pillars of Egyptian tombs and prisoners and saints within their cells, are based on historical events, and some on observation of the general human condition, such as the unsteady breathing of caught fish, distressed small children and of the dying.

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<sup>465</sup> This cosmic eye may have its origin in the "eye of eternity" which is found in the philosophy of Jacob Boehme as a symbol of Sophia-wisdom. Andrew Weeks states that the eye is connected with "a reflexive absorption into being . . . The bent of the . . . eye of eternity . . . involves a magic self-absorption, a centripetal, concentrating antipode to the centrifugal flight into particularity—hence a leaning from the many, back toward the One." Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* 123-4. Boehme, in *Signatura Rerum* VI 28/3.40 uses the terms "eye of eternity" and "wonder-eye" interchangeably to speak of the place of revelation of God himself. Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* 196.

Nelly Sachs's visual images are distorted, surreal and apocalyptic; they expand to fill the landscape of the poem as the terror and evil of Nazi extermination policies filled society and as the effect of evil fills the human mind, to the exclusion of what is simple, calm and healing.

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The changed emphasis which Nelly Sachs brings to historical narrative, and her distortions of scale, may be observed in the second stanza, which is based on Genesis 22: 1-19, the Akeda or the Binding of Isaac, a significant text for Jewish interpreters of the Holocaust. Sachs concentrates neither on issues of obedience nor on the place of burnt offerings—the origin of the term "Holocaust"— within Jewish life, but on Abraham's silent scream of pain as he faces the sacrifice of his only, beloved and late-born son.

As always in the post-Holocaust interpretation of the Akeda, when the issues of Jewish continuity are so significant, an important secondary consideration is God's promise, which immediately follows in the scriptural text of this story. Issued to Abraham because of his willingness to sacrifice his son by fire, God's promise is the blessing of Jewish descendents "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen. 22: 17). Issues of the survival of the Jewish people hover behind Sachs's stanza, as they do behind much of her poetry, but they are not made specific; Sachs's emphasis remains on Abraham's silent scream of pain.

The scriptural original of this narrative is a traditional metaphor of ascent to God,<sup>466</sup> as Abraham, who has walked steadily for three days towards the mountain in the land of Moriah, leaves his servants and, carrying a

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<sup>466</sup> The archetypal text of ascent is Moses' meeting with God on Mt Sinai (Ex. 19: 16-20, 24: 12-18), but metaphors of ascent, based on the image of a two- or three-tiered universe, occur throughout scripture and the literature of spirituality.

knife and fire, begins to ascend the mountain beside Isaac, who is carrying the wood for his sacrifice.

By contrast, the mountain in Moriah becomes for Sachs "the falling off cliffs to God", the scriptural metaphor of steady ascent being replaced by a violent fall which is evocative of the mediaeval images of tiny figures tumbling down at the last judgement which are found in the work of Hieronymus Bosch and of others.<sup>467</sup>

Because it is linked with the statement that the fall is towards God, the change of direction in this poem collapses together concepts of heaven and hell; in this way Sachs insists on the presence of the Divine in the hell of Holocaust suffering.

Because of the lack of punctuation at the end of the stanza's second line, Abraham's silent scream becomes visual as both a flag bearing the heraldic symbol of a knife which flies over the cliffs of Moriah, and a gigantic ear of Scripture which catches and holds the scream. The cliffs, the flag and the giant ear together form a surreal montage, with radical distortions of scale. Such extreme distortion will not continue to appear in Sachs's work, but dislocation will be found as a continuing trait. We will discuss this issue further below.

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Hamida Bosmajian, in *Metaphors of Evil*,<sup>468</sup> names her chapter on Nelly Sachs "Towards the point of Constriction". Since the scream in this mental landscape is repressed, it is instructive to trace the inscription of

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(See for instance Elijah's ascent to Heaven in 2 Kings 2:11, Psalms 120-134 sung as pilgrims "went up" to Jerusalem, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.)

<sup>467</sup> See for instance Hubert and/or Jan van Eyck's *The Last Judgment*, c. 1420–25, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Janson, *A History of Art: A Survey of the Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day* 275.

<sup>468</sup> Hamida Bosmajian, *Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979) 183.

constriction, containment and entrapment, of pain held in, within the images of the poem.<sup>469</sup>

Beginning with Abraham's scream preserved in "the great ear of the Bible", images of containment in this poem include the body's "grate of bones", and a quiver of arrows.<sup>470</sup> Both prisoners and saints are confined within cells, while inmates chained within the "doghouse of madness" are capable of only "shackled leaps". Jesus Christ's scream of pain is hidden in the Mount of Olives "like a crystal-bound insect overwhelmed by impotence," trapped in amber.

By contrast, much movement within the poem lies in the form of blood, "wildly rearing manes of sacrificial blood" or trees of sleep which "rear blood-licking from the ground". In this world, violence is more freely expressed than pain. A startling image of freedom occurs when the "gulping train of breath of the very old" is "slashed into seared azure with burning tails." The movement from the breaths of the dying to the trope of the comet is one from the intimate to the cosmic as well as from containment to freedom. Cosmic freedom here equates with the human movement to God at death.

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The silent scream in 'Landscape of Screams' is primarily written through representations of the body: in Sachs's "Wounded coral of shattered throat flutes", a fractured larynx is conflated with a crushed coral necklace, and in

screams, shut tight with the shredded mandibles of fish,

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<sup>469</sup> It is interesting to note that in Judith Herman's understanding of trauma theory, constriction—the numbing response of surrender—is named as one of the three classified symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, together with hyperarousal and intrusion—the imprint of the traumatic moment. See Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 3.

<sup>470</sup> This quiver is probably the quiver of the body. In 'And everywhere' these lines occur: ". . . with the blazing arrow of homesickness / flying out of the quiver of skin—". Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 157.



woe tendril of the smallest children  
 and the gulping train of breath of the very old,  
 the muted voice and the breath are written as alternatives to screaming.

In writing the rib-cage and clutching hands, Sachs writes fear through tropes with Scriptural associations. In "Ascension made of screams / out of the bodies grate of bones", the ladder of the rib-cage evokes the angels' ladder in Jacob's dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:12:

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

With this trope, as in the Akedah passage discussed above, Sachs once again brings to awareness traces of God's covenantal promises, because the scriptural text of the vision of Jacob's ladder too is immediately followed by a promise of descendants and of land:

And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth . . . (Gen 28: 13–14).

Throughout the books of Genesis and Exodus, many striking events in the lives of the Jewish patriarchs are followed by God's covenantal promises of descendants and of land, often written through tropes of stars, dust and sand. Wherever references to these events are found within Sachs's poetry, the Scriptural promise of land and descendants will be found as a cultural trace. The images of stars and sand which are scattered through Sachs's poetry, as well as dust, which is primarily an image of mortality, but one which carries reference to "offspring . . . like the dust of the earth" in the passage above, similarly act as reminders of the promises of the covenant.

A shadow lies behind the representation of stars and sand, wells and ladders, the motifs of God's covenantal promise to the Jewish nation, in Nelly Sachs's post-Holocaust writings. With the decimation of European

Jewry, survivors' confidence in the covenantal promises has been cruelly shaken, and for them these motifs are now deeply ambiguous. Sachs herself however never wavers in her faith in Israel's God; these references which carry traces of covenantal promises are for Sachs always statements of the reason for hope.

In the clutching hands of "O, O hands with finger vines of fear, / dug into wildly rearing manes of sacrificial blood," scripture is evoked not through a specific passage but through the genre of the apocalyptic. Although the horse with the mane of blood shares characteristics with the white horse of Revelation 19:11–13 as well as with a number of mythical horses, the most striking similarity in this image is to the blood-drenched world of Revelation 8:7 or Revelation 6:12:

The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up . . .

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

Christopher Rowland describes apocalyptic as

. . . a particular strand of thought within Jewish eschatology emerging from a particular socio-political matrix. It represents the views of those who have despaired of seeing the Jewish hope for a reign of God on earth being manifest in the world. Instead they look for a realm of a transcendental kind which could only be established as a result of a divine irruption into the present order to overthrow it and its evils.<sup>471</sup>

I see no evidence that Nelly Sachs holds expectations of the imminent emergence of the reign of a heavenly Son of Man.<sup>472</sup> She does, however,

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<sup>471</sup> Christopher Rowland, "Apocalyptic," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. and J. L. Houlden Coggins (London: SCM Press, 1990), 29.

<sup>472</sup> This is not to say that Sachs does not believe in the final victory of good over evil. This concept is explored in the verse-play *Eli*, while her poem which begins "Someone / will take the ball / from the hands that play / the game of terror",

in 'Landscape of Screams ' write Holocaust evil as similar in scale and quality to the cosmic catastrophes described in apocalyptic literature.

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In *Hurban*,<sup>473</sup> Alan Mintz discusses the continuities of those who write the Holocaust as the latest and most terrible suffering of a people who have endured persecution over millennia; they have the advantage of traditional responses to previous calamities which place them within a cultural continuity, but they are at risk of interpreting Jewish culture primarily as persecution. Or, as David G. Roskies states, "Living after the apocalypse" is "preferable to being linked to an unbroken chain of oppression."<sup>474</sup>

Nelly Sachs writes as one who lives "after the apocalypse" of the Holocaust, and avoids the interpretation of Jewish life as persecution in her poetry, if not in her life.<sup>475</sup> The cultural continuities which sustain her are not the memory of earlier times of persecution, but knowledge of archetypal Jewish figures drawn from the scriptures, God's covenantal promises to Israel, the realised hope of a return from exile to the land of Israel, and the continuities of the Jewish Kabbalistic mystical traditions.

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We will now see that Sachs is able to transcend the overwhelming scream of pain and horror inscribed in 'Landscape of Screams', and to write with compassion of the fragility of the damaged survivor.<sup>476</sup> 'World do not ask',

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expresses Messianic hope. This, however, seems not to be an immediate expectation. Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 153.

<sup>473</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* passim.

<sup>474</sup> Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* 261.

<sup>475</sup> From the late 1950s Nelly Sachs was institutionalised and treated for paranoia.

<sup>476</sup> Sachs shares this theme with Yehuda Amichai, whose 'Since Then' was discussed above.

'How many', and 'Chorus of the Rescued',<sup>477</sup> are all examples of Sachs's survivor poems; we will consider the last in detail.

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<sup>477</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play*, Eli 75,161,25.

## 2. THE HOLOCAUST AND THE WOUND

### 2A. THE WOUNDED SURVIVOR

"The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life."<sup>478</sup>

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#### Chor der Geretteten

*Wir Geretteten,  
Aus deren hohlem Gebein der Tod schon seine Flöten schnitt,  
An deren Sehnen der Tod schon seinen Bogen strich—  
Unsere Leiber klagen noch nach  
Mit ihrer verstümmelten Musik.*

*Wir Geretteten,  
Immer noch hängen die Schlingen für unsere Hälse gedreht  
Vor uns in der blauen Luft—  
Immer noch füllen sich die Stundenuhren mit unserem tropfenden  
Blut.*

*Wir Geretteten,  
Immer noch essen an uns die Würmer der Angst.  
Unser Gestirn ist vergraben im Staub.*

*Wir Geretteten  
Bitten euch:  
Zeigt uns langsam eure Sonne.  
Führt uns von Stern zu Stern im Schritt.  
Lasst uns das Leben leise wieder lernen.  
Es könnte sonst eines Vogels Lied,  
Das Füllen des Eimers am Brunnen  
Unseren schlecht versiegelten Schmerz aufbrechen lassen  
Und uns wegschäumen—*

*Wir bitten euch:  
Zeigt uns noch nicht einen beissenden Hund—  
Es könnte sein, es könnte sein  
Dass wir zu Staub zerfallen—  
Vor euren Augen zerfallen in Staub.  
Was hält denn unsere Webe zusammen?  
Wir odemlos gewordene,  
Deren Seele zu Ihm floh aus der Mitternacht  
Lange bevor man unseren Leib rettete  
In die Arche des Augenblicks.*

*Wir Geretteten,*

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<sup>478</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* 7.

*Wir drücken eure Hand,  
Wir erkennen euer Auge—  
Aber zusammen hält uns nur noch der Abschied,  
Der Abschied im Staub  
Hält uns mit euch zusammen.*

Chorus of the Rescued

We, the rescued,  
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes,  
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow—  
Our bodies continue to lament  
With their mutilated music.  
We, the rescued,  
The nooses wound for our necks still dangle  
before us in the blue air—  
Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood.  
We, the rescued,  
The worms of fear still feed on us.  
Our constellation is buried in dust.  
We, the rescued,  
Beg you:  
Show us your sun, but gradually,  
Lead us from star to star, step by step.  
Be gentle when you teach us to live again.  
Lest the song of a bird,  
Or a pail being filled at the well,  
Let our badly sealed pain burst forth again  
and carry us away—  
We beg you:  
Do not show us an angry dog, not yet—  
It could be, it could be  
That we will dissolve into dust—  
Dissolve into dust before your eyes.  
For what binds our fabric together?  
We whose breath vacated us,  
Whose soul fled to Him out of that midnight  
Long before our bodies were rescued  
Into the ark of the moment.  
We, the rescued,  
We press your hand  
We look into your eye—  
But all that binds us together now is leave-taking,  
The leave-taking in the dust  
Binds us together with you.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>479</sup>Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 25.

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In this poem, Sachs writes of what comes after the Holocaust, in the company of those who believe "that a catastrophe can be known only through its survivors and its survivals."<sup>480</sup> Sachs writes the fragile survivors of 'Chorus of the Rescued' as haunted by death; they carry death within them, like the survivor in Yehuda Amichai's poem 'Since Then' which was discussed in chapter 1.

Although there is no direct representation of the Holocaust in this poem, the images of death which accompany the survivors carry traces of Nazi atrocities. Behind the concept of Death playing music on the bodies of the survivors, those—" From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes, / And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow"— lies the echo of death-camp musicians forced to play classical music to accompany gassings, while the hour-glasses filled with blood recall the soap made from human fat and lampshades from tattooed skin which are the obscene relics of the Nazi regime. Nooses dangling in the air are reminiscent of death-camp hangings which all prisoners were forced to witness. Only the "The worms of fear" which "still feed on us" forms a less specifically Nazi trope of death.

In the list of events which, the poetic speaker suggests, may cause the survivor's pain to burst out and overwhelm her,<sup>481</sup> only one, the angry dog which evokes the SS killer dogs, carries Nazi associations. Otherwise it is the events of the normal world which may devastate the fragile survivor: the sun, stars, birdsong, and a pail being filled at the well.

Of these events, the image of the well carries special significance. The well with its water is a symbol of the uterus and its amniotic fluid and so of birth and fecundity. Wells in Jewish scriptures are also, as Sandra M.

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<sup>480</sup> Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* 206.

Schneiders has pointed out, the paradigmatic meeting places for the future marriage partners of the patriarchs:

We find the pattern in the story of Abraham's servant finding Rebecca, the future wife of Isaac, at the well of Nahor (Gen. 24: 10–61); Jacob meeting Rachel at the well in Haran (Gen. 29: 1–20); and Moses receiving Zipporah as wife after his rescue of the seven daughters of Jethro at the well in Midian (Exod. 2: 16–22).<sup>482</sup>

For Holocaust survivors like Sachs herself, whose hope of marriage as well as children has died with a fiancé murdered in the Holocaust, wells, like stars, are fraught with potential pain; these tropes which previously flagged renewal and hope now have the potential to construct the identity of the survivor as isolated and sterile by contrast with others, and to speak of the never-to-be-born.

But why do the other everyday events carry the potential for disintegration of the damaged survivor, the risk that she will "dissolve into dust" in an unmaking of God's creation?<sup>483</sup> The possibility of interpreting this poem in relation to the theory of post-traumatic stress syndrome will be discussed below.

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"For what binds our fabric together?" asks the poetic speaker in this poem. "The breath of life" is the usual answer to that question, but these fragile survivors are those "whose breath vacated us, / Whose soul fled to Him out of that midnight / Long before our bodies were rescued / Into the ark of the moment."

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<sup>481</sup> It was not until the 1970's that trauma theory began to speak of "flashbacks" but these are described in this poem.

<sup>482</sup> Sandra M Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, Second ed., *A Michael Glazier Book* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999) 187.

<sup>483</sup> God "formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" in the second creation myth of Genesis 2, so, at the end of life, humankind will crumble into dust: ". . . until you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; You are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Gen. 3: 19).



The concept of binding together occurs again in the final stanza of the poem, and has been variously interpreted. Kathrin M. Bower reads these lines as a statement of solidarity with the living,<sup>484</sup> but William West, in his essay "The Poetics of Inadequacy", interprets them in relation to the dead:

In the face of a world full of epitaphs, it is only *Abschied*, leave taking, that can preserve those who have been saved from death. The task is not to bring the dead back, but to let them go or to take leave of them oneself. But this leave taking, while it preserves the lives of the saved, also turns them into epitaphic representations of the dead. Their leave taking is like the leave taking of the dead, and so their *Abschied* not only holds the living together, but holds them together with the dead . . . In a sense, then, to be alive is to become dead to the dead, to mark their lost place but not to answer their call.<sup>485</sup>

West's statement seems to me to go to the heart of the matter.

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Trauma theory, which permits a new understanding of post-traumatic stress syndrome, helps to throw light on the poetic speaker's statement that normal events may lead to survivor disintegration. The essence of post-traumatic stress lies in its separation from the traumatising event.

Freud describes post-traumatic stress in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle":

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a "traumatic neurosis." This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the "incubation period" . . .<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> See Bower, *Ethics and Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer* 27-29.

<sup>485</sup> West, "The Poetics of Inadequacy: Nelly Sachs and the Resurrection of the Dead," 101-2.

<sup>486</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," vol. 18, 84.

As the Holocaust is at least the equivalent of Freud's "shocking accident," within trauma theory we may interpret Sachs's events of sunshine and birdsong as the context for the traumatic response.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth speaks of the element of fright in trauma, the lack of preparedness for anxiety. The survivor was not prepared to confront the threat of death in the past, she suggests, so she is forced afterwards to confront the event again and again. Consciousness, once faced with the possibility of its death, repeats the destructive event.

Caruth goes on:

From this perspective, the survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but rather the endless *inherent necessity* of repetition which may lead to destruction.<sup>487</sup>

If this is true, the poignancy of Sachs's poem is increased, for however gradual and careful the survivor's introduction to normality may be, trauma will inevitably break through and the destructive event will repeat itself. One important fact to remember, Caruth states, is that the repetition of the traumatic event in flashback is itself retraumatizing.<sup>488</sup> If the survivor dreams of the traumatic event, "he wakes up in another fright."

But, even more significantly, because Freud has defined "fright" as the traumatic effect of not having been prepared in time, the waking to survival constitutes a new fright. Therefore normal life follows nightmare as the new threat. "Normal" life therefore becomes for the survivor "an awakening out of a 'death' for which there is no preparation."<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* 63.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

Then, states Caruth, the survivor's struggle becomes "the endless attempt to assume one's *survival* as one's own"<sup>490</sup> (emphasis mine). Hence it is the very symbols of normality—sun, water at a well, birdsong—which may be significant in the trauma of the survivor. For trauma is

the oscillation between a crisis of *death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.<sup>491</sup>

In the words which I have used as the epigraph to this section, "The story of trauma, . . . far from telling of . . . the escape from a death . . . rather attests to its endless impact on a life."<sup>492</sup> This impact is the main theme of Nelly Sachs's 'Chorus of the Rescued'.

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## 2B. THE HOLOCAUST AND THE WOUND: THE MUTILATED BODY OF THE SURVIVOR

In 'Those Expelled', the vulnerability of the wounded Holocaust survivor which we saw in 'Chorus of the Rescued' no longer appears; instead, in this poem Nelly Sachs maps psychological damage and interior pain onto the mutilated body of the survivor:

### *Vertriebene*

*Vertriebene  
aus Wohnungen  
Windgepeitschte  
mit der Sterbeader hinter dem Ohr  
die Sonne erschlagend—*

*Aus verlorenen Sitten geworfen  
dem Gang der Gewässer folgend  
dem weinenden Geländer des Todes  
halten oft noch in der Höhle*

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

*des Mundes  
ein Wort versteckt  
aus Angst vor Dieben*

*sagen: Rosmarin  
und kauen eine Wurzel  
aus dem Acker gezogen  
oder  
schmecken nächtelang: Abschied  
sagen:  
Die Zeit ist um  
wenn eine neue Wunde aufbrach  
im Fuss.*

*Reissend wird ihr Leib  
im Salz der Marter fortgefressen.*

*Hautlos  
augenlos  
hat Hiob Gott gebildet.*

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### Those Expelled

Those expelled  
from dwellings  
whipped by the wind  
with the vein of death behind the ear  
slaying the sun—

Cast out of lost customs  
following the course of the waters  
the weeping railings of death  
often still hide a word  
in the hollow of the mouth  
for fear of thieves

saying: rosemary  
and chewing a root  
pulled from the field  
or  
tasting for many nights: farewell  
saying:  
The time is gone  
when a new wound opened  
in the foot.

Their bodies are ravenously

eaten away in the salt of torment.

Skinless  
eyeless  
Job created God.<sup>493</sup>

The last three stanzas of this poem concern us here. In the first of these, the wound of the one who walks long distances into exile is dismissed, for the damage to the survivor here so far exceeds previous pain as to be incomparable with it—"The time is gone / when a new wound opened / in the foot." In the next stanza, the body is eaten away as if torment were a caustic substance attacking it—"eaten away in the salt of torment."<sup>494</sup>

Last, the image of Job, first seen as the epigraph to 'O the chimneys', appears again. This time his body is not only flayed, but he is blinded as well—"Skinless / eyeless." The final lines inscribe terrible images of the body, unprotected by the envelope of skin, with the inside of the body now on the outside, exposed and raw.

No descent into the body is needed here to encounter the site of trauma; interior pain is now inscribed on the surface of the body itself. This is the ultimate in the vulnerable body/psyche, a self which is not simply partly exposed in a wound, but completely exposed through violence, in a mutilation.

The body of Job is, in Julia Kristeva's understanding, an image of abjection,<sup>495</sup> which arouses universal horror when what should be inside of the body—pus, blood, vomit, faeces, urine—breaks through the skin. In this flayed man, the whole body breaks through; only the corpse is a greater object of abjection. Unlike the corpse, however, in which death

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<sup>493</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 283.

<sup>494</sup> A similar concept appears in 'Glowing Enigmas I' where Sachs writes of "those fishes that speak on the hook / in the skeleton of salt / to make legible the wound—". Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 263. In 'Made Fearful', lightnings are "salt-petrified". Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 323.

swallows life, Job still lives, and in living, even in this most desperate of states, in a reversal but not an unmaking of creation, affirms the Divine.

Nellie Sachs has been concerned with the unmaking and remaking of creation; we saw how in 'Chorus of the Rescued' the poet wrote her fear that the survivors of calamity would crumble into dust, and I will discuss the transcending of evil as an act of creation in more detail below.

Job, with his tenacious hold on faith, is not simply equated with the thirty-six just men who in Jewish tradition uphold creation, but, as a suffering survivor, his faith enables him to participate in the creation of the Creator himself. This is a claim which, although breathtaking in its audacity, is significant as a link in Nelly Sachs's belief system, a link between the Divine, suffering, and the creative transcending of evil.

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## 2C. THE SCARRED BODY OF THE TEXT

"Cascading imagery overwhelms coherent teaching."<sup>496</sup>

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Theorists speak of the impossibility and the inadvisability of writing coherent and closed accounts of the atrocities of the Holocaust. They seek for ways in which "unspeakable traumatic experience can be transformed into a narrative",<sup>497</sup> they refer to "unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experience"<sup>498</sup> and to the survivor's attempt "to put into words an event

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<sup>495</sup> See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* passim.

<sup>496</sup> Introduction. Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* 32. In this statement Matt is describing the style of the *Zohar*; his words are equally true of the poetry of Nelly Sachs.

<sup>497</sup> Robson, *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life-Writing* 11.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

that seems to exceed the limits of knowledge and understanding and even of language".<sup>499</sup>

"What is at stake in assimilating trauma into narrative?" asks Kathryn Robson. Robson suggests that writers of trauma are concerned with "exploring, and exploding, the limits of what can be told."<sup>500</sup> Nelly Sachs is concerned not with limits, but with the surface of the textual body and the distortions which are beneath it; she replies to this question, in the words which I have used as epigraph for this chapter: "My metaphors are my wounds."<sup>501</sup>

While Sachs herself considers her metaphors to be the unhealed, weeping spaces on the body of her poetry, her metaphors could equally be read as stigmata, culturally encoded open wounds with symbolic religious meaning, or, following the etymology of stigmata as the branding marks of slaves, as indelible marks of violence on the body of the text.

But most helpful, I believe, is the possibility of reading Sachs's metaphors as scars on the body of the text of her poems, healed points of hard tissue which pull against the surface of the poem and distort the soft tissue of the text beneath them, leading to permanent disfigurements and dislocations—in Sachs's case primarily of space and time.

An example of Sach's scar of metaphor is found in the first stanza of 'Rescued':<sup>502</sup>

Rescued  
much falls  
into the baskets of memories  
for  
this night-age also  
will have its fossils

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>501</sup> Sachs, *Briefe der Nelly Sachs (Letters of Nelly Sachs)* 201.

<sup>502</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 179.

the black-bordered mourning scripts  
of its crookedly grown dust.

The simplicity of the language is deceptive here; readers, attempting to trace the metaphor through, and place items spatially, become confused. We begin with the knowledge that something, rescued, will fall into the basket of memory and be caught there, but where are these objects then? Are they fossils? Surely not, for these become mourning-scripts—elegies? bereavement cards?—and the scripts become scripts of dust, and how can dust be black-bordered?

Yet the text is evocative, filled with emblems of death, the dust shifting, the fossils lifeless but enduring, the mourning scripts suggestive of funeral ceremonies. The metaphor's site, however, has no space where the reader can stand for self-orientation. Emblems flow together, and the landscape fails to cohere.

Alvin H. Rosenfeld describes

. . . the severe dislocations from normalcy, from common orientations to time and space, that characterize [Nelly Sachs's] poetry . . . Time in her world, is *Herzenszeit*, and the heart, opened by a wound that will not close, counts off time by the heavy strokes of suffering and longing. Space is likewise abstracted from any framework of recognizable place and becomes, instead, *Schmerzenländer*, ("lands of pain") and *Schweigen . . . ein neues Land* ("silence . . . a new land").<sup>503</sup>

The topos of 'Landscape of Screams' can be described as both *Schmerzenländer*, one of the "lands of pain" and *Schweigen . . . ein neues Land*, a new land of silence. The topos of pain is written in 'Landscape of Screams' through surreal distortions of scale. Space here in 'Rescued' is different in the quality of its distortion however. Like a Marc Chagall

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<sup>503</sup> Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Poetry of Nelly Sachs," *Judaism* 20, no. 3 (1971): 363.



painting, it is a place of dreamlike floating objects, which transmute and so evade us; it is timeless and liquid under the scar of the metaphor.

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In 'If the Prophets Broke In', we find this description of prophetic harvest:

If the prophets broke in  
through the doors of night  
tearing wounds with their words  
into fields of habit,  
a distant crop hauled home  
for the labourer

who no longer waits at evening—<sup>504</sup>

These lines contain multiple images which occur in such quick succession that space and time buckle into dislocation within Sachs's text. The image of the prophets breaking in through the doors of night has begun every stanza of this poem and is a familiar one: from this point however the reader must integrate the concepts of wounds inflicted, words as weapon, tearing as the method of injury, and fields as the site of trauma, (a concept which quickly changes to "fields of habit" as the trauma site) and the transportation of the crop. As the departed labourers are encountered the reader is still trying breathlessly to hold aspects of the trope together. Here the soft tissue of the text distends almost to breaking point under the scar of metaphor.

Elsewhere the scar of metaphor distorts the text through swooping changes of scale between tropes, and extremes of sudden movement between the domestic and the cosmic. The movement from "ashen scream from visionary eye tortured blind—" to "O you bleeding eye /

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<sup>504</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 59.

in the tattered eclipse of the sun" in 'Landscape of Screams', is one from the intimate and closely-examined individual to the cosmic, and places evil as both damage and pain to the individual at her most intimate and private, and universally horrendous.

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We have seen in the quotation above that, in addition to dislocations of space in Sachs's poetry, Alvin H. Rosenfeld describes dislocations of time. He equates these with suffering and with longing, but an even more significant equation of woundedness and time occurs in Sachs's poem, 'Jacob',<sup>505</sup> a rewriting of the episode in Gen. 32:22–32 in which Jacob wrestles with the angel, and goes away limping. There these lines occur: "O the wound between night and day / which is our dwelling place!"

Kathrin M. Bower states of this trope that here Nelly Sachs uses "the configuration of the wound as both a sign of separation and a condition of suspension between temporal levels,"<sup>506</sup> and goes on to say that Sachs "deepens and widens the incision of suffering and pain evoked by the image of the wound by referring to it as a dwelling place."<sup>507</sup> While Bower reads this trope spatially, reading the wound as a dwelling place, I read it as temporal, and see Sachs interpreting the time of twilight as itself being a wound.

For Cathy Caruth, trauma is a breach in the mind's temporal framework:

What causes trauma is a shock that may appear to work very much like a bodily event but is in fact a break in the mind's understanding of time.<sup>508</sup>

If we accept Caruth's understanding of trauma, we may note that any formation of cultural links will bind time together and tend to work

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<sup>505</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 85.

<sup>506</sup> Bower, *Ethics and Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer* 37.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* 61.

towards the mind's healing.<sup>509</sup> Even as the scars of metaphor tend to distort the text around them, Sachs's use of the images associated with God's covenantal promises and archetypal figures from Jewish culture may be seen as aids to the binding together of time.

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So we see that Nellie Sachs writes the Holocaust through a discourse of the fragile, wounded survivor in 'Chorus of the Rescued' and other survivor poems, and by mapping psychological damage on the survivor's mutilated body in poems such as 'Those Expelled'. Throughout her poetic works her metaphors may be read as distorting scars on the body of the text.

Nelly Sachs's poetry therefore provides an answer to Theodor Adorno's statement about the ethics of writing poetry after Auschwitz. For Sachs, the appropriate form for such poetic discourse is the wounded or traumatized text, in which metaphors distort and dislocate space and time.

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We turn now to what are primarily Nelly Sachs's discourses of belief rather than of calamity. We have already encountered her use of many Jewish cultural and religious resources: apocalyptic in 'Landscape of Screams', the covenantal motifs of wells, sand and stars, midrash—a reworking of Scriptural narratives such as the Akedah, and archetypal patriarchal figures such as Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Job.

Other traditional resources which are available to Nelly Sachs include the mediaeval miracle play, (reworked in her verse play, *Eli: A Mystery Play*

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<sup>509</sup> For discussion of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage as mis-recognition of the existence of a coherent ego and the particular need for the subject to accept this fiction of an integrated self after trauma, see Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* xiv-xvi.

*of the Sufferings of Israel*),<sup>510</sup> the philosophical writings of the seventeenth century shoemaker-mystic, Jacob Boehme, scriptural prophetic discourse, and other Christian and Jewish mystical writings. The mystical Kabbalistic text of the *Zohar* is, however, Nelly Sachs's major influence in her discourses of belief.

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<sup>510</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 309.

### 3. A MYSTICAL DISCOURSE OF BELIEF: NELLY SACHS AND THE KABBALAH

"So we will meet, nonetheless, in hope—in a dark star-time, but still in hope! . . . In the night the blessing blooms upon the wrongly—but for God rightly—blessed man."<sup>511</sup>

But in the first word rest stars fallen from their orbit  
and twisted longing limps towards the place it shall inhabit.<sup>512</sup>

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The hope which is seen in the poetry of Nellie Sachs's grows from her deep belief in the Divine power of re-creation; she holds the conviction that evil can be transcended and transformed in the presence of the Divine.

A profound statement of Sachs's mystical religious belief is found in one of her letters to Paul Celan:

There is and was in me, and it's there with every breath I draw, the belief in transcendence through suffusion with pain, in the inspiritment of dust, as a vocation to which we are called. I believe in an invisible universe in which we mark our dark accomplishment. I feel the energy of the light that makes the stone break into music, and I suffer from the arrow-tip of longing that pierces us to death from the very beginning and pushes us to go searching beyond, where the wash of uncertainty begins. I was helped by the Hasidim mysticism of my own people, which—in this it is close to all mysticism—must ever make its home anew amid birth-pangs, far away from all dogma and institutions.<sup>513</sup>

What Nelly Sachs refers to as Hasidim mysticism is the most recent form of the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah. We have seen the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah on the poetry of Paul Celan; now we see the *Zohar* as the primary mystical influence on Nelly Sachs.

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<sup>511</sup> Celan and Sachs, *Correspondence* 24.

<sup>512</sup> 'Jacob was Smitten out of Dark Conflagration', Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 209.

<sup>513</sup> Celan and Sachs, *Correspondence* Letter 5, 6.

The *Zohar*, or *Book of Splendour*, is the classical work of the Kabbalah. The text contains the record of revelations regarding the Divine Mysteries which were said to be vouchsafed to the second century teacher Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai and to his circle. The book first became known through Moses de Leon of Guadalajara in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century; it is now believed that he was the principal author of the book.<sup>514</sup> Essentially, the *Zohar* is an exegesis of the Pentateuch or Torah with the doctrine of the *sefirot*, the ten aspects of God's being whose patterns and rhythms inform creation,<sup>515</sup> written into the narrative.

Lurianic Kabbalah, which is influential in Paul Celan's thought, was founded by Isaac Luria in Safed, Palestine, in the sixteenth century. This form of the Kabbalah was discussed in the previous chapter.

Hasidism, the third major area of influence within the Kabbalah, was founded by Ba'al Shem Tov, "the Master of the Good Name" or Besht, on the border between Russia and Poland in the early eighteenth century. The Torah and Talmud are its main religious references, but Hasidism emphasises emotion over an erudite approach to the Law. The Hasidic tales have been popularised by Martin Buber.<sup>516</sup> Interest in the *Zohar* was revived within Hasidism; Nelly Sachs appears to have encountered the text of the *Zohar* in this way.<sup>517</sup>

Two major clusters of mystical concepts which are drawn from the Kabbalah are found in the poetry of Nelly Sachs. The first involves

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<sup>514</sup> For discussion of the state of research on the author of the *Zohar*, see Daniel Chanan's Introduction to Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* 12-14.

<sup>515</sup> For further discussion on the *sefirot* (singular *sefirah*), see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 207-39.

<sup>516</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1991).

<sup>517</sup> For further details of the Kabbalah, see Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)., Unterman, ed., *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend.*, and R J Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

creation, language and tropes of rebirth; the second involves the transformation of evil, and the overcoming of death through resurrection.

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### 3A: HOPE FROM THE KABBALAH: CREATION, LANGUAGE AND REBIRTH

Peoples of the earth,  
leave the words at their source,  
for it is they that can nudge  
the horizons into the true heaven . . . ('Peoples of the earth")<sup>518</sup>

All is salvation in the mystery  
and the word went forth  
the breath-dispensing universe

protects like masks with its side turned away  
the night giving birth to stars.<sup>519</sup>

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Nelly Sachs, the poet with the wounded text, seeking a space of redemption and renewal for herself and for the wounded survivors of the Holocaust, finds in the *Zohar* concepts of rebirth through the power of the Divine word. Much of Sach's capacity for hope, even in the face of the evil of the Holocaust, springs from her hold on this belief. In 'Then Wrote the Scribe of the Sohar',<sup>520</sup> Nelly Sachs reinscribes the power of the Divine word to bring about renewal.

In the creation myth of Genesis 1, the cosmos is brought into being through the Divine word. The *Zohar* describes God's word which is inscribed as the letters of the law on the tablets of stone on Mt Sinai:

The moment these letters came forth,  
secretly circling as one,  
a spark came out to engrave.  
A flowing measure extended ten cubits on this side,

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<sup>518</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 93. The birth of the stars is linked to human birth in the philosophy of Jacob Boehme. See the discussion of *The Aurora in Weeks, Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* 91.

<sup>519</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 131.

<sup>520</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 123.

and out shot comets inside comets, seventy-one . . .  
 Now they came forth, those carved, flaming letters  
 flashing like gold when it dazzles . . . <sup>521</sup>

In 'Then Wrote the Scribe of the Sohar', Nellie Sachs reinterprets this passage of the *Zohar*. In this poem, we see the author of the *Zohar* reactivating the power of the Divine Word in his text, a power which will bring hope to rebirth for the wounded world, suffering in "the wound called day".

*Da schrieb der Schreiber des Sohar*

*Da schrieb der Schreiber des Sohar  
 und öffnete der Worte Adernetz  
 und führte Blut von den Gestirnen ein,  
 die kreisten unsichtbar, und nur  
 von Sehnsucht angezündet.*

*Des Alphabetes Leiche hob sich aus dem Grab,  
 Buchstabenengel, uraltes Kristall,  
 mit Wassertropfen von der Schöpfung eingeschlossen,  
 die sangen—und man sah durch sie  
 Rubin und Hyazinth und Lapis schimmern,  
 als Stein noch weich war  
 und wie Blumen ausgesät.*

*Und, schwarzer Tiger, brüllte auf  
 die Nacht: und wälzte sich  
 und blutete mit Funken  
 die Wunde Tag.*

*Das Licht war schon ein Mund der schwieg,  
 nur eine Aura noch den Seelengott verriet.*

*Then Wrote the Scribe of the Sohar*

Then wrote the scribe of the *Sohar*  
 opening the words' mesh of veins  
 instilling blood from stars  
 which circled, invisible and ignited  
 only by yearning.

The alphabet's corpse rose from the grave,

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<sup>521</sup> Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* 119-20.



alphabet angel, ancient crystal,  
 immured by creation in drops of water  
 that sang—and through them you saw  
 glinting lapis, ruby and jacinth,  
 when stone was still soft  
 and sown like flowers.

And night, the black tiger,  
 roared: and there tossed  
 and bled with sparks  
 the wound called day.

The light was a mouth that did not speak  
 only an aura intimated the soul-god now.<sup>522</sup>

In the poem's first stanza, the power of the Divine word which brought about creation and is still contained within it, "invisible and ignited / only by yearning" is instilled by the writer of the *Zohar* as "blood from stars" and becomes visible in his text.

In Sachs's reinscription of the *Zohar*, the letters of the Divine Word are made of crystal<sup>523</sup> and each character takes the form of an angel. The crystals have great beauty; they are "still soft / and sown like flowers", the deep blue of lapis lazuli, ruby red and blue-purple jacinth softly emerging. Each character is "immured by creation in drops of water / that sang." Blomster suggests that this water is "the moisture of the breath of God who spoke the original words of creation."<sup>524</sup>

In the third stanza, evil is introduced into this universe in the roar of the black tiger. This is merely unarticulated sound, compared with the

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<sup>522</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 123.

<sup>523</sup> Crystal or precious jewels are often used in scripture to describe God's place in heaven. In Exodus 24:9 for instance, God is described on Sinai: "Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness." The New Jerusalem in the Christian Book of Revelation "has the glory of God and a radiance like a rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal" (Rev. 21:11).

<sup>524</sup> W. V. Blomster, "A Theosophy of the Creative Word: The *Zohar*-Cycle of Nelly Sachs," *Germanic Review* XLIV, no. 3 (1969): 222.

creative Divine word. The final stanza indicates that God's speech is audible now only to chosen people, the prophets; the scribe of the *Zohar* stands within their company. To others it is only visible as light, as "a mouth that did not speak."

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Since the power of the Divine word can be "ignited / only by yearning," this poem explains Nelly Sachs's lifelong concern with the significance of longing.<sup>525</sup> In 'How Long Have We Forgotten How to Listen', Sachs pleads with humankind to listen towards longing:

Even in the market,  
In the computation of dust,  
Many have made a quick leap  
Onto the tightrope of longing,  
Because they heard something,  
And leapt out of the dust  
And sated their ears.<sup>526</sup>

Humankind needs to long because, Sachs asserts,<sup>527</sup> longing dwells with God—"wherever else should it dwell"—and may be the foundation of the spiritual world; longing "fills mysterious spaces of air— / And perhaps is invisible soil from which roots of stars grow and swell". Longing for Sachs always equates with the wish for homecoming to the Divine. W. V.

Blomster summarises Nelly Sachs's position in the following words:

Man carries within himself a subconscious knowledge of the sanctity and blessedness of the original mystery. This awareness manifests itself as longing, an intense nostalgia, and a desire to

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<sup>525</sup> Longing is a significant concept within the philosophy of Jacob Boehme. Andrew Weeks summarises this aspect of *The Human Genesis of Christ* as follows: "(a) God is the world beyond this world, about which no finite being can know; but (b) God would not know Himself if not for His longing for the wisdom of the 'ground'. Hence, (c) just as the divine desire and longing for the mirror of wisdom engenders this world in a magic act of self-impregnating imagination (as the passage goes on to explain), the believer too approaches the unknowable deity through the transforming process of longing and imaginative faith." Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* 149.

<sup>526</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 17.

<sup>527</sup> 'But Perhaps God Needs the Longing,' *Ibid.* 25.

experience the presence of God during the exile of earthly existence. This longing must be understood as a mutual one, for God himself shares in it.<sup>528</sup>

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Sachs's belief in the power of the Divine word to recreate, to bring life from what is dead, includes the certainty that evil, even the evil of the Holocaust, will be transformed in the cosmic realm. This belief permits Sachs to gaze steadily at evil, and accounts for her ability, unique among the poets whom we have considered, to avoid an over-cohesive writing of belief in the face of calamity. Sachs suppresses no ambiguity, nor does she write a latent message which will subvert her overt statements of belief. Instead, Nelly Sachs, alone among our poets, integrates the knowledge of evil into her religious faith.

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### 3B. THE KABBALAH: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF DEATH AND EVIL

Press, oh press on the day of destruction  
 The listening ear to the earth,  
 And you will hear, through your sleep  
 You will hear  
 How in death  
 Life begins. (How Long Have We Forgotten How to Listen!)<sup>529</sup>

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Nelly Sachs writes her Kabbalistic belief in the Divine power to transform evil through the themes of fire and darkness. 'Night of Nights' is a poem of resurrection, of life brought from what is dead.

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#### *Nacht der Nächte*

*Die Nacht war ein Sarg aus schwarzem Feuer  
 Die roten Amenfarben der Gebete*

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<sup>528</sup> Blomster, "A Theosophy of the Creative Word: The *Zohar*-Cycle of Nelly Sachs," 217.

<sup>529</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 17.

*bestatteten sich darin*

*In diesem Purpur wurzelten Zähne—Haare—und der Leib  
ein geschüttelter Baum im Geisterwind  
Hellgesichtig—dieser Eintags-Cherub  
zündete sich an  
Die Flammen im Adernetz  
liefen alle ihrer Deutung zu*

*In der Auferstehungsasche spielte Musik.*

### Night of Nights

The night was a coffin of black fire  
the red amen-colors of prayers  
interred themselves inside it

In this purple were rooted teeth—hair—and the body  
a shaken tree in the ghostly wind  
Lightfaced—this one-day cherub  
ignited itself  
The flames in the mesh of veins  
all rushed towards their significance

Music played in the resurrection ashes.<sup>530</sup>

'Night of Nights' is filled with images of darkness and of fire. Throughout the Torah's accounts of God's meetings with Moses, these concepts occur together.<sup>531</sup> The fire of the Divine, "the breath of flame / of the terribly

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<sup>530</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 237.

<sup>531</sup> In Kabbalistic thought, too, these concepts are linked. The Kabbalists answered critics who charged that the Kabbalah verged on polytheism in positing ten aspects of Divinity by the statement that *Ein Sof* (the infinite, unmanifest God) and the *sefirot* (the perceived aspects of God) form a unity "like a flame joined to coal."

While the first paragraph of the first section of the Zohar, which is concerned with the creation of the world, is translated by Matt as, "In the Beginning . . . / a blinding spark flashed within the Concealed of the Concealed / from the mystery of the Infinite," in Gershom Scholem's translation it reads, "In the beginning— . . . within the most hidden recess a dark flame issued from the mystery of *Eyn Sof*, the Infinite." See *Zohar* 3:70a. Cited Introduction, Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* 33, 49.

close-come mystery"<sup>532</sup> which caused Moses's thornbush to burst into flame, is a recurring image throughout Nelly Sachs's mystical poetry; Moses's meeting with God on Sinai takes place in "the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20: 21).<sup>533</sup>

In 'Night of Nights' Sachs writes fire in a cremation image, conflating echoes of the death camp crematoria with the site of Divine presence. Death-camp crematoria references to fire are even more specific in 'I Do Not Know the Room':

I do not know the room  
 where exiled love  
 lays down its victory  
 and the growing into the reality  
 of visions begins  
 nor where the smile of the child  
 who was thrown as in play  
 into the playing flames is preserved  
 but I know that this is the food  
 from which earth with beating heart  
 ignites the music of her stars—<sup>534</sup>

Here, the terrible images of a child thrown "as in play" into fire and the playing flames, in a perversion of the concept of childhood games which are played in freedom, leads through the crematorium image into a trope which combines the music of the spheres, (which will appear again in 'Night of Nights'), nourishment, and the embodied, living earth in transcendence.

The momentousness of evil is never trivialised by Nelly Sachs, but her belief in the Divine ability to transform even evil is unwavering; here the evil done to this child is the source of ignition of the cosmic energies.

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<sup>532</sup> 'Land of Israel', Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 115.

<sup>533</sup> Fire, too, is of central significance in the philosophy of Jacob Boehme. "[Boehme's] theology has been described as a theology of fire." Robin Waterfield, ed., *Jacob Boehme: Essential Readings* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Crucible, 1989) 28.

The day-old cherub in 'Night of Nights', one day dead, who is ignited by the fire of God, is reminiscent of Moses whose glowing face, which necessitated the wearing of a veil after his encounter with the Divine on Sinai, is written in the narrative of Exodus 34:29–35. Sachs makes reference to this passage in 'Sinai' where she writes

Sinai  
down from your peak  
Moses bore the opened sky  
on his forehead  
cooling step by step . . .<sup>535</sup>

Sachs writes a second reference to the Exodus passage in her verse-play *Eli*, in the glowing face of Michael the shoemaker,<sup>536</sup> one of the thirty-six just men who uphold creation in Jewish legend. There the Farmer tells Michael "You've death on your brow . . . When a man has something shining between the eyes, / big as a snowflake . . ." <sup>537</sup> In this play, when Michael locks glances with the killer of the child Eli, the light on Michael's forehead will cause him to crumble into dust, in a literal unmaking of evil.<sup>538</sup>

The glowing face which reflects an encounter with the Divine is in *Eli* a death-dealing instrument of Divine justice and a sign of Sachs's belief in apocalyptic justice for the perpetrators of the Holocaust's evil. Inter-textual referencing therefore brings traces of concepts of justice as well as the more direct transformation by fire into the interpretation of 'Night of Nights'. While the fire of the Divine causes the faces of the living to shine, in the Divine realm Divine fire fills the body of the newly dead.

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<sup>534</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 233.

<sup>535</sup> 'Sinai'. Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 95.

<sup>536</sup> In folk-literature, the shoemaker is a type figure who joins the upper to the sole/soul. The seventeenth century Christian mystic, Jacob Boehme, influential in Sachs's mystical belief system, was a shoe-maker by trade.

<sup>537</sup> Sachs, *Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, Eli* 371.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid. 382-95.

The image of flames ignited in the web of veins of the "lightfaced" cherub in 'Night of Nights'—the pallor of death replaced in her face by illumination—links with Sachs's epigraph to 'Hasidic Scriptures', a statement from the Talmud:

It is said: the commandments of the Torah equal the number of a man's bones, its prohibitions the number of the veins. Thus the whole law covers the whole human body.<sup>539</sup>

The law, the Torah, is inscribed on the body in this epigraph; in 'Night of Nights', the fire of the Divine replaces the Law as the embodied sign of the Divine presence, as mysticism takes the place of the dogma of Jewish institutional belief. As Sachs has stated in the citation above, "all mysticism—must ever make its home anew . . . far away from all dogma and institutions."<sup>540</sup>

In 'Night of Nights' the image of the one-day cherub who "ignited itself / The flames in the mesh of veins / all rushed towards their significance" may be seen as the culmination of the process of elevation towards God as the newly-dead child enters the Divine presence beyond death.

We have seen the concept of "blood from stars" as a synonym for Divine power in 'Then Wrote the Scribe of the *Sohar*'. The fire of God, however, is an attribute of God's actual presence, purifying, refining, destroying and transforming. The dead child, his veins now filled with fire, is a sign of evil overcome through the power of the Divine. As his body caught fire in the crematorium, now his entire being, transformed, is aflame with Divine presence.<sup>541</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 131.

<sup>540</sup> Celan and Sachs, *Correspondence* Letter 5, 6.

<sup>541</sup> Blood and fire are conflated within the philosophy of Jacob Boehme. "We . . . discover in living things that the essential fire in the *corpus* dwells in the blood and that blood is its mother and that fire is the father of blood." *The Way to Christ* 1.14. Jacob Boehme, *The Way to Christ*, trans. John Joseph Stoudt (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979) 141.

The colours of fire and darkness, of red and black, are primary within this poem. "In this purple . . ." superficially refers to colour within the flames as the body is burnt; purple is in the *Zohar* in addition a royal colour, associated with *Tif'eret*, the male principle of the *sefirot*, the King or Blessed Holy One.<sup>542</sup> The burnt child attains royal status in the presence of the Divine.

The trope of black fire in 'Night of Nights' links concepts of fire and of darkness. Sachs writes, "I have always endeavoured to raise the unspeakable onto the transcendental level to make it bearable . . . and to let a glow of the holy darkness fall into this night of nights."<sup>543</sup> In this statement, "night of nights" is a reference to the depravity and evil of the Holocaust. In the title of this poem, however, "night of nights" may as readily be positively unique—a description of the time when the holy darkness of God acts to transform evil and bring life from death.

Darkness as a characteristic of the Divine has its source in the mediaeval tradition of apophatic or negative mysticism. Denys Turner states that the concept of the darkness of God is the product of a convergence of sources from Plato and the Jewish scriptures book of Exodus account of Moses' meetings with God, as interpreted by Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>544</sup>

The holy darkness of God is a dazzling darkness caused by blinding light.  
The brilliant light of the presence of the Divine is

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<sup>542</sup> Matt lists the images associated with this *sefirah* as heaven, sun, harmony, king, green, purple, Jacob, Moses, "beauty," compassion and Blessed Holy One. Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* 35, 226. "Come and see: / There are four lights. / Three are concealed and one is revealed. / A shining light. / A glowing light; / it shines like the clear brilliance of heaven. / A purple light that absorbs all lights. / A light that does not shine . . ." Matt, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* 108. For the technique of visualization in Kabbalistic prayer see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988) 103.

<sup>543</sup> Nelly Sachs, in the appendix to her play, *Beryll Gazes into the Night, or the Lost and Refound Alphabet*. Cited Schwebell, "Nelly Sachs," 46-7.



so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even, as in Exodus, death, but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess—therefore a "luminous darkness".<sup>545</sup>

It is likely, however, that when Nelly Sachs writes dazzling darkness, her sources are the Kabbalah and the Exodus accounts of Moses' meeting with God, unmediated by Dionysius.

"I feel the energy of the light that makes the stone break into music," states Nelly Sachs in the letter to Paul Celan which was cited above. In 'Night of Nights', ashes are similarly transformed to music by the energy of fire. In this trope of resurrection, as the flames "rush towards their significance", the human ontological or existential need for meaning is satisfied as the search for significance, and especially for understanding of the meaning of evil, finds resolution, even as life grows from an evil death.

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<sup>544</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 4–5.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.* 17–18.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Skinless

eyeless

Job created God. ('Those Expelled')<sup>546</sup>

"Within . . . the war we are all waging with the forces of death, . . . I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior."<sup>547</sup>

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In the *Zohar* Nellie Sachs finds not only a space of sacred power and redemption; she finds significance and a sacred task. A corollary of her belief in the Divine word is her faith that a poet can reinscribe God's act of creation through her poetics, and take part in the transcending of evil and "the metamorphoses of the world."<sup>548</sup>

David G. Roskies believes that to write the transcending of evil as an act of creation is the greatest achievement of Jewish writers in the face of the evil of the Holocaust:

Thus the great *imitatio Dei* of the modern period has not been the Jews' endless capacity to suffer, to be Christ figures for the world, or even their willingness to die for the sanctification of the Name. It has been their ability, in the midst and in the wake of the apocalypse, to know the apocalypse, express it, mourn it, and transcend it; for if catastrophe is the presumption of man acting as destroyer, then the fashioning of catastrophe into a new set of tablets is the primal act of creation carried out in the image of God.<sup>549</sup>

The poetry of Nelly Sachs forms a part of this act of creation. Sachs, conscious of the wounded survivor and writing within a wounded text, alone of the poets whom we have considered, writes an integrated poetry of belief in calamitous times, gazing steadily at the evil of the Holocaust,

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<sup>546</sup> Sachs, *The Seeker and Other Poems* 283.

<sup>547</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984) 41.

<sup>548</sup> Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* 310.

but believing nevertheless in resurrection and renewal through the fire and dazzling darkness of the Divine.

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We turn now to a very different type of calamity. The thinking of post-modern theorists, which stresses the disjunction between signifier and signified (word and meaning), challenges the poet's traditional understanding of language, and can prove calamitous for the poet. The French poet Yves Bonnefoy writes religious discourse against post-modernity's crisis of language and meaning.

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## Yves Bonnefoy: The Post-Modern Crisis of Language and of Loss

"Why should there not be an increasing captivation with negation in a modern epoch characterized as it is by its difference [from] a classical age in which the energy of synthesis and perception of unity was so necessary to forming its consciousness of self and world? Isn't it inevitable . . . that [post]-modernity's understandable concern with difference, discontinuity, and the novelty of the evolving, unfolding, unfinished (and unfinishable) experience should issue in a progressive sensitivity to and wariness of all positive terms, predications, equations, adequations?"<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> Toby Foshay, "Introduction: Denegation and Resentment," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Howard Coward & Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1.

## 1. CALAMITOUS TIMES

### INTRODUCTION

Yves Bonnefoy was born in Tours, France in June 1923. After taking an advanced degree in mathematics and philosophy, he moved to occupied Paris in late 1943 where he became involved in the Surrealist circles of the city and became acquainted with André Breton. There he married and taught science and mathematics.

In 1953, Bonnefoy's first book of poetry was published, *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (*On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*). This was followed in 1958 by *Hier régnant désert* (*Yesterday's Desert Dominion*), by *Pierre écrite*, (*Words in Stone*) in 1965, and in 1975 by *Dans le leurre du seuil* (*In the Lure of the Threshold*). In 1981, Bonnefoy was elected to the College of France to fill the seat formerly occupied by Roland Barthes. Since that time he has published further books of poetry, *Ce qui fut sans lumière* (*In the Shadow's Light*) in 1987, *Début et fin de la neige* (*The Beginning and the End of the Snow*) in 1991 and *Les planches courbes* (*The Curved Planks*) in 2001.

In addition, Bonnefoy has published art criticism, literary criticism<sup>551</sup> and autobiography,<sup>552</sup> has edited *The Dictionary of Mythologies*<sup>553</sup> and has translated and discussed Shakespeare, Donne, Keats, Yeats and Leopardi.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Bonnefoy, *The Lure and the Truth of Painting: Selected Essays on Art*. And Bonnefoy, *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays*.

<sup>552</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Arrière-pays* (Paris: Skira, 1972).

<sup>553</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, ed., *Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionnelles et du monde antique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981). Translated as Yves Bonnefoy, *Mythologies*, trans. Wendy Doniger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>554</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *Shakespeare and the French Poet*, ed. John Naughton (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Yves Bonnefoy is today considered by many to be the most influential poet in France. He has been enriched by much travelling, by academic lecturing and by time spent in a former monastery in Provence, now a dilapidated farmhouse, which has become for Bonnefoy, in John Naughton's words, "the locus of a simple and persistent, if menaced and precarious, sacred order."<sup>555</sup> This monastery/farm is the setting for Bonnefoy's fourth book of poetry, *In the Lure of the Threshold*.

For the purpose of this thesis, however, the most significant fact about Bonnefoy is the interest in the problems of language which he shares with Europe's post-modern theorists, with, for instance, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin. Like these men, Bonnefoy is intimately concerned with issues of language's opacity and with the disjunction between language and meaning.

These theorists do not take up identical positions. Bonnefoy uses the Saussurean distinction between *la langue* and *la parole* in his discussion of language, but, unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom the signifier (the word "stone") and the signified (the concept of "stone") together comprise the sign, Bonnefoy stresses the importance of the object itself. Yves Bonnefoy's and Jacques Derrida's positions on presence are not identical, though they are not as different as they may appear at first sight.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>555</sup> Naughton, Introduction. Ibid. viii.

<sup>556</sup> Stuart Sim summarises Derrida's concept of Presence as "the assumption that we can grasp meaning in its entirety, and that when we hear a word or phrase it is totally 'present' to us in our minds"; therefore behind Derrida's denial of presence is an assertion that a metaphysics of presence necessarily implies a belief in the stability of words and meanings. Bonnefoy, like Derrida, denies the possibility of such a stability, yet continues to assert a belief in the importance of presence even as he asserts, with Derrida, the opacity and elusiveness of language. However, in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials", Derrida, who describes this as "the most 'autobiographical' speech I have ever risked", seems close to Bonnefoy in religious belief. Certainly Derrida's ideas of the Divine and of silence

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To date we have considered poets whose discourse of calamity is relatively direct, but whose religious discourse contains the suppression of ambiguities and contradictions, which are discernable as both gaps and traces. The writing of ambiguity by Yves Bonnefoy is more overt than that of other poets, and is discernable in his discourse of calamity, which is primarily the calamity of language and of meaning, (since the post-modern understanding of language is calamitous for a poet), as well as within his religious discourse.

I believe that several factors have a bearing on Bonnefoy's greater tolerance of ambiguity. The nature of the pressures of the calamities of post-modern theories of language, even for a poet, is different in kind and quality from the trauma of Jewish poet survivors of the Holocaust of course, and the subjectivity of the poet under the former pressures is far less fragile.

Second, the tolerance of ambiguity within post-modern thought is a given; all post-modern thinkers operate within a framework of contradiction and disjunction and the pressure towards closure which existed in modernism is eased for them.

Third, Yves Bonnefoy's poetics is one in which disjunction and ambiguity play a positive role. In an article written for *Encounter*, Bonnefoy states:

Poetic activity does not merely assert, it creates. It is not based on the unity of sign and thing signified, but on their disjunction, which is what initiates the specific drama of poetic thought.<sup>557</sup>

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sit easily with those beliefs of Bonnefoy's which can be identified with negative theology.

<sup>557</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, "Critics- English and French and the Distance Between Them," *Encounter XI*, no. 1 (1958): 42.



With the poets whom I have previously discussed, I have separated out and analysed their primary discourses of calamity. Yves Bonnefoy is a subtle and sophisticated thinker, and one whose ideas, pervaded by ambiguity and contradiction, are presented in clusters of thought. To attempt to completely separate the calamities which inform his poetics would be to do injustice to Bonnefoy's complex thinking.

I shall simply note here that two main areas of calamity inform the thought of Yves Bonnefoy. The first involves issues of language and of meaning, and the second a lack of religious Presence. These concepts are linked within his thought, and interwoven through them are other issues of concern to Bonnefoy, including human mortality and the real.

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## 2. THE CALAMITY OF LANGUAGE— OPACITY AND DISJUNCTION, AMBIGUITY AND LOSS

"We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."<sup>558</sup>

"Speech can indeed celebrate presence, sing of its being, as I am doing now; it can prepare us spiritually for encountering it, but it cannot in itself allow us to achieve it."<sup>559</sup>

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In his interview with Shusha Guppy, Yves Bonnefoy speaks of the primacy and inadequacy of language:

For poetry can only be a partial approach, which substitutes for the object a simple image and for (our feelings) a verbal expression—thereby losing the intimate experience. On the other hand there is nothing before language, for there is no consciousness, and therefore no world, without a system of signs. In fact, it is the speaking being that has created this universe, even if language excludes him from it. This means that we are deprived through words of an authentic intimacy, with what we are, or with what the Other is. We need poetry, not to regain this intimacy which is impossible, but to remember that we miss it and to prove to ourselves the value of those moments when we are able to encounter other people, or trees, or anything, beyond words, in silence.<sup>560</sup>

In this statement, Bonnefoy reiterates a Lacanian belief in language as primary, and entry to the symbolic world of language as an essential process in human maturation: "On the other hand there is nothing before language, for there is no consciousness, and therefore no world, without a system of signs." He underlines the inadequacy and opacity of language, which "substitutes for the object a simple image and for (our feelings) a verbal expression—thereby losing the intimate experience."

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<sup>558</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 146.

<sup>559</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 113.

<sup>560</sup> Shusha Guppy, "Yves Bonnefoy: The Art of Poetry LXIX," *The Paris Review*, Summer 1994, 114.

Bonnefoy articulates the dilemma of the human situation, as he states that "it is the speaking being that has created this universe, even if language excludes him from it. This means," in Bonnefoy's view, "that we are deprived through words of an authentic intimacy, with what we are, or with what the Other is." Finally, in the face of language's opacity and disjunction, he articulates a limited role for the language of poetry:

We need poetry, not to regain this intimacy which is impossible, but to remember that we miss it and to prove to ourselves the value of those moments when we are able to encounter other people, or trees, or anything, beyond words, in silence.<sup>561</sup>

We may observe in this statement Bonnefoy's tendency towards ambiguous language statements. Even as Bonnefoy asserts the human primacy of language—"there is nothing before language"—he affirms its secondary status as "a simple image . . . which substitutes for the object." The distinction is a subtle one. The significance of the object for Bonnefoy which is apparent here will be seen throughout his poetic works, and bring with it one of the essential contradictions of Bonnefoy's concept of language.

Disjunctions and substitutions between object, image, experience and language are apparent in Bonnefoy's statement, as language substitutes image for object, and words for feelings, and in language's inability to convey "authentic intimacy, with what we are, or with what the Other is", to mediate human connection in a direct way. Only in silence, Bonnefoy believes, is human encounter direct.

Poetry's power is limited to its capacity to awaken longing or Lacanian desire, the knowledge that genuine harmonious connection was once possible (as described in the Edenic myth or experienced by the child in Lacanian theory who is held and fed at the mother's breast). Bonnefoy's statement here of the limited power of language needs to be held in

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

tension with the power which he ascribes elsewhere to words of the simple real, which will be discussed below.

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It is tempting to believe that Bonnefoy's preoccupation with the inability of language to directly mediate meaning, so that "we are deprived through words of an authentic intimacy, with what we are, or with what the Other is" is a purely post-modern concern, but attention to the problems of language and of meaning may be traced within far older historical traditions. Issues of language and its disjunctions may be discerned within Augustinian theology of the Fall, and through this in both positive and negative mediaeval theology.

The creation myth of Genesis 2 and 3 in the Hebrew scriptures depicts a Paradisal state of absolute harmony between nature, humankind and the Divine, and the fall from that state which results from Adam's refusal to accept the limits assigned to humankind by God. The result of the fall (known in Augustinian theology as the Fall) is a loss of the ease and natural harmony of the previous state. Kevin Hart summarises the condition:

From God's presence we pass to His absence; from immediacy to mediation; . . . from fullness of being to a lack of being; from ease and play to strain and labour; from purity to impurity; and from life to death.<sup>562</sup>

In *The Trespass of the Sign*, Hart reads the Fall in terms of language. The Fall, he states, is the trespass of the linguistic sign because it is a desire for knowledge which is unmediated by language,<sup>563</sup> "and the sign of this

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<sup>562</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 5.

<sup>563</sup> Karsten Harries, linking theories with traditional theological concepts, states that "The refusal of metaphor is inseparably connected with the project of pride, the dream of an unmediated vision, a vision that is not marred by lack, that does not refer to something beyond itself that would fulfil it", and adds that "It is a vain hope. We do not have an unmediated understanding of anything real, not even of our own selves." Karsten Harries, "Metaphor and Transcendence," in *On*

disobedience is none other than the mutability of all signs."<sup>564</sup> As a result of the Fall, from the perfect congruence of sign and referent, language passes to the gap between word and object. Humankind is no longer master of signs but is frequently mastered by them. In Hart's words,

No longer in harmony with God, this world becomes a chiaroscuro of presence and absence; everywhere one looks, there are signs of a divine presence that has withdrawn and that reveals itself only in those signs.<sup>565</sup>

Significantly, the myth of the Fall as interpreted by Hart links issues of language with the absence of the Presence of the Divine: "everywhere one looks, there are signs of a divine presence that has withdrawn and that reveals itself only in . . . signs."<sup>566</sup> This description of rigid and empty signs, no longer filled with the meaning of the Divine Presence, is compatible with Bonnefoy's statements of the inadequacy of language which was discussed above, and, like Bonnefoy's thought, links the concept of the hiddenness of God with mutability of signs.

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In several places within his poetry Yves Bonnefoy engages with the inadequacy of language. In 'Hopkins Forest', Bonnefoy writes language as closed and empty of all meaning, the sign reduced to signifier. Here the white page becomes an abyss of meaninglessness:

*Je rentrai  
Et je rouvris le livre sur la table.  
Page après page,  
Ce n'étaient que des signes indéchiffrables,  
Des agrégats de formes d'aucun sens  
Bien que vaguement récurrentes,  
Et par-dessous une blancheur d'abîme  
Comme si ce qu'on nomme l'esprit tombait là, sans bruit,*

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*Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 82-83.

<sup>564</sup> Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*. 3.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

*Comme une neige.*

I went back in  
 And reopened the book on the table,  
 Page after page,  
 Nothing but indecipherable signs,  
 Aggregates of meaningless forms  
 Though vaguely recurrent,  
 And beneath them the white of an abyss  
 As though what we call mind were falling there,  
 Soundlessly,  
 Like snow. ('Hopkins Forest')<sup>567</sup>

In part II of 'Wind and Smoke', from *La Vie Errant (The Wandering Life)* of 1993, the clumsiness of the tool of language is stressed:

*Chaque fois qu'un poème,  
 Une statue, même une image peinte,  
 Se préfèrent figure, se dégagent  
 Des à-coups d'étincellement de la nuée,  
 Hélène se dissipe, qui ne fut  
 Que l'intuition qui fit se pencher Homère  
 Sur des sons de plus bas que ses cordes dans  
 La maladroite lyre des mots terrestres.*

Every time that a poem,  
 A statue, even a painted image,  
 Prefers itself as form, breaks away  
 From the cloud's sudden jolts of sparkling light,  
 Helen vanishes, who was only  
 That intuition which led Homer to bend  
 Over sounds that come from lower than his strings  
 In the clumsy lyre of earthly words. ('Wind and Smoke' II)<sup>568</sup>

Language is written here as static form, while meaning is subtle, elusive and subliminal, imaged as "sparkling light", intuition and music.

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Bonnefoy's response to the post-modern crisis of language and meaning is to warn against a retreat to the stronghold of rigid speech, to advocate the use of *la parole*, simple language which speaks from the heart,

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<sup>567</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 180-81.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.* 200-01.

(especially in the concrete words which are so significant to him, words like "tree" "stone" and "house"), and to experiment, especially in *Douve*, with an elusive, liquid poetic language which drifts between form and formlessness and seeks to allow meaning to hover between the words.

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### 3. "UNDER THE DEAD SKY": THE CALAMITY OF THE LOSS OF RELIGIOUS PRESENCE

" . . . a message of pessimism that may be found in Mallarmé and that exists, in any case, in the great space of our modernity, under the 'dead sky'—a twofold or perhaps just a single crisis, which offers the legacy of an empty world. And if it is true that no god any longer sanctifies created things, that they are pure matter, pure chance, why indeed should one not seek to escape from them?"<sup>569</sup>

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In 'The Art and the Place of Poetry', Bonnefoy writes of Rimbaud's poetic voice separating "a concept of itself that it thus knows or feels to be its essence, its divine part, from the degradations of lived experience." Such poetry, he states "is forgetful of death. And so it is often said that poetry is divine. And indeed when there are gods, and when man believes in his gods, this spiritual impulse may bring happiness . . . It is easy to be a poet among the gods."

"But," Bonnefoy continues, "we come after the gods. We can no longer have recourse to a heaven to guarantee our poetic transmutation, and we must inevitably question the seriousness of the latter."<sup>570</sup> Bonnefoy thus connects Rimbaud's religious belief with a flight from lived experience, and ascribes the calamity of the emptiness of the created world to the collapse of traditional systems of value and sacred order which is associated with modernity.

Many theological traditions engage with, and seek to understand, the absence of God. The concept is found in atheism, as the *Deus Absconditus* of the Hebrew scriptures or Christian Old Testament,<sup>571</sup> in the

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<sup>569</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 109.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>571</sup> Richard Elliott Friedman, in *The Disappearance of God*, discusses the *Deus Absconditus*. He traces God's withdrawal from visible and audible contact with humankind into a presence which involves hiddenness and mystery. God's personal appearance in the Garden of Eden gives way to appearances in fire, cloud, thunder, smoke and earthquake, and to the appearance of angels, who seem to be both representations of God and beings in themselves, until after the



proclamation by the madman in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* that God has died at the hands of humankind,<sup>572</sup> and in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statements about humankind come of age.<sup>573</sup> Biblical Studies engages with it when it considers the cry of dereliction in Matthew 27:46. And, as Bonnefoy's statement shows, the culture of post-Enlightenment society no longer assumes religious belief.

The hiddenness of God is integral to mediaeval negative theology, where it is seen to be a result of the mystery of God rather than of a culture which has been emptied of religious meaning. Bonnefoy makes a distinction in *L'Improbable* suivi de *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* between absence, which is akin to the mediaeval concept of hiddenness, and emptiness or nothingness, when he speaks of "one long dreary concept":

Here he states:

There is *nothingness* when some order is perpetuated, with everything in place—except devoid of all real content, so that our experience of things through it is no longer anything but one long dreary concept, through which the feeling of absurdity will triumph over all our hopes . . . *Absence* is of another spirit. One experiences it—one is sometimes intoxicated by it—when the collapse of mediations, often endured as a result of history, throws us brutally, suddenly outside every human order, and into the great silence of the world in all its frightful evidence. And as no myth has survived to refract or to filter its violence, we are blinded

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encounter between God and Moses on Mt Sinai. At this time prophecy, (mediated communication between the Divine and humankind) is instituted, and God now speaks to the prophets in visions and in dreams. After the people's settlement in the Promised Land, signs of the Divine Presence diminish further, until the Temple is the only visible channel for the human-Divine encounter. The Temple is destroyed by the Babylonians at the end of the books of Kings and Chronicles. See Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* passim.

<sup>572</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>573</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. E. Bethge (New York & London: Macmillan & SCM Press, 1971) 359-61. Bonhoeffer's statement was never part of a developed theology. Although others attempted to expand the concept after his death, their thinking led only to an atheistic humanism.

by this day which so many mystics have therefore called dark night.<sup>574</sup>

It is nothingness, the dreary, sterile emptiness of the world, which is one of Bonnefoy's calamities, not the absence of the dark night of mystical experience. Absence remains of interest to Bonnefoy however, and is written in the poem addressed to "God who are not" in 'The Light, Changed'. Irrespective of the delicate philosophical distinctions which may be made when God is discussed 'ontologically', this poem carries its own imaginative authority.

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La Lumière, Changée

*Nous ne nous voyons plus dans la même lumière,  
Nous n'avons plus les mêmes yeux, les mêmes mains.  
L'arbre est plus proche et la voix des sources plus vive,  
Nos pas sont plus profonds, parmi les morts.*

*Dieu qui n'es pas, pose ta main sur notre épaule,  
Ébauche notre corps du poids de ton retour,  
Achève de mêler à nos âmes ces astres,  
Ces bois, ces cris d'oiseaux, ces ombres et ces jours.*

*Renonce-toi en nous comme un fruit se déchire,  
Efface-nous en toi. Découvre-nous  
Le sens mystérieux de ce qui n'est que simple  
Et fût tombé sans feu dans des mots sans amour.*

The Light, Changed

We no longer see each other in the same light,  
We no longer have the same eyes or the same hands.  
The tree is closer and the water's voice more lively,  
Our steps go deeper now, among the dead.

God who are not, put your hand on our shoulder,  
Rough-cast our body with the weight of your return,  
Finish blending our souls with these stars,  
These woods, these bird cries, these shadows and these days.

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<sup>574</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable suivi de Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1980) 95. Cited Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 95.

Give yourself up in us the way fruit falls apart,  
 Have us disappear in you. Reveal to us  
 The mysterious meaning in what is only simple  
 And would have fallen without fire in words without love.<sup>575</sup>

One striking feature of this prayer/poem is its address to the "God who are not", and the request that s/he should return and "put your hand on our shoulder, / Rough-cast our body with the weight of your return". The tension between the linked concepts of Divine non-being and of return is extreme.

Also striking is the nature of the requested arrival; the God evoked in this poem, at return, will have the weight of the embodied. This God of non-being is an attractively incarnate Divinity who will make a human gesture of affectionate friendship—"put your hand on our shoulder"—as well as the Lord of humanity, the heavens and the earth— "Finish blending our souls with these stars, / These woods, these bird cries . . ." Bonnefoy's concept of the Divine at this point includes absence, incarnation, and transcendence.

In the trope of the fruit which falls apart, there are connotations of ripe fruitfulness and echoes of the myth of Eden. Immanence is added to Bonnefoy's concept of the Divine and is combined with the Christian imperative to lose one's life in order to save it<sup>576</sup> in an appealing trope of mutual self-giving.

The transformation which the Divine will bring about on return is written as insight and illumination— "We no longer see each other in the same light"; as a changed, embodied, self-perception—"We no longer have the same eyes or the same hands"; and as a closer, more vital and deeper

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<sup>575</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 80. Translation from Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 143.

<sup>576</sup> Matt. 10:39, Mark 8:35, Luke 17:33, John 12:25.

engagement with the real and with the dead—"The tree is closer and the water's voice more lively, / Our steps go deeper now, among the dead."

There is a strong similarity between the God-who-is-not of 'The Light, Changed' and the God of the mediaeval negative theologians. Negative theology or apophatic discourse may be traced in the classical writings of Philo, Plotinus, Proclus, and the patristic Christian writings of Clement and Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. Following Thomas Aquinas's formulation of the concept of the *via negativa*, which complements the *via positiva* and is transcended by the *via eminentiae*, the concept was most fully developed in the mediaeval writers Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, John the Scot Eriugena and Meister Eckhart.<sup>577</sup>

Even the prayer-form of the poem is a reminder of negative theological principles—Dionysius states the need to begin the writing of negative theology with a prayer<sup>578</sup>—while the final line, with its trope combining concepts of fire and of love, is particularly reminiscent of the beguine

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<sup>577</sup> For the historical context of apophatic discourse see J. P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 14-39. Although theologians whose work carries a high percentage of apophatic discourse are loosely termed "negative theologians", concepts of negative theology are found in the thinking of all major theologians. This point is made by Elizabeth A. Johnson in *She Who Is* as she lists examples of negative theology in major "positive" theologians: "So transcendent, so immanent is the holy mystery of God that we can never wrap our minds completely around this mystery and exhaust divine reality in words or concepts. The history of theology is replete with this truth: recall Augustine's insight that if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God; Anselm's argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived; Hildegard's vision of God's glory as Living Light that blinded her sight; Aquinas's working rule that we can know that God is and what God is not, but not what God is . . ." See Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* 7.

<sup>578</sup> "Before everything and especially before a discourse about God, it is necessary to begin with a prayer—not so that the power present both everywhere and nowhere shall come to us but so that by our divine remembrance and invocations we ourselves shall be guided to it and be united with it." Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, ch. 3:680b. Cited Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid

Marguerite Porete's book, *The Mirror of the Simple Souls Who Are Annihilated and Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love*,<sup>579</sup> which is filled with the symbolism of fire.

But the most significant connection with negative theology found here is the affirming of the positive returning God in terms which include negation. Negative theology understands the God who "is not" to be beyond everything, indefinable because any definition would render the Divine finite, beyond language and negations of language, beyond even the concept of negation, in the dazzling darkness which is beyond light.

John the Scot Eriugena, in the *Periphyseon*, speaks of the nothingness of God, the vision of a non-entified divinity:

*Alumnus*: Please explain what holy theology means by that name of "nothing".

*Nutritor*: I would believe that by that name is signified the brilliance of the divine *bonitas*, ineffable, incomprehensible, inaccessible, and unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic—for it is beyond being and beyond nature—which while it is conceived through itself neither is nor was nor shall be, for it is understood to be in none of the things that exist because it surpasses all things, but when, by a certain ineffable descent into the things that are, it is beheld by the eyes of the mind, it alone is found to be in all things, and it is and was and shall be. Therefore so long as it is understood to be incomprehensible by reason of its transcendence it is not unreasonably called "nothing" . . .<sup>580</sup>

Within the tradition of negative theology, the God who "is not" is both present and hidden in mystery. This absence is not a part of humankind's calamities; the hiddenness of the Divine is simply an element in an adequate understanding of the mysterious nature of God.

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Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 112.

<sup>579</sup> Marguerite Porete, *Le Mirouer des Simples Ames (Speculum Simplicium Animarum, The Mirror of Simple Souls)*, ed. Romana Guarnieri & Paul Verdeyen sj (Turnholt: Corpus Christianorum 69, 1986).

<sup>580</sup> Cited Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 58.

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Bonnefoy feels keenly the pain which humankind experiences in those times which seem empty of the sense of Presence of the Divine, however. He describes the human condition when God seems not to be present in terms of exile and of lack of freedom:

Thus divinity is seen as an absence that manifests itself only at certain times and in a veiled way; we live, then, in exile and our moments of lucidity only come in flashes of momentary, incomplete freedom.<sup>581</sup>

In his essay on the *Song of Roland*, Bonnefoy makes his clearest statement about the emptiness of lack of Divine Presence:

We collide with the forces of nature, with the malignancy of chance, with the immoderation of men, and the collision is painful. But this is not what causes us the most suffering; it is rather the indifference of the world, the hollow sound it sometimes makes, as though it were an empty jar.<sup>582</sup>

For Bonnefoy, the calamity of the lack of Divine Presence is the calamity of a world which is indifferent to human existence and to human pain.

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Bonnefoy does, however, allow a space for hope. In writing his distress at the emptiness of the world, he asserts the possibility of intermittent experiences of Divine Presence within the world of signs:

It is not at every moment that a presence dwells in our system of signs, so porous despite the streams and grasses to which it gives life; they both are and are not.<sup>583</sup>

#### 4. THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCE

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<sup>581</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, "The Origins and Development of My Concept of Poetry: An Interview with John E. Jackson," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 151.

<sup>582</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, "Words and Speech in The Song of Roland," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

" . . . Something has happened, something of infinite depth and gravity . . . still and smiling at the gates of light."<sup>584</sup>

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In 'The Act and the Place of Poetry', Yves Bonnefoy speaks of the experience of elusive moments of religious Presence:

. . . when the 'green gloom of moist summer evenings' . . . or anything else that is real, . . . will emerge in the sacred heart of this instant for an eternity of presence . . . Here . . . we have stepped out of space, we have slipped out of time. All that we had once lost is restored to us, still and smiling at the gates of light. All that passes and never stops passing pauses, postponing night. It is as though sight had become substance, and knowledge possession . . . Something has happened, something of infinite depth and gravity, a bird has sung in the ravine of existence, we have touched the water which would have allayed our thirst, but already the veil of time has wrapped us in its folds, and as the instant draws near we are exiled anew.<sup>585</sup>

This record of a moment of epiphany, of religious Presence, contains elements which are familiar from many accounts of similar experiences. Eternity, experienced with awe and wonder, is felt to break into time—"in the sacred heart of this instant," the observer is gripped by stillness—"All that passes and never stops passing pauses," there is a sense of renewal—"All that we had once lost is restored to us," and the significance of the moment is known—"it is as though sight has become substance and knowledge possession." Then the moment passes—"but already the veil of time has wrapped us in its folds," but the experience is never forgotten.

This is perhaps Bonnefoy's simplest description of the experience of religious Presence which is central to his understanding of the Divine. We will explore Bonnefoy's concept of Presence further below, in a quotation in which he characteristically clusters concepts of Presence with many others—love, mortality, chance and language. But first we will consider

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<sup>584</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 112.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-12.

what Bonnefoy believes to be wrong directions in the human search for religious Presence, and the ways in which he allows a space for Presence within his poetry.

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## 5. SEEKING PRESENCE: WRONG DIRECTIONS

Yves Bonnefoy believes that in the search for Presence, humankind may seek safe positions which ultimately deny both mortality and the fleeting nature of the experience of the Divine; he cautions against the tendency to avoid anxiety by retreating to language as a stronghold, and he warns against what he names as "Gnosticism" or "excarnation"—a flight to the spiritual which denies the goodness of embodied human life.

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### 5A. THE STRONGHOLD OF LANGUAGE

"Are we entitled to reject the contamination of the impermanent and to withdraw into the stronghold of speech, like the king in Poe's tale, far from the plague-stricken land?"<sup>586</sup>

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The fixed, immobile quality of language was seen in the extract above from 'Wind and Smoke', where "a poem, / A statue, even a painted image, / Prefers itself as form, breaks away / From the cloud's sudden jolts of sparkling light." The rigid form of language, separated from what is elusive in meaning, may act as a space of retreat from the mutability and loss which is intrinsic to life. In 'The Act and the Place of Poetry', Yves Bonnefoy speaks of language as a space which falsely promises security, even immortality:

When we have to face up to a person's absence, to the deceitfulness of time, to the gulf that yawns in the very heart of presence or maybe of understanding, it is to speech that we turn as to a protected place. A word seems to be the soul of what it names, its ever-intact soul. And if it frees its object from time and space, those categories of our dispossession, it does so without impairing its precious essence and restores it to our desire. Thus Dante, having lost Beatrice, speaks her name.<sup>587</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., 101.

If a poet seeks safety in language, he silences within himself his original desire "toward anxiety and understanding";<sup>588</sup> his security is gained at the cost of a type of human, and poetic, death. We see in this statement Bonnefoy's belief that an awareness of mortality and flux will always be linked with human life fully lived.

In his essay on Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Bonnefoy describes the empty rhetoric of language. It consists of "bold descriptions, logical thought, emotions expressed with precision—it is all a conceptual development as little concerned as possible with what surpasses words . . ." <sup>589</sup>

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In the book of *Douve*, Bonnefoy demonstrates the alternative to retreat into language. The entire book of *Douve* is an encounter with the anxieties of mortality and loss, extinction and negation, of the physical disintegration of the corpse and its part in the cycles of the natural world, and of occasional moments of Presence. Bonnefoy uses for his epigraph the words of Hegel, "But the life of the spirit is not frightened at death and does not keep itself pure of it. It endures death and maintains itself in it."

'Theatre xi' is an example of Bonnefoy's approach to mortality.

*Théâtre xi*

*Couverte de l'humus silencieux du monde,  
Parcourue des rayons d'une araignée vivante.  
Déjà soumise au devenir du sable  
Et tout écartelée secrète connaissance.*

*Parée pour une fête dans le vide  
Et les dents découvertes comme pour l'amour,*

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>589</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, "Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 45.

*Fontaine de ma mort présente insoutenable.*

Theatre xi

Covered by the world's silent humus,  
Webbed through by a living spider's rays,  
Already undergoing the life and death of sand  
And splayed out secret knowledge.

Adorned for a festival in the void,  
Teeth bared as if for love,

Fountain of my present unbearable death.<sup>590</sup>

This stanza writes the disintegrating body in death, now festooned with spider's webs in an image of the natural world's connections between the living and the dead. Here there is interplay between integrating patterns of webbing and decomposing flesh, the flesh of one species in death providing material for the life of another.

There are echoes here of the literary webs of Penelope and Ariadne, women who used threads to take control of circumstances not of their choosing to help those that they loved. Penelope weaves by day and unravels her threads at night to buy time for her husband Odysseus to return; Ariadne uses thread to lead Theseus from the labyrinth.

The death of Douve and the unbearable pain of the grieving survivor are connected through the fact that pain is itself written as a kind of death. The image of sand evokes the instability of a life which is lived in the awareness of mortality, and the grotesque image of "Teeth bared as if for love", as flesh disintegrates to leave the skull exposed, makes a Freudian connection between *thanatos* and *eros*. Death here is both physical disintegration, and the unravelling and remaking of meaning in the mind of the survivor.

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<sup>590</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *Early Poems 1947-1959*, trans. Galway Kinnell & Richard Pevear (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990) 47.

For Yves Bonnefoy the alternative to the stronghold of speech is "the presences that words leave in their dotted lines in their mysterious intervals."<sup>591</sup> In the book of *Douve*, open language is linked with the writing of mortality. We shall discuss the language of the book of *Douve* below.

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### 5B. EXCARNATION

"While imagination grants us worlds," states Yves Bonnefoy in 'Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé,' "we cease to belong to the world, we shall awake as strangers."<sup>592</sup> Bonnefoy mistrusts the flight to the imagination, or the flight to the spiritual, (both of which he names as excarnation or Gnosticism), which can be made in the hope of regaining a sense of Presence. He insists that Presence will only be found in the real, incarnate world.

Bonnefoy believes that the possibility of access to Presence is lost at the moment in which "the olive is no longer the complement to bread and wine but has joined the chain of concepts."<sup>593</sup> In his stress on the reality of the stone, the tree, the water (and the olive), Bonnefoy breaks from the Structuralist or Post-structuralist theorists whose concepts include signifier and signified, the word and the concept to which it refers, but allow no place for the tangible object itself.

Writing, however, is always concerned with images; Bonnefoy admits as much himself. In 'The Origins and Development of Poetry' he states that "there is gnosis, to my mind, or at least the risk of gnosis, the moment

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<sup>591</sup> Bonnefoy, "Words and Speech in The Song of Roland," 4.

<sup>592</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, "Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

there is writing."<sup>594</sup> John H. Naughton suggests that Bonnefoy understands poetry to be the type of writing which seeks to reconcile these areas:

Neither an idolater nor an iconoclast, Bonnefoy will recognise that if the "presence" he seeks is normally abolished by the images of most kinds of writing, poetry, in striving to simplify and universalise its images, attempts to reconcile what are usually the mutually exclusive categories of *presence* and *image*.<sup>595</sup>

This reconciliation, Naughton states, "is based on what one might call the 'healing' of the image from the sickness of the imaginary by nourishing it by what is proposed to it directly from life and lived experience."<sup>596</sup>

Bonnefoy states: "And I say that the longing for the True Place is the vow made by poetry."<sup>597</sup>

The True Place is the locus of Yves Bonnefoy's own tendency to seek Presence through excarnation. Naughton describes this inclination as follows:

In his enchanting spiritual autobiography, part memoir and part reverie, *L'Arrière-pays*, the back-country, away from the beaten paths and well-trodden roads—there exists a Great Good Place that is the physical and terrestrial embodiment of such an epiphanic plenitude of being.<sup>598</sup>

Others have named this place Eden or Heaven; it is perhaps an indication of Bonnefoy's belief in the importance of the real that he places this site of longing and nostalgia somewhere "off the beaten track".

Bonnefoy is a sophisticated and subtle thinker, and he knows that the True Place, site of Presence, has no earthly existence. Yet how real is the

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<sup>594</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Origins and Development of My Concept of Poetry: An Interview with John E. Jackson," 152.

<sup>595</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 14.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 116.

<sup>598</sup> John Naughton, "Foreword," in *Yves Bonnefoy: New and Selected Poems*, ed. John Naughton & Anthony Rudolph (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), ix.

strength of Bonnefoy's nostalgia and hope for this place which he sees as the site of temptation towards excarnation:

The true place is a fragment of duration consumed by eternity; in the true place, time is annulled within us. And I might equally say, I know, that it does not exist, that it is only the mirage, against the background of time of the hours of our death—but has the term *reality* still a meaning, and can it free us from the engagement we have contracted toward the remembered object, which is to go on seeking?<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>599</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 115.

## 6. LANGUAGE SOLUTIONS: WRITING PRESENCE IN THE POROUS WORLD OF SIGNS

### 6A: MUTABILITY AND PRESENCE

In his essay, 'Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé', which was first given as a lecture in Geneva in 1967, Yves Bonnefoy states: "I used to think that words, desiccated by their conceptual use, failed to convey presence, were forever limited to a 'negative theology'."<sup>600</sup> It seems that Yves Bonnefoy held this belief in 1953 when his first book of poetry, *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (*On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*), was published, and that the liquid language of this book was Bonnefoy's solution to writing Presence outside of a language which he believed to be fixed, rigid, empty, and sterile—"desiccated" as he describes it in the quotation above—and unable to carry religious Presence.

We must first ask ourselves what Bonnefoy means by his statement that words are "limited to a 'negative theology'." We have spoken above of negative theology and the hiddenness of God in mystery. Negative theologians speak in addition of the impossibility of finding adequate language with which to speak of the Divine; words are inadequate because a transcendent God springs "from a depth so profound as to escape finite concepts."<sup>601</sup> "God dwells in unapproachable light so that no name or image or concept that human beings use to speak of the Divine mystery ever arrives at its goal."<sup>602</sup> Post-structural theorists believe that all reality, not just the reality of God, escapes the language which seeks to give it expression.

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<sup>600</sup> Bonnefoy, "Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé," 63.

<sup>601</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* 186.

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.* 117-8.

Negative theologians make three responses to the dilemma of language and transcendence. The first is silence, the second is to distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names, and ways in which it is not, distinguishing between God-as-he-is-in-himself and God-as-he-is-in-creatures for instance. The third, the response we are concerned with here, is *apophasis* which is, in effect, a new form of language. In suggesting that words are "forever limited to a 'negative theology',"<sup>603</sup> Bonnefoy refers to *apophasis*.

In *apophasis*, any language used of the Divine is subject to negation, cancelling and unsaying, and the negation is in turn negated, until even the act of negating is transcended and the speaker lapses into silence. In Michael A. Sells' words, within this tradition the Divine mystery is seen "only in the interstices of the text, in the tension between the saying and the unsaying."<sup>604</sup> Neither positive statements about the Divine nor negations of them prove adequate, for God transcends both language and its cancellation.

The way in which Yves Bonnefoy shapes the language of poetry in the book of *Douve* places him as a descendent of the apophatic tradition for, with his liquid and elusive language, he too places meaning, and particularly religious Presence, "in the tension between the saying and the unsaying".

Bonnefoy experiments in *Douve* with an elusive poetic language which hovers between form and formlessness, poetry written with a subtlety which seeks to allow meaning to hover between the words. "The word too must be saved," Bonnefoy states, "and from that fatal urge to define everything . . ."<sup>605</sup> John T. Naughton describes Bonnefoy's language as "this struggle between conceptual meanings and the intuitions which

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<sup>603</sup> Bonnefoy, "Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé," 63.

<sup>604</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* 8.

<sup>605</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable* suivi de *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* 248.



unsettle those meanings: 'so much evidence through so much enigma'."<sup>606</sup>

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The elusive language of *Douve* is first seen in the title of the book itself. John T. Naughton sees *Douve* as a "marvellous polysignifier".<sup>607</sup> *Douve* is sometimes the name of the dead woman who is the main focus of the poems, though at other times she is addressed by the speaker simply as "you".

"*Douve*" literally means "moat" or "ditch", but may be read too as the signifier of death. Naughton suggests that *Douve* may be read in addition as *D'où vient?* (Whence), as a shortened form of *D'ouverture* (Opening), "for *Douve* is that opening 'undertaken in the thickness of the world' "<sup>608</sup> and as the English word "dove", traditional signifier of the Holy Spirit, here applied to the spirit of humankind:

The poetry of a dark time, for which belief in the transcendent deity and specific systems of sacred order has died out, will have to build its fires in the midst of 'vast unutterable matter.' Its refusal to accept the disappearance of meaning, its determination to reconstruct even amid the ruins are an indication, however, that "*Douve*" is associated with human spirit, with those spiritual aspirations suggested by the English word "Dove" . . .<sup>609</sup>

Interesting as these interpretations are, I suggest that it is probably enough to read *Douve* as "moat"—water which is at the threshold of a sometimes accessible site—with the concept's associated qualities of what is fixed and what is changing.

The image of water is found in stanza vi of 'Theatre' of *Douve*; this extract may serve to indicate the poetic quality of the book:

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<sup>606</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 17. Citing Yves Bonnefoy, *Poèmes (1947-1975), Poems*. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1978) 233.

<sup>607</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 48.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.* 49. Citing Bonnefoy, *Poèmes (1947-1975), Poems*. 41.

*Quelle pâleur te frappe, rivière souterraine, quelle artère en toi se rompt, où l'écho retentit de ta chute?*

*Ce bras que tu soulèves soudain s'ouvre, s'enflamme. Ton visage recule. Quelle brume croissante m'arrache ton regard? Lente falaise d'ombre, frontière de la mort.*

*Des bras muets t'accueillent, arbres d'une autre rive.*

What paleness comes over you, underground river, what artery breaks in you, where your fall echoes?

This arm you lift suddenly opens, catches fire. Your face draws back. What thickening mist wrenches your eye from mine? Slow cliffs of shadow, frontier of death.

Mute arms reach for you, trees of another shore.<sup>610</sup>

This extract serves to demonstrate the quality of Bonnefoy's elusive language in the poetry of *Douve*. In this stanza, a frontier-space of shadow and mist, the woman's dead body and the water of an underground river are overlaid. Although the paleness, broken arteries and fall which are associated with the trope of the river hint at the body's disintegration and liquefaction after death, the poetry retains coherence if read as a river which branches, rises and falls from underground and catches the sun's light.

Perhaps the underground river is the space of the receding memory of the dead, or of the death of memory. Perhaps the river/body with the cliffs of shadow and mist is the liminal-zone space between the living and the inaccessible dead in the world of the mind, the moving water permitting misted sight but prohibiting access. Perhaps the frontier is that between self and the other or between language and meaning. It is certain that here Bonnefoy writes relationship, the dead, the body and the natural world in a state of liquid mutability, lit by a single flash of fire, whether of

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<sup>609</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 49.

<sup>610</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 4-5.

spirit, of Spirit or of life. It is certain too that his poetic language is as elusive as water itself.

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The elusive language of Douve is Bonnefoy's first solution to the dilemma of language and the hope of writing a discourse of reverberating Presence. In his later poetry however, he experiments with the belief that religious Presence may best be written through the objects of the natural world in their "metaphysical *thereness*, . . . their pure existence, their stubborn atomicity, and their opaque silence."<sup>611</sup> Now Bonnefoy concentrates on writing simply the experience of the real.

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#### 6B. PRESENCE IN A DISCOURSE OF THE SIMPLE REAL

"*L'objet sensible est presence.* (The tangible object is presence.)"<sup>612</sup>

"The earth *is*. Bonnefoy will never cease insisting upon it. The earth is our reality. The tree. The stone. Fire. Water."<sup>613</sup>

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In response to post-modernity's concept of language, which is a calamity to any poet, Bonnefoy, (following Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *la langue*—social, collective language—and *la parole*—its individual manifestations), advocates the use of the simple language which speaks from the heart, *la parole*. "For if language is our great sin, speech can be our deliverance" (*'autant la langue est la faute, autant la parole est la délivrance'*), he states.<sup>614</sup> "A few words in the end will glitter perhaps, which, though simple and transparent like the nothingness of language, will nevertheless be everything, and real."<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>611</sup> Bonnefoy, *Shakespeare and the French Poet* 19.

<sup>612</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable* suivi de *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* 123.

<sup>613</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 3.

<sup>614</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *Le Nuage rouge, The Red Cloud* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1977) 251.

<sup>615</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Arrière-pays* 149. Cited Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 9.

*La parole* unsettles the strongholds of habitual social language. Using simple language, Bonnefoy believes, the poet may write a discourse of religious Presence if he engages with the real objects of the world. Bonnefoy's belief in the simple real involves the experience of the particularity of an object, of "the Thing, the real object, in its separation from ourselves, its infinite otherness."<sup>616</sup> In his essay 'Paul Valéry' he speaks of "this very olive tree, but in its profound difference, its existence *hic et nunc*."<sup>617</sup>

Encountered, this object "can give us an instantaneous glimpse of essential being and thus be our salvation, if indeed we are able to tear the veil of universals, of the conceptual, to attain it."<sup>618</sup> In encounter with the object the simple word becomes "porous",<sup>619</sup> and open to Presence:

And in some of the best poetry of our century—I think of glaciers, of deserts, of forgotten crafts, of moments of dry stone or mist—we find that the object has become hollow like a wave, separate from its body like a flame in the light, to imply the essential fluidity we share, both it and us, when we meet.<sup>620</sup>

Sometimes Bonnefoy implies that the objects which mediate Presence in a unique way are the four elements which the mediaeval world of thought believed to comprise the whole of reality, "the wind, fire, earth and waters —everything that the universe has to offer."<sup>621</sup> At other times, as in the paragraph above, he includes other elemental words among those

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<sup>616</sup> Bonnefoy, *Shakespeare and the French Poet* 19.

<sup>617</sup> Bonnefoy, *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays* 96.

<sup>618</sup> Bonnefoy, *Shakespeare and the French Poet* 19.

<sup>619</sup> "It is not at every moment that a presence dwells in our system of signs, so porous despite the streams and grasses to which it gives life; they both are and are not." (Bonnefoy, "Words and Speech in The Song of Roland," 1.)

<sup>620</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 110.

<sup>621</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable* suivi de *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* 125-6. For Bonnefoy's comments on the unique qualities of fire, see Yves Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays*, ed. John T. Naughton (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 119.

which he believes to hold this power, "concrete but universal elements:"<sup>622</sup>

In modern French poetry, there is a Grail procession passing by; the things that are most full of life on this earth—the tree, a face, the stone—and they must be named. All our hope rests on this.<sup>623</sup>

Bonnefoy's belief in the power of elemental words is one which he shares with Heidegger who writes in *Being and Time* that "the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the power of the most elemental words in which Dasein expresses itself."<sup>624</sup>

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'Delphi, the Second Day', found in *Hier régnant désert (Yesterday's Desert Dominion)*, is an example of Bonnefoy's discourse of the real. This is among the final poems in the book, one in which the poetic speaker has arrived at a state of quiet acceptance.

*Delphes du Second Jour*

*Ici l'inquiète voix consent d'aimer  
La pierre simple,  
Les dalles que le temps asservit et délivre,  
L'olivier dont la force a goût de sèche pierre.*

*Le pas dans son vrai lieu. L'inquiète voix  
Heureuse sous les roches du silence,  
Et l'infini, l'indéfini répons  
Des sonnailles, rivage ou mort. De nul effroi  
Était ton gouffre clair, Delphes du second jour.*

Delphi, the Second Day

Here the unquiet voice agrees to love  
Simple stone,  
Flagstones time enslaves, delivers,  
The olive tree whose strength tastes of dry stone.

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<sup>622</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable* suivi de *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* 125-6.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid. 123. Cited Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 9.

<sup>624</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 262.

The footstep in its true place. The unquiet  
 Voice happy beneath the rocks of silence,  
 And the infinite, the undefined response  
 Of death, shore, cattle bells. Your bright abyss  
 Inspired no awe, Delphi on the second day.<sup>625</sup>

The "unquiet voice" is here grounded in the real objects of the natural world, simply named—"simple stone", olive tree, rocks, shore, cattle bells. It is significant that death is included among the objects listed here; as the olive tree has learned to flourish among stones, so the speaker appears to be able to ground herself among the real in spite of the presence of death. So mortality is recognised, but the real, rather than death, is the foundation for vision and becoming.

The connotations of these significant words rise to awareness; olive trees are suggestive of a Mediterranean life-style and have biblical connotations of fruitfulness and abundance,<sup>626</sup> and of peace,<sup>627</sup> and associations with deep suffering and with legends of the resurrection of the dead.<sup>628</sup> Yet the cultural echoes of Bonnefoy's objects seem distant and muted; in reading his poetry we are mainly conscious of these single objects in their solidity.

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Bonnefoy's belief in the simple real may be compared with Gershom Scholem's belief that what Robert Alter names as "the haunting vocabulary

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<sup>625</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 44-5.

<sup>626</sup> "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey . . ." (Deut. 8: 7-8).

<sup>627</sup> Both pagan and Christian. The emblem of Minerva, the olive symbolises peace because Minerva, as a warrior goddess, fights against Mars to maintain law and order. In Genesis 8: 11, following the Flood, the dove carries an olive leaf back to the ark, signifying peace between God and humankind.

<sup>628</sup> The Mount of Olives near Jerusalem is both the biblical site of Jesus Christ's arrest on the night before his crucifixion (Matt. 26: 30ff, Mark 14: 26ff, Luke 22: 39) and a Jewish burial ground. Jewish legend states that the resurrection of the dead will begin here.

of beginnings in Genesis"<sup>629</sup> are Hebrew names which are saturated with special spiritual potencies. Scholem states:

Having conjured up the ancient names day after day, we can no longer suppress their potencies. We roused them, and they will manifest themselves, for we have conjured them up with very great power.<sup>630</sup>

Words which are "transparent for the inner spiritual reality"<sup>631</sup> for Scholem include *shamayim*, heaven; *ruah*, wind/spirit; *teloh*, abyss; *'adamah*, earth; *tselem*, image; and *da`at*, knowledge. These words form the vocabulary of the great myths of origin of the Jewish scriptures. The boundary between inclusions and exclusions from the vocabulary which Bonnefoy considers to be elemental words is less clearly defined.

Scholem states that

anything in [humankind's] world can become a symbol; it need only have something of the spiritual "charge", of the intuitive heritage which lends the world meaning . . .<sup>632</sup>

This understanding of symbolism becomes problematic when a particularly idiosyncratic object becomes, for the poet, emotionally-charged. Yves Bonnefoy experienced an epiphanic encounter with a salamander which was "here present as the softly-beating heart of the world".<sup>633</sup> Although the reader may know that the salamander was reputed to survive fire unscathed, when the animal appears in Bonnefoy's poetry it carries an emotional charge which is more significant for the poet than for the reader, and therefore, to my mind, fails to act as a resonant symbol.<sup>634</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge Massachusetts and Cincinnati: Harvard University Press and Hebrew Union College Press, 1991) 88.

<sup>630</sup> 'Letter to Franz Rosenzweig'. Gershom Scholem, *'Od Davar* (Tel Aviv: 1989) 58-9.

<sup>631</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 132.

<sup>632</sup> 'The Star of David'. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* 257-8.

<sup>633</sup> Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," 120.

<sup>634</sup> See 'Place of the Salamander'. Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 24-5.

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In 'Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé', Bonnefoy writes of his belief that some words are bound to potential presences:

If we listen to it in its depths, we hear that some words—home, fire, bread, wine—are not entirely concepts, can never be taken quite as 'pure notions,' for they are bound to potential presences, pillars upholding the vault of speech, points of condensation where physical needs appease the needs of being, by analogies that structure the human place and preside over the formation of words. Fire and the name of fire *are* so that life might have a centre.<sup>635</sup>

This is Bonnefoy's strongest statement of the significance of the real in mediating religious Presence. Here the words which he singles out are resonant with associations of homecoming and hearth. They are central in human nostalgia, etymologically "the ache to be making the journey home," and all have significant Judeo-Christian religious connotations.

The concept of being bound to what is potential is an elusive one, yet it is a deepening of Bonnefoy's repeated statements of insistence on the significance of the real. John H. Naughton suggests that the words which Bonnefoy names here—"home", "fire", "bread", and "wine"—"are so fully steeped with what they name as to become for the poet who uses them, and lives them, more signified than signifier,"<sup>636</sup> and reverberate with the potential for Presence.

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The untitled poem which begins 'Let a place be made', one of the final poems of *Douve*, is based on this focal vocabulary of homecoming:

*sans titre*

*Qu'une place soit faite à celui qui approche,  
Personnage ayant froid et privé de maison.*

*Personnage tenté par le bruit d'une lampe,*

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<sup>635</sup> Bonnefoy, "Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé," 62.

<sup>636</sup> Naughton, "Foreword," xxxiv.



*Par le seuil éclairé d'une seule maison.*

*Et s'il reste recru d'angoisse et de fatigue,  
Qu'on redise pour lui les mots de guérison*

*Que faut-il à ce cœur qui n'était que silence,  
Sinon des mots qui soient le signe et l'oraison,*

*Et comme un peu de feu soudain la nuit,  
Et la table entrevue d'une pauvre maison?*

### Untitled

Let a place be made for the one who approaches,  
He who is cold and has no home.

He who is tempted by the sound of a lamp,  
By the bright threshold of only this house.

And if he stays overcome with anguish and fatigue,  
Let be uttered for him the healing words.

What needs this heart which was only silence,  
But words which are both sign and litany,

And like a sudden bit of fire at night,  
Or the table, glimpsed in a poor man's house? <sup>637</sup>

In this poem of homecoming, Yves Bonnefoy is "giving to each thing its name, and . . . listening to the mystery of being reverberating, indefinitely, in it."<sup>638</sup> As Bonnefoy states in *Le Nuage rouge*, "Long is the road that brings us back to the ordinary house—which is our place."<sup>639</sup>

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We have selected the concept of the real as significant in Bonnefoy's discourse of Presence. We have considered Bonnefoy's stress on an object's particularity, as he writes the words which reverberate with the

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<sup>637</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 22-23.

<sup>638</sup> John Naughton, "Introduction," in *The Act and the Place of Poetry: Selected Essays* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxii.

<sup>639</sup> Bonnefoy, *Le Nuage rouge, The Red Cloud* 113.

potential for Presence. We will now return to Bonnefoy's concept of Presence to consider its complexity.

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## 7. PRESENCE: THE COMPLEX CONCEPTS OF BONNEFOY'S THOUGHT

"Presence [is] the sacred heart of the moment."<sup>640</sup>

"In the expectation of presence, one does not 'signify'; one lets a light disentangle itself from the meanings that conceal it."<sup>641</sup>

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Yves Bonnefoy's concept of Presence is more complex than has so far appeared. Bonnefoy, who always tends to gather concepts into constellations, clusters other perceptions around his understanding of Presence. It is impossible to restate these concepts in a linear form, because they connect with each other at a number of points.

The long Bonnefoyan paragraph which ends with the statement about focal words which we have already considered will serve as an example of this complex thought. Bonnefoy enters his exploration by considering chance and mortality; by the end, he has constellated love in human relationship, the real, and the role of language, around the concept of Presence.

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Yves Bonnefoy writes:

The key to our being, the only path towards wholeness, thus seems to me the acceptance of chance. One might call such acceptance *a sacrifice*, since it implies that the individual should renounce infinite possibilities and choose to venture towards the absolute. One might call it consent to death, since it fixes our eyes on finitude. And one may call it love, for only love with its imperious decisive choices enables us to consent to what has been given us. Thus love is a consequence of language: the mode of being that words compel us to discover within ourselves, and to protect, so that their free associations should not rob us of what is present. And so we find—a paradox according to Mallarmé's logic—that we need *the other*, so profoundly different, so free, if our own form is to acquire full meaning. Awareness of the other is the way to incarnation, the decipherment of reality. Respecting another's presence and

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<sup>640</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable* suivi de *Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* 122.

<sup>641</sup> Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," 121.

thereby, before long, that of all others, as individuals, this awareness recognizes needs, reexperiences necessity, is converted to the weight of things, *la pesanteur*, it understands the way the particular is inscribed in the whole. This means too the deciphering of language. For language is not originally the freedom granted to words. If we listen to it in its depths, we hear that some words—fire, home, bread, wine—are not entirely concepts, can never be taken quite as "pure notions," for they are bound to potential presences, pillars upholding the vault of speech, points of condensation where physical needs appease the need of being, by analogies that structure the human place and preside over the formation of words. Fire and the name of fire *are*, so that life might have a centre.<sup>642</sup>

We should note first the elusive nature of Bonnefoy's understanding of Presence as it is revealed in this paragraph. When he states that "Awareness of the other is the way to incarnation, the decipherment of reality", "the other" may be what we have so far considered as the real. Incarnation, "the decipherment of reality", permits contact with the Divine in the objects of the natural world, and precludes a flight to the "spiritual" which separates humankind from the experienced world.

But here too Bonnefoy extends the word "presence" to the human other in her uniqueness—"Respecting another's presence and thereby, before long, that of all others, as individuals." Bonnefoy expands his statements about the real to indicate that attention to the presence of a person can also facilitate a momentary intuition of the Divine.

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We see in this paragraph a connection between Presence, language and love. Bonnefoy states the post-modern understanding of language as preceding reality; here words bring into being the reality of love, which both depends on language for its existence and needs to be protected from the language which has brought it to being, lest it be depleted:

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<sup>642</sup> Bonnefoy, "Baudelaire Speaks to Mallarmé," 62.

"Thus love is a consequence of language: the mode of being that words compel us to discover within ourselves, and to protect."

In 'French Poetry and the Principle of Identity', Bonnefoy makes it clear that human love is a response to the encounter with Presence, because such an encounter reawakens the experience of delight:

I perceive everything in the continuity and sufficiency of a *place* and in the transparency of *unity*. The wall is justified, and the fireplace, and the olive tree outside, and the earth. And having again become one with all that, having been awakened to the essential savor of my being—for this space arches in me as the inner world of my existence—I have gone from accursed perception to love, which is prescience of the invisible.<sup>643</sup>

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The use of the simple tangible language of *la parole*, which we discussed when considering the calamity of language, by itself provides no guarantee of Presence and no buffer against emptiness; even in discussing focal signs here, Bonnefoy is careful to state only that they are bound to *potential* Presences. Rather, Bonnefoy believes, it is Presence which permits simple language to become poetry, a true exchange after an encounter with the real in love:

When we plunge into time, we discover that its wheel does, of course, crush lives; but it also unites them momentarily in a kind of shared absolute, in a *recognition* which is, in its essence, timeless. When our eyes are all at once opened in this way, words are no longer ends in themselves, impersonal forces that set us adrift, guilty stereotypes: they now allow speech to take place, in a true exchange between people.<sup>644</sup>

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Love is first found in Bonnefoy's paragraph as that which "enables us to consent to what has been given us", the real. Bonnefoy insists on the need for loving relationship "if our own form is to acquire full meaning,"

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<sup>643</sup> Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," 121.

<sup>644</sup> Bonnefoy, "Words and Speech in The Song of Roland," 4.

because we move from love of one to respect for humankind and all that is human, and in doing so come to understand the pattern of life, "the way the particular is inscribed in the whole". Love, therefore, is inseparable from incarnation, human involvement with the real, in the structure of Bonnefoy's thought.

And because human love inevitably involves the loss of the other through death, mortality too becomes fused with the concept of Presence at this point, just as it has been connected by Bonnefoy with acceptance of life's chance. John H. Naughton also notes Bonnefoy's links between Presence and mortality. He states:

"Presence" for Bonnefoy is inseparable from the backdrop of absence, and the moment of epiphany in his work is often recognition of imperilled being, an encounter with the reality of finitude which exceeds intellectual and conceptual category.<sup>645</sup>

In *Pierre écrite* (*Words in stone*) love is expressed through Bonnefoy's repeated use of the verb *voûter*, to arch or bend over, signalling, in John H. Naughton's words, a "special blend of concentration and care".<sup>646</sup> In '*Le Livre, pour vieillir*' ('The Book for Growing Old') for instance, the shepherd bends over his happiness, cherishing and protecting it:

*Étoiles transhumantes; et le berger  
Voûté sur le bonheur terrestre; et tant de paix . . .*

Stars moving from their summertime  
To winter pastures; and the shepherd, arched  
Over earthly happiness; and so much peace . . .<sup>647</sup>

It is this tender, protective love which Bonnefoy ascribes to Presence, which he writes in the quotation which we considered above from 'French Poetry and the Principle of Identity' as an internalised space and links with both justification and unity:

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<sup>645</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 129.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid. 132.

<sup>647</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 84-5.

The wall is justified, and the fireplace, and the olive tree outside, and the earth. And having again become one with all that, having been awakened to the essential savor of my being—for this space arches in me as the inner world of my existence—I have gone from accursed perception to love, which is prescience of the invisible.<sup>648</sup>

In one of Yves Bonnefoy's loveliest poems, '*La Terre*' ('The Earth'), which is filled with the concept of Presence as unity, as light, as fire, and as yes-sayer in the reality of the earth, a different verb, *pencher*, occurs, as the Presence of the Divine is seen to bend protectively over the earth:

*Et elle! n'est-ce pas  
Elle qui sourit là ("Moi la lumière,  
Oui, je consens") dans la certitude du seuil,  
Penchée, guidant les pas  
D'on dirait un soleil enfant sur une eau obscure.*

And she! Is it not  
She who is smiling there ("I the light,  
Yes, I consent") in the certainty of the threshold,  
Bending down, guiding the steps  
Of what seems a child-sun over dark waters.<sup>649</sup>

As *pencher* can mean "to bow" as well as "to bend", the attitude of the Divine Presence to humankind and the earth is written here as one of a careful reverence towards creation.

So we see that in the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy religious Presence is written (a) in the elusive, liquid language of *Douve* and (b) through a primary discourse of the real, but (c) that concepts of mortality, of chance, and of language and love, cluster together in Yves Bonnefoy's theory around the concept of Presence.

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<sup>648</sup> Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," 121.

<sup>649</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 88-9.

## 7B. PRESENCE AND THE DAIMONIC

"Whoever attempts the crossing of physical space rejoins a sacred water which flows through all things."<sup>650</sup>

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In 'Words and Speech in the Song of Roland', Bonnefoy speaks about "the rustling of presences which are closer still."<sup>651</sup> These rustling presences are often referred to as the daimonic, a sense that every tree and rock is imbued with the spirit of Divine life, and contrasts with the emptiness which is one source of Bonnefoy's distress.

Gershom Scholem believes that the first religious age of humankind was "full of gods whom man encountered at every step",<sup>652</sup> and Ernst Cassirer imagines primordial religious experience to be a "whispering or rustling in the woods, a shadow darting over the ground, a light flickering on the water."<sup>653</sup> Similarly, David Farrell Krell writes: "The daimon is as close as the nearest rock, tree or canoe paddle . . . the daimon hovers in the reflected or refracted light of the world."<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable suivi de Un Rêve fait à Mantoue* 26.

<sup>651</sup> Bonnefoy, "Words and Speech in The Song of Roland," 4. Bonnefoy may be citing Boris Pasternak, who, in 'Random Thoughts' described poetic inspiration in the following terms: "No real book has a first page: like a rustling in the woods it is born heaven knows where, grows and rolls on, waking hidden thickets in its path, and suddenly at the darkest, overwhelming, panic-stricken moment it speaks out from all the tree-tops at once, having reached its goal." Boris Pasternak, "Random Thoughts," in *Selected Writings and Letters* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990), 88. Cited Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* 119.

<sup>652</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 7. Cited Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* 120. Wasserstrom suggests that Scholem's statement may echo Vico, paragraph 379, "All things are full of Jove," which in turn derives from Virgil, or Thales of Miletus's statement, "Everything is full of gods."

<sup>653</sup> Cited John Michael Krois, *Cassirer, Symbolic Form and History* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1987) 86.

<sup>654</sup> David Farrell Krell, "Shattering: Towards a Politics of Daimon Life," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 14, no. 5 (1991): 166. See, too, Frazer on tree-spirits: Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* 109-20.



These statements of the Divine as a rustling, moving, liquid Presence have the quality which we find in Bonnefoy's writing of the natural world in the book of *Douve*. There we find such lines as "I see Douve stretched out. / On the highest level of fleshly space I hear her rustling" ('Theatre' x), "I awaken, it is raining . . . Great dogs of leaves tremble" ('Theatre' iv), "In the scarlet city of air, where branches clash across her face, where roots find their way into her body—she radiates a silent insect joy . . ." ('Theatre' xii)<sup>655</sup>

In writing the disintegrating body of the woman in *Douve* in the sensitive, liquid language which allows meaning to hover between the words of the text, Yves Bonnefoy writes a daimonic Presence even as he addresses the calamities of language, of mortality, and of a world which seems empty of Divine Presence. This is a world equivalent to that of primitive worship, where every object of the natural world is alive with its own spirit of the Divine.<sup>656</sup>

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In *Douve*, therefore, we find in addition to the woman's constant resurrections, which John H. Naughton interprets as "recurrent but ephemeral moments of epiphanous vision,"<sup>657</sup> and the use of language which allows meaning to hover in the tension between the saying and the unsaying,<sup>658</sup> a writing of the rustling world of the daimonic.

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So we see that Bonnefoy speaks of the calamity of language in terms of the primacy of language, of its inadequacy and opacity, of humankind's exclusion from participation in the universe which language has

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<sup>655</sup> Bonnefoy, *New and Selected Poems* 9, 5, 9.

<sup>656</sup> This set of beliefs is often named as animism.

<sup>657</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 46.

<sup>658</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* 8.

constructed and the loss of intimacy which results from the rigidity of language and its incapacity to carry meaning.

He speaks of the loss of religious Presence, under the 'dead sky', modernism's legacy of an empty world.<sup>659</sup> Warning against the flight to the stronghold of language and the human temptation towards excarnation or Gnosticism, Bonnefoy uses a liquid language in the book of *Douve* which John H. Naughton describes as "so much evidence through so much enigma"<sup>660</sup> as he seeks to write Presence in the space between saying and unsaying. At the same time he writes Presence in a simple discourse of the real, believing that words like "home", "fire", "bread", and "wine" resonate with the potential for Presence and "are so fully steeped with what they name as to become for the poet . . . more signified than signifier."<sup>661</sup>

We must now ask ourselves how Yves Bonnefoy's religious discourse of Presence, which is written in response to post-modernity's crisis of language and of meaning, compares with that of the other poets whom we have considered. Does Bonnefoy, too, suppress ambiguity in the face of calamity?

We have noted Bonnefoy's overt confirmation of the significance of ambiguity and contradiction, especially his statement that "Poetic activity . . . is not based on the unity of sign and thing signified, but on their disjunction, which is what initiates the specific drama of poetic thought."<sup>662</sup> In spite of this statement, I suggest that ambiguity is suppressed within Yves Bonnefoy's discourse.

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<sup>659</sup> Bonnefoy, "The Act and the Place of Poetry," 109.

<sup>660</sup> Naughton, *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy* 17. Citing Bonnefoy, *Poèmes (1947-1975)*, *Poems*. 233.

<sup>661</sup> Naughton, "Foreword," xxxiv.

## 8. CONCLUSION: LANGUAGE AMBIGUITY SUPPRESSED

In his 1994 interview with Shusha Guppy, Bonnefoy asserts that meaning is contained, not in language itself, but in poetic forms; rhymes, alliterations, assonances, he states, "indeed all the materials of poetic form", rather than the words themselves, provide the structure in which meaning can be perceived. He goes on:

Indeed, only form allows us to hear the tone of the words, and it is precisely because verse is sonorous reality that words in it are no longer subject to the sole authority of conceptual thought. This enables us to perceive reality otherwise than through language. Form in poetry silences the conceptual meaning of words . . .<sup>663</sup>

Seeking to free words from the "sole authority of conceptual thought", Bonnefoy speaks of his use of word associations which rise from the unconscious mind "bringing verbal fragments which are at once enigmatic and rich with my past, my unknown present and my future." Although he has repudiated Surrealism's approach to reality,<sup>664</sup> the Surrealist influence is apparent in Bonnefoy's appeal to the unconscious. When discussing words which defy rational analysis, Bonnefoy cites the surrealist image as an example, discussing "The crow wise be reborn redder than ever" in a poem by Eluard.<sup>665</sup>

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This view of the role of language is compatible with post-modernity's emphasis on the disjunctions of language and with Bonnefoy's elusive and ambiguous language in the book of *Douve* where he situates meaning "in the tension between the saying and the unsaying."<sup>666</sup> But such language concepts are incompatible with Bonnefoy's belief in the power of words of

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<sup>662</sup> Bonnefoy, "Critics- English and French and the Distance Between Them," 42.

<sup>663</sup> Guppy, "Yves Bonnefoy: The Art of Poetry LXIX," 115.

<sup>664</sup> Bonnefoy came to mistrust André Breton's occultism and Bataille's "ethics of paroxysm". See Bonnefoy, "The Origins and Development of My Concept of Poetry: An Interview with John E. Jackson," 147, 51.

<sup>665</sup> Guppy, "Yves Bonnefoy: The Art of Poetry LXIX," 116.

<sup>666</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* 8.

the simple real, and his statements that the poet's task lies in "giving to each thing its name, and . . . listening to the mystery of being reverberating, indefinitely, in it."<sup>667</sup> There is a discrepancy between post-structuralism's belief in the disjunction between signifier and signified and the view that language is the transparent, reverberating carrier of religious meaning. Bonnefoy asserts both positions, and suppresses his awareness of the incompatibility between them.

The discrepancy between Bonnefoy's language statements cannot be explained away by developments within his thought. Bonnefoy's concepts of language disjunction can be found in his writings as early as the 1960's<sup>668</sup> and as late as his 1994 interview with Shusha Guppy, while his statements about the language transparency of the simple real occur throughout the papers collected in *The Act and the Place of Poetry*.

So we conclude that, like four out of the five poets whom we have considered in this study, Yves Bonnefoy suppresses ambiguity in the face of calamity. In his suppression of awareness of the incompatibility between the theories of language on which his poetics is based, Bonnefoy, like the poets we have previously considered, writes an over-cohesive statement. Unlike them however, Bonnefoy's suppression occurs not within his religious discourse, but within his statements of the crisis itself, the post-modern crisis of language and of meaning. His concept of Presence, although not clearly spelled out in his essays, remains relatively consistent, and no traces of suppression may be discerned in this area.

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<sup>667</sup> Naughton, "Introduction," xxii.

<sup>668</sup> 'The Act and the Place of Poetry' which contains Bonnefoy's statement that "Speech can indeed celebrate presence, sing of its being, . . . it can prepare us spiritually for encountering it, but it cannot in itself allow us to achieve it" was published in 1963.

## Conclusion

As I stated in the Introduction to this thesis, when I began my research it was my hypothesis that under conditions of calamity, poets would display a flight to metanarrative and religious closure and would tend to write over-coherent poetic worlds of belief, because, in their fragile subjectivity, the religious ambiguities which might be tolerable to them under less stressful situations would be suppressed.

I therefore explored discrepancies between the overt and the latent in these poets' depictions of calamity and of belief, seeking for evidence of the suppression of ambiguity through cracks, traces, palimpsest effects, fragmentation and alterity as I tested my hypothesis. In the case of five out of the six poets whom I researched, my hypothesis proved to be correct.

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In the poetry of the Israeli Yehuda Amichai, who took part in constant warfare from the time of his arrival in the country of Israel (then Palestine) in the 1930s, the poet's beliefs are written against a background of war and of erotic love, as he flees from war into the refuge of loves which themselves become battle zones. Amichai writes a pattern of belief which veers between assertions of the absence of God and poetry in which he calls God to account.

In this, Amichai may be compared with the Romanian Holocaust poet, Paul Celan. Written against the background of poems like 'Death Fugue' (perhaps the ultimate poetic testimony to the victims of the Holocaust) and 'Stretto', a poem in which European Jewish culture is inscribed as absence, Celan's overt religious statements are primarily an angry repudiation.

His discourses include the inscription of an absent God in 'Psalm',<sup>669</sup> and a bitter Jewish-Christian dialectic in 'Tenebrae',<sup>670</sup> in which he places responsibility for the horrors of the Holocaust squarely on the shoulders of the German, Christian people. Paul Celan states in letters that he hopes to blaspheme until the end of his life.<sup>671</sup>

In the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, a nurturing spiritual belief first breaks through his overt discourse, then becomes dominant by Amichai's final book, *Open, Closed, Open*. This spiritual discourse is paralleled in Paul Celan's luminous, simple, late poetry in which an immanent spirituality also wells through.

Connections by both poets with the land of Israel seem significant in the development of their covert spirituality; Amichai is influenced in addition by the language of modern Hebrew, the elegiac memory of his father and a deflating, ironic religious register, while Celan's knowledge of the Kabbalah proves significant for him.

In the case of Anne Sexton's poetry, in which she writes belief against her psychotic mental illness, a different pattern, but one which also involves an over-cohesive statement, emerges. Sexton overwrites the previous nurturing religious discourse of plenitude seen in 'O Ye Tongues', where she has written the Divine as companion, liberator and nourisher in a discourse of Christ as Divine mother, the One who satisfies her hungers.

In a flight to metanarrative and the beliefs of the institutional church, she writes a totalising vision of an overbearing patriarchal God. With a strong death-wish and a Pelagian theology, following a life-time in which the uproar of the internal world of the mentally ill has drowned out any awareness of Divine presence, the poetic speaker struggles towards the

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<sup>669</sup> Felstiner, ed., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 156-57.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid. 102-03.

<sup>671</sup> Celan and Sachs, *Correspondence* 41.

Divine who is sited past death. Her primary discourse is over-cohesive; yet unable to reconcile a good and omnipotent God with the evil of her mental suffering, she covertly subverts the Divine figure she has sought to inscribe. Sexton's institutional vision compares with the overt repudiation in the poetry of Amichai and Celan.

While Amichai and Celan overtly repudiate God and Sexton flees to institutional representation, Seamus Heaney, under the pressures of Ireland's sectarian violence, silences and suppresses the primary Catholicism which was most evident in 'Station Island'. By doing so he avoids placing himself within Northern Ireland's ideologically charged Protestant/Catholic sign systems.

In the case of Heaney's suppression too, alternative discourses of belief rise through his poetry—a pagan sexuality, a Jungian discourse of water, the use of emblems and a silent Presence; these increase in prominence until they become primary, as his Catholicism is suppressed.

In the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy, suppression of contradiction may also be seen. Writing against the background of the European post-modern theorists with their emphasis on disjunctions of language and of meaning, Bonnefoy sees as calamitous the loss of a sense of religious Presence as well as language's inability to mediate the Divine.

Although ambiguity appears to remain overt in Bonnefoy's poetry, he suppresses an aspect of the calamity itself, the discrepancy between two theories of language. In *Douve*, Bonnefoy writes a liquid and elusive language which hovers between form and formlessness in response to post-structuralism's belief in the disjunction between signifier and signified. In later work, he seeks a space for Presence in a discourse of the simple real, privileging such words as "tree" and "stone" and stressing the experience of particularity.

Post-structuralism's belief in the disjunction between signifier and signified and the view that language is the carrier of meaning are two irreconcilable theories, yet Bonnefoy at various times asserts both positions as his own and suppresses their incompatibility.

So we see that in five of my chosen poets, my hypothesis, that under conditions of calamity poets will lose tolerance for religious ambiguity, will display a flight to metanarrative and religious closure and will tend to write over-coherent poetic worlds of belief, proves to be true. The single exception to this position is found in the Holocaust poetry of Nelly Sachs who, from the start, integrates the existence of evil into her discourse of belief.

I attribute this integration to Sachs's sophisticated mystical belief system, one which contains no expectation of Divine intervention. Sachs has knowledge of the Kabbalah (which was made accessible to her through the texts of Gershom Sholem) and the philosophy of the seventeenth century mystic Jacob Boehme, as well as of Christian mystics. Her beliefs include resurrection, rebirth, and the possibility of the containment and eventually transformation of evil within the Divine. Sachs believes that "to raise the unspeakable onto the transcendental level" is "to make it bearable".<sup>672</sup> Alone among the six poets who are the subjects of my research, Sachs writes no over-cohesive discourse of belief in the face of calamity.

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Primo Levi believed that in calamitous times, "old certainties lose their outlines, / Virtues are negated, and faith fades."<sup>673</sup> My research into these six contemporary poets suggests that nothing fades under the pressures

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<sup>672</sup> Nelly Sachs, in the appendix to her play, *Beryll Gazes into the Night, or the Lost and Refound Alphabet*. Cited Schwebell, "Nelly Sachs," 46-7.

<sup>673</sup> Primo Levi, 'Huayna Capac', *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 35.



of calamity; rather the outlines of old certainties tend to be more heavily drawn (even if only as a prelude to repudiation).

If beliefs are negated, I question their virtue. On the one hand, the conventions of institutional belief systems which prove empty under the pain and terrors of calamity may be better dispensed with. On the other, no Christian follower of a God-man who was unjustly executed holds reasonable expectation of Divine intervention to prevent acts of injustice, and the concept of the *Deus Absconditus* traced by Friedman in *The Disappearance of God*<sup>674</sup> is familiar in sophisticated Jewish thought.

What Levi's statement fails to take into account is the possibility of a nourishing spirituality welling up through the cracks in the over-cohesive primary discourses which we have discerned in the majority of the poets whom I have researched.

Presence may go unnamed, as it is in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, or it may be interpreted in secular terms, as in Rena Kornreich Gelissen's identification of the strengthening, protecting, inner voice with the presence of her mother in *Rena's Promise*.<sup>675</sup> Sometimes, however, Presence is overtly identified as the immanent Presence of the Divine.

It seems that as violence and tenderness are inextricably linked in life, (a state which is written in such poems as Seamus Heaney's 'Keeping Going'),<sup>676</sup> so an inner awareness of nurturing and renewing Divine Presence is inseparably interwoven with calamitous events. Religious immanence rises to dominance in the religious discourse of calamitous times.

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<sup>674</sup> Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery*.

<sup>675</sup> Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* 263-5.

<sup>676</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 10.

We have noted that Amichai writes an immanent spirituality while avowing unbelief; that Sexton's writing of an immanent Christ/Christopher figure, repudiated in the interests of metanarrative, remains her primary religious statement; that religious discourses of Presence and silence, together with those of water, pagan harvest/sexuality and emblems, rise to prominence in Heaney's poetry as his Catholicism recedes.

Bonnefoy's discourse of immanent Presence, written through the simple real, places him, in this regard, with the modernist poets; Paul Celan's discourses of absence and bitter Jewish/Christian dialectic give way to poetry of the Shekhinah and Presence in Israel's ceremonies.

Even Nelly Sachs, with her contained tropes of the Holocaust in 'O the Chimneys' and her surreal tropes in 'Landscape of Screams', her emphasis on the wounded and mutilated survivor and the wounded text, and her belief in the transcending of evil, takes comfort from Divine Presence as she endeavours "to raise the unspeakable onto the transcendental level to make it bearable . . . and to let a glow of the holy darkness fall into this night of nights."<sup>677</sup> In calamitous times, the only significant religious comfort lies in the Presence of a God who is near.

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<sup>677</sup> Nelly Sachs, in the appendix to her play, *Beryll Gazes into the Night, or the Lost and Refound Alphabet*. Cited Schwebell, "Nelly Sachs," 46-7.

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