

EPILOGUE

“Desperate Conversation”— Poetic Finitude in Paul Celan and After

In opening and ending this project with the works of Paul Celan, I hope to suggest some of the ways in which the struggles of acknowledgment in the inhabitation of finitude continue after Hölderlin and Rilke into the second half of the twentieth century and perhaps through the beginning of the twenty-first. Here, I read Celan’s speech *Der Meridian* (The Meridian) as suggesting the ways in which his poetry takes up the problems of finite subjectivity as it lives in and with language.¹ In particular, Celan’s engagement with finitude appears in the *Meridian*’s treatment of poetry’s individual and historical particularity, its communicative or intersubjective dimension, and its role in the conflict between art and artificiality, which Celan treats in the speech under the rubrics of *Dichtung* (poetry) and *Kunst* (art).

As in the case of Hölderlin and Rilke, these themes, which I identify as bespeaking Celan’s engagement with finitude, are familiar to Celan’s readers. But the account of finitude I have developed throughout helps show, first, how Celan’s language, even or especially at its most difficult and distant from everyday speech,

1. Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung—Entwürfe—Materialien*, ed. Bernhard Böschstein and Heino Schmull, with Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkop, vol. 4 of Paul Celan, *Werke, Tübinger Ausgabe*, ed. Jürgen Wertheimer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999); Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, trans. Rosemarie Waldorp, in *Selections*, ed. and intro. Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 154–69.

can take part in the project of what I called “convening on conventions,” in which language and world index and alter each other in what Celan, like Hölderlin, calls “conversation” (*Gespräch*). Second, the idea that finitude is inhabited most authentically via the unfulfillable desire to transcend it provides one possible frame for understanding the baffling and circular interplay between poetry and art in Celan’s work. For my sketch of Celan, as in my longer treatments of Hölderlin and Rilke, the account of finitude and its reciprocal relation to language is at once a mode of approach to the poet and is itself changed and challenged by the poetic, temporally specific responses individual poets offer to the problems of inhabiting finitude.

The *Meridian*, delivered on the occasion of Celan’s acceptance of the Büchner Prize in Darmstadt in 1960 and published in 1961, is a complex interweaving of references and citations, most prominently to and of Georg Büchner, the German dramatist and pamphleteer for whom the prize was named.² A conclusion is not the place to tease out these references (to Kafka, Benjamin, Buber, Scholem, Levinas, Schestow, and others); nor can I give an overview of Celan’s biography or poetic career, situate him fully in aesthetic debates of his era, or even provide a complete accounting of the ways in which his speeches and letters elaborate the difficulties of inhabiting finitude. Both for reasons of space and because of my noncomparative approach, I also do not analyze the ways in which Celan refers to and writes poetry that takes up the tradition of Hölderlin and Rilke (especially the former).³ Like them, Celan attracted the attention of Martin Heidegger, but because (unlike Hölderlin or Rilke) he lived during the philosopher’s lifetime, Celan also read and responded to Heidegger as the twentieth century’s most prominent thinker on poetic language and finitude, first enthusiastically and then critically as Heidegger failed to address either his involvement in the Nazi Party or his silence on the Shoah after the war.⁴

2. On quotation in the speech, particularly as part of Celan’s response to critical reviews in conjunction with the spurious accusations of plagiarism tinged with anti-Semitism initiated by Claire Goll, see Helmut Müller-Sievers, “On the Way to Quotation: Paul Celan’s *Meridian* Speech,” special issue, *New German Critique* 91 (Winter 2004): 131–49. Kristina Mendicino describes Celan’s treatment of quotation as *er-innern*, literally, “internalization,” from Celan’s repeated rhetorical formula “Sie erinnern sich” (You will remember) in the speech. See Kristina Mendicino, “An Other Rhetoric: Paul Celan’s *Meridian*,” *MLN* 126, no. 3 (2011): 640. Alexandra Richter notes Celan’s citation of every interlocutor except Büchner by way of a Jewish mediator (e.g., Pascal via Schestow, Malebranche via Benjamin, etc.) and thus sees the speech as a dialogue between German and Jewish traditions whose pleas for attentiveness she reads convincingly as a call to political alertness in light of reviving anti-Semitism in Germany. Alexandra Richter, “Die politische Dimension der Aufmerksamkeit im *Meridian*,” *DVjs* 77, no. 4 (2003): 659–76.

3. See, e.g., Aris Fioretos, “Nothing: History and Materiality in Celan,” in *Word Traces*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 295–341; and Anja Lemke, “Andenkendes Dichten—Paul Celans Poetik der Erinnerung in ‘Tübingen, Jänner’ und ‘Todtnauberg’ in Auseinandersetzung mit Hölderlin und Heidegger,” in *Die Zeitlichkeit des Ethos: Poetologische Aspekte im Schreiben Paul Celans*, ed. Ulrich Wergin and Martin Jörg Schäfer (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2003), 89–11.

4. Pierre Joris, “Introduction: ‘Polysemy without Mask,’” in Celan, *Selections*, 21. Indeed, the *Meridian* speech has been read as a criticism of Heidegger in terms similar to those in which I take issue with

Rather than elaborating all of these developments and connections (which would furnish the material for several monographs), I touch on Celan's themes of historical and individual particularity, the intersubjective nature of poetry, and the conflict between art and artificiality. In placing these themes in relation to my account of finitude (far more briefly than I have done with Hölderlin and Rilke), I hope to give some idea of one way the problems of finitude change in the latter half of the twentieth century and, conversely, show how the account of poetic quests for the inhabitation of finitude I have developed might help us understand the persistent questions of Celan's poetry and speeches: how can poets seek any orientation between subject, language, and community; indeed, how can poets speak at all in light of the traumas of individual and historical experience? Although the *Meridian* should not be read as directly applicable to or explanatory of any of Celan's poetry (any more than Hölderlin's poetological texts or Rilke's letters were of their poems), its repeated thematizations of what poetry attempts to do illuminate what Celan seeks to "add here, today, to the old hopes" of poetry.⁵

The accusation of a flight into poetic virtuosity I saw as raised by and refuted in Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* was leveled repeatedly at Paul Celan, whose early reviewers suggested that his work "escape[d] the bloody horror chamber of history," "ris[ing] to the ethereal domain of pure poetry."⁶ But in his consideration of what differentiates poetry "here today" from poetic tradition, Celan foregrounds not the pure timelessness of poetry but rather the historical particularity of poetic speech, and thus also poetry's connection to, and power to intervene in, its particular time.⁷ Contrary to notions of poetry as a timeless, universalizing mode and to the idea that poetry must purify itself of worldly contamination,⁸ Celan

him in chapter 1: Heidegger elides subjectivity, individual particularity, and historical specificity in his subsuming of the poem to his historico-philosophical schema of the gradual saying of Being in poetry. See, e.g., Dennis J. Schmidt, "Black Milk and Blue: Celan and Heidegger on Pain and Language," in Fioretos, *Word Traces*, 110–29; and Lemke, "Andenkendes Dichten." Christopher Fynsk goes so far as to read both of Celan's major public addresses as saying: "Here is what must be said about poetry after Heidegger" (Christopher Fynsk, "The Realities at Stake in a Poem: Celan's Bremen and Darmstadt Addresses," in Fioretos, *Word Traces*, 159).

5. Celan, *Selections*, 163.

6. Hans Egon Holthusen, "Five Young German Poets," in *Der Merkur*; cited by Joris, "Introduction," 21. Holthusen, "an enthusiastic member of the SS before the fall of the Reich," made the criticism specifically with reference to Celan's now-canonical "Todesfuge"; "This negation of the context of the poem was not a singular aberrance but happened with regularity throughout the fifties and sixties" (ibid.). The *Meridian* may thus be read as offering a critique of a historiography of poetry as becoming increasingly self-absorbed, culminating in the hermeticism of "sweet song" or the "magic" of pure language. See, e.g., Fioretos, "Nothing," 319.

7. That historical and individual particularity themselves constitute the political and ethical thrust of Celan's poetology is an idea worked out at length in the essays collected in Wergin and Schäfer, *Die Zeitlichkeit des Ethos*, especially in Schäfer's introduction (9–17).

8. This second notion, in particular, derives from the poetic tradition culminating in Mallarmé, to whom Celan refers by name in the address (Celan, *Meridian*, 5; Celan, *Selections*, 159).

suggests that contemporary poetry must “remain mindful of its dates” (*die Daten eingedenk bleiben*). In the tentative, questioning mode that characterizes the speech, Celan asks:

Perhaps we can say that every poem is marked by its own ‘20th of January’? Perhaps the newness of poems written today is that they try most plainly to be mindful of this kind of date? But do we not all write from and toward some such date? [And which dates do we ascribe to ourselves?]⁹

The twentieth of January is the date on which Büchner’s *Lenz* begins; it is also the date of the day of the Wannsee Conference in 1942 on which the implementation and coordination of the “final solution” to the Jewish question was discussed.¹⁰ Celan’s choice of a date with a multiplicity of significances, together with his questions about whether writing toward and from such dates might be a general phenomenon (*wir alle*, “we all”), emphasizes that such mindfulness is not a matter of identifying universal dates, rooted in the past and infinitely repeatable, but is always an issue or problem at any particular moment. Rather, poetry must discover the dates from which and to which it proceeds as it develops a mindfulness rooted in language.¹¹

In addition to its reformulation of the mutual shaping of world (history) and language played out in “Die Silbe Schmerz” (The Syllable Pain) this insistence on the particularity of historical finitude puts a significant strain on the intelligibility of poetic language.¹² But—through questioning, paradox, encounter, and exploration—Celan works in the *Meridian* speech to develop a poetics of particularity that, precisely by *way* of its inscription in history and its individual fragility, is able to seek a communicative space with an address or “you”:

But the poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf.

But I think—and this will hardly surprise you—that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange*—no, I can no longer use this word here—*on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*.¹³

9. Celan, *Selections*, 162–63.

10. See Celan, *Selections*, 226.

11. Lemke reads this mindfulness of dates as a radicalization of the Heideggerian theme of being-toward-death (Lemke, “Andenkendes Dichten,” 94).

12. “It is true, the poem, the poem today shows—and this has only indirectly to do with the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis, none of which we should underrate—the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence.

“The poem holds its ground, if you will permit me yet another extreme formulation, the poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from [its] ‘already-no-more’ [*Schon-nicht-mehr*] into [its] ‘still-here’ [*Immer-noch*]” (Celan, *Selections*, 163–64).

13. Celan, *Selections*, 163.

That is, despite its historical circumscription, and not only despite but because of its ability to speak only in its own voice or on its own behalf, the poem also seeks an encounter with and speaks—perhaps—on behalf of another, without eliding the alterity of that other: the poem “always acts as a promise of communication, contact, and community; yet it is always equally true that by carrying us to the point of our finite singularity, poetic experience—the experience of language as language—renders mortality possible as the mortality that is ours and that keeps us apart.”¹⁴ The very finitude of language and those who speak it is what the I and the other share; the basis of communication is the impossibility of its certainty. Any attempt to elide individual or historical particularity once and for all would, as displayed in “Die Silbe Schmerz,” risk repeating the totalizations of thought and voice that culminated in the Shoah; instead, the poet must remember that he speaks “from the angle of [inclination] of [his own creaturely] nature.”¹⁵

Thus the insistence on individual and historical finitude in Celan’s *Meridian* speech does not represent a retreat to a hermetic world or to an isolated community of two; instead, poetry “must be read as having a basic role in the political life of those who share a language, as well as in the decisions of history.”¹⁶ In terms that recall Hölderlin’s insistence on individual experience and memory, as well as Rilke’s emphasis on attention to the things of the phenomenal world,¹⁷ Celan describes the kind of poetry

14. Schmidt, “Black Milk and Blue,” 114. Fynsk extends this point by remarking that according to Celan’s reading of “I” and “you,” “I may situate myself only in relation to an other, but my reach is toward an otherness of the other that I can never appropriate and that exposes me always to an alterity. . . . This alterity is marked in the poem—brought to ‘speak’ there—but its voice is fundamentally unsettling *because always other*” (Fynsk, “Realities at Stake,” 177). Echoing Celan’s critique of Heidegger’s lack of particularity as well as my Cavellian critique of Heidegger’s ethical blind spot, Fynsk reflects that Celan’s emphasis on the alterity of the other shows that for all his talk of *Mitsein*, Heidegger “failed, in effect, to think through sufficiently the relation to the other in its otherness, and to take the measure of what this might mean for a thought of the historicity of Dasein” (176).

15. Celan, *Selections*, 164. The German is “unter dem Neigungswinkel seiner Kreatürlichkeit” (Celan, *Meridian*, 9). This is not to say that Celan’s mindfulness of dates refers only to the murder of Europe’s Jews or that he insists that every poet write under the sign of the death camps (although he is critical of those with nothing to say about them); because all poetry, for Celan, writes toward finitude and mortality, “one constricts [the] full force” of Celan’s treatments of finitude and death “if one regards him only as a poet of the Holocaust” (Schmidt, “Black Milk and Blue,” 124). Such emphasis on particularity also prevents the inference, toward which some scholarship on Celan tends, that writing mindful of the Shoah entails and even enables taking up or over the position of victim or survivor. (In part because of her laudable efforts to return to poetry the historicity Heidegger effaces, Lemke, “Andenkendes Dichten,” tends in this direction.)

16. Schmidt, “Black Milk and Blue,” 118. Martin Jörg Schäfer also analyzes the reciprocity between intimate and political relations, reflecting that the fleeting intimacy worked out in many of Celan’s poems always points beyond itself to a historical conditionedness while, conversely, the calling up of history overturns again and again into the most intimate of relations, that between I and You. Martin Jörg Schäfer, “Zeitlichkeit, Ethos, Poetologie—Zur Einleitung,” in Wergin and Schäfer, *Die Zeitlichkeit des Ethos*, 12–13.

17. The poem’s fundamental mode is that of individual attention to the singular or particular: “The attention the poem pays to all that it encounters, its *more* acute sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of the ‘tremors and hints’ [a quotation from Büchner’s *Lenz*]—all this is not, I think, achieved by an eye competing (or concurring) with ever more precise instruments, but rather, by a kind of concentration mindful of all our dates” (Celan, *Selections*, 164).

that emerges from an encounter between the singularity of the I and the alterity of the other as “the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation—often desperate conversation [*verzweifelt Gespräch*].”¹⁸ This conversation—a topos already fraught with uncertainty in Hölderlin—does not refer to an always-already existing other whose answers are taken for granted; rather, the poem must constitute its own conversational space and encounter in its own writing.

Celan does not present this poetics of historical and individual particularity that seeks an encounter in *Gespräch* directly or by way of analytical argumentation. Instead, it unfolds in conflict and dialogue with what reads very much like an analysis of poetic attempts to overcome or deny finitude, figured in the *Meridian* speech as *Kunst* (art). In German, as in English, the word for “art” gives its root to “artificial” and “artificiality” (*Kunst, künstlich, Künstlichkeit*). In the address, Celan contrasts art with *Dichtung* (poetry), where the former is associated with marionettes, automata, and mechanics, and metrical technique.¹⁹ Perhaps most tellingly for questions of finitude, he characterizes art as “a problem, and, as we can see, one that is variable, tough, long lived, let us say, eternal.”²⁰ Using terms of contrast derived from Büchner’s *Lenz*, Celan also underscores the consequences for individual particularity of attention to or immersion in art (an eternal but sterile possibility): Büchner’s title character, in an extended discussion of art, forgets himself in what Celan describes as the *Ich-Ferne* (distance from the I) of the artist, with whom he contrasts the historical person (“himself, as a person . . . the historical Lenz,” “he as an I”).²¹ And finally, in specifically poetic terms, art is full of images and metaphors and tropes (*Bilder* and *Metaphern* and *Tropen*), the very components attributed to Celan’s poetry as enabling his ostensible retreat into decorative hermeticism.

Poetry (*Dichtung*), by contrast, interests itself precisely in the historical, particular individual; it is what interrupts art’s eternal continuation with a “counterword” (*Gegenwort*) or a “step” (*Schritt*) that constitutes an act of freedom or breaking away from art’s grandiloquence and virtuosity.²² Celan first defines poetry as a name for “the majesty of the absurd which [bears witness to] the presence of human beings.”²³

18. Celan, *Selections*, 165.

19. “Die Kunst, das ist, Sie erinnern sich, ein marionettenhaftes, jambisch-fünffüßiges und . . . kinderloses Wesen” (Celan, *Meridian*, 2; Celan, *Selections*, 154: “Art, you will remember, is a puppet-like, iambic, five-footed thing without . . . offspring”). Thinking of Cavell’s thought experiment of the perfect automaton, one might say that in both Cavell and Celan, what the automaton calls forth is the strangeness or otherness of the human/Other. See chapter 1, “From Knowledge to Acknowledgment.”

20. Celan, *Selections*, 155.

21. *Ibid.*, 160–61. In German: “Er, als historische Person,” “Er als ein Ich” (Celan, *Meridian*, 6–7).

22. Celan, *Meridian*, 3; Celan, *Selections*, 156. See on this point Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s analysis that “poetry is the interruption of art. Something, if you will, that ‘takes art’s breath away’” (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” trans. Andrea Tarnowski, in Fioretos, *Word Traces*, 132).

23. Celan, *Selections*, 157. There is no good English way to render the extended participial phrase in German: “die für die Gegenwart des Menschlichen zeugenden Majestät des Absurden” (Celan, *Meridian*, 3).

Poetry, then, testifies (the German word *zeugen* means “to bear witness” and also “to beget a child,” against the sterility of art) to the presence of the human, the particular, the absurd; art is thus contrasted with the singularity of “the human as that which allows there to be one man or another—that man there, the singular—in the here and now.”²⁴ Once more by way of *Lenz*, Celan links poetry to the living, the human, and the creaturely, “the ‘life of the least beings,’ the ‘tremors and hints,’ the ‘subtle, hardly noticeable play of emotions on [the] face.’”²⁵ Poetry, then, seems to abandon as dangerous and destructive the desire to transcend finitude, attending instead to the particularity of the individual and the other, and their embodied life and mortality that are shared in a community of conversation from “I” to “you.”

But already in Celan’s depiction of *Lenz* the distinction between art and poetry begins to fold in on itself: the words cited in *Lenz*’s program of attention to the creaturely and the finite are precisely those he speaks in the discussion of art that renders him alienated from himself. Moreover, the inanimacy of art takes over the living and the human in *Lenz*’s own example: describing a scene of two peasant girls helping each other put up their hair as more alluring than classical sculpture or Dutch painting, he asserts: “Sometimes one would like to be a Medusa’s head to turn such a group to stone and gather the people around it.”²⁶ Linking this desire back to the naturalist program (with which Büchner was affiliated) of “expanding art,” Celan finds a sinister, uncanny undertone to this expansion, in which art’s strangeness grasps or invades what is other to it, “to seize the natural as natural by way of art!”²⁷ The very act of grasping the natural is inevitably ossifying, petrifying, deadly. In his own program that seems to turn away from the artificiality of art, Celan takes up Büchner’s challenge to art (*In-Frage-Stellung der Kunst*), a calling into question of art that forms the starting point of poetry: “A challenge to which all poetry [today] must return if it wants to question further.”²⁸ That is, he identifies, with Büchner, a calling into question of art without which “poetry today” cannot begin.

I cannot trace here every move toward and away and through the two poles of *Kunst* and *Dichtung* that Celan moves through in the dynamics of the speech, throughout which he repeatedly takes up the theme of turning, both in the vocabulary of artifice (*Tropen*, “tropes,” a synonym for Celan’s “metaphors” and “images,”

24. Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” 135.

25. Celan, *Selections*, 158. Phrases in single quotation marks are quoted from Büchner by Celan.

26. Celan, *Selections*, 158; the entire passage is a direct quotation from Büchner’s *Lenz*.

27. Celan, *Selections*, 158. Lacoue-Labarthe summarizes this point helpfully: “Art wants to expand itself; it clamors to be expanded. It wants its difference from the things and beings of nature to be effaced. In a way, that which is art’s own, which is ‘proper’ to art (to the *Unheimliche*), is the tendency to mitigate differentiation, and in so doing invade and contaminate everything. . . . Art is, if the word can be risked, generalized ‘estrangement’—the Medusa’s head, the robots, the speeches—without end” (Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” 134).

28. Celan, *Selections*, 159.

derives from the Greek *tropos*, “turn or way”) and of poetry.²⁹ Shortly before the end of the address, Celan returns to the question of art’s expansion. He sketches the conflict once more and then offers the answer he had thought to give, only to call it into question:

Elargissez l’art! This problem confronts us with its old and new uncanniness. I took it to Büchner, and I think I found it in his work.

I even had an answer ready, I wanted to counter, to contradict, with a word against the grain [*Gegenwort*], like Lucile’s.

Enlarge art?

No. On the contrary, take art with you into your innermost narrowness. And set yourself free.

I have taken this route, even today, with you. It has been a circle.

Art (this includes the Medusa’s head, the mechanism, the automaton), art, the uncanny strangeness which is so hard to differentiate and perhaps is only *one* after all—art lives on.³⁰

Art—and Celan reiterates many of the negatively connoted terms he associates with it throughout the speech—returns; the path poetry traces toward and away from it is a circle, and the opposition between enlarging and contracting, strange and other, freedom and constraint, collapses. Even in the quest for the human, the techniques and technologies, the desire to exceed the human and “live on,” constantly reemerges; poetry and art come into being in constant tension with each other.

In the passages quoted above, the interweaving of poetry and art seems to represent a failure; the “way out” Celan sought turns out not to be a way out but a return to its origin. The very end of the *Meridian*, however, recasts this circular turning and returning, introducing its title image for the first time:

Ladies and gentlemen, I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road in your presence, this road of the impossible.

I find the connective [*das Verbindende*] which, like the poem, leads to encounters.

I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics [*Tropen*]: I find . . . a *meridian*.³¹

The attributes of art and poetry fall together: the “tropes” of rhetorical figuration and artistic virtuosity become the tropics of terrestrial turning (*Tropen* means both

29. “Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath” (Celan, *Selections*, 162; Celan, *Meridian*, 7: “Dichtung: das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten”).

30. Celan, *Selections*, 166–67.

31. Celan, *Selections*, 169; suspension points in original.

“tropes” and “tropics” in German); the circle that was before an image of the futility of escaping art now appears to enable the very encounter in whose name poetry sought to free itself from art. But the path is still “impossible,” the path *of* the impossible: poetry can neither free itself once and for all from the alienation of art, nor can the human escape its own finitude, its “radical individuation” and its dates in the eternal repetition of art without also losing itself. Poetry, that is, comes to be not as an escape from or denial of art’s striving toward the infinite, but in the very impossibilities that striving uncovers, in the yearnings beyond itself of a single I who seeks a communicative encounter along the meridian of the poem.³²

Celan thus traces a path for the poem that inhabits this conflict between “mutism’s *saying nothing*” and “the saying too much of grandiloquence.”³³ The speech’s final definition of poetry bespeaks both the uncanniness of art that seeks to transcend or overcome finitude and the finitude itself that yearns for that impossible transcendence: “Die Dichtung, meine Damen und Herren—: diese Unendlichsprechung von lauter Sterblichkeit und Umsonst!”³⁴ Read one way, this sentence seems to catch poetry in a lie: it is the declaration that mortality and what is in vain are eternal (*unendlich*). In this reading, mortality and “what is in vain” (*Umsonst*) belie art’s claims to eternity. But read the other way, poetry is defined as the perpetual *speaking* of that which is mortal and that which is in vain; that is, as the move into the language of art and with art of the human, mortal, and absurd or in vain that makes up Celan’s poetic response to inevitable finitude in the face of the catastrophes of language and history. His poetry, perhaps even more than Hölderlin’s or Rilke’s, is aware of the dangers of the desire to overcome finitude: the absolutism and totalization that can follow from the search for what reaches beyond itself, and the endless self-perpetuation of the poetic techniques and traditions that, in attempting to attain immortality, cut themselves off from the human. This awareness, then, is a particularly acute and self-conscious form of the dissatisfaction with language that can inspire either a quest for certainty (anxious or coercive, as the case may be) or the flight into hermeticism. “Art” in Celan’s speech is thus a double figure that both identifies dangers whose internal relation to poetry nonetheless

32. In an argument that ends up subsuming individual particularity and history to Heidegger’s historico-philosophical schema, Lacoue-Labarthe nonetheless accurately characterizes this internal relation: “Poetry, then, *in effect* says existence: the human. It says existence, not because it takes the opposing course to discourse or because it upsets the *unheimlich* turnaround. . . . Poetry does not take its place outside art, in some sense supposed to be the other of art or of its strangeness. It takes place in the ‘strange place’ itself” (Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” 138).

33. Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” 141–42.

34. Celan, *Meridian*, 11; Celan, *Selections*, 167: “Poetry, ladies and gentleman: what an eternalization of nothing but mortality, and in vain.” I give the German only in the main text because Waldorp’s translation is problematic in that it reduces the sentence’s two possibilities to one and heightens the negative affect; moreover, it does not recognize that *Umsonst*, capitalized, is a noun, not a description of the result of poetry’s so-called eternalization. (Nor does “eternalization” capture the sense of speaking in *Unendlich-sprechung*.) I give English versions of the two possible readings above.

prompts dissatisfaction with language, and requires standing attention to the necessity of that dissatisfaction in the inhabitation of finitude.

Perhaps the central claim of this project has been that the questions and struggles of human finitude cannot and must not be answered once and for all; accordingly, any conclusion to it can have only a provisional character. Acknowledgment—the repeatedly attempted and uncertain state of responsiveness to what is separate from me but not inaccessible to me—is not something, once completed, whose results can be adduced, recorded, and then left alone. This insight is expressed in Cavell's call for the "holding open" of the "argument of the self with itself (over its finitude)."³⁵ Rilke abandons his character Malte's call for a single step that would recast all human relations, instead working out repeated shapings of relationality within the finite plasticity of sonnet form. And Hölderlin, in his own historically specific language, forbids the closing of the arguments over finitude both in his insistence that true harmony of and between subjects is achievable only in poetry and in his poetry's calls for communication and responsiveness. I have hinted at some of the ways in which for Celan this responsiveness moves into the material of language itself, thus enabling a tentative encounter and conversation that registers historical particularity. Such responsiveness likewise fully informs the picture of language *use* rather than reference that I unfolded throughout my readings; the abutment of language and world that changes over time and is a matter of deep convention likewise denies any advance certainties of fit or correlation between language and world.

This view of language foregrounds the powers of lyric poetry to address and register but not to solve once and for all the problems of world orientation peculiar (and native) to human subjects; lyric poetry does this yet more paradigmatically than ordinary language use (or, I would want to say, even than prose texts) because of its attention to all of language's semantic, historical, acoustic, written, and formal components. And these powers ground the ambitious claims that both Hölderlin and Rilke make for lyric poetry, including, among other things, that it can create political communities, that it can recast human relations to death, or that it can unite the sensual and intellectual components of human subjectivity. For both poets, orientations in words *are* orientations in and to the world: "That these words should lay aside their differences and join upon this ground of sense, proposes a world which mocks the squalor and cowardice of our imaginations."³⁶ The harmonies, dissonances, unities, and conflicts poets create in language both come from and influence the world that language comes from and reaches. In my

35. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

36. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden—An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 44.

readings of Hölderlin and Rilke I have looked in detail at their poetry to show what kind of world each proposes as a challenge and an invitation to the imagination. And in each case this challenge stands not as an example of a philosophical position worked out elsewhere but as the expression of a yearning most fully articulated in poetry.

For Hölderlin, this yearning is expressed as a call for unification in the endeavor to show the subject to be linked with something outside itself, whether in a religious or political community or in inhabitation of the finite natural world. What Hölderlin's poems acknowledge is that the certainty desired in these unifications is unattainable, but that the desire itself can nonetheless form the grounds of tentative and temporary communication, community, or communion. The acknowledgment of this uncertainty requires responsiveness from the poet to the world, as it is separate from but inhabited by the subject, and to others, represented as separate groups or individuals within poetry. Acknowledgment extends even further in the creation of a space for responsiveness from the reader as she holds together the oppositions and unifications unfolded but not forced or assured across the dynamic temporality of any given poem. Each of the three poems I have read from Hölderlin's late period approaches acknowledgment in a different way on both semantic/thematic and formal levels, and each foregrounds a different element of the struggle to live within human finitude.

The unfulfillable yearning for certainty reverses direction in Rilke: where Hölderlin strove to link the subjects and the world, Rilke's protagonist in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* seeks and ultimately fails to find assurances of precisely *which* elements of the world (human or thing) can provide successful world orientations. Absent such certainty, Malte experiences an alarming degree of openness to the world; what Rilke's subsequent texts work out is that this openness is not only threatening but productive. This openness, appearing in the themes of a recast relation to mortality, to earthly existence, and to embodied subjectivity, informs his *Sonnets to Orpheus* in formal and semantic registers. The program of the figure collects these registers into a simultaneously thematic and formal or even plastic shaping and testing of world orientations. The *Sonnets* investigate relationality as such, asking the reader to investigate the relations between elements of individual sonnets, between sonnets, and throughout the entire cycle.

As my turn to Celan emphasizes, the three poets differ not only in the discourses in which they treat the problems of finitude but in their treatment of language: Hölderlin, for all his emphasis on sensory concretion and the intensity of his formal shaping of language, does not have the same sense of language as a material medium as does Rilke. When Hölderlin discusses unifications of *Stoff* or material with mind/spirit (*Geist*), he is referring almost invariably to content, not to ink on the page or sounds in the ear. Rilke, in contrast, is highly attentive to both, as evidenced by his laments that he has no such plastic medium for artistic work as does Rodin, and by a strange text from 1919, "Ur-Geräusch" (Primal Sound), in

which he imagines the noise that would be made if a phonograph needle traced the grooves in a human skull.³⁷ The arenas in which theorizing about language occurs, to put it simply, change drastically in the century between the two poets and continue into Celan's radical experimentation with poetic/linguistic materiality.

Surveying the developments in lyric poetry and theorization with a very wide lens at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is surely safe to say that the emphasis on the materiality of language, whether in concrete poetry, in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, in transnational or multilingual poetry, or in dialect or noise poetry, has only intensified. Similarly, the search to explain human mindedness has shifted from philosophy to psychology to the physical material of the brain treated in cognitive science or neurology, at least in one of its strains (this is not to say that philosophy and psychology do not go on—productively and provocatively). And I would suggest that poetry has, in some cases, undertaken the task of reminding us that this emphasis on the material may turn out to be anything but brute or determinist. The explanation of definite theses by way of which investigations of material mindedness proceed will need to be transformed by and in the kind of open exploration of mind, language, and world I have argued lyric poetry is perhaps uniquely qualified to undertake. (At least, such explanations will need to be so transformed if they want to tell us anything about the inhabitation rather than the facts of finitude.) Indeed, these material orientations too are uncertain and in need of convening upon, something that the discourses from which they emerge often seem to elide: “Nothing is more human than the wish to deny one’s humanity.”³⁸ Whether precisely the problems of finitude I have been investigating find a home in the quests for knowledge of the new millennium and in its poetry is far too large an investigation to undertake here; in any case, whether they do or not will be determined only by addressing contemporary poetry with the same attention and responsiveness that Hölderlin, Rilke, and Celan call for—and seeing whether that poetry answers.

37. KA 4:699–704.

38. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.