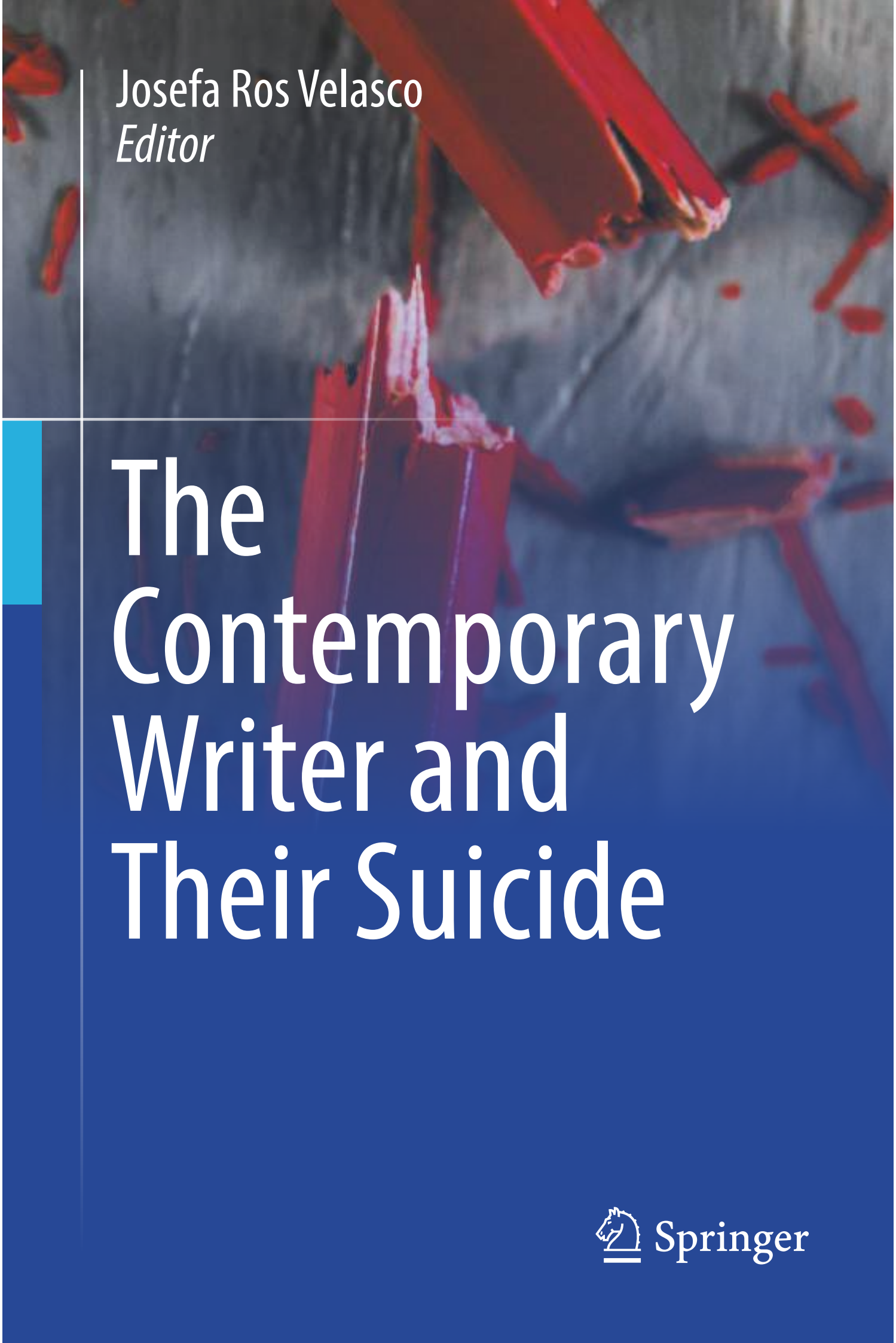

Josefa Ros Velasco
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Chapter 8
Paul Celan: The Abyss of the Word "Forgiveness"

Fernando Gilabert Bello

In 1967, Paul Celan, a poet and Holocaust survivor, took part in a reading in Freiburg. There, he personally met the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was Rector of the University of Freiburg promoted by the politics of National Socialism. Much has been said about the meeting between the two and the friendship and admiration that arose after the poet's visit to the philosopher's hut in the Black Forest. The most eloquent as well as the most enigmatic testimony is Celan's poem *Todtnauberg*, in which he expects to hear "a coming word" from the philosopher's lips. We can speculate that, perhaps, this word was "forgiveness." But Heidegger never apologized. After several encounters over the next three years, Celan eventually threw himself into the Seine. This chapter speculates whether it is possible that it was never hearing the word "forgiveness" for the crimes of Nazism that drove him to suicide. To reconstruct this suicide hypothesis, the chapter leans towards the existing biographical documentation on the author, both studies by specialists and Celan's own epistolary exchange. It will also turn directly to his poetic work, especially his late work (in which I believe the encounter with Heidegger is important), where he expresses the absurdity of any attempt at communication, confronting existential anguish itself, perhaps that which led him to the abyss because he could not find the word "forgiveness" in the language of extermination, an otherwise impossible encounter.

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1 Introduction

When, in 1967, Paul Celan, poet and Holocaust survivor, agreed to participate in a reading in Freiburg, he did not imagine that he would have a decisive encounter for the relationship between thought and poetry. At the end of the reading, he personally met the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was Rector of the University of Freiburg during the National Socialism era. At first, Celan refused to be publicly related to Heidegger, but later he agreed to visit him at the hut that Heidegger had in Todtnauberg, in the Black Forest. The relevance of such an encounter in Heidegger's hut, in spite of its controversy, lies in the fact that it (allowed for) made possible a justification of the proximity between poetry and philosophy. The most eloquent testimony of the poet's visit to the thinker's hut, as well as the most enigmatic, is *Todtnauberg* (1983), a poem by Celan in which he claims to hear a "coming word" from the philosopher.

On that "word to come" I direct my gaze on this occasion, for it is where I want to lend my ear today. I speculate, because there is no certain data, that perhaps that word was "forgiveness." But Heidegger never pronounced it. After several encounters in the following years, Celan ended his life by throwing himself into the Seine. In the present chapter, I echo the hypothesis that never hearing the word "forgiveness" for the crimes of Nazism was what drove the poet to suicide. I will base this suicidal hypothesis both on academic studies and on Celan's own epistolary exchange. Likewise, I will also turn to his poetic work, especially his late work, where I believe that the meeting with Heidegger is of fundamental importance, where he expresses the absurdity of any attempt at communication, facing existential anguish itself, perhaps the one that will lead him to the abyss when he finds the word "forgiveness" in the language of extermination, an encounter that is otherwise impossible.

2 A Room Near the Seine

What follows is of course conjecture. I do not intend to present this research as an explanation of the poet's suicide. Trying to clarify it is an excuse to reflect on his work, which is a turning point in the literature of the twentieth century, entering continuous language games. In addition, his peculiar philosophical-poetic style allows him to dialogue with the most relevant thinkers of his time.

But all that I expose here is merely hypothetical. I can imagine what led Celan, on the evening of April 20, 1970, to leave his apartment on Avenue Zola, near the Seine, and walk to the river. He had been reading a biography of Hölderlin, the poet of the Germans (Heidegger, 2000) and felt the impulse to get up and leave the apartment. On his walk, he would probably pass a few closed *cafés* and exchange a polite greeting with the watchman posted at the sentry box of the Citröen factory in Javel. Arriving at the quai, he would turn his head to the right where the presence of the

Eiffel Tower would evoke the words he had underlined a short time before in the biography he was reading: "Sometimes genius darkens and sinks into the bitterness of his heart" (Felstiner, 1995, p. 287). He went to the bridge and turned his head towards the docks; perhaps he would see some clochard dozing, and then the underlined words about the poet who ended up mad and locked in a tower came back. He would not end up like that; he went to the railing, and as he lifted his legs to cross it, he knew that already his genius had darkened, and there remained only that *Lichtzwang* delivered shortly before to the publisher. Clinging to the parapet, he turned and gazed at the streetlights of the Parisian night, but all was now dark and bitter; all that remained was to sink into the Seine. The next morning, his corpse would be found floating adrift.

We truly know nothing about what went through Celan's head while he was reading the biography, nor about what urged him to commit suicide. Those who could have shed light on this fateful event remained silent or died soon after, like Nelly Sachs, who died far from Paris the same day the poet was buried (Dinesen, 1992). Perhaps she would have suspected his intentions in their frequent epistolary exchange.

Any hypothesis about his suicide does not stand on solid foundations because we have no data to confirm the motive of his suicide. We can even assume that it was an accident. But it is doubtful, especially when we know about his manias, his depressive tendencies, and his outbursts of madness, which became more acute eight days before his death (Felstiner, 1995). All this mental tension is continuously reflected in his poetics. Without testimony of that fateful night, we can only rely to clarify his death on data subject to our own hermeneutics: what he announced with his poetry and what those who treated him in the last months, who also had to interpret the facts after the event, told us about him. One of the few reliable facts are those underlined words in Hölderlin's biography, but what did Celan intend to imply by highlighting them?

Going to Hölderlin's reading leads us to suppose that perhaps it had to do with the encounter and the possibility of dialogue with Heidegger, whose particular reading of the Romantic poet uniquely connects thought and poetry, something that caught the attention of Celan, whom we know had been approaching Heidegger's philosophical work since the 1950s (Emmerich, 2020). Their meeting in Freiburg three years before the poet's suicide, Celan's visit to the Todtnauberg hut, and their mutual correspondence allow us to assume a dialogue between the two, a connection through language, through words. But I argue, however, that between the two there is only the abyss of silence.

3 A Silent Dialogue in Todtnauberg

Why does silence become an abyss? What separates poet and thinker so that dialogue is not established and only silence mediates? In this encounter (not misencounter), silence stands out, not because there is no conversation between our

protagonists, but because of the impossibility of speech between them. Silence is terrible and even more so in the case of poetry, for it is nothingness itself, the impossibility of speech. To speak is to seek the word, but to find it is a limit (Gadamer, 1983). The poet longs to go after that word that is never reached, because he "says" what is impossible to say. But in Todtnauberg, the poet did not hope to articulate that pursued word, but his hope was to hear it. Silence martyrs the poet: his world is that of "saying," even saying with silence. In the encounter between Celan and Heidegger, silence says nothing, because there is nothing. That is the terrible thing.

Perhaps this terrible silence is what beats in Celan's suicide. My hypothesis moves in the (failed) possibility of the dialogue between poet and thinker. This silent dialogue is starred by a philosopher attached to National Socialism and a poet survivor of the concentration camp and must necessarily be located in the hut that Heidegger owned in Todtnauberg, where so many have tried to interpret this encounter (Oyarzun, 2013). It is convenient, first of all, to narrate the events that led to the meeting.

In 1967, the German Gerhard Baumann invited Celan to a reading held on July 24 of that year in the Auditorium Maximus of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg. More than 1,000 people made up the audience, the largest number of listeners Celan ever had (Celan & Celan-Lestrange, 2001). Heidegger was part of this large audience. Until then, they had not known each other personally, but the work of each was no stranger to the other. We know of Heidegger's interest in poetry and the imprint it left on his philosophical thinking from his reading of Hölderlin (Heidegger, 2000), Rilke (Heidegger, 2002), and Trakl (Heidegger, 1985), as well as his friendship with poets such as René Char (Safranski, 1999), facilitating the proximity between philosophy and poetry. Celan was also no stranger to the late philosophy of Heidegger, of whom we know that he was a fine and critical reader (2004) and that he even wanted to contact him as early as 1957 (Pöggeler, 1990). The only drawback to such an encounter was the burden that weighed on both of them, albeit in a different way: the concentration camp.

After Celan's reading, Heidegger approached Baumann to greet him and someone even suggested a photograph of the both of them. But Celan rejected it, considering it inappropriate that his name should be linked to someone who adhered to National Socialism. However, he regreted his behavior and agreed to visit the Todtnauberg hut with Heidegger and Baumann. At some point, they spoke alone, but we do not know the content of the conversation (Safranski, 1999). Perhaps Celan expected an explicit gesture of repentance about Nazism that Heidegger was unable or unwilling to make: to utter the word "forgiveness," as I speculate here. However, it seems that Celan had that hope, since such a word would mean many things and not a simple gesture of repentance (Safranski, 1999). In that conversation alone, Heidegger must have said something for the poet to harbor that hope: Baumann found them in animated conversation, and also, shortly after the meeting, when the poet Marie Luise Kaschnitz meets Celan, she finds him in an exultant state of mind (Baumann, 1992). It is in that joy that he writes the poem *Todtnauberg* (1970) (evoking the return journey from the visit). Such an encounter is taken by the poet as positive by making possible something like a dialogue (France-Lanord,

2004). Since then, Heidegger and Celan maintained a friendly epistolary relationship and several meetings, until their last appointment a little less than a month before the poet's suicide.

Celan believes, it is my hypothesis, that the fact that Heidegger formulates the word "forgiveness" opens the door to dialogue between the two, but such a dialogue is difficult, if not impossible (Oyarzun, 2013), not only because Heidegger was silent: Celan is also silent about the conversation in the cabin. The possibility lies in establishing a complicit dialogue in silence. But this is not the case: I dare say that their silences "speak" different languages.

The center of this possible failed dialogue is in *Todtnauberg*, the poem in which he records the visit to Heidegger's hut, collected posthumously in *Lichtzwang* (1970). Such a poem has been interpreted as showing how the walk with the philosopher becomes a descent back into the hells of Nazism (Bollack, 2017). But I disagree with such an interpretation: even if we grant that the poet evokes the memory of horror, I believe that the encounter produces (or at least that is Celan's hope) some healing (the mention of arnica, consolation of the eyes) in seeing that there is not so much difference between the two isolated individuals (orchid and orchid, alone). However, the difficulty of the poem is one of its central characteristics: such difficulty prevents a reliable hermeneutic verdict. This is reinforced by its being an impenetrable text of pure diaphanousness (Oyarzun, 2013). In that sense, it is like silence: something totally open. But that openness, as there is no sound or saying in silence, prevents entering silence itself, because any irruption already prevents silence from being silence. This does not mean that the poem is hermetic, but it should be noted that it is not unidirectional either.

Although rather simple, Gadamer's interpretation of *Todtnauberg* is adequate for our own exegesis, even though it is not critical of Heidegger: Celan expects a word of hope, a coming word from Heidegger. But Heidegger cannot utter such a word, something Celan understands on the way back (Gadamer, 1987). We could think that such a word is "forgiveness," but Heidegger cannot say that word being consistent with his own approaches, justifying this impossibility of his saying in Gadamer's eyes. To conjecture about such a coming word would be adventurous because it is not a word of hope, but "corresponds" to it, because it does not say something, but it is only an event of its own "coming" to the encounter (Oyarzun, 2013). Only if the word is "forgiveness" is the tension between Celan and Heidegger illuminated. Where does such tension lie? The answer leaves us speechless: in the Holocaust, in Auschwitz.

4 There Where the Horror

The horror of the Holocaust silences us. The extermination of the Jewish people leaves the poet speechless; the adherence to Nazism is silenced in the thinker. The terrible thing is the emptiness that this silence leaves as it is impossible to say anything about the horror. But neither is Celan a spokesman for the victims, nor is

Heidegger the usual Nazi. In Auschwitz, there is an exceptional situation (Agamben, 1998). This exception in the first instance provokes the tensional silence of both and can only be broken by a reconciliatory word that intercedes between the two, loosening the exception and bringing it back to the everyday. But this would be true if the dialogue were broken by their differences. But there is only silence, there is no disagreement or rupture because they are two isolated individuals placed in the trance of having to answer each for their own (Oyarzun, 2013). There is the possibility of conversing, but what prevails is a silence that in each one presents a different meaning, mediating an abyss between those meanings.

We can speculate about a dialogue that allows bridging that abyss, but only about its possibility, not about its plot or its interpretation, since the abyss between both senses of silence is the result of horror: mutism makes dialogue impossible and isolates the meaning of each silence, preventing cohesion through the same language. Adorno's statement (1983) about whether every poem after Auschwitz is barbarism, whether there is a possibility of a sincere and true poetics afterwards is relevant. The answer is yes—Adorno himself acknowledges it after reading Celan (Adorno, 2004)—but it is loaded with pain: it is not a rupture of silence evoking hope, but a question whose meaning is only in the mutism in the face of modern horror. Because Auschwitz is only a milestone of an epoch dominated by horror. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Baia Mare... Landmarks where horror is shown under an aura of progress. Faced with the silence produced by these horrors, poetry tries to break the silence through a question that brings it closer to philosophy. But to such a question, one should not expect an answer, at least not in the usual way.

But it seems that Celan did hope to find such an answer in his encounter with Heidegger: a word from the thinker, his answer to the horror, because he does not understand that Heidegger can only be silent (Gadamer, 1987). That hope is reflected in Celan's signature in Todtnauberg's guestbook: "To the book of the hut, with the gaze on the star of the fountain, with the hope of a coming word from the heart" (Pöggeler, 1986, p. 259). And also in the poem *Todtnauberg*: "word coming from the thinker." Some have claimed that this word can only be "forgiveness" (Lacoue-Labarthé, 1999). But Heidegger responds with silence.

5 Philosopher's Answer

Philosophers' answers open up more questions than they seek to close; philosophy, in order to answer, usually asks again. Each question opens up a whole new battery of questions (Heidegger, 1976). But it is that Heidegger cannot give an answer to the use, as Celan expects, about Auschwitz. It even seems at first that the latter understands that such an answer could not be given (Gadamer, 1987). After the meeting with Heidegger, Celan presents a predisposition to joy, but three years later, this enthusiasm has progressively deteriorated. On the 26th of March 1970, Holy Thursday, the last meeting with Heidegger took place. After a reading of poems, the poet accused him of inattention. Testimonies indicate that this accusation was false,

since even Heidegger could repeat from memory some recited verses (Safranski, 1999). That evening Heidegger took leave of Baumann with words of assumption of the poet's condition: "Celan is ill, incurably ill" (Baumann, 1992, p. 80). Celan threw himself into the waters of the Seine that same spring, on the 20th of April.

It is possible that Celan intended Heidegger's coming word to be a "traditional" response: an apology, to say the word "forgiveness." The philosopher's silence opened the hope for a future response, of whatever kind. First of all, as I have pointed out, the poet was reluctant to meet Heidegger, because, for Celan, the dialogue was broken beforehand by the crimes of Nazism. But Heidegger neither justifies his political adherence nor the horror. He only remains silent. The hope that this silence might mean repentance urges Celan to approach the thinker, as if the silence were not the result of incomprehension of the horror, but of shame. Perhaps he harbored the secret desire to hear "the word of the thinker that reaches the heart," which could only be "forgiveness." But Heidegger says no such word. Nor any other. Heidegger is only silent.

Celan's hope arises from the enthusiasm of believing he has found a peer in the search for connection through the language of poetry and philosophy. But when that enthusiasm dissipates, there arises only the horror that impels him to write, not seeking an answer, but only transcribing the questions that that horror asks in the knowledge that there is no answer. Because the meaning of any question is to pursue an answer, even if infinite surrounding questions arise, as happens in philosophy. But Celan does not seek to expand the question to other formulas that deepen the question, he only seeks an answer to horror. His desperation could even be satiated with a justification by Heidegger of Auschwitz, perhaps alleging ignorance of what happened there would also be worthwhile; it would not be enough, but it would be an answer, if only to place Heidegger as an unredeemed Nazi. But if that answer were the word "forgiveness," it would be a success that would suggest a suture to the dialogue broken beforehand.

6 The Reason for Silence

What is the explanation for Heidegger's silence? We must qualify that Celan, in spite of being close to philosophy, is a poet and does not have the philosophical depth of Heidegger: his work with language points at all times to poetics, which, although close to reflection, harbors differences with respect to it. Celan's interest in Heidegger, in addition to his adherence to Nazism and the mark that this implies in the poet's biography, I believe that it lies in the use of a language full of neologisms that sharpens in the thinker's late philosophy (Vattimo, 1989). However, Celan reaches a summit that every thinker has to face: the anguish in the face of the aporia that underlies all metaphysical reflection. The paradox lies in harboring the hope of a rational response, reason itself being the one that should put the word "forgiveness" on the philosopher's lips. Rationalism is a method of thought that imposes a "closed" model of language that explains scientific approaches without

fissures. But with such language, one cannot respond to horrors like Auschwitz. When we think of the Holocaust and try to find an explanation for it, our reason is short-circuited.

Heidegger might suspect that every word he said to Celan about Auschwitz would be an abyss. There is no viable answer on a rational plane of meaning. And in the absence of a rational response, such as I think Celan expects, silence is necessary. Heidegger cannot say a word about Auschwitz, but not because of the massacre that took place there, not because he adhered to the movement, but because of the very tessitura of thinking the concentration camp. One can speak of Auschwitz as a historical fact or as a subject of study, even as Celan does through poetry (the poem *Todesfuge*); one can speak of the horror and suffering of the Jewish people, but there are no words with which to say the lack of consequence with one's own thinking, because existence (*Dasein*) loses its authentic counterpart and voluntarily submits to the middle stage of everyday life (Heidegger, 2010).

Heidegger's affiliation to Nazism is beyond any doubt (Ott, 1993). Another thing is the motive or if he understood that it supposed his adhesion or if his philosophy really harbors some political approaches in agreement with the National Socialist theses. This is not the subject of the present study. It is necessary to emphasize that Nazism harbors a "scientific" component (although in a rigged way), that advocates that the Aryan race establishes a dominion over the rest, because its pre-eminence is justified under biological precepts. But if Heidegger defends some pro-German positions, he does it from areas outside reason and science. Heidegger's support for the German spirit is expressed above all in terms of language, but not the logical-rational language: from German spirit and language, no predominance over the Jews can be justified, since they can speak German perfectly well, there being no anti-Semitic superiority of a spiritual nature.

7 The Silence of Reason

If we try to justify Auschwitz, we find an abyss that reason cannot answer. Nazi "rationalism" comes to justify it, but always by means of fudging and not by means of rigorous scientific research. Thus, it seems impossible to find a rational answer for the concentration camp. And despite Adorno's reticence about the possibility of poetry after the horror, however, the only answer seems to come from the poetic.

Heidegger's silence is poetic, for only through poetry, which is open language, can the abyss be named since the language of reason and science is closed. This, which Celan also understood, did not, however, facilitate the dialogue, for, like the poem *Todtnauberg*, such language becomes impenetrable because it is so diaphanous. If the question of the concentration camp is answered by reason, it becomes the old question of the Theodicy translated into a new language suitable for the twentieth century. The Theodicy asked: if evil exists, how can the existence of God be justified? Now that question has become aesthetic: if the horror of Auschwitz exists, how can there be poetry?

This change is one more episode of the secularization that rules universal history and that is at the heart of the crisis of conscience that has led to the epochal changes that have occurred in the West. In the modern world, the limits imposed by the values of the human will are suppressed, and with this suppression comes nihilism (Wolin, 2001): pure nothingness, which is what Auschwitz represents. There, reason capsizes and becomes mute. This mutism is not a poetic silence, but the impossibility of saying anything more through its own mechanisms. When nihilism reigns, the status achieved by reason throughout history is shipwrecked in the twentieth century. Each epoch forges its predominant figure: the first is the divinity and with it originates the Theodicy's question about evil. After it became the empire as the first secularized answer to the problem and then came the various figures that at each moment designate what is or is not valid: humanity, the State, liberty, science, etc. With each historical change, the predominant figure is replaced by another and withdraws to become embers: religion, politics, humanism. But such vestiges do not serve as criteria for making decisions, since they only survive as a surplus that no longer sets the standard of validity.

Behind all this process, reason beats as the instigator that either supports or demolishes each figure. But after the horrors of the twentieth century, reason is now the one who goes bankrupt, opening the door to relativism and nihilism. In these times of hardship, empty, and ephemeral figures are erected, who know of their provisionality and precariousness, waiting for a new figure that may never come. Thus, the provisional figure par excellence, we dare to venture, is art, collected in the form of poetics, which takes on the role of the divine: if evil exists, how can the artistic enterprise be justified?

8 Above Good and Evil, Above Pain

Nietzsche (2002) placed art, poetics, as the predominant figure of our time before aesthetic conceptions that openly break with reason. Evil is a moral concept and, as such, alien to art, the analysis of which is the responsibility of aesthetics and about which moral studies have nothing to say. But Nietzsche errs in pretending to derive the artistic enterprise towards science (Vattimo, 2002), since the latter is based on reason. Reason is beyond good and evil. This is the same criterion that the Nazis employ in Auschwitz: the concentration camp derives from a reason that is beyond good and evil; although it seems irrational, it represents an act of dominion of reason over nature.

Reason eliminates the pain of the concentration camp. But both in Celan's poetics and in Heidegger's silence, the only thing that remains is the event full of pain. And in the face of pain, there is only room for silence because it is not to pronounce the word "forgiveness" for Auschwitz: one can say the concentration camp, but its meaning is saturated by nihilism, it is not a mute nothingness, but it resounds in a saying that drags again and again to the void. This saturated nihilism that leads us irremediably each time to the Holocaust is not only present in Auschwitz but also in

other problems of our time, such as the ecological crises, in the effort to dominate the world and not to let it be.

This vision of domination responds to the will to power formulated by Nietzsche, which can only be overcome through poetic approaches that respond with a language other than that of reason. Poetics alludes to creative activity, giving existence to that which has none, but if it is only understood as lyric, it no longer has the character of representing. Representing has to do with temporality, for it is to bring something to the present, something that, like the concentration camp, fortunately, is no longer, but that returns again and again to question us in our now. In bringing something into presence, only that doing-present itself indicates that which becomes present, without a further assumption and conclusion, which is the mode of rational argument (Heidegger, 2001). In the face of this argument of reason, whose line is closed, poetics alludes to the language of silence, a being-openness of many forms.

9 In Conclusion

To make a study on a hypothesis of the suicide of someone like Celan implies more than a closed conclusion, an opening towards something different. Rather than closing, I show that, purely diaphanous, like the poem *Todtnauberg*, the wound is so open that it is impossible to suture. Let these words serve then only as the opening of a new question that, from the silence, pushes us to continue in the thread of questioning, as a proximity between poetry and thought. Both are co-originary and rely on silence. Thus, philosopher and poet are founders of language. But language is even more original than poetry and thought; hence, the question of language is perhaps even more urgent. But even more original is silence. Celan's anguish is justified in that silence because he cannot find the word "forgiveness" in the language of extermination, because to speak of "forgiveness" implies a poetically impossible closure of the wound. All that remains is silence, because to say "forgiveness" can only precisely become an unbridgeable abyss.

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