

Attention to Detail: Analyzing Paul Celan's *Psalm* Through the Lens of Leonard Olschner

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In “Fugal Provocation in Paul Celan’s ‘Todesfuge’ and ‘Engführung,’” scholar Leonard Olschner analyzes each detail of Celan’s work, from seemingly small aspects such as title to large concepts such as theme. He contextualizes the work according to Celan’s experiences, namely experiences of suffering and loss during the Holocaust. Olschner focuses on Celan’s individual words, questioning whether they are meant literally or figuratively, which meaning they should be read according to, and so on.

In his analysis of *Todesfuge*, Olschner begins by exploring the concept of a “fugue” and stating with certainty that this poem is not a literal fugue: “unless we hear the text of a sung fugue...we will not experience a fugue in prose or verse.”¹ Once he has established that *Todesfuge* cannot be a fugue in the musical sense, Olschner begins to explore alternate definitions of the word “fugue,” such as, “the original Latin meaning of *fuga* as ‘flight’ or even ‘exile’...the medieval Latin meaning of *fuga* as ‘antiphony’ and, in the early modern period, of ‘imitative counterpoint’.”² After presenting the various meanings of “fugue” or “fuga”, Olschner introduces Celan not just as a poet, but as a person. He discusses Celan’s native language, his experience in a labor camp, and his struggles with loss. Olschner states that these experiences represent the purpose of the poem, writing, “‘Todesfuge’ represents an attempt to order the unorderable, to grasp the perfidy of the murder machinery, and also to define a mode of expression, to exercise [German].”³

Then, Olschner dives into analyzing the poem’s form, breaking the work into sections and performing close reading. He pays close attention to repetition and continues to

¹ Leonard Olschner, *Fugal Provocation in Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge' and 'Engführung'* (German Life and Letters 43, no. 1 (October 1989): 79-89), 79.

² Olschner, 79.

³ Olschner, 80.

contextualize the writing according to Celan's experience with death and murder. After concluding his analysis of the poem's form, Olschner acknowledges criticism and misuse of the poem. Many critics questioned how Celan could write poetry, an inherently beautiful art form, about the Holocaust. Alfred Kittner, a Holocaust survivor, wrote that *Todesfuge* "seemed...all too artful, too perfect, measured against the horrors [Kittner] had barely escaped."⁴ By including this quote from a critic of Celan, Olschner places the poem in the context of the time and gives readers an idea of how Celan's initial audience reacted to his work.

To analyze Celan's *Psalm* through the lens of Olschner, one would begin with the title. "Psalm" has a biblical connotation, as psalms make up an entire book of the Old Testament. A psalm is defined as "a sacred song or poem used in worship,"⁵ which begs the question of who (or what) is this poem worshipping? And whom considers it "sacred"? Celan's reference to "Niemand" (No one) throughout the poem, seemingly referring to God, implies that while he is searching for someone to worship, his experiences have left him feeling that there is "No one" to adore or praise. Other survivors, likely also questioning the existence of a supreme being, may consider this poem "sacred," as they have also witnessed the horrors of genocide and are left feeling helpless and alone.

In stanza three, Celan parallels the terms "Nichts" (Nothing) and "Niemand'srose" (No-One's-Rose). "Nichts" is used in reference to "we," which could be referencing the survivors of the Holocaust or humanity as a whole, and "Niemand" refers to God, as revealed by the capitalization of the term as well as the biblical language throughout the piece. Not only is Celan questioning the existence of a God, but he also appears to be questioning the purpose of 'our'

⁴ Olschner, 83 (translation provided by Scott Denham via Dropbox).

⁵ "Definition of PSALM." Merriam-Webster. Accessed November 30, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psalm>

own lives—writing, “Ein Nichts / waren wir, sind wir, warden / wir bleiben,”⁶ (A Nothing / we were, are now, and ever /shall be...) The phrase “is now and ever shall be” alludes to the Christian tradition, specifically the doxology *Gloria Patri*, which is recited in the Roman Catholic Church and reads, “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.” Antisemitism has deep roots in Christian and Catholic history, and many Christians accepted or welcomed Nazism. Celan’s questioning of the existence of a God was likely influenced by the racism and hatred performed by people who claimed to be followers of Christ.

Celan’s language, or in this case Felstiner’s translation, evokes Christian images from the first line of the poem, which reads, “No one kneads us again out of earth and clay.”⁷ This alludes to Genesis 2:7; “The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground...”⁸ The next line, “Niemand bespricht unsern Staub”⁹ (no one incants our dust), alludes to the incantations of priests or other religious figures, often performed to summon a deity. The capitalization of “Staub” implies that Celan is referring to the dust of the people burned in labor camps. These lines work in conjunction to allude to Genesis 3:19, which reads, “For dust you are and to dust you will return.”¹⁰

Because psalms are written as poems, the form of Celan’s poem *Psalm* naturally mirrors that of a biblical psalm; it is broken into short stanzas of approximately five lines each. Celan’s *Psalm* also contains content similar to that of a biblical psalm. Psalms are songs or poems rather than prose; therefore, they contain more figurative language than other books of the bible. For

⁶ Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, Translated by John Felstiner, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 156-157.

⁷ Celan, 156-157

⁸ BibleGateway." Bible Gateway. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

⁹ Celan, 156

¹⁰ BibleGateway

example, Psalm 1 uses simile to compare a person to a tree, saying, “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water.”¹¹ Celan’s *Psalm* mirrors this use of figurative language, using an extended metaphor to compare “we” to a rose, saying, “Our pistil soul-bright / our stamen heaven-waste / our corona red.”¹² The use of imagery and language about the natural world seen in both of these examples is commonly found in the Book of Psalms.

Like Celan, the authors of the psalms had moments of doubt. The psalms are intimate conversations between believers and God, as writers like David confess their sins, express their doubts, and ultimately offer praise to God. While Celan’s *Psalm* may not be a psalm in the biblical sense due to its clear atheist undertones and lack of praise to a deity, it contains glimmers of hope which offer a provocation for readers to move forward after the horrors they’ve faced. The image of a rose blooming “über, o über / dem Dorn,”¹³ (over, O over / the thorn) attempts to answer the question of how to get “over” the Holocaust. The rose continues to bloom despite the thorns covering its stem, and Celan hopes that he may somehow continue to bloom despite all that he has faced.

¹¹ BibleGateway.

¹² Celan, 156.

¹³ Celan, 156.

Works Cited

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Paul Celan. Analyses. This is an analysis of the poem Psalm that begins with: No-man kneads us again out of Earth and Loam, no-man spirits our Dust. Elements of the verse: questions and answers. The information we provided is prepared by means of a special computer program. Use the criteria sheet to understand greatest poems or improve your poetry analysis essay. Rhyme scheme: Xab bcdec eXeXX XabXedb.Â Pay attention: the program cannot take into account all the numerous nuances of poetic technique while analyzing. We make no warranties of any kind, express or implied, about the completeness, accuracy, reliability and suitability with respect to the information. More information about poems by Paul Celan. Analysis of Corona. Analysis of Death Fugue. III Explanation through the Lens of Descriptiveness and Power. The simplest way to judge an explanation is to consider each piece of evidence for it independently, keeping a running tally of the degree to which it makes the explanation look better or worse. This is captured by descriptiveness, the sum of the independent log-probabilities of the relevant facts.² Paul Celan's significance as a poet has long been undisputed, and increasingly outside German-speaking countries, but his translations of poetry have remained at the periphery of critical attention and are only gradually becoming recognized as an integral and indeed major part of his poetry and poetics. The present essay attempts to elucidate specific aspects of the biographical, linguistic, literary and historical background at work in Celan's translating and offers analytic interpretations of texts by Mandel'stam, Apollinaire and Shakespeare in Celan's translation. Tweet.