

Mădălina Borcău\*

**THE LANGUAGE OF REMEMBRANCE:  
CULTURAL MEMORY AS “ACTUALISED LANGUAGE”  
IN THE POETRY OF GEOFFREY HILL  
AND PAUL CELAN**

**Keywords:** *Geoffrey Hill; Paul Celan; Holocaust; performative language; Sacrament; Charles Taylor*

**Abstract:** *In his essay Celan and the Recovery of Language Charles Taylor discusses the concept of language as a creative and performative force which enables human beings to grasp concepts which exist outside language but which cannot be accessed without it. By referring to Taylor’s analysis of Celan’s poetry, to Sheridan Burnside’s concept of ‘memory as undoing’ (as expounded in her essay Undoing Remembrance: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan) I shall argue that both Celan’s and Hill’s poetics possess that performative power which is able to render worldly that which transcends language, namely memory. In order to analyse the way in which cultural memory is created through poetry, I shall use concepts from Heidegger’s Being and Time. I shall argue that poetry embodies truth and that cultural memory is created by the release of truth into the present of the reader.*

*I shall argue that the cultural memory of the Holocaust cannot exist without the Holocaust being constantly actualised through poetry, which Celan referred to as *aktualisierte Sprache*. I shall further argue that this creation of cultural memory through ‘actualised language’ is part of a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which occurs at two levels, namely personal – in Celan’s case – and cultural – in Hill’s case. Nonetheless, the boundaries between the two levels are not always clear, and shifts from personal memories to a cultural desire for reconciliation with the past can occur.*

Paul Celan and Geoffrey Hill are poets whose works deal with the memory of the Holocaust. In this paper, I shall discuss the way in which the poetry of Celan and Hill creates cultural memory. I shall argue that poetry embodies truth and that it is the reading of poetry as truth that creates cultural memory. In order to discuss the complex relationship between writer, poetry, and reader, and to provide an analysis of poetry as bearer of truth, I shall use concepts from Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Charles Taylor’s “Celan and the Recovery of Language”, and Sheridan Burnside’s “Undoing Remembrance”.

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\* University of Bucharest, Romania

In his essay “Celan and the Recovery of Language” Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, argues that Paul Celan stands within the poetical tradition that originated in Germany in the 1790s and which was based on a new understanding of language as a “constitutive force”. This tradition was anticipated by an understanding of language as a force which can open up a new dimension of reflection and understanding (*Besonnenheit*) within which concepts can exist, and later on continued by poets such as the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, and arguably Paul Celan.

In this essay I shall discuss the concept of cultural memory as a form of ‘*Besonnenheit*’ brought about by the constitutive and performative function of the language involved in the writing of poetry. By referring to the works of Paul Celan and Geoffrey Hill, I shall argue that poetry can render worldly that which transcends language, and that this is the process involved in the creation of cultural memory. I shall further discuss the concept of “memory as undoing” as expounded by Sheridan Burnside in her essay “Undoing Remembrance: the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan”, and argue that the existence of cultural memory as part of ‘*Besonnenheit*’ involves both a shift from first-hand experience to a state of abstractedness, and a later re-materialisation of what had been experienced first-hand and conceptualised.

While discussing the poetical tradition within which Paul Celan stands, Charles Taylor mentions the fact that in order for some states and truths to exist within the world of human cognition, they must be rendered worldly through language.

We can get a better sense of what was meant by these higher, “invisible” things, if we think, as a first approximation, of the things that couldn’t figure in our experience at all if we weren’t language beings. Take “spirit” (*Ruach*, *Pneuma*). Well, wind would be there for us, even if we had remained pre-linguistic animals; we might seek shelter from it. And breathing would be there, as we gasp for breath running.

But spirit? Not that gift, that rushing, that onset of strength to reach for something higher, something fuller. This sense of the force of the incomparably higher only takes shape for us in the name. Spirit enters our world through language; its manifestation depends on speech (Taylor 57).

Therefore, language is a form of “world-making”; language as a performative and constitutive force makes that which transcends the limitations of the material world apprehensible to human beings. When truths become part of our world through language, they enter a new mode of existence within understanding; they become conceptual, and take the form of narratives. Thus reality becomes embedded in narrative and narrative itself becomes a form of reality which is constantly developing, as a tradition is set up. Narrative thus becomes inextricably linked to human existence and to awareness. In order to understand the relationship between human existence, narrative, and history, it is useful to look at Martin Heidegger’s book *Being and Time*.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that human existence in this world is ontologically conditioned and determined by history. Heidegger uses the term Dasein (“being here”) to refer to the idea of human existence. Heidegger believes that human existence (Dasein) is an act of Being. In his Heidegger Dictionary Michael Inwood mentions the fact that Heidegger believes that Being is “the thinnest of abstractions, the most general feature of everything that is” (Inwood 27). Heidegger also believes that human existence is conditioned by a specific act of Being which makes existence within time possible. In this connection, he mentions that Dasein possesses a “temporal kind of Being” (Heidegger 41) which he calls “historicality”. It is this instance of Being that triggers a process of “historising”, which then makes it possible for Dasein to exist within the boundaries of the worldly time which is known as world-history.

Heidegger introduced the concept of “thrownness” (Geworfenheit) and used it in order to describe the way in which the human subject interacts with the world. “Thrownness” is a fundamental characteristic of Dasein and it refers to the relationship between human beings and their surroundings. It is because Dasein is “thrown-into-the-world” and thus is faced with various contexts and situations that it becomes factual. By facticity, Heidegger means the interaction of Dasein with the world around it. At a factual level, Dasein becomes its own history: “In its factual Being, any Dasein is as it already was, and it is “what” it already was. It *is* its past, whether explicitly or not” (Heidegger 41).

Therefore, the process of “historising” makes history become a fundamental part of the existence of Dasein as thrown-into-the-world.

In order to understand the poetical tradition within which Celan stands, it is important to point out that modernity has rejected narrative tradition, as pointed out by Alasdair MacIntyre, a Scottish philosopher from whom Taylor draws inspiration.

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the character of modernity is fragmented, and that the only way to overcome this condition is through the restoration of Aristotelian virtue-ethics. He believes that Enlightenment project of justifying morality has failed because the tradition of Aristotelian thought was rejected during the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, in his book *After Virtue* he points out the fact that Western culture has accumulated too many incompatibilities in its understanding of the virtues and that, therefore, it is lacking the ground for a commonly shared concept of morality. He also views tradition as a narrative and stresses the importance of narrative unity, which, he argues, can help restore a telos to humanity. While narrative is ever-present in human life, narrative unity has been subdued by subjective morality.

Charles Taylor discusses the influence of subjective morality on poetry, and how it relates to the objectivity of poetic language. He argues that modern poetics has been ultimately shaped by a “reflexive turn” (Taylor 57), in the sense that it has brought about awareness of how language makes the “‘Invisible’ manifest” (Taylor 57). Taylor believes that there are some poets – such as Eliot and Hopkins – whose works combine a traditional theological approach to the world with the intense reflexivity which is characteristic of modern poetics; nonetheless, it is this turn of poetry upon itself that brings about proneness to subjective interpretation. Taylor points out the fact that there is both an objective and a subjective aspect to poetry:

poetry is objective in that it “sets free” (Taylor 58) something that transcends language; however, poetry is also subjective because it needs to resonate with the reader. It is this dependency on its effect on the reader that makes the language of poetry fragile. Modern poetics breaks away from the tradition of transmitting concepts whose meaning is established and widely accepted. The language of modern poetics endeavours to establish new meanings and therein lies its fragility: if poetry fails to resonate with the reader, its language dies, in that it ceases to exist within the mode of ‘Besonnenheit’.

Taylor believes that Celan’s poetry is marked by a shift from the Romantic idea that poetry should only resonate within the poet’s soul, to the idea that poetry is fundamentally dialogical:

The original Romantic idea of the poet as creator and seer could suggest a monological view. The resonance which really matters is that in the poet’s soul or being. But more and more a dialogical understanding of language (implicit in the founding theories of Hamman, Herder, and Humboldt) makes its way, and it becomes clear that the resonances which matter are those that link speaker and hearer, writer and readers, and eventually (perhaps) whole communities. Poets may fail to be heard, but the end of the writing is to reach others and to effect a coming together in the Being revealed, or set free.

The sense is central to Celan, as we saw above. In so many of his poems, the breaking through to a free-setting word coincides with the moment of address to a “du” (Taylor 61).

It can be argued that Celan’s poetry is marked by a double setting free of concepts. Through the constitutive power of the language employed in his poetry, Celan manages to write the horror of first-hand experience of the Holocaust. However, Celan’s poetry does not simply describe this horror; it contains its reality and thus it becomes that horror itself. Celan referred to poetry as “actualiserte Sprache”, stating that poetry was “actualised language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation, which at the same time stays mindful of the limits drawn by language, the possibilities opened by language” (*Mikrolithen Sinds*, 409).

Therefore, the truth contained within the poem is released into the present of the reader through radical individuation. Radical individuation is what happens when the poem is read, and the truth within it is released into the present of the reader. While the truth of the poem remains unchanged, each reading of the poem is unique and it is this uniqueness of the reader that makes radical individuation possible.

It is this understanding of poetry as actualised language that makes the second level of setting free possible: the Being (act of existence and of truth) contained within the poem is released by the radical individuation of language, which takes place when the reader comes into contact with the truth of the poem. Poetry, as a bearer of truth, becomes history itself.

In order to understand what is meant here by history, it is useful to turn back to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. It is important to point out the fact that Heidegger distinguishes two different meanings of “history”. He draws attention to the fact that there are two different words denoting ‘history’ in the German

language, namely ‘Geschichte’ and ‘Historie’. ‘Geschichte’ is a Germanic word which refers to the idea of a series of events that have happened, whereas ‘Historie’ is a word of Greek origin, which means “enquiry”. Therefore, ‘Geschichte’ is related to the idea of the linear chronological existence of Dasein as thrown-into-the world, while ‘Historie’ is the enquiry of Dasein into its own past. In this sense, poetry becomes both ‘Geschichte’ and ‘Historie’. Its becoming ‘Geschichte’ is linked to its existence within world-history, and its becoming ‘Historie’ is related to its existence as actualised language.

The existence of poetry within world-history is fundamentally conditioned by the setting free of its Being through the above-mentioned radical individuation. In other words, poetry needs to be read, and it is this process of reading and enquiry into the meaning of the poem that releases its Being into the present of the reader, thus assuring its continuous existence within world-history. Therefore, the status of poetry as ‘Geschichte’ depends upon the actualisation of poetry as ‘Historie’. In order for human beings to apprehend concepts which belong to the past, they need to enquire (Historie) into history (Geschichte) and need memory to be rendered worldly through poetry.

The truth contained within poetry continues to exist within world-history so long as it is remembered through its release into the present of the reader. It is this relationship between the present of the author and the present of the reader that lies at the basis of cultural memory. When approached from this perspective, cultural memory can be regarded as a cultural state of ‘Besonnenheit’ (awareness) brought about by a time warp which makes it possible for the past (the present of the writer) to exist in the present (the present of the reader).

Paul Celan’s poem *Todesfuge* is an example of how this mechanism of cultural memory works. The idea of re-actualisation of an event through the reading of poetry is suggested by the word “fugue”. A fugue is a musical composition, based on counterpoint, which involves imitation. In music theory, the term “imitation” is used to refer to the repetition of a melody in a different voice.

This repetition is similar to the process involved in the creation of cultural memory. Imitation resembles radical individuation, in the sense that both processes are based on a carrying forth of what is central to them through repetition; repeating that nucleus means transforming it in such a way that it fits within the context, but without altering its essence. In other words, the melody is somewhat transformed each time it is repeated at a different pitch, but still remains the same melody. Similarly, each reading of the poem is unique and thus the truth contained within it may be released in different ways; however, the Being of the poem remains the same.

In *Todesfuge*, the first three lines are the main theme of the poem:

Schwartz Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends  
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts  
wir trinken un trinken (Celan 21).

The idea of a fugue is suggested by the repetition – with slight variation – of these three lines throughout the poem. Furthermore, the obsessive repetition of

the verb “wir trinken” (the verb is repeated twenty times throughout the poem) suggests constant re-actualisation. The ‘black milk of daybreak’ in Celan’s poem – which stands for the horrors of the Holocaust – is constantly drunk; the horror contained within is unleashed each time the poem is read, and cultural memory of the Holocaust is created through actualisation of the Holocaust itself. The fact that reality is made manifest in the poem is also suggested by the verb ‘trinken’ in the present tense: the performative power of language makes it possible for an action to happen over and over again, through its release into the present. The verb “to drink” is related to the sacramental re-enactment of the Last Supper during Holy Communion. According to the doctrine of transubstantiation the wine used in the Eucharist become the blood of Christ. Similarly, the reading of poetry makes the action described take place again.

Geoffrey Hill’s poem *History as Poetry* is a good example of how cultural memory is built through the performative power of language. The final two lines of the first verse can be linked to the idea of cultural memory as poetry:

The tongue’s atrocities. Poetry  
Unearths from the speechless dead (Hill 46).

In Paul Celan’s *Todesfuge* Jews are being forced to dig graves in which they can later lie (“wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng”). The idea of “unearthing” in Geoffrey Hill’s *History as Poetry* shows how cultural memory is created through the performative power of language, which can bring history back into the present. It is the Jews who died during the Second World War who are remembered through Celan’s and Hill’s poetry, and thus they “unearth” from their graves. While the dead are speechless, poetry speaks for them, making sure that the atrocities of the Holocaust are never forgotten.

In her essay “Undoing Remembrance: the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan” Sheridan Burnside argues that “undoing” is a key-concept in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan. She argues that “undoing” is not related to the idea of failing to remember, but that Celan’s and Hill’s “texts draw attention to and unpick the processes of memory” (Burnside 2). She also draws attention to a particularly interesting understanding of the term “undoing”:

The penultimate section of Hill’s *Scenes from Comus* opens with a statement in which the poet claims that the only memorable thing is guilt. “Nothing is unforgettable but guilt”. This statement points towards the fifth understanding of “undoing” in the OED, drawn from psychoanalysis, and which actually describes the repetitive *doing* of an action as if to undo a previous for which the subject feels guilty. The exemplary instance of this type of undoing is Lady Macbeth’s obsessive washing of her hands in act five, in a doomed attempt to seek expiation for a deed whose guilty memory will not go away. Aptly, almost her final words in the play are, “What’s done cannot be undone.” Lady Macbeth’s insight at this point is the realisation that all her hand-washing has been in vain, and amounts to Hill’s epithet on the unforgettability of guilt (Burnside 3).



Burnside argues that both Hill's and Celan's poetics of remembrance are closely linked to the concept of undoing, and that they both approach it by making use of three main motifs, namely, "sacrament, naming, and nature", but that Hill writes about remembrance "with a uniquely British inflection" (Burnside 3). She argues that

Of all the ways in which remembrance is articulated in Hill's work, his concern with the British landscape, with the indigenous species of its fells, parks and hedgerows, differentiates his poetics most definitively from those of Celan. Hill's recollection of landscape is frequently nostalgic, as in *Scenes from Comus*, when he declares, "This is fabled England, vivid / in winter bareness; bleakly comforting, / the faded orchard's hover of grey-green (Burnside 5).

She points out the fact that Geoffrey Hill believes that the purity of language is constantly threatened by sin, and that the only ways to eschew the corruption of language by sin are poetry and sacramental worship.

Burnside argues that both Hill and Celan's poetics resemble religious rituals. The fragility of language discussed by Taylor in "Celan and the Recovery of Language", as well as the potentiality of linguistic corruption through sin which concerns Hill, can be overcome by writing poetry as religious ritual. To be more specific, the language of poetry is not empty and subjective, but sacramental. The poetics of remembrance unravel – or undo – Christian rituals: poetry becomes confession, in the sense that it is written in order to relieve the collective and cultural feeling of guilt related to the Holocaust. It is this understanding of poetry as solace, as well as the idea of poetry as embodying truths which are carried forth and delivered to the reader, that enables Eleanor McNeese to state that poems "act like Eucharistic ceremonies, embodying kenotic [emptying] sacrifice and pleromic [full] communion, through words that break down linear logic, then erect a personal logic of faith" (cf. Burnside 3).

Burnside mentions naming as the second motif of remembrance as undoing. She argues that it is the countless people whose names are not known who need poetry to act as "sacramental remembrance":

It is the unnamed victims who are more frequently the objects of sacramental remembrance in their work, however. "Unnamed is not nameless", writes Hill in *The Triumph of Love*, and reinforces this idea in the title of his latest collection of poetry, *Without Title*. Hill is referring to the unnamed victims of the Holocaust and other atrocities, whose names cannot all be known, and towards whom remembrance is thus at the same time more difficult and more necessary. (Burnside 4).

Hill's poem *History as Poetry* contains this idea of "sacramental remembrance" of the unnamed. In order to understand how this idea is expressed in *History as Poetry* one needs to look at the first two lines of the second verse:

Lazarus mystified, common man  
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face (Hill 46).

According to the Gospel of John, Lazarus of Bethany was raised from the dead by Jesus. The idea of the victims of the Holocaust being raised from the dead by Poetry, just as Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus in the New Testament, adds a sacred dimension to the performative power of poetry. However, the fact that Lazarus is depicted here as a “common man of death” points to the fact that he stands for the countless “unnamed” victims of the Holocaust. The “unnamed” are thus raised from the dead by Poetry.

A final point worth making is that the understanding of poetry as confession is related to the need to come to terms with the past. The German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is often used in post Second World War literature to refer to the idea of coming to the terms with the past. Poetry impels both the writer and the reader to understand the past and to come to terms with it. Therefore, the writing of poetry becomes a moral imperative, and cultural memory becomes a moral necessity. When discussing the problematics of Dasein (human existence) as part of world-history, Heidegger argues that Dasein has already compared itself to a future potentiality of itself and has historised itself as striving to achieve that potentiality. The fact that Dasein has already compared itself to a future potentiality of itself implies the existence of an end, while the action of comparing itself to another possible version of itself implies awareness. Similarly, poetry is born out of its own end, in the sense that it historises in order to fulfil an end, while at the same time turning upon itself – as shown by Taylor’s analysis of “the reflexive turn”. Just like Heidegger’s account of Dasein’s historising out of its own future, the writing of poetry implies both an end and awareness. Therefore, cultural memory, as born out the complexity of poetry, can be seen as an instance of phenomenologised teleology, in the sense that its existence within the collective consciousness is determined by end, toward which it constantly strives.

The fact that Hill’s poetry is peculiarly British, as well as the fact that his experience of the Holocaust was not first-hand experience, shows that coming to terms with the past implies an overlapping between individual and cultural memory. Hill’s understanding of the Holocaust does not involve first-hand experience of the concentration camps, while Celan’s memory of the Holocaust is individual. Nonetheless, Hill’s poetry is not lacking in empathy, and shows a very thorough understanding of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Similarly, Celan’s poetry is not drowned in subjectivity. This balance is possible due to the fact that both poets understand poetry as a constitutive and performative force which embodies truth, carries it forth through time, and delivers it to the reader. It is this understanding of poetry as embodying truth rather than simply referring back to it that can help modern cultures to overcome the fear of corruption of language by sin, as well as the potential fragility of language discussed by Taylor. This fear can be overcome by enabling individuals and cultures to understand themselves as participating actively in history and continuing tradition.



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