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May 30, 2007

Poetry as a Destructive Force in Celan's "Deathfugue"

The idea that poetry can be a "destructive force" roughly correlates to the idea that language, being as shapeless and as manipulable as it is, can be used to obscure the objective reality from a reader as readily as it can be used to enlighten a reader about the same objective truth. The "destructive force" of poetry, therefore, is not literal; it is not to say that poetry necessarily dictates the destruction of either the poet or the reader (though this can often be the case). It *is* to say, however, that poetry, in seeking to achieve an emotional resonance with the reader, must often manipulate the rational, objective truth, either by simplifying, embellishing, or altogether ignoring it, in order to exact the full intended impact of the poetry's subject matter upon the reader. In Celan's "Deathfugue", for instance, the devastation of the Holocaust is communicated through a carefully selected stream of discordant symbols and images that distort, manipulate, and simplify the truth. The "destructive force" of poetry, therefore, is the process by which the rational, objective truth is manipulated to secure an emotional response, which can only be achieved through the reader's direct emotional engagement with an experience, as opposed to a removed intellectual understanding of an experience. Celan's "Deathfugue", in particular, which is tasked with triggering an emotional response to an event as massive and as cataclysmic as the Holocaust, ultimately does so through a jarring assault on the reader's own peace of mind.

Poetry, of course, has little, if any, responsibility to "tell the truth". While Plato would certainly disagree with this sentiment, poetry is a form of literature that, like fiction, has no superseding accountability to historical truth. However, unlike fiction, poetry has the tendency to

obscure reality through the use of ambiguity; in other words, while communication is still the ultimate goal of poetry, it is often achieved through techniques of miscommunication. What is at stake when the “rational, objective truth” is invoked is, primarily, clarity. Celan, like many poets, devalues clarity with the intention of communicating a “general feeling”; poetry, in this sense, can be thought of as a corrupted version of prose. Of course, Celan’s “Deathfugue” also exhibits a “destructive force” simply on the basis of the effect it has upon the reader. The ability of poetry to emotionally “violate” a reader is dependent upon the reader’s vulnerability, or willingness to be affected by the text. Every reader must, to some degree, make his emotions vulnerable in order to sustain the benefits of reading poetry. “Deathfugue” exploits the reader’s vulnerability by unsettling him instead of soothing him, as is often expected of poetry. This essay will first explain Celan’s use of imagery and symbolism as a barrier to understanding reality, and then examine the destructive qualities intrinsic to these images and symbols themselves.

One of the most pervasive and unsettling images in Celan’s “Deathfugue” is the “black milk of daybreak” (1). In reality, no animal on Earth produces black-colored milk; black milk, therefore, is a perversion of reality. The color “black” could potentially refer to the appearance of milk in the darkness of daybreak; it is unclear if the pronoun “it” that follows each reference to the “black milk of daybreak” refers to the “black milk” or simply to “milk” itself. The connotation of the term “black milk” is, nevertheless, extremely unsettling: milk, after all, white in color, is one of nature’s primal forms of nourishment. Because the only nourishment that the prisoners of “Deathfugue” have apparent access to is the black milk, it is most likely a metaphor for the poisoning of what is needed to maintain health. The reference to “milk” engenders two specific images: one is of an infant being fed by its mother, while the other is of a domesticated animal being fed by its owner. Both images imply a unidirectional dependency, suggesting that

the “we” of “Deathfugue” are trapped, to some degree, in their current states as dependents, like infants or domesticated animals, with little or no ability to determine their own fates.

A second image that is used to manipulate reality is the “grave in the air” (4). Once again, the image is a perversion of reality because no such object can physically exist. As a poetic device, however, the image communicates the degree of the atrocity with macabre clarity and precision: the destruction of human lives is so great that the ground itself cannot sustain the vast amount of dead bodies. The reality that the “grave in the air” is most likely intended to invoke is cremation, or, specifically, the smoke of the cremated remains of the victims filling the sky. The image of the “grave in the air” is often juxtaposed with an account of the prisoners shoveling a grave in the ground, while, nearby, other prisoners are forced to play music and sing. In the context of the Holocaust, this description resembles an actual practice of concentration camp guards; however, once again, it is a perversion of reality. The poem creates a dream-like environment in which death is a song that the prisoners are forced to play, and where the magnitude of the dehumanization inflicted upon the victims is not restricted by the constraints of reality.

he shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise up as smoke to the sky (ll. 24-25)

The idea of death as being musical is yet another perversion of reality; music is conceived by humanity as an enlivening art. The musical notes that “rise up as smoke to the sky” is most likely another reference to cremation. The image that Celan paints is of a horrific world in which cremated remains are strewn across the sky, while on the ground (already oversaturated with corpses), prisoners are forced to dig graves for themselves and each other in a demented celebration of death.

Celan's use of symbolism and imagery exemplifies the "destructive force" of poetry to the extent that it disrupts the reader's immediate cognitive understanding of the situation, in the sense that metaphors can corrupt – in addition to illuminate – the truth. However, the poem embodies destruction in other ways as well: first, it is important to examine the theme of destruction inside the content of the poem. Three specific people are singled out by Celan – the man, Margareta, and Shulamith – along with two specific entities – the Jews and Germany. Each work in the context of each other, as well as independently, to illuminate the extent and nature of the destruction that is occurring around them.

The man is not named, nor is he given any title; though he is separated from the prisoners by a home and he ominously "plays with his vipers", he is initially given no discernibly evil characteristics:

A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling he whistles his
hounds to stay close (ll. 5-7)

It is not until later in the poem that the reader learns the man's full role in the ongoing destruction. The man is immediately associated with powerful animal imagery: the hounds suggest that he is in an authoritative position, while the vipers suggest that he is aligned with evil. Vipers, it should be noted, also produce highly venomous milk; the allusion to the man's vipers, therefore, could signal an extended metaphor that works in conjunction with the "black milk". The fact that Celan does not outright state that the man is at least partially responsible for the destruction that is occurring is an indication of the highly deceptive nature of evil: during the Holocaust, the perpetrators looked like any other citizen.

The third fact that we learn about the man as he is initially introduced – in addition to that "he lives in the house" and that "he plays with his vipers" – is that "he writes". The killer is not

an uneducated savage, but a cultivated man, who, Celan goes on to suggest, has an interest in “golden hair Margareta” (6). Margareta, with her blonde locks and her classically German name, represents the ideal German woman. When the man is alone in the house, Margareta appears independently of Shulamith. After the man steps outside of the house and into the devastation that he oversees, however, Margareta is always paired with Shulamith. The suggestion is that while Margareta is the man’s object of affection, Shulamith is the man’s object of destruction. They are twinned together throughout the remainder of the poem, always in adjoined lines, yet one is destined for admiration while the other is condemned to death. The only thing that separates their identities are their names and their hair colors; their names signify their ethnic identities (Margareta is a Germanic name, while Shulamith is a Hebrew name) and their hair colors signify their dissimilar appearances. Physical appearance seems to be the only determinant in deciding on which side of destruction a human being falls: at a critical point in the poem, when the man is seen committing physical violence for the first time, he is described as “his eyes are so blue” (17). Meanwhile, Shulamith’s “ashen hair” (15) suggests that her ultimate fate is cremation.

The literary device of repetition is also used effectively throughout the poem, causing the reader to feel trapped within the confines of the poem and thereby violated in a unique way. The first three lines of each stanza are identical and, in themselves, cyclical in nature:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink (ll. 1-3)

These three lines serve the function of a songlike chant that sets a disquieting tone that lingers throughout the poem. First, the idea of drinking black milk from morning to evening is unsettling in and of itself. However, the physical structure of the words is also highly confining:

the form does not change from phrase to phrase, and the words “we drink” appear over and over again, suggesting an interminability to the act. The coercion of the prisoners to sing and dance is another act that is repeated in the first three stanzas. The horror of this act becomes progressively more clarified in each stanza, however. Initially, it is only a command; in the second stanza, however, the man “grabs for the rod in his belt” and swings it at the prisoners; and in the third stanza, the man shoots the prisoners as he is giving the command. The effect of this culminating intensity is that the reader feels an impending sense of doom. The same actions are happening over and over again, but the reader, with no means of escape, can only watch as each incarnation of the action brings him closer and closer to his ultimate fate of death. The poem is also designed so that each stanza reads like a new day: for example, the first stanza begins at daybreak and ends with the man standing underneath the stars. The repetition of daybreak at the beginning of each new stanza makes the reader feel helplessly carried through time towards his ultimate fate.

Is the fate of death the *reader's* fate, however? To answer this question, the poem's manipulation of pronouns must be examined. At various points in the poem, “you” is used in the context of the victims of the massacre, Margareta, and even the black milk. However, in the latter two cases, the pronoun “you” is invoked from the perspective of the victims speaking to the objects that, while not directly responsible for their suffering, are symbols of their bondage. When “you” is directed towards the reader, it is always in the context of the victims of the massacre, forcing the reader to share in the victims' fate. The initial appearance of the pronoun “you” is jarring: “We shovel a grave in the air where you won't lie too cramped” (4), the poet writes. The reader is forced out of a passive reading of the poem, into a state where his own well-being is challenged, along with the victims'. Of course, as the poem progresses, the reader must

experience the suffering alongside the victims as the situation deteriorates. The reader is forced to contemplate his own impending death before he is finally shot by the man.

this Death is ein meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true (ll. 30-31)

The “destructive force” of Celan’s “Deathfugue”, therefore, manifests itself not only within the nature of the poem’s interaction with its subject matter, but within the nature of the poem’s interaction with the reader as well. The violence enacted upon the reader of “Deathfugue” is not physical; it is emotional and psychological. Whereas nonfiction and, to a lesser extent, fiction draw upon facts, anecdotes, and statistics to achieve a connection with the reader (a connection which may be emotional, intellectual, or both), poetry uniquely employs devices such as ambiguous symbols, isolated details, and hazy images to communicate a general feeling. To understand poetry at its most fundamental level, it is imperative only to discern this general feeling and not the details of a poem’s particularities. (The same cannot be said of fiction or nonfiction, however, where the particularities, more often than not, are of immediate significance.) Poetry can indeed be a destructive force – its potency is not merely limited to what is within the realm of the poem, however. Though poetry has the potential to corrupt its own subject matter, it ultimately has the more unsettling and potent power to corrupt the reader of the poem as well.