

CELAN AND THE "STUMBLING BLOCK" OF MYSTICISM

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May we proceed from the notion (as is now often done)
that art is something given, something to be taken for
granted . . . ?

—Paul Celan

A few years ago I attempted a mystical commentary on a few poems by Paul Celan based on the observation that we find in them thematic configurations which are related to mystical speech, as well as exact quotes from both Gershom Scholem's presentation of Jewish mysticism and from the sermons of Meister Eckhart.¹ My goal was to make these poems more understandable and to clarify somewhat their obscurity by finding a conceptual framework and by ordering them in a certain universe of discourse in which a particular field of experience is articulated verbally.² I would like to illustrate this approach through a short example and then to discuss a problem that has arisen through my commentary on the poems of Paul Celan in a mystical context.

The example is a poem from *Fadensonnen* (1968) which reads:

Du warst mein Tod:
dich konnte ich halten,
während mir alles entfiel.

You were my death:
you I could hold
when all fell away from me.³

[II, 166]

There once was a common universe of discourse describing one's death in or encounter with a "Thou," and this was the poetic and

philosophical speech of the Renaissance about love⁴—something one would not like to appropriate for an author like Celan, for whom death is important in a quite different context. What this context is can be seen in the poem “Treckschutzenzeit” from *Lichtzwang*, which ends with the lines:

Todes quitt, Gottes
quitt.

Quit of Death, quit
of God.

[II, 326]

The expression “quit of God” is a citation from the writings of the mystic Meister Eckhart. It comes from the sermon “Beati pauperes spiritu” in which the relevant passage, repeated several times, reads: “Therefore I pray God he may make me quit of God.”⁵ The main point of Meister Eckhart’s thinking in this sermon and elsewhere is that, “to the extent God is conceived of as having his origin with the beginning of all creatures,” man’s essential being is “above or outside God.” But in that essential being, “where God is above all being and all difference,” man in his original being was not distinguishable from God. “Therefore,” Meister Eckhart continues, “I am my own first cause according to my being, which is eternal, but not according to my becoming, which is temporal. Therefore I am unborn, and after the fashion of unbornness I can never die.” It was this last sentence which provided the basis for the subsequent phrase “quit of death” that Celan borrows.⁶

I shall start from the assumption that Celan, who cites Eckhart’s mystical teachings in support of a view that his being released or freed from death (“quit of death”) also makes him “quit of God,” had himself seen death in a similar connection not too long before. Further, I propose the hypothesis that the death in “Du warst mein Tod” is to be understood mystically. The context which presents itself here is not difficult to find. It concerns the different articulations of that religious experience formulated so succinctly in the letters of Paul: “Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Romans 6:8) and “Nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2:20).

One finds the following commentaries on mystical death by Eckhart:

Since the love of our Lord is as "strong as death," it kills man in the spiritual sense, and in its own way separates the soul from the body. This happens when man surrenders himself completely, and divests himself of his ego, thus separating him from himself. This, however, happens through the extraordinarily high power of love, which knows to kill so sweetly.⁷

This death is "the death in which the soul dies away in God"⁸ to a new life, because

with this, it completely separates itself from this world and travels to the place it has earned. And where else has it earned to go, if not in Thee, O eternal God, who must be its life because of this dying through love.⁹

The situation which Celan's poem captures seems to me to be comparable to those quoted in Paul and similar texts of mystical speech, for in his poem an "I" dies in an encounter with a "Thou," and it is a death in life which allows it to report about it. Because "everything fell away" from this "I," the poem probably deals with a death in which the "I," in the words of Meister Eckhart, "departs this world," and since the "everything" is apparently meant to be all-inclusive, it would probably also include "giving one's self up completely and divesting one's self of one's ego." What is left to him after this, what he could still "hold," is only this "Thou." There are, however, undeniable differences between Paul and Meister Eckhart. Especially with the former, the "Thou" refers to a specific figure. It has a name and a history, and it had its epiphany in the experience on the road to Damascus. Such concrete details are missing in Celan. With him the "Thou" has neither name nor history. It is simply one's vis-a-vis. In addition, the "Thou" can only be determined by the "I," specifically through its death. It is not clear from the poem whether it has died, or whether its death caused the death of the "I." This, however, plays no significant role in the passages quoted from Eckhart, because at that point Eckhart deals with a passage which does not have reference to Christ's death, viz. Song of Solomon 8:6, according to which "love is strong as death."

A further difference between Celan and mystical speech in regard to the death of the "I" is that Celan speaks of an "I" that can "hold" or retain the "Thou" (which was his death) as the only thing remaining to him—not, however, that this "Thou" is now his life, which is what is essential to Paul and the mystics. The encounter with a "Thou," which causes death and the loss of everything, but through

which the “Thou” is won, leads us to assume a certain religious experience. But in an important departure from traditional religious experience, this “Thou” is not interpreted in a traditional manner, but rather remains an indefinite “other.”

Precisely this absence of a more exact definition of the “Thou” might lead to the assumption that this is a poem about a deeply disturbing encounter with a beloved that changed the “I” profoundly. In spite of the aforementioned reservations about the “Petrarchian” hypothesis, I wish to explore the question, which is all the more obvious because the poem in *Fadensonnen* which precedes “Du warst mein Tod” speaks explicitly of love in this way:

Die Liebe, zwangsjackenschön,
hält auf das Kranichpaar zu.

Wen, da er durchs Nichts fährt,
holt das Veratmete hier
in eine der Welten herüber?

Love, straight-jacket-lovely,
makes for the pair of cranes.

Whom, since he moves through Nothingness,
does the expired draw over
into one of the worlds?

[II, 165]

This poem uses Bertolt Brecht’s poem “Die Liebenden” as its point of departure, and, if I’m not mistaken, it calls into question quite literally that poem’s statements. From Brecht we have the image of the lovers as a pair of cranes. His poem also speaks of nothingness, albeit somewhat off-handedly:

Sieh jene Kraniche in grossem Bogen!
[. . .]
So mag der Wind sie in das Nichts entführen
Wenn sie nur nicht vergehen und sich bleiben
So lange kann sie beide nichts berühren.

See there two cranes veer by one with another,
[. . .]
What though the wind into the void should lead them

While they live and let nothing yet divide them
 So for that while no harm can touch their haven.¹⁰

In Brecht's poem, love makes the pair of cranes strong enough to withstand even nothingness (translated here as "the void"), if need be. But in Celan, love "makes for" the pair of cranes, which means it has not yet caught hold of them. The main thing that Celan questions is whether it is possible for one who "moves through nothingness" to be drawn over into "one of the worlds." Therefore, the question is not whether love can withstand nothingness, but whether it is able to draw something out of the nothingness. What "one of the worlds" means can be understood by glancing at the poem "Treckschutzenzeit," whose final lines I have already cited. In its entirety it reads:

Treckschutzenzeit,
 die Halbverwandelten schleppen
 an einer der Welten,

der Enthöhte, geinnigt,
 spricht unter den Stirnen am Ufer:

Todes quitt, Gottes
 quitt.

Barge-time,
 the half-transformed tow
 on one of the worlds,

the dethroned, inwarded,
 speaks under the foreheads on the bank:

Quit of death, quit
 of God.

[II, 326]

The line "the dethroned, inwarded" refers to passages from Meister Eckhart's sermon "Surge illuminare iherusalem," which says that "God must be dethroned" in order "that we can be raised." It continues: "You should be united from yourself into yourself, so that He may be in you."¹¹ The background passages to these verses have

already been discussed, so that, based on these sources, the poem can be paraphrased in this way: Beneath the foreheads or brows of those on the bank towing the barge, God, "inwarded" in man, promises a state of "single being"¹² in which man is again the cause of his own self. The barge-pullers, however, are only "half-transformed," that is, they have not yet been transformed back into "single beings," but still live in the state of "created being,"¹³ and it is this that they are towing or hauling. The expression "one of the worlds" means, then, that Celan understands the life of the "born-ness of creatures," (to be distinguished from life in its original state of being "unborn") as the life in *one* possible world, one which is a product of chance as opposed to the primeval "being-ness" which can again be attained.¹⁴

Therefore, "one of the worlds" in the poem "Die Liebe, zwangsjackenschön" can be taken as an accidental, unessential world whose opposite pole is "nothingness." In another sermon by Meister Eckhart concerned with the soul's becoming "quit of God," he says of nothingness: "The soul suffers total loss—God and all creatures . . . everything must be lost. The soul must subsist in absolute nothingness!" God himself is "one whose nothingness fills the world, and the place of his being is nowhere. . . . He who wishes to come to God, says a master, he comes as a nothing!"¹⁵ He who "moves" through such nothingness, it would seem, is completely lost to the world of "being born" and of creatures. But in the sermon just cited it also says: "Thus these people, in a God-like condition of unselfish openness, are turned outward toward all humankind."¹⁶ Celan's poem could be asking about the possibility of a return through the power of love from a state of nothingness to a relationship with one person. But it stops at the question, and therefore at the position of nothingness from which the question was put. The designation of love as "straightjacket lovely" can perhaps be understood as an exaggeration of the idea of the body as the jail of the soul, as a drastic expression for the sensuality of creation in its "being born."

If the poem "Die Liebe, zwangsjackenschön . . ." is understood in this way, the poem that immediately follows, "Du warst mein Tod," can hardly be taken as a love poem in the usual sense. Even if one is of the opinion that the "Thou" which was the death of the "I" could have been another person, one would have to take into account what Celan wrote in *Der Meridian* about the "other" in his poems. He states there that it had always been one of the hopes of the poem to speak "in the cause of an 'Other'—who knows, perhaps in the cause of a 'wholly Other'." And further: "Perhaps, I must now say to

myself—perhaps it is now possible to conceive a meeting of this ‘wholly Other,’ . . . and an ‘other’ which is not far removed, which is very near.”¹⁷ With this well-known phrase one reflexively thinks of dialectical theology, which calls God the “totally or wholly Other.”¹⁸ Thus the “Thou” in a poem of Celan’s would not be limited simply to another person, especially since Celan says in the *Meridian*: “Each thing, each person is a form of the Other for the poem, as it makes for this Other.”¹⁹

When my study *Celan and the Mystics*, in which I had attempted a mystical commentary on poems by Celan based on the method I described above, appeared in 1976, I was criticized for not differentiating “between mystical experience and the mystical level of poetry as a possible artistic form of representation.” Specifically, I was accused of omitting “Celan’s transformation of precisely these [mystical] images.”²⁰ From a book published one year before this review, one can see how such a “transformation” can be conceived and described. In his book *Negativität in der Dichtung Paul Celans* (1977), Georg-Michael Schulz uses a detailed interpretation of the poems “Mandorla” and “Psalm” from *Die Niemandrose* (1963) in an attempt to answer the question as to what degree the “use of mystical motifs” should lead us to classify the poem “Mandorla” as a “mystical” expression, something I had asserted, and, on the other hand, to what degree there existed a fundamental difference between the poem and the mystical experience.²¹

Schulz believes this “fundamental difference,” which separates the poem from the mystical experience, lies in the poem’s auto-reference. Though he does not acknowledge it, he is using Roman Jakobson’s method. Jakobson’s chief maxim of poetic function states: “The set towards the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language.”²²

In reference to the recognizability of the set of the message toward itself and therefore to language in its poetic function, Jakobson explains his second principle of poetics: “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.”²³ Schulz, however, does not use this part of Jakobson’s theory. Although a poem such as “Mandorla” with its many repetitions would seem to be well-suited for a Jakobsonian analysis, Schulz has chosen a different method by trying to make the concept of “nothingness,” which occurs both in this poem and in the poem “Psalm,” credible as evidence for its autoreferentiality. “In the poems ‘Psalm’ and ‘Mandorla’ . . . it [the concept of nothingness] refers to

the poem itself and its execution in language itself by resisting a direct connection to concreteness.”²⁴ One must admit that with the concept of “nothingness” it is not easy to establish a connection to the concrete when its content is exactly the opposite of concreteness. Still, it is extremely difficult to conclude that simply because a concept that denies concrete reality appears, it is used with the intention of referring to itself in part or whole, or that it even carries the connotation that its context refers to itself. By contrast, Jakobson’s principle of equivalence does suggest this. The recurrence of similarities in places where dissimilarities normally are combined adds something to the expression which makes the contrast to a normal form of expression conspicuous and, through its very lack of referential function, emphasizes the intrinsic value of the expression. No such thing could be said about a concept. It seems to me that the contention that the concept (of nothingness) refers to the poem and to its own representation in language is based on the a priori certainty that poems are autoreferential by nature, and not based on a (repeatable) observation of the poetic text.

But even an analysis that took Jakobson’s second principle of poetics into account would not prove a “fundamental difference between poem and mystical experience,” because even in Jakobson’s view the poetic function in poetic texts is dominant but does not exclude the other functions of language, among them the referential function: “Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, subsidiary, accessory constituent.”²⁵ Therefore, according to Jakobson, poems with mystical references are possible without the reference having been “transformed” into a poetic function.

In addition to Jakobson’s theory of the dominant autoreferentiality of language in a poem, Schulz brings up another theory of poetics, that of the poem being created out of the impulses of language. In Celan’s poetry, Schulz claims, “the speaking ‘I’ enters the language as the dominant force” and is identical with “language, which has become the subject, . . . and which asks the question and gives the answers.”²⁶ This idea rests on Mallarmé’s concept of the “oeuvre pure,” the “pure work” whose canonical passages are to be found in *Crise de vers*: “The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields the initiative to the words, mobilized through the shock of their inequality; they catch fire by means of reciprocal reflections like a virtual trail of flames spread over precious gems, replacing the breathing perceptible in the ancient

lyrical breath or in the enthusiastic personal direction of the sentence."²⁷ In opposition to the "enthusiastic personal direction" of the sentence, Mallarmé posits the impersonal inspiration from the powers of language which causes the person of the poet to disappear.

Comments from Celan himself, however, made in answer to a questionnaire sent by the Librairie Flinker in 1958, prevent us from using Mallarmé's concept of the "oeuvre pure" as proof of the "fundamental difference between poem and mystical experience." He maintains that German lyricism takes a quite different direction from the French, and that in it, "it is never language itself that is operative, but always an 'I' which speaks from a special vantage point of its existence, and which is concerned with contours and orientation. Reality does not exist, reality must be sought and won."²⁸ In *Der Meridian*, Celan's direction becomes even more clear because there he uses the word "correspondence": "This . . . can only be language, but not just language generally, and presumably also not just deriving from the word 'correspondence'."²⁹ In French the word "correspondance" is an important signal word in the self-commentary of lyric poets, especially Mallarmé and Valéry, and is connected with concepts like rhythm, harmony and musicality.³⁰ Rhythm, harmony, and musicality are, however, characteristics of beauty, and in the name of "truth" Celan has certain reservations about "beauty." The language of lyricism which he has in mind "distrusts beauty; it tries to be true" and wants to have "its 'musicality' located where it will have nothing in common with that 'melodiousness' that resounds more or less untroubled along with or next to the terrible."³¹ That Celan has turned against Mallarmé is explicitly expressed when he asks skeptically: "should we follow Mallarmé to his logical conclusion?"³² That, I believe, forbids our looking for the "fundamental difference between poetry and mystical experience" in Celan in the entrance of a speaking "I" into "language which has become its own subject."

I have discussed Georg-Michael Schulz's argumentation in such detail because it seems to me symptomatic of the way critics deal with the stumbling block of mystical themes and direct citations from primary and secondary mystical literature. The cornerstone of this type of argument seems to be a *petitio principii*, that is, the premise that texts which are published under the genre of "poetry" belong to the area of art, which by nature is completely different from the area of religious experience. From a historical viewpoint this is based on classical aesthetics, according to which art is the area of

“disinterested pleasure” (Kant), from which involvement with reality, truth, and orientation (all expressions Celan uses when speaking of his poetry) is banned. In order to claim these poems, which are saturated with mystical thought, for this area of art, critics seize on the most contradictory theories of poetics without regard for Jakobson’s theory, which disallows any fundamental distinction between “poetic” and “engaged” language.

In light of such a pre-determined decision that every text published as a “poem” belongs to a realm of art which is strictly separated from the realm of the religious, there is justification in emphasizing a comment of Celan’s in which he expresses reservations about classifying his poetry as this kind of art, an art which he believes reached its culmination in Mallarmé, who represented the quintessence of the “l’art pour l’art” standpoint. “May we,” as it says in the *Meridian* in a passage that has already been quoted, “proceed from the notion (as is now often done) that art is something given, something to be taken for granted; should we, to be specific, above all—let’s say—follow Mallarmé to his logical conclusion?”³³

Mallarmé, whom Celan has doubts about following to a logical conclusion in his particular conception of art, is an interesting case for the problem of the difference between poetry and mystical experience. I shall discuss this case in some detail because I believe it illustrates how this difference, when it actually exists, can better be established by depending on the intentions of the author in question, at least to the degree that these intentions can be reconstructed out of the author’s own explanations, rather than by relying on one or the other theory of poetics that has been determined to be the only correct one for a particular author.

Since the nineteenth century, personal commentary has become an increasingly significant part of a writer’s work, especially for lyric poets. It appears that such commentary has increased to the degree that agreement on the meaning and purpose of poetics (not to mention the demise of the close symbiosis between author and audience and the change this relationship has undergone) has decreased. Since this time, poets repeatedly give information about the position from which they are writing. Mallarmé discussed this problem in his letters to his friend Cazalis. From these letters we can see that his attempts at achieving the ideal purity of the “oeuvre pure,” which were driven by a dissatisfaction with everything attainable,³⁴ had led him into experiencing nothingness—something he understood as a religious experience, as shown by the comparison with Buddhism when he

speaks of "the Nothingness at which I would not have arrived without knowing Buddhism" ("le Néant auquel je suis arrivé sans connaître le Bouddhisme"). This experience caused him to stop writing for a time.³⁵ One year later it became clear that this acquaintance with nothingness was the "borderline case of a nihilistic mystic," a type about whom Gershom Scholem says that he views as his highest value "the demolishing of all forms" and who, in an undialectic spirit, tries to preserve this "impulse instead of using it the way other mystics do as a driving force in constructing new forms."

With such a mystic, "the destruction of all religious authority in the name of authority seems itself to be the purest representation of the revolutionary aspect of mysticism."³⁶ With Mallarmé the destruction of religious authority assumes the form of a struggle with God, who is represented as an angel, and ends with the conquest of God: "my fight with that creature of ancient and wicked plumage [whom I] fortunately defeated—God" ("ma lutte avec ce vieux et méchant plumage, terrassé, heureusement, Dieu").³⁷ That the destruction of this authority is carried out in the name of authority itself can be seen from the fact that the struggle with the angel takes place on its wings, and is "winged" or carried by it.³⁸ A second indication of the mystical character of this experience is the mention of the state of "external indifference" ("indifférence extérieure")³⁹ into which he is transported. This appears to be the *sancta indifferentia* of the mystical tradition, where it expresses one's death from worldly things in order to concentrate on more essential matters.⁴⁰

After Mallarmé's experience of nothingness, however, there followed for him an "aesthetic turn," a return to writing. The "dream in its ideal nakedness" ("rêve dans sa nudité idéale"), which led into nothingness, now appears as "sin," and the remorse of the poet has the following appearance: "For me, two years ago I committed the sin of seeing the Dream in its ideal nakedness, while I ought to have amassed between it and myself a mystery of music and forgetting" ("Pour moi, voici deux ans que j'ai commis le péché de voir le Rêve dans sa nudité idéale, tandis que je devais amonceler entre lui et moi un mystère de musique et d'oubli").⁴¹ And: "I want to produce for myself this spectacle of [the] matter . . . proclaiming, before the Nothing which is truth, these glorious lies" ("je veux me donner ce spectacle de la matière, [. . .] proclamant, devant le Rien qui est la vérité, ces glorieux mensonges").⁴² The drama of the material world as music and lies interposed between the ego and the nihilistic mystic's experience of nothingness in order to forget ("oubli") this

experience of the truth so that he can once again be a poet: that is Mallarmé's poetic position and his vocation as a poet relative to mystical experience. Thus his relationship as a poet to this experience is one of "aesthetic distance," a distance which makes turning one's attention back to the "drama of the material world" possible, that is, back to the forms of the world which have been overcome by experiencing nothingness and the "external indifference." These are forms whose "sparse beauty" ("éparse beauté") can be isolated from the poetic view and synthesized to poetic signs,⁴³ but which still remain a "lie."

This is Mallarmé's position, at least in connection with the problem of the difference between poetry and the mystical experience, a position Celan has reservations about following to its logical conclusion, because for truth's sake he distrusts the beauty and musicality which are Mallarmé's means of hiding the truth of nothingness with a "beautiful" lie; it makes a certain view of art questionable for his own works. If one wants to make a credible argument for a "fundamental difference between poetry and mystical experience" in Celan's poetry, one cannot simply base one's proof on the *petitio principii* that mystical citations—which occasionally, as in the case of "Treckschutzenzeit," comprise almost the entire poem—do not have the same sense their original sources do, but are meant only aesthetically. One must also harmonize Celan's skepticism toward Mallarmé and his type of art with Mallarmé's stance on art by proving, for example, similar "aesthetic distance" in Celan.

Proving this distance as a pre-condition for *aisthesis*, i.e. the aesthetic perception, seems to me the only way to dispose of the notion that mysticism in Celan's works is a stumbling block. If this proof does not succeed with the same clarity that, in my view, is possible with Mallarmé—and also Baudelaire⁴⁴—which is to say without applying external concepts to the poetry, concepts that cannot be rendered understandable from the text itself (who can tell by looking at a text whether or not it arose out of devotion to the sheer force of language?), then there seems to be another possible hypothesis. From Celan's theme of nothingness, which is connected to mysticism in many ways, among them direct citation, we can reach the conclusion that he tries to follow Mallarmé, perhaps not to his logical conclusion, but in the opposite direction, in the direction toward exactly this "Nothing that is truth" ("Rien qui est la vérité"), which he does not

wish to hide anymore with the lie of beauty and musicality, but which he engages for the sake of truth, orientation, and reality with all its consequences. This results in the position of the one who "moves through nothingness" ("Die Liebe, zwangsjackenschön"), who knows himself to have been

durchgründet vom Nichts,
ledig allen
Gebets

— —
constituted of nothingness
free of all
prayer

["Wirk nicht voraus," II, 328]

This is the one who sees the king in the "Nothingness in the almond," and who does not fear even the highest degree of mystical destruction:

Todes quitt, Gottes
quitt.

Quit of Death, quit
of God.

That could be the premise of the "stumbling block" of mysticism, a notion which rejects the taking of art as "something given, something to be taken for granted" and likewise rejects the reduction of religious speech to art, even if this is only a "mystical level of poetry," whatever one understands that to be.⁴⁵ But there still remains the question of understanding how mystical experience articulates itself in the genre we call lyric poetry and which is thus in large degree suspiciously "artistic."

First of all, I would answer this question by saying that after the thematic expansion of literary genres which took place mostly during and after the Romantic era, literature became a very broad field that allowed every type of experience to be expressed and all forms to be used to articulate experience better. Secondly, I would point out that the religious, and especially the mystical aphorism, has a long tradition in poetry. The aphorism resists systematic treatment. It

formulates succinctly an isolated thought, inspiration, or insight without attempting an explanation in a broader context, with no attempt at argumentation, and without trying to prove anything.⁴⁶ It is in this way, for example, that in the 17th century Johannes Scheffler (Angelus Silesius) extracted isolated thoughts and insights from a systematic context of mystical tracts, mostly from Jakob Boehme, and put them into the poetic form of the epigram. Here are two examples of the paradoxes that shocked more orthodox spirits:

Die Gottheit ist ein Nichts

Die zarte Gottheit ist ein Nichts und Übernichts:
Wer nichts in allem sieht, Mensch, glaube, dieser siehts.

The Godhead is a Nothing

The gentle Godhead is a Nothing and Over-Nothing:
He who sees nothing in everything, believe, oh man, that he sees this.⁴⁷

With Angelus Silesius, however, the systematic essays precede the aphorism. As one commentator says, the conversion of the systematic essays into aphorisms serves the purpose of “lifting mysticism out of its dark underground to the heights of highly formalized mastery.”⁴⁸ In the use of the epigram, a form that emphasizes making points, one can recognize the intention of a “formal-aesthetic reconstruction”⁴⁹ which does not, however, prevent even the modern reader from gaining the “impression of a dual religious/poetic nature,”⁵⁰ which has as its background both classical aesthetics and the re-discovery of Baroque literature as an artistic form. The reverse is true with Pascal, whose religious aphorisms precede a systematic treatment. One of his “pensées,” whose dual “religious-poetic nature” was discovered only in this century by Paul Valéry,⁵¹ is famous, and for this reason I will discuss it in the form that Valéry discovered:

Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis
M’effraye.

The eternal silence of the infinite spaces
Terrifies me.

Finally, in twentieth century poets before Celan, e.g. in Guiseppe Ungaretti, we can also find aphorisms in poetic form with religious content. His famous "lyrical laconism" is not unrelated to Pascal's "pensée."

Mattina
M'illumino
d'immenso

Morning

I illuminate myself
with the immense

"The immense" in the context of "illumination" can certainly be understood as religious in nature,⁵² and even the "morning" in the title takes on a religious character in this context in the sense of the "sun of salvation," which rises every morning in the east ("es oriente lux").⁵³ In addition, Ungaretti answers the question he asked of himself: "Should our century therefore perhaps have a religious mission?" ("Dunque, forse, sarebbe il nostro secolo di missione religiosa?") with the concise statement: "There is no notion of liberty if not for poetic action, which gives us the notion of God" ("Lo è che non si ha nozione di libertà se non per l'atto poetico che ci dà nozione di Dio").⁵⁴ From the pen of a lyricist, quite an interesting statement. Thus one can see a certain relationship between Celan and the mystical aphorisms of Angelus Silesius in a number of poems which take as their base a systematic connection between mystical sermons and tracts as well as Gershom Scholem's portrayal of Jewish mysticism. To some degree he does this for personal use of what, point by point, he finds there, but scarcely, I believe, for the purpose of "highly formal mastery" or "formal-aesthetic reconstruction." If we take him seriously, the most compelling argument against this position comes from his own reservations about art.

(Translated by Mary Ann Buckles and James K. Lyon)

NOTES

1. Joachim Schulze, *Celan und die Mystiker: Motivtypologische und quellenkundliche Kommentare* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1976). For references to excerpts from Meister Eckhart, see Werner Weber, "Zum Gedicht 'Du sei wie Du'," *Über Paul Celan*, ed. Dietlind Meinecke (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 277-80.

2. On this methodological concept, see my essay "Überlegungen zur inhaltlichen Kommentierung dunkler Gedichte. An vier Beispielen," *Poetica*, No. 8 (1976), pp. 145-76.

3. Translation by Michael Hamburger, *Paul Celan: Poems. A Bilingual Edition* (New York: Persea Books, 1980), p. 210. Citations of Celan in the text refer to the two-volume edition, Paul Celan, *Gedichte*, ed. Beda Allemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975).

4. The Petrarchian motif of the "Liebestod" and its neo-Platonic commentary was reintroduced to a wider audience by Hugo Friedrich in *Epochen der italienischen Lyrik* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1964), p. 292.

5. Georg-Michael Schulz, *Negativität in der Dichtung Paul Celans* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977), p. 241-42 for this and other citations in the poem by Eckhart. Celan's source is either: Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint (Munich: Hanser, 1963), p. 308; or Meister Eckhart, *Schriften*, ed. and trans. Hermann Büttner (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1934), p. 152. In both works the translation of the Middle High German original into New High German reads: "daz er mich ledic mache gotes" = "dass er mich Gottes quitt mache" ("that he may make me quit of God").

6. Translator's note: The original German text by Schulze, including the citations from Meister Eckhart, reads: "das wesentliche Sein des Menschen [ist] 'oberhalb von Gott, sofern wir Gott als Beginn der Kreaturen fassen.' In jenem wesentlichen Sein, 'wo Gott über allem Sein und über aller Unterschiedenheit ist,' da war auch der Mensch in seinem ursprünglichen Sein nicht von Gott unterschieden. 'Und darum,' fährt Meister Eckhart fort, 'bin ich Ursache meiner selbst meinem Sein nach, das ewig ist, nicht aber meinem Werden nach, das zeitlich ist. Und darum bin ich ungeboren, und nach der Weise meiner Ungeborenheit kann ich niemals sterben'."

7. From a sermon entitled "Fortis est ut mors dilectio," *Schriften*, ed. Büttner, p. 274 f. The New High German text reads: "Da nun die Liebe zu unserem Herrn 'stark ist wie der Tod,' so tötet auch sie den Menschen in geistigem Sinne, und scheidet die Seele auf ihre Weise von dem Leibe. Und zwar geschieht dies dann, wenn sich der Mensch völlig aufgibt, und sich seines Ichs entschlägt, und so sich von sich selber scheidet. Dies aber geschieht durch die aussermassen hohe Kraft der Liebe, die so lieblich zu töten weiss."

8. "Vom Gottesreich. Ein Sermon," *Schriften*, ed. Büttner, p. 305. This death is "das Sterben, mit dem die Seele hinstirbt in Gott."
9. "Fortis est ut mors dilectio," p. 277. "Damit scheidet sie [die Seele] sich überhaupt von dieser Welt und fährt dahin, wohin sie es verdient hat. Und wohin hat sie es anders verdient hinzufahren, als in Dich, o ewiger Gott, der Du ihr Leben sein musst um dieses Sterben durch die Liebe."
10. Bertolt Brecht, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, trans. W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman (Boston: Godine, 1976), pp. 71-72.
11. "Dass Gott enthöh't werden sollte"; "auf dass wir erhöht werden"; "Du sollst geeinigt werden von dir selber in dich selber, auf dass er in dir sei." Celan read the sermon in Josef Quint's Eckhart edition, *Die deutschen Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958), pp. 227-241. This is evident from the poem immediately following this one, which has the title "Du sei wie Du . . .," and which cites passages directly from the text and also uses the uncommon word "Gehugnis" in the spelling given in Quint's commentary. See Werner Weber, "Zum Gedicht 'Du sei wie Du'." The English rendering here follows Raymond Blakney, *Meister Eckhart. A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper, 1941), p. 486.
12. The expression comes from the sermon "Beati pauperes spiritu," from which the expression "quit of God" comes: *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, ed. Josef Quint, p. 304.
13. In the same sermon, it goes on to say that "before there were creatures, God was not yet 'God'. . . . When creatures came to be and took on them creaturely being, God was no longer God in himself, but God as he was in his creatures" ("Ehe die Kreaturen waren, war Gott (noch) nicht 'Gott'. . . . Als die Kreaturen wurden und sie ihr geschaffenes Sein empfangen, da war Gott nicht in sich selber Gott, sondern in seinen Kreaturen war er Gott").
14. The concepts "chance" (G. "Zufälligkeit") and "nature of being" (G. "Wesenhaftigkeit") occur in Quint's translation, p. 307 f. Büttner works from another version of the text and uses "unity" instead of "chance."
15. From "Reich Gottes. Ein Sermon," *Schriften*, ed. Büttner, pp. 304, 306. In German the passages read: "Alles büsst hier die Seele ein, Gott und alle Kreaturen . . . es muss alles verloren sein, der Seele Bestehen muss sein auf einem freien Nicht! [Gott selber] ist ein solcher dessen Nichtsein die Welt erfüllt, und die Stätte seines Daseins ist nirgends. . . . Wer zu Gott kommen will, spricht ein Meister, der komme als ein Nichts."
16. From "Reich Gottes. Ein Sermon," *Schriften*, ed. Büttner, p. 304: "so sind auch diese Menschen in gottgleicher Verfassung und selbstlosem Auftun hinausgekehrt zu allen Menschen."
17. *Der Meridian* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1961), p. 16. English translation by Jerry Glenn, "The Meridian," *Chicago Review*, No. 3 (1978), p. 36.
18. In German, Celan uses the same phrase employed by theologians today—"das

ganz Andere." Wilhelm Höck is reminded by this phrase of Rudolf Otto's "Bestimmung des Numinosen als das 'Ganz Andere' "; "Von welchem Gott ist die Rede?" in *Über Paul Celan*, pp. 265-276.

19. *Der Meridian*, p. 16.

20. Klaus Weissenberger, review in *The German Quarterly*, No. 2 (March, 1978), p. 264.

21. Schulz, p. 112.

22. "Linguistics and Poetics," *Style and Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964), p. 358.

23. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," p. 358.

24. Schulz, p. 145. As an illustration of this idea, here are the opening lines of "Mandorla":

In der Mandel—was steht in der Mandel?

Das Nichts

Es steht das Nichts in der Mandel.

Da steht es und steht. [I, 244]

In the almond—what dwells in the almond?

Nothing.

What dwells in the almond is Nothing

There it dwells and dwells.

(Trans. by Michael Hamburger)

After reading my discussion of the mystical Nothing, one can easily imagine how I interpret this poem.

25. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," p. 358.

26. Schulz, p. 137: In Celan's poems, he asserts, "geht das sprechende Ich in die Sprache als die umgreifende Instanz ein, wodurch dieses Ich mit der zum Subjekt gewordenen Sprache . . . , die selbst die Fragen stellt und die Antworten gibt, zusammenfällt."

27. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 366. This and subsequent renderings from the French are by Catherine Lowe.

28. "Niemand [sei] die Sprache selbst, die Sprache schlechthin am Werk, sondern immer ein unter dem besonderen Neigungswinkel seiner Existenz sprechendes Ich, dem es um Kontur und Orientierung geht. Wirklichkeit ist nicht, Wirklichkeit will gesucht und gewonnen sein." The complete text of Celan's answer is printed in *Über Paul Celan*, p. 23. Schulz, of course, is familiar with this passage, since he cites it. But he retreats to the Mallarméian position with a quotation from Adorno about the "self-

forgetfulness of the subject, which puts itself in the hands of objectivity." Schulz, p. 137.

29. *Der Meridian*, p. 17: "Also nicht die Sprache schlechthin und vermutlich auch nicht erst vom Wort 'Entsprechung' her."

30. In Baudelaire, "correspondance" is the principle through which, in a state of poetic grace, "the depth of life . . . is revealed in its entirety in the spectacle, as natural and trivial as it may be, that one has in front of him ("la profondeur de la vie . . . se révèle toute entière dans le spectacle, si naturel et si trivial qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux") so that the first best object becomes the "speaking symbol," the "symbole parlant," in "Le Poème du Haschisch," *Oeuvres complètes* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 375. Mallarmé uses this word to indicate the harmonious mood of the poetic condition, which is activated in him, a reading poet, by giving himself up completely to language: "The turn of a particular sentence or the 'lake' of a couplet . . . help the blossoming, in us, of insights and correspondences" ("Le tour de telle phrase ou le lac d'un distique, copiés sur notre confirmation, aident l'éclosion, en nous, d'aperçus et de correspondances," "La Musique et les lettres," *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 646). To this "deep treasure of correspondences" ("trésor profond des correspondances") belongs, among other things, the "memory of the previous rhythm" ("le souvenir du rythme antérieur," *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 262). Valéry uses the same word in describing the "poetic state" in which all things, all happenings, feelings, and acts "are . . . musicalized . . . and as if harmonically corresponding," ("se trouvent . . . musicalisées, . . . et comme harmoniquement correspondants") "Poésie et pensée abstraite," *Oeuvres* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 1959), I, 1320-21.

31. Celan's answer to the questionnaire of the Librarie Flinker, *Über Paul Celan*, p. 23.

32. *Der Meridian*, p. 12.

33. *Der Meridian*, p. 12.

34. "I know of moments when, whatever it may be, in the name of a secret arrangement, must not satisfy" ("je connais des instants où quoi que ce soit, au nom d'une disposition secrète, ne doit satisfaire," *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 647).

35. "Je suis encore trop désolé pour pouvoir croire même à ma poésie et me remettre au travail, que cette pensée écrasante m'a fait abandonner," letter of March, 1866, Mallarmé, *Propos sur la poésie*, ed. Henri Mondor (Monaco-Ville: Editions du Rocher, 1953), pp. 65-66.

36. "Religiöse Autorität und Mystik," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (1957), 26, 251-52.

37. Letter dated May 14, 1867. *Propos sur la poésie*, p. 87.

38. "But even this fight took place on his bony wing which, in death-throes more vigorous than I would have expected of him, had carried me into Darkness, victorious I fell bewilderedly, infinitely . . ." ("Mais même cette lutte s'était passée sur son aile osseuse, qui par une agonie plus vigoureuse que je ne l'eusse soupçonné chez lui,

m'avait emporté dans les Ténèbres, je tombai victorieux, éperdument et infiniment . . .” Mallarmé, *Propos sur la poésie*, p. 78. For more information on overcoming God, see Meister Eckhart's teachings that one must be “quit of” God as image and creature.

39. Mallarmé, *Propos sur la poésie*, p. 77.

40. See the article “Gelassenheit” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958), II, 1309. On the same concept in France, see Jeanne Lydie Goré, *La Notion d'indifférence chez Fénelon et ses sources* (Grenoble: Université Faculté des Lettres, Publications, 1956).

41. Letter of April 20, 1868, *Propos sur la poésie*, p. 97.

42. Letter of March, 1866, *Propos sur la poésie*, p. 66.

43. “Crayonné au théâtre, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 295 f.

44. The “aesthetic distance” can also be found in Baudelaire, whose discovery of the “infernal part” of man and the “consciousness of evil” bears a remarkable similarity to the discoveries of mystical introspection in Mme. Guyon, by whom many of Baudelaire's metaphors of decomposition and of the abyss are prefigured. The proof of the “aesthetic distance” in Baudelaire is the role of “pride” and “pleasure,” which are connected with the “consciousness of sin.” For the mystic Mme. Guyon, the recognition of evil is the necessary condition for giving oneself up to repentance and for religious transformation; for Baudelaire, it is valuable in and of itself as well as a source of pleasure *sui generis*: “this infernal part . . . which man takes pleasure in explaining to himself” (“cette part infernale . . . que l'homme prend plaisir à s'expliquer à lui-même”). Baudelaire also speaks of “remorse, the singular ingredient of pleasure” (“Le remords, singulier ingrédient du plaisir”). A clearer case of the “transformation” of mystical experience of similar or analogous insights into aesthetic ones that intend no more than a notion of pleasure can scarcely be found—but only through the poet's own explanation, and not imposed or postulated from outside. See my essay “Einige Bemerkungen zur Vorgeschichte von Baudelaires ‘conscience dans le Mal’ und ‘sang chrétien’,” *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 31 (1981), 365-74.

45. Cf. Klaus Weissenberger's recommendation in the review cited in footnote 20.

46. Franz H. Mautner, “Aphorismus,” *Das Fischer Literatur Lexikon* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1965), I, 43-48.

47. Celan uses the word “Übernichts” in the poem “In der fernsten Nebenbedeutung,” *Zeigehöft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 15.

48. Horst Althaus, *Johannes Schefflers “Cherubinischer Wandersmann”*: *Mystik und Dichtung* (Giessen: W. Schmitz, 1956), p. 69.

49. Althaus, p. 67.

50. Althaus, p. 72.

51. “Sur une pensée,” *Oeuvres*, I, 458-73.

52. See *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* for relevant articles on "Ewigkeit" ("eternity") and "Aufklärung" ("enlightenment").
53. Franz Josef Dölger, *Sol salutis. Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum* (Münster/Westphalia: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1925).
54. "Ragioni d'una poesia," *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1970), p. lxxx and p. xcvi.