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REFLECTION STATEMENT

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“Pontic Once-upon-a-time: here

a drop

on

the drowned oar blade,

deep

in a petrified oath,

it bubbles up”¹

Upon reading words like this I felt a rekindling of the enjoyment I felt from the stories my father would tell me as a child, and I have grown increasingly aware of the significance of the storyteller. The stories my father told when I was a child were so real to me that much of the poetry I have since read has seemed inferior, which is why the immediate passion I found for Paul Celan’s poetry of witness struck me. Celan’s poetry introduced an experience of the real world in the way I had experienced the fictional world as a child. Of course, my father’s stories were not about atrocity, yet it was the same ‘drawing-in’ that compelled to partake in the exploration lead by Celan into creating a glimpse of the Holocaust.

My thesis is intended to re-evaluate the aspects of Paul Celan’s poetry that make experiencing the enormity of events like the Holocaust possible. I found that much academic criticism of Celan is concerned with his poetry as a literary product rather than his poetry’s distinct ability to repackage his own experiences to provide a glimpse into his suffering. I wanted to free my analysis from the confines of linguistic comprehension and contribute to the discussion of Celan by highlighting that which

¹ Quotation from “*Aschenglorie*” by Paul Celan

takes place off the page as well as on it. I hope that my work will be a valuable contribution to the continually expanding appreciation of Celan's poetry.

Why poetry of witness? I was fascinated by the English Extension 1 'Post-colonialism' elective and was inspired to research Apartheid literature. The skills I learnt in the elective guided my study, at which point I first encountered witness poetry. The ability to compare poetic styles I had learnt in Module A of the English Advanced course 'Comparative Study of Texts and Context' helped in the identification of witness poetry's idiosyncrasies and rendered me capable of pursuing a study of the form. Journalism is keen passion of mine, and my research corrected my impression that witness poetry is a form of documentation, a correction that spurred my investigation.

My research progressed with depth and though the structural form of witness poetry interested me, I found that a thesis focusing on the structure of poetry during the Apartheid was leading me down the path of an essay historically founded rather than literarily. Somewhat disheartened, I abandoned the Apartheid context as well as the focus on structure, and, fighting frustration, rigorously researched poets from different times and contexts.² Doing so allowed me to comment on the composition of witness poetry through the works of an individual, opening a natural avenue for discussion of context in relation to witness rather than of context itself. I posed myself a great challenge by directing my study towards Paul Celan, though much of it to a higher intellectual degree than the local library was capable to contain.

² I read from all poets whose works are included in Carolyn Forché's anthology '*Against Forgetting: 20th Century Poetry of Witness*' aside from those in the section '*The Armenian Genocide (1909-1918)*' and three poets from the section '*The Spanish Civil War*'.

The process of research was incredibly demanding, yet the process itself inspired deeper research and I found it difficult to develop one concept without creating another. Utilising the skills of poetic analysis and interpretation I had acquired in my study of Seamus Heaney, both independently³ and as part of the ‘Area of Study: Navigating the Global’, as well as learning from the applications of critics, I analysed Celan’s use of poetic devices and voice that are distinctly his, with a strong focus on his ‘I-Thou’ relationship with the reader. The relationship warranted due attention as it was by Celan’s address to the present third-party that his witness could be experienced. The obvious dilemma of reading Celan is the barrier of translation, and as I cannot read German, I had to examine his poems in translated English. Translation itself is complex and I decided to rely solely on the translations of John Felstiner, as I did not deem it necessary to weigh in on conflicting translations.⁴

So why write an essay? At an early stage in my research I considered writing my own poetry of witness, but I recognised that I lacked the personal exposure to human extremity to do the form justice. I determined that I would return to the core of my research – the experience of witness poetry – so I could contribute to appreciation as well as examination of an aspect of Celan’s poetry that is sometimes lost in the weight of his poems. I understood that professional composition was essential for my work to be of value, so I undertook thorough research into the conventions of literary form.⁵

³ I applied W.B. Yeats’ ‘3 dilemmas’ theory of witness poetry to Heaney’s ‘Punishment’ to gain insight into the purpose behind the poem, and to identify the characteristics of witness poetry that Yeats outlined.

⁴ The translations of Michael Hamburger and John Felstiner were the most often referenced in criticism and the two largely agreed on English translations. As I comment in the Third Chapter

⁵ This involved structural analysis of commentaries on poetry and reading dissertations on the essay form.

I wrote in a formal tone to match the academic voices of the critics I explored, and like the majority I avoided using unnecessary esoteric terminology. Celan wrote his poetry for all to connect with, so why should my essay not be composed in the same spirit? The tone is a reflection of how my intended audience consists of academics of the Holocaust, witness poetry or Jewish literature, along with a mature, educated audience with a passion for the art of poetry, and students undertaking the 'Area of Study: After the Bomb'. Some of the material most relevant to my area of study, however, was written in highly academic terminology, and the necessity of comprehending it was a challenge.⁶

I found composing the body of the essay a draining, yet rather enjoyable experience as it put into perspective the strain that hung over every word Celan chose. Following the strenuous specificity of the essay's body, I decided to experiment with the layout. I added chronological poetic quotations of Celan at the bottom of each page to emphasise the increasing strain of his poetry as the weight of remembrance grew heavier. Yet, although I liked the idea, I determined with my mentor that the quotations became lost in the formatting and did not add to the work. The title of my essay '*Constructing the Experience of Horror*' was dually inspired by the experience of reading Celan and by Moberley Luger's dissertation in which I agreed with his notion of witness poetry as a 'construction'.⁷ I decided to open the work with the quotation from Adorno "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"⁸, as it captured the complexity of poetry of witness within the context of the Holocaust. I chose Adorno's quotation over Gillian Rose's: 'To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment

⁶ The Jstor database was accessible via subscription.

⁷ Luger titled his dissertation '*Poetry after 9/11: Constructing the Memory of Crisis*'. I had used the word '*Reconstructing*' as part of the working title for much of the process, but ultimately felt that the word carried connotations of a lesser authenticity.

⁸ Quotation from "*Prisms*" by Theodor W. Adorno

of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of ‘ineffability’, that is, non-representability, is to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous, with what we are – human, all too human’. Although the quotation would have been adequate in introducing my exploration, I felt that Adorno’s was more appropriate due to his direct address of the Holocaust.⁹

I reached my destination after a considerably taxing process of editing and redrafting, as I understood that poetry is a far more powerful tool of expression than it is considered by many of my generation¹⁰. Clarifying the connection between the experience of the witness and the experience of his ‘Thou’ made my thesis more cohesive. Upon completing my major work I reflect on the role of Paul Celan in balancing his ethnic dichotomy to witness for his people. I reflect, too, on my role in reading Celan to become a part of it, just as Celan had designed it to be.

*“Deep
in the time crevasse,

by
honeycomb-ice
there waits, a Breathcrystal,

your unannullable
witness.”¹¹*

⁹ Quotation from Gillian Rose’s *“Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation”*, p43

¹⁰ My initial impression of poetry was close to that of Wordsworth, that poetry was just ‘memorable speech’

¹¹ Quotation from *“Etched Away”* by Paul Celan