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**Memory and Mystical
Detachment in Paul Celan's
Eckhart-Poems**

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In late 1967, shortly after having been released from a Parisian psychiatric hospital, the poet Paul Celan turned his attention to the Middle High German writings of the speculative mystic Meister Eckhart. Celan's engagement with Eckhart's work resulted in the final three poems of the final volume of poetry that Celan was able to submit for publication before drowning himself in the Seine in 1970. These three poems thus might be said to mark a certain culmination of Celan's own work, although, for those familiar with the latter, this idea might seem strange. What does a late-medieval Dominican have to do with a post-Holocaust Jewish poet? Celan, who bridges and challenges numerous traditions and languages in his poetic activity, would have been drawn to the mediating work of Eckhart's corpus. Eckhart is the only major theologian of the Middle Ages whose oeuvre survives substantially in both Latin and the vernacular, and Eckhart combines and transforms various movements with consummate linguistic creativity and ease: scholasticism and mysticism, Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, Maimonidean exegesis and Beguine metaphors, to name a few. However, Celan was also disturbed by Eckhart's central concept of *abegescheidenheit* (Modern German *Abgeschiedenheit*) or "detachment," especially in the wake of the Shoah. In this paper, I will survey Celan's critical appropriation of Eckhart by offering brief commentaries on his three Eckhart-poems. I will focus on the themes of memory and detachment.

TRECKSCHUTENZEIT,
die Halbverwandelten schleppen
an einer der Welten,

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

Todes quitt, Gottes
quitt.¹

[TIME FOR THE TREKSCHUIT, / the half-transformed schlep / at
 one of the worlds, // the unheightened one, interiorized, / speaks under
 the foreheads on the bank: // Done with death, with God / done.]

This first poem draws directly on the language of a couple of Eckhart's Middle High German sermons, which scholars often refer to by the Vulgate passages they explicate: "Surge illuminare iherusalem" ["Arise, Shine, Jerusalem"] and "Beati pauperes spiritu" ["Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit"]. The *Enthöhte* ["unheightened one"] from the second stanza refers to God, inasmuch as human humbleness has forced him to abase himself, enter the soul, and become *geinnigt* ["interiorized," "internalized"]. As Eckhart preaches:

If a man were truly humble, either God would have to abandon all His Godhead and go right out of it, or He would have to pour Himself out and flow right into that man. Last night I thought, God's height [*hoicheit / Höhe*] lies in my lowliness: when I humbled myself, God would be exalted [*erhoeget / erhöht*]. Jerusalem shall be exalted, says scripture and the prophet. But I thought last night that God should be brought down [*intheoget / enthöht*], not absolutely but inwardly [*in / innen*]. This phrase of "God brought down" pleased me so much that I wrote it in my book. This means God is brought down, not absolutely but inwardly, that we may be raised up. What was above has become inward. You must be internalized [*geinneget / geinnigt*], from yourself and within yourself, so that He is in you. It is not that we should take anything from what is above us, but we should take it into ourselves, and take it from ourselves, and take it from ourselves into ourselves.²

But more is going on here than the mystical union between God and the meek. For Eckhart, there is a deeper oneness underlying creature and creator, an abyssal oneness that time cannot touch nor space delineate, a oneness—a Godhead—that we *are* fundamentally, in our ground. Here there is no nameable or relatable god; here there is no death (*Todes quitt, Gottes/quitt*; "Done with death, with God / done"). In his notorious sermon on spiritual poverty, Eckhart says, provocatively: "I pray to God to make me free of God [*ledic mache gotes / Gottes quitt mache*], for my essential being is above God, taking God as the origin of creatures. For in that essence of God in which God is above being and distinction, there I was myself and knew myself so as to make this man. Therefore I am my own cause according to my essence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is temporal. Therefore I am unborn, and according to my unborn mode I can never die."³ Whereas *die Halbverwandelten* ["the half-transformed"] still tug at terrestrial sense, the truly poor in spirit live "without a reason why"

(*sunder warumbe, sine principio*), as Eckhart is fond of putting it elsewhere.⁴ These fully transformed spirits are, again in Eckhart's language, the *Abgeschiedenen*, the "detached ones." One might wonder about the plausibility of mystical detachment, especially in the post-Shoah age. Perhaps there is even a hint of sarcasm or skepticism about such detachment in the poem's second and third stanzas.⁵ At any rate, I would like to turn now to the other two panels of Celan's "Eckhart-triptych,"⁶ where his critique of Eckhart is more fully on display.

The second poem actually intersperses an italicized quotation from Eckhart's "Surge illuminare iherusalem."⁷ The quotation is Eckhart's Middle High German translation of the Vulgate's own Latin translation of the Hebrew from Isaiah 60:1 (the beginning of which Celan cites in the original in the final two lines of the poem) and, perhaps, from Isaiah 51:17. Here, for starters, is the second poem, whose polyglot uncanniness I have endeavored to preserve in translation by either reproducing the Middle High German (when intelligible to the modern Anglophone reader) or resorting to the Middle English of Wycliffe's Bible (when not):⁸

DU SEI WIE DU, immer.

*Stant vp Jherosalem inde
erheyff dich*

Auch wer das Band zerschnitt zu dir hin,

*inde wirt
erluchtet*

knüpfte es neu, in der Gehugnis,

Schlammbrocken schluckt ich, im Turm,

Sprache, Finster-Lisene,

*kumi
ori.*⁹

[YOU BE LIKE YOU, always. // *Stant vp Jherosalem, and / be thou reised* // Even the one who snipped the bond toward you there, // *be thou / liytned* // tied it anew, in memoire, // Gobbets of sludge I swallowed, in the tower, / language, dark-lesene, // *kumi / ori.*]

Despite the quotation, "You Be Like You" is less Eckhartian than "Time for the Trekschuit," for it does not address Eckhart's capital concern: to appropriate the selfsame ground of God and the soul. The poem, at best, elevates language itself as a refuge—if not as a sure-footed saving power—against all the "losses" and the "thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech [*tausend Finsternisse*

todbringender Rede],” against the “gobbets of sludge” that the slaughtered must swallow in their unmarked graves.¹⁰ Celan wrote that although a poem “is not timeless,” “it does, certainly, make a claim to infinity, it attempts to reach through time—through it, and not out beyond it.”¹¹ Now, to reach through time, memory is needed. Memory is needed to tie the severed bonds anew: the bond of Hebrew, for example, which Christianity has long effaced, yet which Celan remembers for us, even as his original/foreign citation provokes his German-reading audience to reach out thoughtfully in search of sense.

The same can be said for Celan’s very word for memory. Few people in the world, including German speakers, would be able to understand the quasi-neologism *Gehugnis* without further ado, and even if they did, they still might wonder about why Celan wrote it the way he did. Astoundingly, beautifully, its root, *hügen*, means both to long for and to ponder.¹² Thus, even before we learn *what* the word means, in wondering about it and wandering in search of it, we are already *experiencing* and *doing* what it means. My own search has led me to back to Eckhart. Celan, I discovered, takes Eckhart’s Middle High German term for memory (*gehochnyisse*) from “Surge illuminare iherusalem” and transforms it into *Gehugnis*. In so doing, he also transforms the sense it has in Eckhart’s oeuvre.

Eckhart introduces *gehochnyisse* toward the beginning of “Surge illuminare iherusalem,” when he is discussing the traditional Augustinian/Trinitarian division of the soul into the powers of memory (*memoria*, Father), reason (*intelligentia*, Son), and will (*voluntas*, Holy Spirit). “The first power,” Eckhart preaches, “is memory [*gehochnyisse*], meaning a secret, hidden art [*heymeliche, verborgen konst / geheimes, verborgenes Wissen*]: this denotes the Father.”¹³ While this line may seem to ennoble the faculty of memory, Eckhart quickly moves on from it, “for,” he says, “it is nothing new.” Indeed, elsewhere he even exhorts his audience to release themselves from the distracting shackles of memory altogether. In the spirit of existentialist cultural critique *avant la lettre*, Eckhart declaims: “And so in truth, if you would find this noble birth [of the Word in the soul], you must leave the crowd and return to the source and ground whence you came. All the powers of the soul, and all their works—these are the crowd. Memory [*gehugnisse*], understanding, and will, they all diversify you, and therefore you must leave them all: sense perceptions, imagination, or whatever you find or seek to find yourself in. After that, you *may* find this birth but not otherwise—believe me! He was never yet found among friends, nor among kindred or acquaintances: there, rather, one loses him altogether.”¹⁴

With the term *Gehugnis*, Celan, for his part, may simply be modernizing a word that the editor of the critical edition of Eckhart’s works equates with *gehochnyisse*, namely *gehugnisse*,¹⁵ which Eckhart also uses, as in the just-quoted passage. It is nevertheless striking that Celan’s spelling lacks the visual connotation of “high” (*hoch* in German). It is as though memory had been brought low and were

struggling to survive, barely holding on—brought low not to be raised up, but to be covered over or condemned, to be buried in rubble or erased without a trace. As Celan wrote in one of his notebooks while preparing “You Be Like You,” again citing the phrase “with God / done” from Eckhart’s “*Beati pauperes spiritu*”:¹⁶

Eine vom Boden aufsteigende | schmale *Lisene*
 damnatio memoriae
 Bruchsteinmauerwerk

—
 Tafeln, mit der Mauer *geschalt*
 und gegossenem / Gottes
 Spielpomp / quitt

*

A small *lesene* rising up from the ground
damnatio memoriae
 drystone-wall-work

—
 tablets, *planked* with the wall
 and with cast / with God
 playpomp / done

In his denunciation of the crowd, Eckhart denigrates not just memory, but even all the representations produced by the faculty of imagination, which, incidentally, the noun *gehugnisse* can also mean in Middle High German. To be sure, Eckhart is advocating not so much for the erasure of memory and imagination as for the disregard of their importance. Yet, for Celan—as for the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his own way—without thoughtful remembrance there is no hope for the future; without the thoughtful gathering up of the past’s hold on the present (*Ge-denken des Ge-wesenen*) and its condensation in the word, there is nothing true to come. Given his attention to Heidegger’s *Ge*-words (*Gestell*, “enframing” or “positionality,” being the most famous) and his own fondness for them (*Genicht*, “notness,” being the most conspicuous), Celan must have noted the sense of gathering in the *Ge*- of *Gehugnis* qua memory.¹⁷

But what of the immemorial, by which I mean not just the archaic, but that which cannot be gathered up, and especially that which has been deliberately and irretrievably obliterated (*damnatio memoriae*)? What we cannot remember, we can poetically *imagine*. “You Be Like You” is an imaginative memorial to both the memory and the imagination of *Gehugnis*. If we cannot flee the fraught present, however tempting this may be; if we cannot tap into our pretemporal essence ahistorically, however much we may believe, with Eckhart, that this will serve the present life; if we must reach through time—through it, and not beyond it—then

we need *Gehugnis*. In Celan's memorial, and despite the horrors it must memorialize, we can—and here is yet another meaning of the Middle High German *hügen*—we can *take delight*.

Before moving on to the third poem, I would like to note one final allusion to Eckhart. I hear it in the title itself: “You Be Like You.” It recalls Eckhart on love, where love for the other is not for any particular attribute or even for any particular reason. As the sociologist Georg Simmel interprets Eckhart in a passage from his book on Rembrandt, a passage that Celan marked in the margin of his personal copy thereof: “Eckhart teaches that one should love God not because he is good, just, powerful, etc.—for these are individual, determinate qualities that take from him his absolute unity, his Being-‘Nothing.’ In other words: by possessing these universal qualities, he becomes something particular, he becomes individualized. One should love him only because he is *he* [*er eben er sei*].”¹⁸ The “because” breaks down here: *I love you*.—Why do you love me? *I love you because you are you*.—But why, what is it about me that you love? (Silence . . .) I must fall silent in the face of this question, since any non-tautological answer would move me away from my beloved god toward some universal of which he would be a mere instance.

This account holds not just for the love of God, but for love as such. In a sermon on Jesus's election and appointment of the disciples, Eckhart preaches that “love is without Why”: “If I had a friend and loved him for benefits received and because of getting my own way, I should not be loving my friend, but myself. I ought to love my friend [. . .] for all that he is in himself. Only then would I love my friend aright.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, in a gloss on Jesus's command to his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, Eckhart links such love to his imperative of releasement or letting-be (*gelâzenheit*, or in modern German: *Gelassenheit*): “He who has released [*gelâzen*] self and all things, who seeks not his own in any thing, and works all his works without Why and from love, that man being dead to all the world is alive in God and God in him.”²⁰ Or, in Heidegger's idiosyncratic summary of Augustine on the subject: “Probably the most profound interpretation of what love is can be found in Augustine, in the saying that reads: *amo volo ut sis*, I love, that means, I want, the beloved to be what it is [*sei, was es ist*]. Love is letting-be [*Seinlassen*] in a more profound sense, according to which it calls forth essence.”²¹

Now, while we may, and perhaps ought to, interpret love without Why as letting the other be in all its otherness, for Eckhart, to let the other be means, ultimately, to let the other *be God* (“all things become sheer God to you,” he says²²)—a God, or rather a Godhead, with which I am implicitly one. Furthermore, and perhaps more troublingly, Eckhart espouses Pseudo-Dionysius's claim that love makes me one with the beloved,²³ or in this case makes me explicitly one with the Godhead. Hence, other than the Godhead, the other is not so *other* after all. This is hardly compatible with Celan's appeal to and for the other in his 1960

“Meridian Speech”: “The poem wants to go toward another, it needs this other, it needs something over against it. It seeks it out, it speaks itself to it. / Each thing, each human, is, for the poem that heads toward this other, a shape of this other.”²⁴

For the love of the other, we can learn much from Eckhart’s “without Why.” Celan’s specification of *Jerusalem*, and not God or the Godhead, as the addressee of “You Be Like You” (*kumi* and *ori* being second-person singular feminine imperatives in Hebrew) nevertheless offers resistance to Eckhart’s subsumptive sweep. And even if, beyond Jerusalem, the “you” invokes the divine “thou,” this is a God who is addressable, who has a name, even if the subject of that name will be what it will be. Eckhart’s Godhead, in contrast, who speaks in the next poem of Celan’s triptych, is unnameable and unaddressable. We might say, with Rudolf Otto, that only now do we have a God who is “wholly other.”²⁵

In the last poem, however, Celan shows how this Godhead also—and thus relateably—needs to hold itself in relation to *its* other.

WIRK NICHT VORAUS,
 sende nicht aus,
 steh
 herein:

 durchgründet vom Nichts,
 ledig allen
 Gebets,
 feinfügig, nach
 der Vor-Schrift,
 unüberholbar,

 nehm ich dich auf,
 statt aller
 Ruhe.²⁶

[WORK NOT AHEAD, / do not send out, / stand / in here: // thoroughly grounded by the Nothing, / void of all / prayer, / fine-fitted, to / the Pre-Script, / unsurpassable, // I take you up, / in place of all / repose.]

The poem’s speaker is the Godhead or the detached soul that has appropriated its oneness with the Godhead. The Godhead is telling God the Father and indeed each and every individual to abandon all projects and to return to the divine source. Be detached. Give up your striving. Recognize your oneness with the abyssal, unrepresentable Godhead, which has no need of work, prayer, planning, or scripture. But in Celan’s account, the Godhead takes the other up, abandoning the tranquility of mystical detachment. It is not just we who must heed our essential dependence on alterity (“the other and foreign as what is ownmost to you and as yours”).²⁷

Even Eckhart's Godhead is beholden to another. By caring for otherness at the expense of all repose, the Godhead of Celan's poem provides an ultimate model for ethical imitation.²⁸

In conclusion, to Celan, Eckhart represents a historical, linguistic, and religious topos in which Celan can twist mystical tropes to their breaking point and thereby push his own ideas—about recollection, relationality, and responsibility—to the limit. Celan's poetic trinity both embodies and thematizes a powerful alternative to Eckhartian detachment. Rather than cut ourselves off from memory and alterity, we must recognize and foster otherness as constitutive of our very being. Only in this way may we begin to respond adequately to contemporary traumas, whether it be global pandemic or—and this would worry Celan even more—racist nostalgia and reactionary insurrection. Mystical detachment is, at best, an insufficient strategy for confronting the tasks that Celan poses for our times.

Notes

1. Paul Celan, *Die Gedichte: Neue kommentierte Gesamtausgabe in einem Band*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt, 2018), 308. All translations of Celan and of texts for which I do not specify an English edition in an endnote are my own.
2. Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart, 1936–2016), DW 1: 237,1–12 (Pr. 14, “Surge illuminare iherusalem,” Middle High German) and 486 (the editor's modern German translation) / *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'C. Walshe and revised by Bernard McGinn (New York, 2009), 268.
3. Middle High German in Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 2: 502,6–503,3 (Pr. 52, “Beati pauperes spiritu”). English in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 424. The modern German derives from one of the epigraphs in Gustav Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik: Versuche im Anschluß an Mauthners Sprachkritik* (Münster, 1978; first published in 1903), which Celan copied out in a notebook. See Celan, *Lichtzwang: Vorstufen—Textgenese—Endfassung*, ed. Heino Schmuil with the assistance of Markus Heilmann and Christiana Wittkop (Frankfurt, 2001), 175.
4. See the passages I cite in my discussion of “You Be Like You” below, as well as, for example, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 1: 90,11–12 (Pr. 5b, “In hoc apparuit”) and LW 3: 16, no. 19 (In Ioh.).
5. See Ekkehard Stegemann, “Meister Eckhart beim *magister memoriae*: Zu zwei Gedichten Paul Celans,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 45.2/3 (1989): 248–53.
6. Lydia Koelle, *Paul Celans pneumatisches Judentum: Gott-Rede und menschliche Existenz nach der Shoah* (Mainz, 1997), chapter 4 (“Zu dir hin’: Das Eckhart-Triptychon in *Lichtzwang*”).

7. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 1: 230,6.
8. Cf. John Felstiner, "Paul Celan in Translation: 'Du sei wie du,'" *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 8.1 (Fall 1983): 95.
9. Celan, *Die Gedichte*, 308–9.
10. Paul Celan, *Der Meridian und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt, 1988), 38.
11. Ibid.
12. Matthias Lexer, *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1872), s.v. hügen, hugnisse, gehugnisse.
13. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 1: 230,7–231,1 (Middle High German) and 485 (Quint's modern German translation) / *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 266. Celan copied out a portion of this sentence in a notebook. See Celan, *Lichtzwang: Vorstufen—Textgenese—Endfassung*, 176.
14. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 4: 475,8–14 (Pr. 103, "Et cum factus esset Iesus annorum duodecim") / *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 55 (trans. mod.).
15. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 1: 230n2, 558.
16. Celan, *Lichtzwang: Vorstufen—Textgenese—Endfassung*, 176.
17. For *Gestell*, see, above all, Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 79: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, ed. Petra Jaeger (Frankfurt, 1994), 24–45; for *Genicht*, see Celan's poem "Weggebeizt" (*Die Gedichte*, 185). For further creative use of the prefix *Ge-* in Celan, see, especially, the poem "Benedicta" (*Die Gedichte*, 149). For Celan's relation to Heidegger, see James K. Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation, 1951–1970* (Baltimore, 2006).
18. Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt: Ein kunstphilosophischer Versuch* (Leipzig, 1919). Celan also underlined the last sentence. I am indebted to Koelle, *Paul Celans pneumatisches Judentum*, 169n11, for this reference. Although Celan did not purchase a copy of the book until 1968, thus after he wrote his Eckhart-trilogy, he relates in a letter from April of that year that he had esteemed the book greatly many years prior. See Paul Celan, "*etwas ganz und gar Persönliches*": *Briefe 1934–1970*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt, 2019), 804–5. The parallel between Simmel's "weil er eben *er* sei" and the title of "Du sei wie du" is at any rate striking enough to make one suspect a Simmelian influence.
19. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 2: 59,7–11 (Pr. 28, "Ego elegi vos") / *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 129.
20. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 2: 80,1–3 (Pr. 29, "Convalescens praecepit eis") / *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 125 (trans. mod.). For more on *gelâzenheit* in Eckhart, see Ian Alexander Moore, *Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement* (Albany, 2019), especially chapter 3.

21. Heidegger, “Ansprache zum 80. Geburtstag Ludwig von Fickers (13. April 1960),” in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16: *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, ed. Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt, 2000), 563. Celan cut out a copy of the version of this text that appeared in the newspaper *Seefeld-Tirol*. See “Martin Heidegger an Ludwig v. Ficker: Die während des Festmahles mitgeschriebene Ansprache Martin Heideggers an den Jubilar,” *Seefeld-Tirol: Kur- und Reisezeitung* 19 (1961): 17, and the “Zeitungsausschnitte Paul Celan,” located in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. The oft-cited Latin phrase does not appear in Augustine as such, though Heidegger presumably takes the idea from Book XI of Augustine’s *De civitate dei*. See Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 86: *Seminare: Hegel–Schelling*, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt, 2011), 547.
22. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 4: 488,136 (Pr. 103, “Cum factus esset Iesus annorum duodecim”).
23. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, DW 4: 1116,251–252 (Pr. 117, “Zu dem êrsten suochet daz rîche gotes”).
24. Celan, *Der Meridian und andere Prosa*, 55.
25. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau, 1917). For a more positive interpretation of Celan’s relation to Eckhart in “Du sei wie du,” see, however, Albert H. Friedlander, “Meister Eckhart, Maimonides, and Paul Celan,” *Eckhart Review* 3.1 (1994): 14–30.
26. Celan, *Die Gedichte*, 309.
27. Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung—Entwürfe—Materialien*, ed. Bernhard Böschstein and Heino Schmull with the collaboration of Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkop (Frankfurt, 1999), 128 (#401).
28. For a more detailed commentary on this poem and its demonstrably Eckhartian vocabulary, see Ian Alexander Moore, “‘statt aller / Ruhe’: Divine Dispossession in Celan’s Critique of Eckhart,” *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics* 20 (2021): 306–30.