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Transplanting Languages: Botanical Poetics of Paul Celan and Yoko Tawada

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ABSTRACT

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Concentrating on the work of Paul Celan and Yoko Tawada, my dissertation explores the complicated role played by plants in post-war and contemporary German-language literature. Reflecting on and engaging with the intricate dynamics of vegetative life without the prejudice that it simply stands for an inferior form of life to that of the human, Celan and Tawada address such issues as uprootedness, displacement, and the transplantation of language. I argue that their concern with plant life offers them a refuge in language from language that has been increasingly instrumentalized and historically compromised. The two authors, each in their own way, create a version of what I call “plant writing” by transcending and reinscribing traditional botanical tropes. Tawada’s plant writing is a process that turns words into “word-leaves,” which constantly metamorphose into different meanings, sounds, and shapes that could be interpreted in a number of ways depending on its temporal, spatial, or linguistic context. Celan’s plant writing, especially attempted conversations with plants, become a way to address his “placelessness” [Ortlosigkeit] as a migrant who had never been granted a home and his “timelessness” [Zeitlosigkeit] as a Holocaust survivor who had been robbed of his history and home. Each author creates a dialogue with nature through which to imagine a new language that helps those who are no longer at home with their “mother tongue” to relocate themselves in a post-disaster world.

For Xiaoying

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Introduction

1. Why Plants?

The fate of plants and humans are deeply intertwined: these significant natural and cultural artifacts impact and reform societies and politics on a global scale. Plants in the forms of crop, spices, tea, medicine, and perfumes have been closely entangled in the complexities of wars and hostilities. For over sixty years in the 17th century, the Dutch and the Portuguese fought over cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, pepper, and turmeric, the trade of which created immense profit and contributed to the colonization of the New World. Plants also play a significant role in the political struggles surrounding slavery. Meanwhile, humans constantly move plants around the world, from East Asia to the Mediterranean, from the Americas to China. As the result of globalization, chocolate, coffee, potatoes, and tomatoes become popular commodity around the world, and they further contribute to the international cultural and agricultural exchange. More recently, during World War II, the Nazis successfully seized the world's stores of quinine, resulting in more U.S. soldiers dying from malaria during the war than Japanese bullets in the Pacific.¹ Starting from the 1970s, the war on drugs, a global campaign aimed at reducing the use of illegal substances, including many psychoactive plants, resulted in large number of casualties, in plants and people alike. One of the most fundamental forms of life, plants have been relentlessly colonizing the terrestrial environments on earth, silently transforming the global landscape in which humans and animals reside.

¹ Michael J. Balick and Paul Alan Cox, *Plants, People, and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany* (MacMillan Higher Education, 1996), 29–30.

Plants, forests, and landscapes also provide powerful rhetorical means for grounding national identities, with the idea that there is an organic link between a people and the land beneath their feet. The mountains, meadows, and forests within the borders of a united Germany were used to construct a cohesive national identity, tied together with the myth of Germania. The uniquely German concept of “Heimat,” which signifies a person’s emotional and physical ties with the idea of a homeland and a community, also contains a subjectivized aestheticization of nature that synthesizes landscape and identity.² Although the concept of Heimat offers a promising way of imagining the human place in nature, it also offers compelling discourse to alienate the “rootless” and exclude outsiders.³ The “Heimat movement,” which arose in the late 19th century in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, was primarily concerned with a fear of losing “natural” roots, and therefore sharply opposed the ideas of progress and Enlightenment. This conservative nostalgia and critique of modernity was later transformed into the nationalist slogan of “blood and soil” and manipulated by the National Socialist regime.⁴ Among the different faces of the “rootless” wanderer, the mythical view of Jews as the personification of the eternal wanderer is particularly important in this context. The view is fed by the fact that, from the Middle Ages until the Modern Period, Jewish people were not allowed to purchase land.⁵

² On the significance of forests and mountains for the idea of “Heimat” and the German national identity, see Albrecht Lehmann and Kalus Schriewer, ed., *Der Wald—ein deutscher Mythos? Perspektiven eines Kulturthemas* (Berlin/Hamburg: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2000), Thomas M. Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German identity, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), Johannes von Molke, *No Place Like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema* (University of California Press, 2005), Jeffrey K. Wilson, *The German Forest: Nature, Identity, and the Contestation of a National Symbol, 1871-1914* (University of Toronto Press, 2012).

³ See Vivian Liska, “‘Roots against Heaven.’ An Aporetic Inversion in Paul Celan,” *New German Critique*, No. 91, Special Issue on Paul Celan (Winter, 2004), 44.

⁴ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 85-86.

⁵ Liska, “Roots against Heaven,” 44.

Centuries of persecution, expulsion, and the destruction of the Jewish-European world during World War II also strengthened the role of the “wandering Jew.” For the displaced and uprooted, plants become a symbol for permanent or semi-permanent belonging, a symbol that seems to substantiate the groundless hope of being rooted.⁶

The study of plants originated as herbalism, with the focus on identifying and cultivating food, herbs, and medicine. During the medieval period, academic studies of plants were largely facilitated by physic gardens, the predecessors of modern botanical gardens. These gardens promoted the teaching of botany, the cultivation of medical plants, and the cataloging of garden plants. Later in the 18th century, natural history emerged as a modern scientific subject with the development of modern botany, which was largely a science of taxonomy, nomenclature, and systematic classification. Among the numerous people who took part in the endeavor of botanical research, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus is perhaps the most well-known of his time. Concerned with the naming and classifying of natural objects, Linnaeus believed that the naming and ordering of the products of Creation linked the study of nature with the worship of God. His conception of order reflects his vision of Creation as a balanced and harmonious system, with every plant and animal filling a particular space in an orderly network of life. His binomial nomenclature, which first appeared in a manuscript published in 1736 and was later expanded and used in his *Species plantarum* (1753), assigns plants names that are quite similar to how people are named. The system includes one name common to all the species in a genus, comparable to the family name in the human society, and a specific name that distinguishes the species from each other in the genus. Linnaeus’s system uses terminology that reflects the inventor’s cultural and religious background; for example, it employs the Greek terms for

⁶ Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, 159, Liska, “Roots against Heaven,” 44.

“husband” (*andria*) and “wife” (*gynia*) instead of the more common terms like stamen or pistil. According to Paul Farber, the names of the classes, *monandria*, *diantria*, *triandria*, and so on, reflected the various types of “marriages” in plants, involving multiple so-called husbands, wives, and concubines, which shocked many naturalists of his time.⁷ Linnaeus acknowledges that his artificial method does not reflect the “real” order in nature, but nevertheless encourages naturalists to adopt his system.⁸

Carrying a copy of Linnaeus’s work, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe travelled to the Public Garden in Palermo in 1787, looking for what he called the “Urpflanze,” an archetype of all plants that reflects his theoretical concept of metamorphosis. The “Urpflanze” embodies the type of a flowering plant from which one can imagine all plant forms emerged.⁹ Inspired by Linnaeus’s conceptual hierarchy of nature, which is based on “intrinsic qualities” such as the sexual organs, Goethe speaks of the Urpflanze as a “law” [Gesetz] possessing the “inner truth and necessity” [innerliche Wahrheit und Nothwendigkeit] of nature.¹⁰ Linnaeus’s taxonomy also influences Goethe’s idea of the Urphänomen, which could be apprehended abstractly as well as in the form of a sensual image, given and comprehensible to the senses. Although Goethe’s morphology is

⁷ Paul Lawrence Farber, *Finding Order in Nature: The Naturalist Tradition from Linnaeus to E. O. Wilson*. (Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 9.

⁸ See Phillip R. Sloan, “The Buffon-Linnaeus Controversy,” *Isis*, vol. 67, No. 3 (Sep. 1976), 359. Comte de Buffon criticizes Linnaeus for confusing the abstract orders with the real orders. He argues that Linnaeus’ logical systematization of the natural world “made us imagine an infinitely of false relationships between natural things... it is to impose on the reality of the Creator’s works the abstractions of our mind.” Buffon, “Premier discours de la manière d’étudier et de traiter l’histoire naturelle, » in *Oeuvres philosophiques de Buffon*, ed. J. Piveteau (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1954), 9a-b.

⁹ Goethe, *Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, ed. Hermann Bohlau et al., 143 vols. (Weimar, 1887-1919), Part I, vol. 31: 240. Hereafter cited as WA with volume and page number.

¹⁰ This idea appears in a letter to Charlotte von Stein that Goethe sent from Rome in 1787 (WA IV:8, 233). See also: James L. Larson, “Goethe and Linnaeus,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 28, No. 4 (Oct. -Dec. 1967), 590-596.

now seen as a descriptive and rather casual science, it has an important philosophical legacy, central to the Romantic view of the relation of man to the Absolute.

Goethe's holistic and intuitive perception of science was confronted with a rigorous, systematic application of reductionist and experimental science of Alexander von Humboldt as the two met in 1795. A couple of years after the publication of Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants*, in 1799, Humboldt went on a scientific expedition to the Americas, accompanied by the French botanist Aime Bonpland. They collected seeds and specimens, closely observed plants and animal species in situ, sketched the Chimborazo map with detailed information on temperature, altitude, humidity, and atmosphere pressure, and published the *Essays on the Geography of Plants* in 1807. Humboldt's map, also known as the *Naturgemälde*, delineates isothermal lines and illustrates the animals and plants found at each elevation. Rather than searching for the essence of nature through a singular "Urpflanze," Humboldt revolutionized the way we see the natural world by inventing a web of life. "In this great chain of cause and effects," he said, "no single fact can be considered in isolation."¹¹ Humboldt sees a world where landmass, climate, oceans, plants, and animals are all interconnected with each other. His essays on the geography of plants goes beyond the work of a typical botanist: by collecting, describing, and classifying plant specimens, he shows how the diverse phenomena of plant geography can be unified and elaborated with a small set of interconnected patterns, which he calls "an essential part of general physics."¹²

¹¹ "In dieser großen Kette von Ursachen und Wirkungen kann keine Tatsache isoliert untersucht werden." Quoted in Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 26.

¹² Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, trans. Sylvie Romanowski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 64.

Despite the prevalence and significance of plants in human life, and the efforts of botanists from the Middle Ages till the present day, plants have rarely been at the forefront of our concerns. Theorists refer to the tendency to emphasize animals in scientific studies as “zoocentrism,” arguing that this tendency reinforces the privileging of animals as intelligent, mobile, sentient, and therefore superior to relatively passive plants, which in turn are often overlooked or taken for granted.¹³ In the recent years, scholars have noticed a so-called “plant blindness,” which refers to the inability to notice plants in their environment, the failure to recognize and appreciate the utility of plants for life on earth, and the belief that plants are somehow inferior to animals.¹⁴ The fact that our visual attention to humans and nonhuman animals is more precise than when we see plant is, according to Benjamin Balas and Jennifer Momsen, likely ancestrally-derived; but at the same time, it is worth noticing that the focus of our interest is not plants themselves but rather their usefulness as food or medicine.¹⁵

Plants are traditionally depicted in literature as a mere symbol, an ornamental backdrop, or part of the landscape. Individual plants are often seen as symbols of, for example, desire and sexuality. Perhaps the most famous example of plant symbolism, the blue flower that Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) dreams about, is a sacred symbol of the unattainable object of the romantic quest and the incarnation of desire. Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809), a novel deeply intertwined within the botanical discourse of the 18th century, fuses the author’s hypothesis of elective affinities with the theory of plant

¹³ The concept of zoocentrism was first proposed by Adrian Franklin in his book *Animals and Modern Cultures: a Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity* (London/New Delhi: Thousand Oaks/Sage, 1999), chap.9, ebook.

¹⁴ James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, “Preventing plant blindness,” *The American Biology Teacher* 61 (1999), 84–86.

¹⁵ Benjamin Balas and Jennifer Momsen, “Attention ‘Blinks’ Differently for Plants and Animals,” *CBE: Life Sciences Education* 13, no. 3 (2014), 437–43.

metamorphosis, analogizing the development of plants to sexual attraction and love. In a little poem entitled “Found” [Gefunden] that Goethe gave to Christiane Vulpius on their anniversary, the little flower serves explicitly as a symbol of feminine sexuality and implicitly represents a victim of the patriarchal system, transplanted and silenced “in silent corner” [am stillen Ort].¹⁶ Another enduring form of plant symbolism is that of the metaphor of rootedness: humans often imagine themselves just as embedded and attached to the soil beneath their feet as their vegetal neighbors. Humans tend to use the metaphor of rootedness to illustrate the feeling of being connected to the cultural, political, and ecological environment; while exile, diaspora, emigration, and expatriation are often described in the language of uprootedness. More frequently, plants are seen as part of the natural landscape, providing rich sources for cultural and literary imagination. August Wilhelm Iffland’s *The Hunter* (*Die Jäger*, 1785/1789), a popular forester fiction, ties the problem of natural protection and deforestation to the moral decline of the administrative officials who extort the community and endanger nature to satisfy their petty self-interest. Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s *The Jew’s Beech* (*Die Judenbuche*, 1842), a crime novel about the murders in Westphalia of a forest ranger and a Jewish moneylender, critiques the legal and scientific administrative attempts to manage the forest, and, by extension, rural populations. In her story, trees become a commodity that causes theft and murder, the forest becomes a synonym for the rural community, and the botanical landscape of Westphalia is substituted with the moral landscape of the first constitutional monarchy in Germany. Individual plant figures also play a significant role in late 19th and early 20th century symbolic poetry, such as the botanical references in Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs*

¹⁶ Goethe, WA I:1, 25.

du mal, 1857)¹⁷ and the flowers in Mallarmé's preface to René Ghil's *Treatise on the Word* (*Traité du Verbe*, 1886).¹⁸ In Rilke's "Dinggedichte," roses become an observed phenomenon that reflects the poet's own consciousness, a literary image where external objects and internal intuition overlap.¹⁹

An anthropocentric or zoocentric point of view is also reflected in philosophy, which has historically focused on the study of human beings, with more attention given to the species more akin to humanity, which are often regarded as superior to the less similar ones. The so-called *scala naturae* depicts a hierarchical system in which plants are ranked beneath humans and animals, and just above inanimate things.²⁰ As an example, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel argues that only humans and animals are able to preserve "inwardly the unity of the self," which then allows animals to develop their subjectivity, and humans, their self-consciousness.²¹ Similarly, Heidegger states that the stone has no world, the animal is poor in the world ("weltarm"), and the human is potentially world-making, letting plants slide out of view.²² The favoring of animals over plants continues in contemporary philosophy. While works critiquing traditional metaphysical anthropocentrism abound, from Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) to Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), Donna Haraway's *When Species*

¹⁷ See Doyle Calhoun, "Flowers for Baudelaire: Urban Botany and Allegorical Writing," in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 49, nos. 1&2 (Fall-Winter 2020-2021), 17-34.

¹⁸ René Ghil, *Traité du Verbe avec Avant-Dire de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris: Giraud, 1886).

¹⁹ These poems include the last poem in *Neue Gedichte* (1907) entitled "Die Rosenschale," "Das Rosen-Innere" composed in 1907, and the cycle of 24 poems in French entitled "Les Roses" (1926), to name a few examples.

²⁰ The *scala naturae*, or the "Great Chain of Being," was first systematized by the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, with similar ideas derived from Plato and Aristotle. It describes a hierarchical structure where all living beings can be viewed as representing various degrees of "perfection," with humans at the very top of the ladder. For further reference, see Ulrich Kutschera, "From the *scala naturae* to the symbiogenetic and dynamic tree of life," *Biology Direct* 6:33 (2011), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/1745-6150-6-33>.

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1970), 351.

²² Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 197-198.

Meet (2008), and Cynthia Willett's *Interspecies Ethics* (2014), works focusing on plant life remain scarce. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's highly influential concept of the rhizome, despite its seemingly convincing investment in the vegetal form of life, still appropriates the material existence of actual rhizomes, using them to exemplify a supposedly interconnected form of human being.²³

Recently, there has been more post-structural, post-modern, and post-human efforts aiming at offering a non-dualist, non-anthropocentric epistemology that pivots towards vegetal life, such as Brill/Rodopi's "Critical Plant Studies" book series that aims at promoting discussions about vegetal life.²⁴ A number of theoretical contributions sprouted up around plant life and biopolitics: for example, Elaine Miller provides a feminist account of German romanticism from Kant to Nietzsche in *Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (2002). Richard Doyle's *Darwin's Pharmacy: Plants, Sex, and the Noosphere* (2011) explores the interdependence between psychedelic plants and human beings, illustrating an interconnected ecosystem with an evolutionary mechanism as its rhetoric. Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetable Life* (2013) investigates the non-conscious intentionality of plants in resonance with the human thinking of non-identity. Even these scholarly efforts have been confronted with a sense of skepticism from animal studies and relevant fields. For example, Cary Wolfe, the author of *Before the Law: Humans and Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (2012), claims that plant life, along with bacterial life and much else, falls

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

²⁴ *Critical Plant Studies: Philosophy, Literature, Culture* (6 vols.), ed. Michael Marder (Leiden: Brill, 2013- 2020).

outside of the parameters of the author's biopolitical frame.²⁵ In a debate with Michael Marder, Gary Francione, the co-editor of Columbia University Press's *Critical Perspectives on Animals* series, insists that there is no evidence that "plants suffer or have any intentional states," and are not entitled to ethical recognition of any forms of subjectivity.²⁶ Jeffrey Nealon argues in the preface of his *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (2016) that biopolitics remains in animals not because animals constitute our "others," but because animality "provides the subtending notion of subjective desire that gives rise to biopower in the first place."²⁷ Drawing support from Foucault, Nealon points out that it is plant rather than animal that functions as the forgotten and abjected form of life within a dominant regime of anthropocentric biopolitics. More recently, since 2018, Joela Jacobs and her colleagues at the university of Arizona started a "Literary and Cultural Plant Studies Network," bringing scholars across disciplines to re-conceptualize plants, their agency, and their cultural and natural impact.²⁸

2. "Plant Writing" and Tawada's Biomorphism

What is "plant writing"? In this dissertation, I define it as writing about or in regard to plants, often with a "biomorphic" approach that transforms words in the traditional sense into self-generating, self-operating "word-leaves." My definition of plant writing is derived from Yoko Tawada's concept of language as self-generating "word-leaves," which she formulates in

²⁵Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 82.

²⁶ "Michael Marder and Gary Francione Debate Plant Ethics, Part Two," Columbia University Press Blog, June 6, 2012, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.cupblog.org/2012/06/06/michael-marder-and-gary-francione-debate-plant-ethics-part-two/>.

²⁷ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016): x.

²⁸ "Literary & Cultural Plant Studies Network," University of Arizona, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://plants.arizona.edu/>.

her doctoral dissertation and other poetological works that I will discuss in detail in Chapter Two. The term “word-leaf” is a reference to the Japanese word “kotoba” [言葉], which is often translated as “word”, but has a broad range of meanings including an expression, a phrase, a sentence, a way of speech, or a system of language. The phrase, joined by two characters, “koto” (thing, incident, circumstance) and “ha”²⁹ (leaf, blade of grass), first appears in the preface to *Kokin Wakashū*, the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry dating from the Heian period (c. 905): “Japanese poetry has peoples’ hearts as its seed and it takes form in the myriad leaves of words.”³⁰ In the centuries after the word’s first coinage, the “leaf,” originally a metaphor used to describe the multitude of words, gradually grows to become part of the term for “word” itself. My definition of “plant writing” refers to a similar process, in which words constantly metamorphose into various meanings, sounds, and shapes that could be interpreted differently depending on their temporal, spatial, or linguistic contexts. The plant motifs in this writing are not mere metaphors with a clear underlying reference, but almost-organisms³¹ that have a life relatively independent of the author’s original intention. The text is therefore transient and grows anew each time it is read or translated.

²⁹ The initial consonant of the word “ha” becomes voiced once the two words are joined together. The phenomenon is referred to as “rendaku,” or “sequential voicing” in Japanese.

³⁰ “やまとうたは、人のこころをたねとして、よろづのことはとぞなれりける”. See *Kokin Wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry, With Tosa Nikki and Shinsen Waka*, trans. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).³⁰

Kanji, the adopted logographic Chinese characters used in the Japanese writing system, were introduced around the 5th century, when the Japanese language had no written form. Later during the Heian period (794-1185), when *Kokin Wakashū* was published, a system known as “kanbun” emerged, which accompanied Chinese text with diacritical marks for Japanese speakers to understand Chinese sentences, or added particles and verb endings in accordance with Japanese grammar. The introduction and reproduction of Chinese texts with the grammar and pronunciation of spoken Japanese is arguably a process of language-making, turning spoken words into word-leaves embodied by Chinese characters.

³¹ The phrase “almost-organism” echoes with Paul Celan’s “almost-tree” [Beinah-Baum] in the essay “Edgar Jené and the Dream about the Dream” (1948). See Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983): 155. Hereafter GW with volume and page numbers.

The term “biomorphic” came into use in the 1930s to describe surrealist paintings and sculptures with abstract forms that evoke living organisms such as plants and the human body. Tawada’s literary texts are often said to have a certain proximity to surrealism and automatism. Bettina Brandt’s comparative study of the surrealistic imageries of Tawada, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and Herta Müller, argues that an interpretation of Tawada’s texts from a surrealistic perspective allows her works to be freed from the geographical, political, and linguistic space of “in-between” and allows her to focus on exploring the materiality of language. According to Brandt, Tawada’s surrealist experiment could be interpreted as a means of aesthetic and cultural resistance against a Eurocentric meta-narrative of contemporary literature and an origin-based identity politics.³² Through the montage of everyday objects and familiar characters in a lexicon, she creates classic surrealistic images that mirror the absurdity of our surroundings and create a lingering shock. Matsunaga Miho also relates Tawada’s works to surrealism, particularly her Japanese prose poems, which Matsunaga sees as examples of Tawada’s automatic writing.³³ Her prolonged fascination with typewriters, printers, writing programs, and puppet scripts demonstrate her interest in creating a self-generating text. For Tawada, the writing apparatus is not just a metaphor, but a methodology: some of her texts are intentionally written in an “automatic” way, such as the 17 prose texts in the anthology of short stories, *Kitsune-tsuki* [きつね月, Fox-Possessed Moon], and the poem “Otoma” [おとま, automa].³⁴

³² Bettina Brandt, “Schnitt durch Auge: Surrealistische Bilder bei Yoko Tawada, Emine Sevgi Özdamar und Herta Müller.” *Text+Kritik: Literatur und Migration*, Sonderband 9 (2006): 75.

³³ Miho Matsunaga, “Zum Konzept eines ‚automatischen‘ Schreibens bei Yoko Tawada,” *Études Germaniques* 259 (March 2010): 445-454.

³⁴ Matsunaga, “Zum Konzept eines ‚automatischen‘ Schreibens bei Yoko Tawada,” 449.

In the 1924 *Manifesto of surrealism*, André Breton defines surrealism as “pure psychic automatism...the dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic concerns.”³⁵ While the surrealist movement strives to explore the human unconscious, as influenced by Freud, Tawada’s automatism pays equal, if not more, attention to revealing the unknown in the world around us through wordplay, unusual transcription of Chinese characters, neologism, and intentionally fragmented words.³⁶ Her anthropological interpretation of the so-called “puppet script” [Puppenschrift], a language embodied by man-made puppets—including the Indonesian shadow puppet Wayang, the Japanese Hinanigyō dolls, The Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang’s terracotta army—is entitled *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie: eine ethnologische Poetologie* [Toys and Language Magic: an Ethnologic Poetology]. In this dissertation-turned-book, she uses the ethnographical approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Leiris to analyze the “magic” behind such script. The Hinanigyō, a set of ornamental dolls representing the emperor, empress, attendants, and musicians in the Heian period, displayed on the festival of Girls’ Day, is said to replicate the vertical hierarchy of the Japanese social structure since the Middle Ages.³⁷ Before representing hierarchy, a function widely seen in Tawada’s analysis of other puppets (such as tin soldiers and the Christ child), Hinanigyō dolls had a ceremonial function, allowing them to protect girls from illness and accidents. According to Tawada, the magic of the puppet script of Hinanigyō is no longer accessible because the way people understand it has changed; these dolls “no longer

³⁵ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>.

³⁶ Matsunaga, “Zum Konzept eines ‚automatischen‘ Schreibens bei Yoko Tawada,” 453.

³⁷ Yoko Tawada, *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie: Eine ethnologische Poetologie* (Tübingen: Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke, 2000): 100.

disappear in the river, but are preserved in a box like letters in a book.”³⁸ But Tawada’s ethnographical research of the alternative function of the puppet script allows her to rediscover Hinaninyō’s magic. Reading puppets as language opens a “portal” towards a number of “parallel universes”: one hierarchical and rationally ordered, one spiritual or cultic, and many more. “But when the puppets form a script, it is no longer surprising that people write different texts with the same puppets: little girls paint out their future or imaginary life with them, while the adults use the same puppets to represent the world of Gods ... children’s books are written in the same script as the bible: with the alphabet.”³⁹ The automatic writing embodied by the puppet script allows the user, be it a young girl or an adult, to comprehend the world in different yet equally accurate ways.

What fascinates Tawada in the idea of automatic writing is that, such writing offers a way to connect with organisms and objects in the world that are otherwise incomprehensible, such as stones, trees, and flowers. This way of writing appears again in her reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story “Das fremde Kind” [The Stranger Child], a story about two children and their lifeless-toy-turned-playmate, an androgynous, amorphous, and otherworldly child spirit. The stranger child inspires the two children, Felix and Christlieb, to rediscover and communicate with flowers, stones, trees, and birds in the forest, but the children’s tutor “Magister Tinte” [Tutor Ink] forces them into the mold of social conformity with his natural-scientific terminology and “rational” belief system that discriminates against anything that does not fit into his system. In her book about Hoffmann’s *Lebens Ansichten des Katers Murr*, Sarah Kofman sees a

³⁸ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 100.

³⁹ “Wenn die Puppen aber eine Schrift bilden, so ist es nicht mehr verwunderlich, daß man mit denselben Puppen verschiedene Texte schreibt: Kleine Mädchen malerisch mit den Puppen ihr zukünftiges oder imaginäres Leben aus, während die Erwachsenen mit denselben Puppen die Götterwelt darstellen... Kinderbücher werden mit derselben Schrift geschrieben wie die Bibel: mit dem Alphabet.” Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 105.

hierarchical opposition between reason, as represented by Magister Tinte, and the children's foolishness, which Kofman sees as superior to the scientist's rational reasoning.⁴⁰ Tawada disagrees with Kofman, as she believes that the distinction between reason and foolishness, between wakefulness and dream is blurred, as embodied by the figure of Magister Tinte, which Tawada calls a "Mischwesen," a mixed creature. The tutor first appears as an insect-looking-human with spider legs and shiny, protruding glass eyes,⁴¹ and is later transformed into a big, hideous fly with a human face and a few pieces of remaining clothing.⁴² Despite speaking in the language of understanding and reason, his behavior often undermines his words: he eats candies with unhumanly greed and rip out the flowers that he considers "useless" out of the ground in an uncontrollable fit of anger.⁴³ Tawada comments that the character of Magister Tinte represents the struggle between a "natural, childlike world" [einer natürlichen kindlichen Welt] and an "alienated technical and enlightened world" [einer entfremdenden technischen und aufgeklärten Welt].⁴⁴ The incomprehensible and indissoluble characteristics of Magister Tinte make him "daemonic,"⁴⁵ not because he is a devil or a mythical figure, but because he "reveals the daemonic faces inherent in the Enlightenment, nature, and technology."⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Sarah Kofman, *Schreiben wie eine Katze... Zu E. T. A. Hoffmanns "Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr"* (Wien/Köln: Passagen Verlag, 1985): 46.

⁴¹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Das Fremde Kind," in *Die Serapionsbrüder*. I und II (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1994): 602.

⁴² Hoffmann, "das Fremde Kind," 607.

⁴³ Hoffmann, "das Fremde Kind," 606.

⁴⁴ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 78.

⁴⁵ For spelling consistency, "das Dämonische" and "Dämon" in this dissertation are translated as "the daemonic" and "daemon."

⁴⁶ "Magister Tinte ist nicht deswegen dämonisch, weil er ein Teufel, ein Geist oder eine andere mythische Figur ist, sondern weil er die der Aufklärung, der Natur und der Technik innerwohnenden dämonische Gesichter sichtbar macht." Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 78.

In Tawada's reading, both the stranger child and the tutor represent the same "daemonic" power that allow humans to communicate with parts of the world that remain incomprehensible in the age of technology and enlightenment. The "daemonic" in Hoffmann's story occupies the space where the developed industrial society and the natural world of trees and stones overlap. An androgynous spirit dwelling in a mechanical puppet, the stranger child is another example of the "daemonic," as the child is able to communicate with humans and trees alike. Simultaneously mythical and modern, Magister Tinte and the stranger child reveal the uncanny face of nature and technology with their failed attempts to harmonize the two worlds, which, as a result, problematize both. The "daemonic" art of the stranger child, Tawada suggests, is not his ability to discover beautiful stones and flowers, but the ability to make toys out of organic materials that he finds in the forest. He makes the flowers and stones move and speak not through mechanics, but through "magic."⁴⁷ This magic, or as Tawada indicates with the title of her book, "Sprachmagie," has the power to turn nature into "an event, a thing, a toy."⁴⁸ However, the figure of the stranger child should not be seen as an embodiment of "poesie," which, in Hans-Joachim Kruse's reading, aims at mimicking nature perfectly so that the divine beauty and grace of nature beings could shine through.⁴⁹ Tawada, however, finds it problematic to place the concept of "poesie" in the realm of nature. The stranger child, she argues, appears first after the children separate themselves from the "unnatural" mechanical toys, and the figure of the toy-turned-child functions in a way that allows "the magic of words appear...through the mechanic

⁴⁷ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 78.

⁴⁸ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 78.

⁴⁹ See Hans-Joachim Kruse's commentary in *E.T.A.Hoffmann: Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, Bd.1-8, Textrevision u. Anmerkungen von Hans-Joachim Kruse (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1994): 745, cited in Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 78.

of artworks.”⁵⁰ As Tawada suggests, the appearance of the “daemonic” magic of language requires both the mechanical operation of the puppets and its collapse.⁵¹ “Poesie,” or in this case, the “puppet-script,” only becomes possible when the mechanics of human language fail its first attempts. The story of the stranger child is not a story of industrial development versus primitive nature; it is a story of children’s communication with nature through the (failed) mechanical language of puppets. As Tawada concludes, “Hoffmann’s story does not tell of a childhood in nature, destroyed by the influence of industrial development in the form of mechanical toys. Instead, it describes a magic required by the mechanics, insofar as it only becomes available when the machine has collapsed.”⁵²

In a way, Tawada’s own poetic language also aims at “becoming” the broken mechanical puppet haunted by natural elements. Her writing style, as we have seen earlier, is clearly influenced by 20th century literary and artistic movements including dadaism, surrealism, automatism, and experimental poetic forms such as concrete, visual, and sound poetry. While Tawada’s word play and visual explorations of written signs are clearly influenced by the works of Michel Leiris, Ernst Jandl, and Roland Barthes, she pays particularly attention to things in the natural world, particularly plants, which distinguishes her style from that of surrealists. Tawada’s literary endeavor could be seen as a kind of “biomorphism” in that it aims to bring the power of vegetal life and organic shapes with the traditional structure and function of language, creating a mystical, spontaneous, and often irrational experience, as seen in the works of Hans Arp, Joan

⁵⁰ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 79.

⁵¹ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 79.

⁵² “Hoffmanns Märchen erzählt nicht etwa von einer Kindheit in der Natur, die durch den Einfluß der industriellen Entwicklung in Gestalt des mechanischen Spielzeugs zerstört wird. Vielmehr beschreibt es eine Magie, die die Mechanik voraussetzt, insofern sie erst nach deren Zusammenbruch möglich wird. Im Märchen erscheint zuerst das mechanische Spielzeug und dann das fremde Kind.” Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 80.

Miró, and Yves Tanguy.⁵³ Tanguy's paintings, for example, fuse animal, vegetable, and human figures with rock formations to create sparse, porous, and horizonless landscapes. Tawada is also keen on using figures and words that reflect a fusion of wide-ranging world cultures, mythologies, languages, and more. In an interview, Tawada comments on human beings' propensity to metamorphosis: "Matter morphs constantly and is immortal, though a human being won't return as such but will be part of the soil, of plants, and perhaps of animals, so we are a mass of different forms of matter. Atoms don't sit tightly on one another: there is space between them, and that is true for our body too, it's not really solid."⁵⁴

Just like humans and plants, language is also part of this constant metamorphosis of matters that is constantly changing its shape. For Tawada, language is not an abstract medium of communication represented by written characters, but something visible, audible, and tangible, like a piece of leaf, or "kotoba." The outcome is as artificial as it is organic and natural: the "word-leaf" has the visual and acoustic features of a plant as well as comparable metabolism, yet it is clearly made by the creative force of a human rather than a divine being. The ubiquitous plant motif in Tawada's writing is not a metaphor, which is an abstract figure of speech and a purely mechanical device, but a methodology of creative force that turns plants, animals, and

⁵³ Biomorphism as an art movement started in the early 20th century, and the terms "biomorph" and "biomorphic" were coined by Cambridge anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon in his work *Evolution in Art* (1895), then brought into the language of modernist art history and criticism in the 1930s by British critic and naturalist Geoffrey Grigson, then picked up by American art historian Alfred H. Barr in his exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art." The concept of biomorphism has not been widely adopted in literary criticism, but Daniela Kato's essay on British modernist poet Basil Bunting's long poem *Briggflatts* (1966) offers an example of a literary approach to this concept, and connects the trajectory of 20th century art history and criticism to the ongoing discourse of ecocriticism and eco-poetics. See Alfred Cort Haddon, *Evolution in Art: As Illustrated by the Life-Histories of Designs* (London: The Walter Scott Press, 1895), Jennifer Mundy, "The Naming of Biomorphism," in *Biocentrism and Modernism*, ed. Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011): 61–76, and Daniela Kato, "'Distilled Essence of Cormorant': the Eco-poetics of Briggflatts and the Modernist Biomorphic Imagination," in *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* (April 2014): 4.

⁵⁴ Claudia Steinberg, "Interview with Yoko Tawada." *Free Radical* 16 (October 2017), accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.aesop.com/se/r/the-fabulist/yoko-tawada>.

stones into individual “word-leaves.” As her reading of Hoffmann’s story suggests, this metamorphosis only happens when the purely mechanical puppet breaks down, when language as we know it fails to operate as intended.⁵⁵

Tawada’s analysis of Paul Celan’s poetry follow the same biomorphic approach. She pays particular attention to the botanical lexicon in Celan’s poems, “where roses, cherries, chestnuts, tulips, ferns, palms, bamboos, and other plants grow,” particularly their metamorphosis.⁵⁶ The plants in Celan’s poems, Tawada argues, are “neither a representation of nature nor a metaphor for an abstract matter,” but living things with a multitude of functions and can be interpreted in various ways.⁵⁷ Celan’s plants are also, in a sense, a script made of “word-leaves” that can be understood with different lexicons in mind, “be it a natural scientific one, a biblical one, or a French one.”⁵⁸ In each attempt of reading or translation, these “word-leaves” are transformed into new shapes, as they “not only stand next to each other in a poem, but are bound together by an alchemical process so that the poem shows new forms in every translation attempt.”⁵⁹ While alchemy attempts to produce a miracle by mixing minerals, the “alchemical process” in Celan’s *Niemandsrose* produces a different kind of miracle by transgressing the border between vocabularies, such as mineralogy and botany: “a stone in the realm of

⁵⁵ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 79.

⁵⁶ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 65.

⁵⁷ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 65.

⁵⁸ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 65.

⁵⁹ “Sie [enthält] in sich schon verschiedene Sprachen -- sei es eine naturwissenschaftliche, eine biblische oder die französische. Sie stehen nicht einfach nebeneinander in einem Gedicht, sondern sie sind durch einen alchemistischen Prozess so miteinander verbunden, dass das Gedicht in jedem Übersetzungsversuch neue Formen zeigt.” Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 81.

mineralogy cannot bloom; but when it enters the vocabulary of botany, it can open up like a rose.”⁶⁰

More concretely speaking, Tawada’s biomorphic reading of Celan’s poem includes the following literary experiments: the visual translation of a poem’s “form” rather than its intended meanings; creative punctuation of typographical symbols and word divisions; and alternative transcription or translation into a different script or language. An example of Tawada’s visual translation lies in her analysis of “Dioecious, eternal” [Zweihäusig, ewiger], where she argues that the double-T in the word “Bettstatt” (bedstead) resembles the radical of grass (艹, “grass crown”) in the Japanese word for rose, “薔薇” (bara).⁶¹ Most characters with this radical are plant, such as leaf, flower, grass, or stem; both characters in the word “bara” have the radical of “grass crown.” According to Tawada, the “double crown” in the Japanese translation is the metamorphosis of the *Niemandrose* in the original, which continues to bloom in its translation, albeit at a different, unexpected location.⁶² Her creative interpretation of the dotted line in “To one, who stood before the door” [Einem, der vor der Tür stand] takes the demand “count the almonds” [zähle die Mandeln] literally and counts the dots in the line as almonds.⁶³ In the same essay, the letter “o” in “Radix, Matrix”⁶⁴ transforms from an outcry to the first letter of the poet Mandelstam’s name, Ossip, and again to the number “0,” which is related to the recurring phrases of “nothing” [Nichts] and “nobody” [Niemand] in the book of poems, *No-One’s-Rose*

⁶⁰ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 64.

⁶¹ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 66.

⁶² Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 68-69.

⁶³ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 82.

⁶⁴ “Wurzel. Wurzel Abrahams. Wurzel Jesse. Niemandes/ Wurzel - o/ unser.” Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke, Erste Band: Gedichte I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983): 239, hereafter GW with volume and page numbers.

[Niemandrose].⁶⁵ Tawada also analyzes the duality of Celan's scientific terminology, such as "Kolon," which belongs both to the field of metrics and medicine, and "Matrix," a word that has different meanings in mathematics and in biology.⁶⁶

Although Celan's poetry cannot be strictly categorized as "surrealist," he was involved with the surrealist groups in Bucharest and Vienna in the late 1940s, and produced surrealism-inspired texts including his introduction to the publication of the German artist Edgar Jené's 1948 lithographs, his translations of French surrealist poems between the year 1945 and 1957, and numerous drafts, letters, poetological notes, and prose fragments from the late 1950s to the early 1960s. In her book *Paul Celan's Encounters with Surrealism*, Charlotte Ryland demonstrates that Celan's reception of surrealist themes and structures produces creative insights into his own poetry and poetics.⁶⁷ Celan's engagement with surrealist works is largely one of translation: most of these publications, including encounters with Aimé Césaire's "N'ayez point pitié de moi," Robert Desnos' "le Denier Poème," and Paul Éluard's "Nous avons fait la nuit," are translations in the conventional sense; the essay "Edgar Jené and the Dream about the Dream" [Edgar Jené und der Traum von Traume], which arises from his attempt to articulate the experience of observing Jené's lithographs in words, could also be categorized as an act of translation, or, to borrow Ryland's words, an "inter-semiotic transposition."⁶⁸ With Jené's painting "The Sea of Blood Covers the Land" [das Blutmeer geht über Land] in mind, he writes,

⁶⁵ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 63-83.

⁶⁶ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 64.

⁶⁷ Charlotte Ryland, *Paul Celan's Encounters with Surrealism: Trauma, Translation and Shared Poetic Space* (New York: Legenda, 2010): 3.

⁶⁸ Ryland, *Surrealism*, 4.

A Sail Leaves an Eye. One sail only? No, I see two. But the first one, which still bears the colour of the eye, cannot proceed. I know it must come back. Arduous, this return. All liquid has run out of the eye in the form of a steep waterfall. But down here (up there), the water also flows uphill, the sail climbs the steep incline of the white profile which owns nothing but this eye without a pupil and which, just because it owns nothing but this, knows and can do more than we. For this profile of a woman with hair a little bluer than her mouth (which looks up, diagonally, at a mirror we cannot see, tests its expression and judges it appropriate), this profile is a cliff, an icy monument at the access to the inner sea which is a sea of wavy tears. What can the other side of this face look like? Grey like the land we glimpse? But let us go back to our sails. The first one will come home, into the empty, yet strangely seeing socket. Perhaps the tide will carry it in the wrong direction, into the eye which stares out on the grey of the other side. Then the boat will bear tidings, but without much promise. And the second boat whose sail bears a fiery eye, a flaming pupil on a field, sable, of certainty? We enter it in our sleep: then we see what remains to be dreamed.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ “Ein Segel verläßt ein Auge.” Ein einziges Segel? Nein, ich sehe zwei. Aber das erste, das noch die Farbe des Auges trägt, wird nicht weiterkönnen, ich weiß es, es kehrt zurück. Sehr schwer scheint diese Rückkehr zu sein: al sein steiler Wasserfall ran das Wasser dieses Auges aus, aber hier unten (dort oben) fließt das Wasser auch zu Berge, erklimmt das Segel noch den steilen Hang dieses weißen Profils, das nichts besitzt als dieses Auge ohne Augensterne und das, weil es nichts als eben nur dieses besitzt, mehr vermag und mehr weiß als wir. Denn dieses Profil einer Frau, deren Haar, ein wenig blauer als ihr aufwärtsblickender Mund (in einem uns unsichtbar bleibenden, schräg über ihm liegenden Spiegel erkennt dieser Mund sich selber, prüft seinen Ausdruck und wertet ihn als richtig): dieses Profil ist eine Klippe, ein eisiges Denkmal an den Zugängen des innern Meeres, das auch ein Meer der welligen Tränen ist. Wie mag wohl die andere Seite dieses Antlitzes aussehen? Grau, wie jenes Land, das wir noch erblicken? Aber kehren wir doch zu unseren Segeln zurück. Das erste wird heimkehren in die leere und seltsam sehende Augenhöhle. Vielleicht setzt es auch seine Wanderung fort, in verkehrter Richtung, in das Aug, das auf der anderen Seite ins Grau starrt... So wird dieses Boot noch zum Boten, aber seine Botschaft verheißt nicht viel. Aber das zweite Boot, dessen Segel ein Glutaug, den flammenden Augensterne im schwarzen Felde der Gewißheit trägt? Wir besteigen es schlafend: so sehen wir was zu träumen bleibt. Celan, GW III, 158-159. The English hereafter is cited from *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1986): 3-10.

“The Sea of Blood Covers the Land” contains four bio-organic forms hanging over a bleak landscape, with holes in two of them and icicle-looking shapes hanging beneath. These forms continuously transform from one shape into another in Celan’s four attempts to identify these shapes. He first calls them “also-tree” (Auch-Baum) or “almost-tree” (Beinah-Baum).⁷⁰ Then they become “two sails” with hollow eyes and tears coming of the eyes, forming a waterfall. The third time, these shapes are transformed into the face of a woman, with the holes being her eyes and the icicles, her hair. Finally, it turns into an icy monument on a sea of wavy tears. With a similar function as Tawada’s “grass crown,” the tears seem to be the visual center of gravity in Celan’s translation. Celan’s descriptions create a disoriented feeling with arbitrary temporal and spatial orders: the first sail order goes home, but the tide threatens to carry it in the wrong direction towards the other side. The other boat sails towards a field of certainty enters our dream, but it could also be the other way around, that we enter the boat in our sleep. The waterfall drops into deep sea—or is it a sail climbing the steep incline towards the eye? Disrupting a priori categories of time and space, Celan disorients readers with his words. “Well, old identity monger, what did you see and recognize, you brave doctor of tautology? What could you recognize, tell me, along this unfamiliar road?”⁷¹ His imaginary upside-down mouth mocks him even in a dream.

⁷⁰ Celan, GW III, 155.

⁷¹ “Alter Identitätskrämer! Was hast du erblickt und erkannt tapferer Doktor der Tautologie? Was hast du erkannt, sag, am Rand dieser neuen Straße?” Celan, GW III, 155.

For Celan, the dream-like dizziness of surrealist paintings creates a false and distorted atmosphere that likely echoes with his personal reality as a Holocaust survivor. Gagged and unable to speak,⁷² he sees the potential of language in its constant transformation:

what could be more dishonest than to claim that words had somehow, at bottom, remained the same? I could not help seeing that the ashes of burned-out meanings (and not only of those) had covered what had, since time immemorial, been striving for expression in man's inner most soul. (...) It may be from the remotest regions of the spirit that words and figures will come, images and gestures, veiled and unveiled as in a dream."⁷³

Jené's painting creates a landscape where everything is constantly in motion and metamorphosing, and by translating this visual landscape into language, Celan finds a way to give shape to a new, post-war reality and potentially a new language to come. His literal translation of Jené's visual image does not replicate the exact landscape with its concrete metaphors, but mimics the constant metamorphosis of the surrealist image, and as a result, his language never remains the same. To dust off the "ashes of burned-out meanings" of language before the sincerest expression could happen, Celan's poetry challenges everything about language that has been taken for granted.

⁷² As Celan puts in the poem "Frankfurt, September": "the glottal stop/ sings." ["Der Kehlkopfverschlußlaut/ singt."] GW II, 114.

⁷³ Was war unaufrichtiger als die Behauptung, diese Worte seien irgendwo im Grunde noch dieselben! So mußte ich auch erkennen, daß sich zu dem, was zutiefst in seinem Innern seit unvordenklichen Zeiten nach Ausdruck rang, auch noch die Asche ausgebrannter Sinnggebung gesellt hatte und nicht nur diese! [...] Aus den entferntesten Bezirken des Geistes mögen Worte und Gestalten kommen, Bilder und Gebärden, traumhaft verschleiert und traumhaft entschleiert, und wenn sie einander begegnen in ihrem rasenden Lauf und der Funken des Wunderbaren geboren wird, da Fremdes fremdesten vermählt wird, blicke ich der neuen Helligkeit ins Auge." Celan, GW III 157-158.

Tawada's reading-translation of Celan is, in a way, a continuation of Celan's surrealist translation of Edgar Jené's images into language. Celan's translation allows Jené's visual motif to grow organically from a tower to a stone face, from a clenched fist to swearing eyes ("eine Augenfaust, die schwört").⁷⁴ Tawada's translation of Celan continues to focus on the visual, as she observes the double-T in "Radix, Matrix" transform into a grass crown.⁷⁵ With her deliberate "misreading" of the author's intention, Tawada's biomorphic translation offers a perfect response to the poet: a response from the future. Inspired by Osip Mandelstam's 1913 essay "About an Interlocutor," Tawada argues that poetry should form a dialogue with an unexpected interlocutor as if "trading signals with Mars."⁷⁶ Mandelstam's ideal audience is not someone of his own community, or even of his own generation, but someone unknown and unexpected: "when I am speaking to someone, I have no idea who it is, and I do not, cannot wish to know him."⁷⁷ Tawada the translator therefore positions herself as a translator from Mars, in whose work the most unexpected, dream-like words and images do arise from the "ashes of burned-out meanings."⁷⁸ For Tawada, every reading is a translation in the Benjaminian sense, as texts could only attain an afterlife in the process of living, dying, and metamorphosing. But unlike Benjamin, Tawada is not aiming to reveal the "pure language" through translation, but to create an organic life cycle so that words continue to grow in each attempt of translation. While Benjamin's idea of the afterlife confirms the original's finitude—for him, the translation cannot be reproduced and

⁷⁴ Celan, GW III, 161.

⁷⁵ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 64.

⁷⁶ "Manchmal habe ich das Gefühl, Celan hätte unter anderem die Übersetzer, die er noch gar nicht kennen konnte, als Gesprächspartner vom Mars angesehen und für sie zahlreiche Signale hinterlassen," *Sprachpolizei*, 81.

⁷⁷ Osip Mandelstam, "On the Interlocutor," trans. Philip Nikolayev, *The Battersea Review*, accessed April 11, 2021. <http://thebatterseareview.com/critical-prose/154-on-the-interlocutor>.

⁷⁸ Celan, GW III, 158.

retranslated—the life cycle of a language in the Tawadian sense grows continuously and without limit. Benjamin believes that languages relate to one another by means of the so-called “pure language,” or “the meant” [das Gemeinte], which emerges out of the interplay of languages’ “way of signifying” [Art des Meinens].⁷⁹ As Samuel Weber explains it, “the task of the translator consists, first, in relating the distinctive ways of meaning in different languages to one another, and secondly and correlatively, in bringing out what is ultimately ‘meant’—signified—by these different but related ways of meaning: namely, ‘pure language’ itself.”⁸⁰ But the conflict between the “way of meaning” and “the meant” remains. Citing Walter Benjamin’s provocative slogan of the task of the translator, Weber comments: “‘Fidelity to the word, freedom toward the meaning!’...such [pure] meaning cannot be equated with the sum of meanings of individual words and phrases. Language here names the irreducibility of the way of meaning to what is meant, the non-equivalence of the What (meaning) and the How (signifying).”⁸¹ According to Benjamin, only in the *Holy Writ* does the conflict between literalness and meaning cease to exist, as the holy text is written in “the true language” that does not require the mediation of meaning. The literalness and meaning of the Scriptures are essentially one and the same, therefore it is unconditionally translatable. In Benjamin’s view, any other profane text would have limited translatability, as truth always has to be mediated through something; any attempt to mimic the immediacy of the *Holy Script* with pure “literalness” or “wordliness” will threaten to lose the stable, self-identical meaning of human language and lead straight into the unintelligible.

⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* IV (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974): 17, hereafter GS with volume and page number.

⁸⁰ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008): 71.

⁸¹ Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, 73.

Meanwhile, Tawada's view of language is fundamentally shaped by her studies of folk religions and ethnic spirituality beyond a single belief system. Her view of the afterlife of language takes into consideration that people of different cultures and religious background use the same word or character to express completely different intentions,⁸² and as a result, "the meant" is inherently plural and ever-shifting. "Pure language" in the Tawadian sense would refer to the material nature and livelihood of words, which allow them to grow independently even without human "interference." With her automatic and biomorphic writing, Tawada intentionally recreates the (Benjaminian) linguistic madness of word-by-word literalness that allows syntax to take precedence over grammar and sentence structure. To do so, Tawada's writing intentionally disregards any a priori knowledge that might place constraints on the potential of language, including time, space, and laws of judgement such as causality.⁸³ In a moment of a dream-like frenzy, words are freed from their traditional task of communication and strive towards creating something new. The task of a Tawadian translator overlaps with the difficulty that Celan also frequently encounters, which is the struggle to express himself as a Holocaust survivor with the German language, a language that is simultaneously his mother tongue and his mother's murderers' tongue. In his poetry, Celan often creates a dizzyingly confusing place where time is

⁸² For example, the character for "bed"[床] in Chinese means "floor" in Japanese, because in Japan, it is common that people sleep on floors.

⁸³ Tawada is obviously borrowing the idea of an immediate, pre-a priori language from Benjamin, for whom language itself is "a priori" in that "we cannot represent to ourselves the spiritual essence of anything not communicating in expression" [wir uns nichts vorstellen können, das sein geistiges Wesen nicht im Ausdruck mitteilt]. (GS II, 140-141). Peter Fenves's chapter "On Paradisal Epochē" analyzes Benjamin's adaptation of Kant's argument with regard to the nonconceptual character of space, where he argues that language for Benjamin "is prior even to the a priori forms in which things appear...the immediacy of language makes it not only prejudgmental but also in general prelogical and therefore—to use Benjamin's more colorful word—"magical" (Fenves, *Arresting Language*, 203-204). Tawada even calls Benjamin a "language magician": "Benjamin is not only a theoretician of the magic of language, but he is also a magician of language. He himself practices a "lecture of things" in which their magical moments flash through." [Benjamin ist nicht nur Theoretiker der Sprachmagie, sondern auch ein Magier der Sprache. Er praktiziert selbst eine "Lektüre der Dinge," in der deren magische Momente aufblitzen.] Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 19.

measured by “breathturns” [Atemwende]⁸⁴ and moments of encounter, and space is turned upside-down like the world of Lenz, who “walks on his head.”⁸⁵ This confusing space that Celan creates reminds us of the absurd world of Büchner’s *Leonce and Lena*, where both the temporal and spatial order has been disrupted: “time and lighting are unrecognizable: we are ‘fleeing towards paradise,’ and ‘all clocks and calendars’ are soon to be ‘broken’ or, rather, ‘forbidden.’”⁸⁶ Equally absent here is the presence of human agency and the sovereignty of reason: before the fool Valerio introduced the mechanical puppet prince and princess, the “two world’s famous automatons” that has just arrived, he added, “I myself actually knew for certain who I am, though no one by the way should be surprised that I don’t, since I myself know nothing of what I say, and don’t even know that I don’t know, so that it’s highly probable that I am simply being made to talk like this [daß man mich nur so reden läßt], and in reality it is nothing but cylinders, pipes, and windbags speaking these words of mine.”⁸⁷ For Celan, to write solely based on his perception of “here and now” risks sending all poetic tropes and metaphors down the abyss of absurdity: “What has been, what can be perceived, again and again, and only here, only now. Hence the poem is the place where all tropes and metaphors want to be led *ad*

⁸⁴ “Dichtung: das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten.” Celan, GW III, 195. Apart from being one of the central ideas in the Meridian speech, it is also the title of a volume of poems that Celan published in 1967.

⁸⁵ “Wer auf dem Kopf geht, der hat den Himmel als Abgrund unter sich.” Celan, GW III, 195.

⁸⁶ “Zeit und Beleuchtung sind hier nicht wieder zuerkennen, wir sind ja ‘auf der Flucht ins Paradies’, ‘alle Uhren und Kalender’ sollen bald ‘zerschlagen’ bzw. ‘verboten’ werden.” Celan, GW III, 188. *Leonce and Lena* is obviously a farce, but even so, Celan takes its ridiculous nature seriously, as he sees poetry as a “homage to the majesty of the absurd” (GW III, 190). It is not unlikely that he sees something similar as the figure of Lenz in the discussion of a newborn baby.

⁸⁷ “[...] wenn ich eigentlich selbst recht wüßte, wer ich wäre, worüber man übrigens sich nicht wundern dürfte, da ich selbst gar nichts von dem weiß, was ich rede, ja auch nicht einmal weiß, daß ich es nicht weiß, so daß es höchst wahrscheinlich ist, daß man mich nur so reden läßt, und es eigentlich nichts als Walzen und Windschläuche sind, die das Alles sagen.” Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke und Schriften*. Ed. Burghard Dedner. Band 6: *Leonce und Lena*. (Darmstadt 2003). Accessed April 11, 2021, <http://buechnerportal.de/werke/leonce-und-lena/>.

absurdum.”⁸⁸ Poetry as defined in the “Meridian” speech is a “homage to the majesty of the absurd which bespeaks the presence of human beings.”⁸⁹ It is not homage to the monarchy, but an act of freedom that breaks through the constraints of time, space, and the sovereignty of reason, and strives towards something else in the realm of absurdity, where words operate as puppets and strings, and language becomes “tangible and like a person.”⁹⁰

3. The Chapters

Chapter One contextualizes my analysis of literary plant figures in the German literary tradition and the botanical discourse from the 19th century to the present, connected by three core figures, Goethe, Benjamin, and Tawada. I demonstrate the significance of plant writing in these authors’ effort to connect the “language of things” and the “language of man.”⁹¹ Focusing on Benjamin’s and Tawada’s reading of Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities*, this chapter argues that, the magical language that Tawada discovers in Otilie’s “plant-like” muteness could be traced back to Benjamin’s theory of language and the Goethean concept of the “daemonic.” Released from its traditional task of communication and the constraints of meaning, the “daemonic” language obtains a life of its own, which, as Tawada highlights, appear as unexpected elements in language, towards which readers often turn a blind eye.

Chapter Two focuses on Tawada’s poetological theories and her Japanese-language novel *The Emissary*. As I showed earlier, Tawada’s plant writing is a process that turns words into

⁸⁸ “Das einmal, das immer wieder einmal und nur jetzt und nur hier Wahrgenommene und Wahrzunehmende. Und das Gedicht wäre somit der Ort, wo alle Tropen und Metaphern ad absurdum geführt werden wollen,” Celan, GW III, 199.

⁸⁹ “Gehuldigt wird hier der für die Gegenwart des Menschlichen zeugenden Majestät des Absurden,” Celan, GW III, 190.

⁹⁰ For Lucile, language is “etwas Personhaftes und Wahrnehmbares.” Celan, GW III, 189.

⁹¹ Tawada is clearly drawing from Benjamin’s essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” and Benjamin’s theory of language in general, as I will show later in Chapter One. See: Benjamin, GS II, 140-157.

“word-leaves,” which constantly metamorphose into different meanings, sounds, and shapes that could be interpreted in a number of ways depending on their temporal, spatial, or linguistic context. This chapter argues that Tawada’s theory of language is a “profanation” of language that intentionally ignores any authoritative interpretation of language, taking it from the hands of the divine and claiming it her (and everyone’s) right to use it freely. Tawada’s *The Emissary* plays a childish prank on the idea of a divine naming language, and imagines an absurd yet exciting world where animals, plants, puppets, and machines not only have equal access to language, but play with it freely. From Tawada’s perspective, this free, playful language is essential for the displaced and abused who are no longer at home with their mother tongue, or the colonized and oppressed who are robbed of their mother tongue.

Chapter Three focuses on Paul Celan’s plant writing as a way to reorient himself in a post-Holocaust world. Celan’s poetry speaks about his “placelessness” [*Ortlosigkeit*] as a migrant who had never been granted a home and his “timelessness” [*Zeitlosigkeit*] as a Holocaust survivor who had been robbed of his history and home. From “timeless” crocuses to “rootless” wandering perennials and “inverted” orchids, plants with their unique frame of temporality and spatiality offer a different perspective and invite a new poetic vision. This chapter analyzes a number of poems and essays in which Celan speaks about or to plants as a way to re-establish a relationship with his surroundings and relocate himself in a post-Holocaust world. What Celan hopes to find, as I argue in this chapter, is a “secret echo,” a call emitted into the environment and returned from various nearby objects that allows the poet to locate himself accordingly. In other words, the attempted conversation with plants is part of Celan’s “topological research” that constantly seeks another but only encounters itself.

Finally, the Coda imagines a dialogue between Tawada and Celan, in which Tawada responds to Celan with her poetological theory and the fictional world of *The Emissary*. What Tawada seeks in Celan's poetic language, as I suggest, is not an abstract concept of responsibility of the "I" for an absolute Other, because such ontological critique falls short in elucidating the fact that Celan's absurd, unattainable, often incomprehensible words continue to be highly relevant and translatable in different times and spaces. What Tawada finds in Celan's poetry is its metamorphic capability of "mutation," or, as she ironically calls, "environmental adaptation," an incredibly powerful liveliness that drives language to survive, regardless of its environment. Such "mutation" in itself often appears to be absurd, foolish, or merely an empty gesture; but it allows language to live on, and for Tawada, this "daemonic" power is the essence of poetic language.

Chapter 1. Daemonic Plants and Magical Language: Benjamin and Tawada reading Otilie

This chapter analyzes the reception of the “plant-like” character of Otilie in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Yoko Tawada. Benjamin sees Otilie as “unnatural” and foreign to plants, equating her “plant-like muteness” [pflanzenhaftes Stummsein] with “the expressionless” [das Ausdruckslose], an aesthetic force that could potentially transcend the mythic.⁹² Meanwhile, Tawada implicitly suggests that Benjamin’s reading leaves Otilie’s corporeality and agency out of the picture. To understand Otilie’s plant-like muteness, Tawada reintroduces the Goethean concept of the “daemonic” and Benjamin’s reinvention of the term, arguing that Otilie’s muteness is a daemonic language that, despite often disregarded and ignored, could offer readers a new perspective on the text. By attempting to understand the mute language of plants and plant-like figures, Tawada aligns herself with a major motif of Benjaminian thought—the “magic” of language. She aims at translating the language of things to the language of man, thereby filling the gaps between currently existing systems of thoughts and writing.

1. Otilie and Plants

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities* [*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*] tells the story of a group of friends—the Baron Eduard, his wife Charlotte, Eduard’s best friend Hauptmann (captain), and Charlotte’s young niece Otilie—living under the same roof and experimenting with their relationships and lives. The phrase “Wahlverwandtschaften” refers to both the inevitable chemical reaction between calcium carbonate and sulphuric acid, which immediately recombine and form calcium sulphate and carbon dioxide, and the equally

⁹² Benjamin, GS I, 173, 181.

inevitable outcome of human relationships, in which certain individuals are fatefully attracted to each other. While the story is arguably about chemistry and people, or the chemistry between people, plants play a non-negligible role in the story. The story opens with a scene of grafting; gardens and gardening advice permeate the novel; and, perhaps most importantly, one of the characters, Otilie, is constantly compared to plants. Goethe scholars have long since noticed this tendency, and some of them—particularly Friedrich Gundolf—also compare the progression of Otilie’s character with Goethe’s theory of the metamorphosis of plants.⁹³

In the novel, Otilie spends a lot of time in the garden, planting seeds in the flower beds, taking pleasure in the way everything is growing, and listening to the gardener talking about the grafting of trees. She is genuinely upset when much of her work in the garden is destroyed by the mischievous Luciane, who squanders the greenery and branches on daily decoration of the rooms and the table. The narrator also compares Otilie’s position in the household to the plants she takes care of: “as the plants now put down ever more roots and put out ever more branches, Otilie too felt more rooted to the ground.”⁹⁴ After the death of Charlotte and Eduard’s child, Otilie shuts herself in and refuses to speak to anyone, spending even more time in the garden with the asters. “She had hinted to the gardener that he should preserve as they were as many of the summer plants as he could, and she had lingered in particular before the asters, which that

⁹³ Benjamin and Gundolf are perhaps the most prominent Goethe commentators who compare Otilie with plants, but they are not the only ones. For example, Robert T. Clark compares each of the main characters to a type of plants in the “Metamorphosis of Plants”: Charlotte is normal and progressive, Eduard is retrogressive, and Otilie represents the development of a “monstrous” plant. See Robert T. Clark Jr, “The Metamorphosis of Character in Die Wahlverwandtschaften,” *The Germanic Review*, no.29 (1954): 243-253.

⁹⁴ “Indem nun die Pflanzen immer mehr Wurzel schlugen und Zweige trieben, fühlte sich auch Otilie immer mehr an diese Räume gefesselt,” WA I:20, 306. The English translation is cited from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1971): Kindle. Hereafter EA with page numbers.

year were blossoming in exceptionally great profusion.”⁹⁵ In her journal, Otilie has always expressed a strong curiosity towards nature, even though that curiosity is sometimes mixed with a sense of hesitation, as her interest in the plants is more of an intimate affinity than a rigorous scientific research: “only that naturalist is worthy of respect who is capable of describing and depicting the strange and exotic together with its own locality, with all its environs, in its own proper element. How I should like to hear Humboldt on this subject!”⁹⁶ In the eyes of the schoolmaster, Otilie is like a hidden fruit [verschlossene Früchte] that would eventually develop into vigorous life, as she is incapable of understanding some things that are easy to grasp for others, but the most difficult things are often not a problem for her at all.⁹⁷ The strongest indication of Otilie’s plant-like character is the parallel between Eduard’s plant-trees and Otilie, which is repeated over and over again throughout the book. The intimacy between Otilie and the plant-trees is especially sharpened when Eduard finds out that the trees were planted not only in the same year Otilie was born, but they in fact shared the same birthday.⁹⁸

During Otilie’s boarding school period—when she still lives further away from the world of Christian values and ethics—she resembles an “innocent” plant. Often described as a

⁹⁵ “Sie schien im Garten oft die Blumen zu mustern; sie hatte dem Gärtner angedeutet, die Sommergewächse aller Art zu schonen, und sich besonders bei den Atern aufgehalten, die gerade dieses Jahr in unmäßiger Menge blühten.” Goethe, WA I:20, 399, EA 537.

⁹⁶ “Nur der Naturforscher ist verehrungswert, der uns das Fremdeste, Seltsamste mit seiner Lokalität, mit aller Nachbarschaft jedesmal in dem eigensten Elemente zu schildern und darzustellen weiß. Wie gern möchte ich nur einmal Humboldten erzählen hören!” Goethe, WA I:20, 292, EA 401.

⁹⁷ “Ich verarge dieser tätigen Frau keineswegs, daß sie verlangt, man soll die Früchte ihrer Sorgfalt äußerlich und deutlich sehen; aber es gibt auch verschlossene Früchte, die erst die rechten, kernhaften sind und die sich früher oder später zu einem schönen Leben entwickeln.” Goethe, WA I:20, 38.

⁹⁸ Cornelia Zumbusch’s essay “The Metamorphoses of Otilie” discusses the botanical discourses reflected in the character of Otilie and the analogy of the woman as a plant in the German Romantic tradition in detail. See also: Lisbet Koerner, “Goethe’s Botany: Lessons of a Feminine Science,” *Isis*, vol.84, no.3 (1993): 470-495, and Michael Bies, “Geburten aus dem Geist der Pfropfung? Zu Kant und Goethe,” *Impfen, Pfropfen, Transplantieren*, ed. Uwe Wirth (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2011): 101-120.

natural, vegetal being, she is unable to adapt to the school environment or to meet the headmistress's expectations, but she is nevertheless at ease with herself, learning and growing at her own pace. The headmistress reports that Otilie is modest and agreeable to others, although the headmistress is not completely satisfied with Otilie's "zurücktreten" (retirement) and "Dienstbarkeit" (humbleness).⁹⁹ The headmistress observes that, despite Charlotte sending Otilie a variety of materials and money, the girl has not touched any of them; she dresses herself in a minimalistic fashion, only for cleanliness' sake; she also eats and drinks too little. The schoolmaster reports a conversation between the headmistress and Otilie, in which the headmistress criticizes Otilie for her mediocre performance and her "dumm[es] Aussehen" (stupid appearance) while Otilie claims that it is the result of her headache.¹⁰⁰ The young schoolmaster, witnessing this conversation, admits being perplexed by her mysterious behavior: "no one could be expected to know [about her headaches], for Otilie does not alter her expression, nor have I noticed her once raise a hand to her brow."¹⁰¹

When Otilie moves in with Charlotte and Eduard, she gradually loses her "natural innocence" because the new environment is saturated with the language of fate, sin, and guilt, as Benjamin points out in his essay "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" [Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften].¹⁰² Charlotte invites Otilie to live with them not only to offer her a better environment, but also to bring the relationship of the three friends back into balance. As a result, Otilie must be incorporated within this linguistic and ethical system—in a sense,

⁹⁹ Goethe, WA I:20, 373.

¹⁰⁰ Goethe, WA I:20, 61.

¹⁰¹ "nun es ist wahr; niemand kann es wissen; den Otilie verändert das Gesicht nicht, und ich habe auch nicht gesehen, daß sie einmal die Hand nach dem Schläfe zu bewegt hätte." Goethe, WA I:20, 61, EA, 106.

¹⁰² Benjamin, GS I, 138-140.

“grafted” onto the tree of Eduard and Charlotte’s household, like the young branch we see in the opening scene of the novel—as long as she continues living there.¹⁰³ Unlike her time in the boarding school, Otilie can no longer live and learn at her own pace in the new house. She is often seen running around the household and taking care of everyone around her, paying attention to the likes and dislikes of Eduard. Evidence of any actions of her own will gradually diminishes, to the point that even her writing—both the content and the handwriting—has been replaced by those of someone else.¹⁰⁴ The voice in her writing is deeply undercut by her habit of copying Eduard’s writing: she could perfectly mimic Eduard’s handwriting, as if he had written it himself. Even her personal journal opens with a “warning sign” that she was in the habit of copying in her journals: “we are in the habit of copying into our journals good ideas we have read or striking remarks we have heard, but if we would also take the trouble to transfer these specific observations, original views, fleeting witty phrases from letters we receive from our friends, we should acquire a very ample collection.”¹⁰⁵ The comment immediately leads readers to question the authenticity of any claims Otilie made in her journal.

Later in the novel, Eduard and Charlotte’s child Otto, of whom Otilie has been taking care, falls into the lake and dies under Otilie’s watch. As a result, she renounces her love for Eduard together with language, food and drink, practically starving herself to death. She describes her intention in a letter to her friends:

¹⁰³ The story begins with a grafting scene: “Eduard—so nennen wir einen reichen Baron im besten Mannesalter – Eduard hatte in seiner Baumschule die schönste Stunde eines Aprilmittags zugebracht, um frisch erhaltene Pflanzfreier auf junge 6 Stämme zu bringen.” Goethe, WA I:20, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Goethe, WA I:20, 66.

¹⁰⁵ “einen guten Gedanken, den wir gelesen, etwas Auffallendes, das wir gehört, tragen wir wohl in unser Tagebuch. Nähmen wir uns aber zugleich die Mühe, aus den Briefen unserer Freunde eigentümliche Bemerkungen, originelle Ansichten, flüchtige geistreiche Worte auszuzeichnen, so würden wir sehr reich werden.” Goethe, WA I:20, 243, EA 332. See footnote 106 for the authorship investigations of Otilie’s letters and journals.

“My intention to renounce Eduard and to go far away from him was quite sincere. I hoped never to meet him again. [...] As my feelings and conscience prompted me at that moment I stood silent before him, and now I have nothing more to say. [...] Do not call in any mediator! Do not urge me to speak or to take any more food and drink than I absolutely need.”¹⁰⁶

Although Otilie states her mind clearly in this letter, for some commentators, her overall quiet and passive character, as well as her writing habit, both challenge the authenticity of this letter.¹⁰⁷ Benjamin, for example, argues that Otilie’s rejection of food and water is not an ethical decision, but the result of a “drive” [Trieb].¹⁰⁸ He also refers to Otilie’s silence as a “plant-like muteness” [pflanzenhaftes Stummsein], challenging the morality and agency behind her decision.¹⁰⁹ Yet what does it mean to be mute like a plant? Is Otilie a natural, vegetal figure, or is she acting out of her ethical obligations, as she states in the letter? What could the intimate relationship between Otilie and plants signify? And finally, can we trust her “plant-like” language?

¹⁰⁶ “Ganz rein war mein Vorsatz, Eduarden zu entsagen, mich von ihm zu entfernen. Ihm hoffte ich nicht wieder zu begegnen. [...] Nach Gefühl und Gewissen des Augenblicks schwieg ich, verstummt ich vor dem Freunde, und nun habe ich nichts mehr zu sagen. [...] Beruft keine Mittelsperson! Dringt nicht in mich, daß ich reden, daß ich mehr Speise und Trank genießen soll, als ich höchstens bedarf.“ Goethe, WA I:20, 394, EA 418.

¹⁰⁷ *Elective Affinities* places the narrator in the forefront of the reader’s attention. Speaking in a first-person narrative voice, the narrator explicitly “disowns” part of the text by disclaiming responsibility for certain passages. He expressly casts doubt on the authenticity of some of Otilie’s diary entries: “weil aber die meisten derselben wohl nicht durch ihre eigene Reflexion entstanden sein können, so ist es wahrscheinlich, daß man ihr irgend ein Heft mitgeteilt, aus dem sie sich, was ihr gemüthlich war, ausgeschrieben” (WA I:20, 238). See also: W. J. Lillyman, “Affinity, Innocence and Tragedy: The Narrator and Otilie in Goethe’s die Wahlverwandtschaften,” *The German Quarterly*, vol.53, no.1 (1980): 46-63, and Gordon J. A. Burgess, “Corpus Analysis in the Service of Literary Criticism,” *Working with German corpora* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2000): 40-68.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin, GS I, 176.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, GS I, 175.

2. Otilie's plant-like muteness

In Benjamin's reading, Otilie's decision to die appears out of her control, and her will to die forms itself in a manner that is incomprehensible even to Otilie herself. Since she renounces language altogether, and a moral decision must be communicated through language, her death cannot have resulted from an ethical decision. As Benjamin observes, food was always repugnant to Otilie, so her rejection of food might not be an ethical decision. To Benjamin, the phrase that Otilie repeatedly stresses, that she has "strayed from her 'path'" ["aus ihrer ‚Bahn‘ geschritten"] and that she must take action to renounce her love for Eduard as a result, only means that "death alone can save her from internal ruin" ["nur der Tod sie vor dem innern Untergange bewahren kann"].¹¹⁰ He sees Otilie's death as a drive that is imposed on her, despite the semblance of a choice out of her own will: "In Otilie's complete silence, the morality of the will to die that animates her becomes questionable. In Truth, what underlies it is not a decision but a drive."¹¹¹

Although Otilie, deprived of language, could not be seen as a moral agent, Benjamin refuses to see her as a "natural" plant as well. Friedrich Gundolf, one of the most influential academic representatives of the Georg circle, argues that the characters in the novel could be compared with the existence of plants, particularly the Goethean theory of the metamorphosis of plants: "by analogy with the relation of seed, blossom, and fruit is Goethe's conception of law, his notion of fate and character, in *Elective Affinities* to be conceived."¹¹² Goethe's theory of the

¹¹⁰ Benjamin, GS I, 176.

¹¹¹ "Daher wird, dem vollkommenen Schweigen der Otilie, die Moralität des Todeswillens, welcher sie bestellt, fragwürdig. Ihm liegt in Wahrheit kein Entschluß zugrunde sondern ein Trieb." Benjamin, GS I, 176.

¹¹² "Durchaus nach Analogie des Verhältnisses von Keim, Blüte und Frucht ist auch Goethes Gesetzesbegriff, sein Schicksal und Charakterbegriff in den Wahlverwandtschaften zu denken." Friedrich Gundolf, *Goethe* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1916): 554.

metamorphosis of plants, as Gundolf mentions here, indicates that all organs of the plant are a modified form of the leaf. A regular or “progressive” metamorphosis is a step-by-step progression through alternating polar stages. In Goethe’s theory, leaf becomes the calyx, then the petals, and finally the highly specialized male and female sex organs, whose union results in the production of fruit and seed. Throughout this process, the plant ascends “to the pinnacle of nature: propagation through two genders” [zu jenem Gipfel der Natur, der Fortpflanzung durch zwei Geschlechter].¹¹³ Goethe’s theoretical process of metamorphosis takes three major steps: first, the separation of the two sexes; second, the development of the plant, following two gendered systems, one vertical (masculine) and one spiral (feminine); and finally, the re-unification of the two sexes. “Nature’s regular course” [der regelmäßige Weg der Natur] eventually reaches its goal in the reunion of two genders.¹¹⁴

Benjamin strongly disagrees with Gundolf’s point of view, for he believes that Otilie’s metamorphosis is by no means a development under an overarching guideline, such as Goethe’s theory of metamorphosis.¹¹⁵ Goethe’s portrayal of the figure of Otilie does not aim to “climax” in a conclusive re-unification of two sexes: the bourgeois institution of marriage and the natural principle of sexual attraction, two forces that guide the characters’ actions and struggles, fail to reconcile and re-unite, which arguably leads to disastrous consequences. Furthermore, from Benjamin’s point of view, Otilie is not comparable to an innocent plant, because the character is deeply affected by fate: “for fate (character is something else) does not affect the life of innocent plants. Nothing is more foreign to it. On the contrary, fate unfolds inexorably in the culpable life.

¹¹³ Goethe, WA II:6, 26-27.

¹¹⁴ Goethe, WA II:6, 25.

¹¹⁵ Benjamin, GS I, 138.

Fate is the nexus of guilt among the living.”¹¹⁶. Benjamin sees the disastrous consequences of the characters’ actions as the result of their clinging onto the legal institutions of a Christian moral society even without concrete substances in their relationships. What lies behind the compulsive and fateful actions of these characters, Benjamin believes, is a drive [*Trieb*] or a mythic force that remains at the center of the novel as the ethical forces fade away.¹¹⁷

Fate and guilt distance Otilie from an innocent plant, yet for Benjamin, her muteness and passivity make her still resemble a particular plant, namely, the Christian symbol of innocence, the lily: “the severe lines of the plant, the whiteness of the calyx, are joined to numbingly sweet scents that are scarcely still vegetal.”¹¹⁸ A white lily is often likened to the Virgin Mary, with its petals symbolizing Mary’s pure virginal body, and the golden anthers, the radiance of her soul. For Benjamin, the Christian symbolic values associated with this plant are so strong, that the flower almost ceases to be vegetal. Even though all plants are naturally innocent, the innocence that the lily symbolizes is a religious one rather than a natural one. The lily is guiltless not because it is a being of nature and therefore unaffected by the fate of human beings, but because its beautiful forms resemble the Virgin Mary, who is free from original sin. Similarly, Otilie is not “naturally” innocent in the same way that a plant is innocent, but only bears the resemblance of virgin innocence, an appearance that Benjamin calls a “dangerous magic of innocence” (“gefährliche Magie der Unschuld”).¹¹⁹ In other words, she is only “like” a plant.

¹¹⁶ “Denn Schicksal (ein anderes ist es mit dem Charakter) betrifft das Leben unschuldiger Pflanzen nicht. Nichts ist diesem ferner. Unaufhaltsam dagegen entfaltet es sich im verschuldeten Leben. Schicksal ist der Schuldzusammenhang von Lebendigem.” Benjamin, GS I, 138.

¹¹⁷ Benjamin, GS I, 176.

¹¹⁸ “Die strengen Linien des Gewäches, das Weiß des Blütenkelches verbinden sich mit den betäubend süßen, kaum mehr vegetabilen Düften.” Benjamin, GS I, 175.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin, GS I, 175.

“Plant-like Muteness, which speaks so clearly from the Daphne-motif of pleadingly unpraised hands, lie about her being and darkens it even in the most extreme moments of distress—moments that, in the case of anyone else, place the person’s being in a bright light,” writes Benjamin.¹²⁰ In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Daphne is pursued by Apollo, who was shot by Cupid’s arrow. Daphne flees to her father, the river god Peneus, who transforms Daphne into a laurel tree in order to protect her. Apollo catches her during her transformation, as her hair and hands are turning into branches while the rest of her body remains yet untransformed. Apollo vows that he will have her, breaks off a branch, makes himself a laurel crown, and announces that it will be the symbol of triumph. Otilie’s muteness reminds Benjamin of Daphne’s physical distress at the moment of transformation and her inability to resist. Her pleadingly unpraised hands will soon be mutilated by Apollo, yet her body, which is already under transformation, prevents her from resisting or escaping from the violence. Similarly, although Otilie dies by intentionally depriving herself of food, her voluntary death is not necessarily a moral decision. Her muteness is “pflanzenhaft,” that is, she is no longer fully human, yet she has not completely become a plant. Like Daphne, Otilie is half-plant, half-human, therefore neither natural nor moral. Again, she is only “pflanzenhaft,” “like” a plant.

It is important to investigate what Benjamin (following Goethe) means by the word “natural,” for in his view, Otilie is not “natural” like a plant, yet it is within her “nature” to starve herself to death. He claims that Otilie’s plant-like muteness already contains her wish to die, even though it remains a secret until the end both to her friends and to herself:

¹²⁰ “Pflanzenhaftes Stummsein, wie es so groß aus dem Daphne-Motiv der flehend gehobenen Hände spricht, liegt über ihrem Dasein und verdunkelt es noch in den äußersten Nöten, die sonst bei jedem es ins helle Licht setzen.” Benjamin, GS I, 175-176.

In [Otilie's] death drive, there speaks the longing for rest. Goethe has not failed to indicate how completely it arises from what is natural in her. If Otilie dies by depriving herself of food, then Goethe has also made it clear in the novel how often, even in happier times, food was repugnant to her.¹²¹

In the first part of the essay, Benjamin argues that a fundamental motive for Goethean research into nature emerges from the ambiguity in the concept of nature between perceptible phenomena and intuitable archetypes,¹²² a problem that, as Benjamin believes, is never offered an account of synthesis in Goethe's studies, despite constant attempts. Goethe's theory of plant metamorphosis is based fundamentally on an "intuitive perception," which is a way of seeing the ideal archetype at work in a real natural object, such as the plant he saw in the Public Gardens of Palermo that inspired in him the theory of metamorphosis. In Goethe's theory, a single plant should have two corresponding unities, one ideal, and one empirical; and ideal unity of an individual plant exists as if the diverse parts of this plant have developed from an ideal archetype. While confronted by Schiller, who warned Goethe that his theory of metamorphosis is not an observation from experience, but an idea, Goethe replied that "I may rejoice that I have ideas without knowing it, and can even see them with my own eyes."¹²³ This way of seeing, however, is inevitably a selective one, for it is difficult to incorporate the contradictions and inconsistencies of nature that

¹²¹ "In [Otilies] Todestriebe spricht die Sehnsucht nach Ruhe. Wie gänzlich er Natürlichem in ihr entspringt, hat Goethe nicht zu bezeichnen verfehlt. Wenn Otilie stirbt indem sie sich die Nahrung entzieht, so hat er im Roman es ausgesprochen, wie sehr ihr auch in glücklicheren Zeiten oft: Speise widerstanden hat." Benjamin, GS I, 176.

¹²² Benjamin, GS I, 147.

¹²³ "Das kann mir aber sehr lieb sein, daß ich Ideen habe ohne es zu wissen, und sie sogar mit Augen sehe," Goethe, WA II:11, 18.

one observes. In fact, Goethe was often annoyed by observations that contradicted his ideas and failed to stimulate him.¹²⁴

Benjamin, however, believes that Goethe's attempts to seek a synthesis between intuition and perception through his scientific studies will inevitably fail. He argues that the ur-phenomena that Goethe uses as the standard of his scientific research in fact exist only within the realm of art, which he also calls the "pure domain" [*reiner Bereich*], as opposed to the realm of sensuous nature, or the "empirical domain" [*empirischer Bereich*].¹²⁵ Science is able to illuminate objects in nature with an idea, while only art is able to transform them in intuition. Goethe's attempt to bring intuition and perception together is therefore, as Benjamin calls it, a "contamination of the pure domain and the empirical domain," during which sensuous nature claims the highest place in the hierarchy, and allows its mythic side to dominate the totality of nature's appearances.¹²⁶ As a result, ur-phenomena cannot be used as standards of measurement in scientific analysis, and Goethe's attempt to do so, as Benjamin argues, is an example of his idolatry of nature and the mythic elements in his concept of nature. "If in this most extreme sense, even the 'word of reason' can be reckoned to the credit of nature, it is no wonder that, for Goethe, the empire of the Ur-phenomena could never be entirely clarified by thought. With this tenet, however, he deprived himself of the possibility of drawing up limits."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ "Und ich fand sie immer mehr ähnlich als verschieden, und wollte ich meine botanische Terminologie anbringen, so ging das wohl, aber es fruchtete nicht, es machte mich unruhig, ohne daß es mir weiterhalf." Goethe, WA I:32, 43.

¹²⁵ Benjamin, GS I, 148.

¹²⁶ Benjamin, GS I, 148.

¹²⁷ "Wenn im extremsten Sinne also selbst die 'Worte der Vernunft' zum Habe der Natur geschlagen werden, was Wunder, wenn für Goethe der Gedanke niemals ganz das Reich der Urphänomene durchleuchtete. Damit aber beraubte er sich der Möglichkeit Grenzen zu ziehen." Benjamin, GS I, 148.

In Benjamin's analysis, Goethe's concept of nature is not limited to what we normally understand as natural science or simply the natural world. It also includes a mythic force that cannot be expressed straightforwardly in any concept or words, which Goethe calls "the daemonic." Evidence of this mythic force can be found in Goethe's autobiographical work *Poetry and Truth* [*Dichtung und Wahrheit*]:

He believed that he perceived something in nature (whether living or lifeless, animate or inanimate) that manifested itself only in contradictions and therefore could not be expressed in any concept, much less in any word. It was not divine, for it seemed irrational; not human, for it had no intelligence; not diabolical, for it was beneficent; and not angelic, for it often betrayed malice. It was like chance, for it lacked continuity, and like Providence, for it suggested context. Everything that limits us seemed penetrable by it, and it appeared to do as it pleased with the elements necessary to our existence, to contract time and expand space. It seemed only to accept the impossible and scornfully to reject the possible.—This essence, which appeared to infiltrate all the others, separating and combining them, I called "daemonic," after the example of the ancients and others who had perceived something similar. I tried to save myself from this fearful thing.¹²⁸

The idea of the daemonic accompanies Goethe's vision all his life: it can also be found at the beginning of the first stanza of "Urworte, Orphisch" ("Orphic Primal Words") and in the Egmont quotation from *Poetry and Truth*. It is the idea of the daemonic, Benjamin argues, that

¹²⁸ "Er glaubte in der Natur, der belebten und unbelebten, der beseelten und unbeseelten, etwas zu entdecken, das sich nur in Widersprüchen manifestierte und deshalb unter keinen Begriff, noch viel weniger unter ein Wort gefasst werden könnte. Es war nicht göttlich, denn es schien unvernünftig; nicht menschlich, denn es hatte keinen Verstand; nicht teuflisch, denn es war wohlthätig; nicht englisch, denn es ließ oft Schadenfreude merken. [...] Dieses Wesen, das zwischen alle übrigen hineinzutreten, sie zu sondern, sie zu verbinden schien, nannte ich dämonisch, nach dem Beispiel der Alten und derer, die etwas Ähnliches gewahrt hatten. Ich suchte mich vor diesem furchtbaren Wesen zu retten." Goethe, WA I:29, 174.

emerges in the idea of fate in *Wahlverwandtschaften*, both of which can be traced back to mythic thinking. And this superstitious way of thinking is adopted to interpret material objects as symbols. Benjamin quotes a letter from Gervinus' study *On Goethe's Correspondence* [*Über den Göthischen Briefwechsel*], in which Goethe claims that he observes objects that produce a poetic effect, and notes that they are symbolic. Because of this observation, Gervinus reports, Goethe began to accumulate bundles of files including newspapers, clippings from sermons, theater programs, and so on, hoping to save them for future use.¹²⁹ Benjamin interprets this practice (which is not unlike his own habit of collecting books, quotes, and toys) as an example of Goethe's superstition and belief in signs and oracles: "The human being petrifies in the chaos of symbols and loses the freedom unknown to the ancients. In taking action, he lands among signs and oracles."¹³⁰

The mythic element in Goethe's concept of nature is also reflected in *Elective Affinities*. In Benjamin's reading, the "daemonic" stands right at the center of the character Otilie. "In *Elective Affinities*, however, the daemonic principles of conjuration irrupt into the very center of the poetic composition. For what is conjured is always only a semblance—in Otilie, a semblance of living beauty—which strongly, mysteriously, and impurely imposed itself in the most powerful sense as 'material'."¹³¹ The daemonic dwells in Otilie's taciturnity, which is a sign of her "ghostly" [geisterhaft] origin.¹³² In other words, Otilie's "plant-like muteness" is, because of

¹²⁹ Benjamin, GS I, 153.

¹³⁰ "Der Mensch erstarrt im Chaos der Symbole und verliert die Freiheit, die den Alten nicht bekannt war. Er gerät im Handeln unter Zeichen und Orakel," Benjamin, GS I, 154.

¹³¹ "In den Wahlverwandtschaften aber ragen die dämonischen Prinzipien der Beschwörung in das dichterische Bilden selbst mitten hinein. Beschworen nämlich wird stets nur ein Schein, in Otilien die lebendige Schönheit, welche stark, geheimnisvoll und ungeläutert als 'Stoff' in gewaltigstem Sinne sich aufdrängte." Benjamin, GS I, 179.

¹³² Benjamin, GS I, 179.

the mythic element of Goethe's concept of nature, an example of the "daemonic." As we have seen earlier, Otilie is simultaneously "natural" and "unnatural" because, on the one hand, she cannot be easily categorized according to a Goethean principle of natural order, such as the principle of the metamorphosis of plants. On the other hand, the language of Christian guilt and sin is unable to fully elucidate Otilie's behavior. Like the lily, which is simultaneously a natural plant and a Christian symbol for innocence, Otilie is stuck between two belief systems, one scientific, and one religious. Her plant-like muteness resembles the semi-human semi-arboreal image of Daphne, who could only save herself by (partially) transforming herself into a tree, and therefore depriving herself of any form of active resistance. In Benjamin's view, Otilie's muteness, which eventually leads to her death, hints at a breaking point that momentarily releases the figure from constraints of scientific studies or religious beliefs, "enchants chaos momentarily into world" ["verzaubert Chaos auf einen Augenblick zur Welt"].¹³³

Otilie's death, according to Benjamin, turns her into a work of art. She appears as a "semblance" [Schein] with the potential of momentarily revealing the essentially beautiful.¹³⁴ Otilie's death is seen as an artwork, because Benjamin believes that Otilie's death is a mythic sacrifice, and the mythic, or "daemonic" element in Goethe's concept of nature cannot be elucidated in scientific principles, only in art. In Benjamin's view, the double meaning of Goethe's concept of nature—that it should simultaneously be intuitive and perceived in reality—often results in nature being seen as the model [Vorbild] of intuitable archetypes of artworks.¹³⁵ And, since this model is believed to be observable in reality, the ideal of art is understood as true

¹³³ Benjamin, GS I, 340.

¹³⁴ Otilie's beauty is described as a "scheinhafter Schönheit." See Benjamin, GS I, 179.

¹³⁵ Benjamin, GS I, 148.

and absolute, and that every work of art should reflect this ideal in one way or another. Benjamin challenges this concept of art by arguing that intuitable ur-phenomena could present themselves adequately to perception only in the realm of art, whereas in science, the objects of perception could only be illuminated in thoughts, as ideas.¹³⁶ Therefore, Otilie's death could only be interpreted as an artwork. Furthermore, Benjamin sees Otilie's muteness, which eventually leads to her death, as intimately connected to a force within art itself that could challenge the false harmony in the world of semblance and enchantment, a force that Benjamin calls "the expressionless" [*das Ausdruckslose*]:

The life undulating in [the artwork] must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment. That which in it has being is mere beauty, mere harmony, which floods through the chaos (and, in truth, through this only and not the world) but, in this flooding-through, seems only to enliven it. What arrests this semblance, spellbinds the movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless [*das Ausdruckslose*]. This life grounds the mystery; this petrification grounds the content in the work.¹³⁷

In a fragment drafted around the same time, Benjamin calls the expressionless a "critical violence" [*kritische Gewalt*] that completes the work by shattering into fragments, reducing it to the smallest totality of semblance.¹³⁸ Like the Hölderlinian caesura, which interrupts the rhythmic continuity of poetry, the expressionless is a power within the work of art that could reveal for a moment the essentially beautiful.

¹³⁶ Benjamin, GS I, 148.

¹³⁷ "Das in ihm [ein Kunstwerk] wogende Leben muß erstarrt und wie in einem Augenblick gebannt erscheinen. Dies in ihm Wesende ist bloße Schönheit, bloße Harmonie, die das Chaos—und in Wahrheit eben nur dieses, nicht die Welt—durchflutet, im Durchfluten aber zu beleben nur scheint. Was diesem Schein Einhalt gebietet, die Bewegung bannt und der Harmonie ins Wort fällt ist das Ausdruckslose. Jenes Leben gründet das Geheimnis, dies Erstarren den Gehalt im Werke." Benjamin, GS I, 181.

¹³⁸ Benjamin, GS I, 832.

Due to space limitations, I will save the discussion of the expressionless in Benjamin's aesthetic theory for a later time. For the moment, we will concentrate on Otilie's "plant-like muteness," which Benjamin sees as an example of the daemonic or mythic element that she represents. As we have seen above, this muteness is intimately connected to the "expressionless" that interrupts the language of art from within. Otilie's "plant-like" character confirms that she is an artwork, created under the influence of the mythic, rather than an intuitive manifestation of the ur-phenomenon in nature, as Gundolf suggests. At the same time, the "plant-like" character ultimately results in Otilie's death, turning her muteness into a moment of expressionless violence that has the potential to transcend the work of art beyond its mythic elements.

3. Plants and demons

Yoko Tawada also sees Otilie as a plant figure. In an essay "Metamorphoses of the Heath Rose: An Essay Concerning Goethe" ["Metamorphosen des Heidenrösleins—ein Versuch über Goethe"], she depicts Otilie as a silent flower planted in a garden of *Elective Affinities*.¹³⁹ A keen reader of Benjamin, Tawada is also concerned with Otilie's "plant-like muteness." Like Benjamin, she, too, associates Otilie's plant-like character with the daemonic. While Benjamin believes that the daemonic in Goethe's theory of nature is an example of the author's idolatry of nature and his superstition, and that Otilie's "expressionless" could momentarily transcend the mythic element of the novel, Tawada sees the daemonic as the transcendental power within art that could interrupt the semblance of harmony from within, instead of something that needs to be transcended by art. All three authors—Goethe, Benjamin, and Tawada—use the term "the

¹³⁹ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 57.

daemonic” [*das Dämonische*] as a placeholder for forces and motives that, for the most part, remain invisible and unidentifiable. Like a computer program, as Kirk Wetter’s helpful example suggests, a daemonic force mostly run silently in the background of an operating system. Usually invisible and unnameable, the daemonic only manifests itself in singular moment of crisis, when the function it belongs to becomes problematic.¹⁴⁰ But the difference in Goethe’s, Benjamin’s, and Tawada’s understanding of the “Dämon” is also significant.

In *Poetry and Truth*, the daemonic is a metaphor of the unknown in nature that separate and connects them. In “Orphic Primal Words” [Urworte, Orphisch], a cycle of five stanzas written in 1817 and published in 1820 in *On Morphology* [*Zur Morphologie*], which mostly contains his morphological writings, Dämon is listed along with four other Greek words, *Tyche*, *Eros*, *Ananke*, and *Elpis*, as the earliest and most essential ideas of Greek mythology and religion. Here, Dämon is portrayed along with other “primary words” [Urworte] as an underlying program of development, or a “semi-religious cognitive model, akin to self-help or astrology.”¹⁴¹ In Goethe’s botanical writings, the daemonic is comparable to the “Urpflanze,” an archetypal prototypical plant that supposedly contains all forms of plants of past, present, and future, while the principle of morphology mediates the general (all forms of plants) and particular (the singular Urpflanze). And for Benjamin, as we have seen earlier, morphology itself can be “daemonic,” which he uses more like an equivalent term for “superstitious,” if the synthesis between the intuitive form of Urpflanze and plants as living organisms is actually believed to exist.¹⁴² For Tawada, the daemonic specifically refers to a language that addresses an underlying force within

¹⁴⁰ Kirk Wetters, *Demonic History: From Goethe to the Present* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014): ix.

¹⁴¹ Wetters, *Demonic History*, 37.

¹⁴² Benjamin, GS I, 138.

a literary text that cannot be incorporated in the currently existing “operating system.” It is not an example of Goethe’s superstition, but evidence of a force of resistance within the text against overarching, systematic interpretations that fail to take into account “insignificant” details.

In “Metamorphoses of the Heather Rose,” Tawada presents two systems of languages, one traditional, and one unconventional and “daemonic.”¹⁴³ A traditional system of language can usually be incorporated within a certain system of thought or belief, be it religious, rational, or scientific. In *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Mittler and Eduard’s language of guilt, innocence, and Christian ethics, is such an example. An example of the “daemonic” language is that of chemistry and chemical attractions that could address the various mysterious incidents in the story, such as Ottilie and Eduard’s headaches. The death of Charlotte and Eduard’s child Otto is an event that could be interpreted in completely different ways, depending on the language one adopts. “It is an event where Christian morality, chemistry, and the daemonic collide into each other.”¹⁴⁴ In Eduard’s “Christian” language, the child is born out of double adultery, therefore his death could be seen as God’s punishment against such immoral activities. In the “daemonic” language, however, the child’s death will not be interpreted as a tragic event, for it is within his nature that he returns to water. Otto’s appearance strongly resembles both the Hauptmann and Ottilie, despite being Charlotte and Eduard’s child. In the “chemical” language, the Hauptmann’s name begins with H, which is the symbol for hydrogen, whereas Ottilie’s name begins with the symbol for oxygen. Otto is therefore the product of the chemical bond between hydrogen and oxygen, and, as a water child, he should eventually return to water. As Tawada suggests, “Unlike

¹⁴³ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 57-58.”

¹⁴⁴ “[Es] ist ein Ereignis, bei dem die christliche Moral, die Chemie und das Dämonische aufeinanderprallen.” Tawada, *Sprachpolizei* 58.

the language of bourgeois morality or that of the law, the language of chemistry can better express what is otherwise dismissed as superstition.”¹⁴⁵ She believes that these moments of superstition and pseudoscience from a force of resistance inside the text that threatens to break language from within and render it self-contradictory, if not completely unintelligible. Meanwhile, they also loosen the systematic foundation of language and allow for a potential linguistic “metamorphosis,” as the title of Tawada’s essay suggests.

For Tawada, Otilie’s “plant-like” language has a similar function as the language of chemistry, which is to collect things and events in a text—such as Otilie and Eduard’s headache and Charlotte’s “unconscious memories” [unbewusste Erinnerungen]—that could not be incorporated in the language of bourgeois morality or law and must be categorized as “surreal” or “superstitious.” The word “Dämon” only appears once in *Elective Affinities*, but it plays a key role in both Benjamin’s and Tawada’s critical essays. It appears as Otilie’s own writing, in the letter she wrote after the child’s death to explain her silence to the friends:

What need have I, my dear friends, to say that which speaks for itself? I have deserted my rightful path and I am not to return to it. Even if I could become at one with myself again, it seems that *a malign daemon* [ein feindseliger Dämon] has gained my power over me to bar my way from without.¹⁴⁶

She admits that she took a vow to stop eating, drinking, or speaking to resist the malign “daemon,” who gained power over her and forced her off her rightful path. Tawada comments,

¹⁴⁵ “Die Sprache der Chemie kann das, was man sonst als Aberglaube abtut, besser zum Ausdruck bringen als die Sprache der bürgerlichen Moral oder die des Gesetzes.” Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 59.

¹⁴⁶ “Warum soll ich ausdrücklich sagen, meine Geliebten, was sich von selbst versteht? Ich bin aus meiner Bahn geschritten, und ich soll nicht wieder hinein. Ein feindseliger Dämon, der Macht über mich gewonnen, scheint mich von außen zu hindern, hätte ich mich auch mit mir selbst wieder zur Einigkeit gefunden.” Goethe, WV 278, my emphasis.

“the word ‘daemon,’ which at first glance appears to be a typographical error, surprises the reader, because it is neither part of Otilie’s undramatic language, nor does it fit the explanatory pattern of chemical bonds, which plays an important role in the text.”¹⁴⁷ For Tawada, the word “daemon” is surprising in its context, because it does not fit with the language of the quiet, passive, undramatic Otilie. It is a language of seemingly incoherent signs and letters that resists traditional Christian values and ethical interpretations, while hinting at feelings, events, and relationships that cannot be explained in a language saturated by sin and redemption.

Otilie’s “daemon” is a clear sound of disharmony that challenges the reader’s initial perception of the text. On further inspection, one dissonance leads to another, until one finds an entire network of discordant words underneath its harmonic appearance. These singular traces, loud and incoherent, are what make the otherwise easily ignored voices perceptible. In Goethe’s texts, one of the loudest and fiercest voices of resistance could be found in “Heidenröslein,” in which a seemingly innocent plant suddenly turns “daemonic.” A boy walks in the field, sees a little rose, and wants to pick it. He announces, “I’ll now pick thee, Heathrose fair and tender” (“Ich breche dich, / Röslein auf der Heiden”). The rose replies, “I’ll prick thee, / So that thou’lt remember me, / Never will I surrender!” (“Ich steche dich, / dass du ewig denkst an mich, / und ich will’s nicht leiden”).¹⁴⁸ The rose’s “I’ll pick thee” is a surprising response. Flowers are often portrayed as either a metaphor for fertility and femininity, or as the symbol for beauty and the longing for infinity. The Heidenröslein, however, clearly refuses to be interpreted as a symbol or a passive figure: it not only speaks, but also threatens to react violently. Tawada writes, “its

¹⁴⁷ “Das Wort ‘Dämon’ überrascht den Leser, wirkt auf den ersten Blick wie ein Druckfehler, weil es weder zur undramatischen Sprache Otilies. Noch zum Erklärungsmuster der chemischen Bindungen, das im Text eine wichtige Rolle spielt, passt.” Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 57-58.

¹⁴⁸ Goethe, WA I:1, 16.

aggressive reaction to the boy with the words ‘I’ll pick thee’ does not fit with the traditional image of girls. At least in Goethe’s works, only witches speak with such tone, never a young, beautiful woman.”¹⁴⁹ In Tawada’s reading, the “ich steche dich” is so loud and clear, that it threatens the legitimacy of the widely accepted reading of “der Heidenröslein” as a love poem addressed to Friederike Brion. It also, to a certain degree, challenges the traditional point of view of plants as victims and men as perpetrators: anyone who has ever suffered from pollen allergy, Tawada comments, knows how flowers defend their territories against human beings by attacking their nasal mucous membrane with pollen.¹⁵⁰ Moments of sudden violence, such as Otilie’s “daemon” and the Heidenröslein’s “I’ll prick thee,” are forces of resistance that serve as reminders of the often-ignored power underneath the appearance of an innocent, passive plant.

A final example of Goethe’s daemonic plant is the rose petals in the scene of Faust’s burial, which are scattered in the air by angels to scare the devils away:

Roses, bright glowing,
 Balsam bestowing,
 Fluttering and striving,
 Secret reviving!
 Winged stems golden,
 Buds are unfolding;
 Hasten to bloom!¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ “...Seine aggressive Reaktion auf den Knaben mit den Worten ‘ich steche dich’ passt keineswegs zu den traditionellen Mädchenbildern. Zumindest in Goethes Werken reden in diesem Ton sonst nur Hexen, aber nie eine junge, morgenschöne Frau.” Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 51.

¹⁵⁰ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 50.

¹⁵¹ Rosen, ihr blendenden,

These rose petals appear to be harmless and innocent until they turn out to be deadly weapons and aphrodisiac drugs. Mephistopheles asks the devils to blow fire at the petals so that they will all wither and fade away, but once the petals catch fire, they become poisoned flames. Devils flee from burning petals and Mephistopheles catches on fire. The power of “love” that the roses bring is even more piercing and dangerous than the flames of hell: “My heart and liver burn, my head is rent—/ A more than devilish element! / Far keener than the flames of hell!”¹⁵² under the aphrodisiac influence of the roses, Mephistopheles lusts after the angels, who meanwhile repossesses Faust’s soul.

Bliss-scented flowers,

With fiery powers,

Heavenly love they spread,

Joy from above they spread,

All hearts they sway.

Words of verity

In ether’s clarity

Bring hosts of charity

Balsam versendenden!

Flatternde, schwebende,

Heimlich belebende,

Zweiglein beflügelte,

Knospen entsiegelte,

Eilet zu blühen.” Goethe, WA I:15, 320-321 (line 11699-11705).

¹⁵² “Mir brennt der Kopf, das Herz, die Leber brennt! Ein überteuflisch Element! Weit spitziger als Höllenfeuer!” WA I:15, 323 (line 11753-11755).

Infinite day!¹⁵³

These beautiful, fragrant roses float and hover in the air, as if their stems and petals have wings. Tawada concludes her essay with an analysis of this scene: “the flowers, floating in the air, are fragmentary, unbound, and weightless. They are cut off from the stems, but not dead, because their body [Körper] consists of a magical language that awakens the dead heather rose and revives it.”¹⁵⁴ Again, these petals represent a “daemonic” language, which, according to Tawada, has the power to awaken and revive the dead Heidenröslein.¹⁵⁵ These petals successfully drive away Mephistopheles’s devils, turn them upside-down, make them stand on their heads [“Satane stehen auf den Köpfen”].¹⁵⁶ If these words have the power of turning the world upside-down, are they merely words of truth and clarity as the angels claim? How far away are they from the language of “lies and deceit and dream” [Lug und Trug und Traum] that the devils use to scare sinners away?¹⁵⁷ In this moment of comical absurdity, it appears that

¹⁵³ “Blüten, die seligen,
Flammen, die fröhlichen,
Liebe verbreiten sie,
Wonne bereiten sie,
Herz wie es mag.
Worte, die wahren,
Äther im Klaren,
Ewige Scharen,
Überall Tag!” Goethe, WA I:15, 322 (line 11726-11734).

¹⁵⁴ “Die Blüten, die in der Luft schweben, sind fragmentarisch, ungebunden und gewichtslos. Sie sind von Stängel gebrochen, aber nicht tot. Denn ihr Körper besteht aus einer magischen Sprache, die das tote Heidenröslein wachruft und es wiederbelebt.” Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 62.

¹⁵⁵ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 51.

¹⁵⁶ Goethe, WA I:15, 322 (line 11736).

¹⁵⁷ Goethe, WA I:15, 319 (line 11655).

something other than beauty, truth, and love has been freed from this language of rose petals, something that is no longer within the angels' control.

So far, we have seen a few examples of what Tawada means by “das Dämonische,” and how traces of a daemonic language could influence the overall text. All of these examples involve a plant or a plant-like character: Otilie, der Heidenröslein, and the rose petals in *Faust*. But why is the “daemonic” intimately connected to (literary) plants? The same question is applicable to Benjamin's reading of Otilie, since he sees Otilie's “plant-like muteness” as evidence of the “daemonic” in Goethe's concept of nature and some of his literary writings. It is worth mentioning that, Benjamin is not as interested in plants as in their representations, such as in photography. His essay “News of Flowers” [Neues von Blumen], a review for Karl Blossfeldt's plant photography album, portrays these photographs as artistic realizations of “Urbilder” of nature. Benjamin is less interested in direct observation of natural plants themselves, because he believes that mute nature is incapable of communicating itself. The primal images resting in nature are best realized in art forms, and that is the reason why Benjamin quickly shifts towards a discussion of art and beauty in the second half of the “Elective Affinities” essay. Since Otilie is mute, she represents an inexplicable force within the novel that is inevitably connected with myth and superstition. Tawada's critique of Benjamin's reading is based on the premise that Otilie can indeed communicate. She sees Otilie's “plant-like muteness” as a daemonic force within language that communicates in its own way. To be mute like a plant does not mean to refrain from language all-together: like animals, plants are also perfectly capable of communication. To be mute *like a plant* is to speak and write a particular language that may sound mute to others. Plants talk to each other via smell (by spreading odorous chemicals known as volatile organic compounds in the air), touch (such as in the case of

tendrils), and electrical signals.¹⁵⁸ They are also able to communicate with insects and mammals in their environment, as well as respond to various environmental cues. None of these means of communication could be directly “heard” by humans, and scientists could only observe this signaling system indirectly by, for example, looking at the behavioral changes of the “speaker” plant and the “listener” plant. Like plants, certain animals also communicate at a frequency that normally cannot be heard by human beings. The common range of human hearing is 20 Hz to 20 kHz, whereas dogs can usually hear sounds between 56 Hz and 45 kHz.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, a sound at 40 Hz can be heard by a dog, but is “mute” for a human. Similarly, the above-mentioned signaling systems could work perfectly between plants or animals themselves, but they may sound “mute” to a human ear. Therefore, Otilie’s “plant-like muteness,” in Tawada’s interpretation, implies a language that is unique to plants and plant-like figures, but is often unheard and unresponded to by others.

4. Plant language, magical language

By re-thinking Goethe’s “daemonic” and critiquing Benjamin’s reading of Otilie, Tawada is aligning herself with a major motif of Benjamin’s work: the “magic” of language. Her dissertation, entitled *Toys and Language Magic in European Literature: an Ethnographic Poetology* [*Spielzeug und Sprachmagie in der europäischen Literatur: Eine Ethnologische Poetologie*], extensively reviews Benjamin’s “Sprachmagie” and his predilection for collecting

¹⁵⁸ See Paco Calvo, Vaidurya Pratap Sahi, and Anthony Trewavas, “Are Plants Sentient?” *Plant, Cell & Environment*, vol. 40, issue 11 (September 2017): 2858–2869.

¹⁵⁹ See Richard R Fay and Arthur.N. Popper, *Comparative Hearing: Mammals. Springer Handbook of Auditory Research Series* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1994): 136-137.

children's toys.¹⁶⁰ In the introductory chapter, Tawada quotes Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" [Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen], where he introduces the idea of "the magic of language" ("die Magie der Sprache").¹⁶¹ God's language is magical because it is immediate: his words "let there be" and "he named" are immediately connected with his acts of creation. God's word is recognizable to men because it is "name," the "pure medium of knowledge" [reine Medium der Erkenntnis].¹⁶² The language of man is a reflection of God's creative word and "the name of things" [der Name der Dinge], which should emerge from the absolutely infinite and immediate language of creation.¹⁶³ While the naming words of God shines through the "mute magic of nature" [stumme Magie der Natur],¹⁶⁴ man's language is not magic in the sense that words are identical with the essence of the thing. Instead, man's "magical community" and communication with things is spiritual and immaterial. Human language can only be magical when it functions as a pure medium of the divine language that listens to and echoes it with the acoustics of the spoken words.

In a letter to Martin Buber in which he declined the offer to contribute to Buber's journal, *Der Jude*, Benjamin points out that the bourgeois linguistic theory—or, in other words, a rationalistic logocentrism—fails to notice the connection between the language of man and the magical creative language of God and, as a result, perceives the relation between words and things as accidental. Instead of seeing language as simply the communication of information, he

¹⁶⁰ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 153-178.

¹⁶¹ Benjamin, GS II, 143.

¹⁶² Benjamin, GS II, 148.

¹⁶³ Benjamin, GS II, 150.

¹⁶⁴ Benjamin, GS II, 150.

believes that one should treat language as an immediate medium that aims at communicating its own “linguistic being” rather than its material content. He writes to Buber, “as far as effect is concerned, I can as well as poetically, prophetically, and objectively understand literature, however, only magically, that is, im-*mediate*-ly.¹⁶⁵ As opposed to an instrumental, abstract language, a magical, “immediate” language could potentially emblemize God’s creative language that most intimately connects words and deeds.

Tawada’s response to Benjamin’s theory of magic of language is twofold. First, she claims that literary text must be read as a translation of the language of things in order to retain the trace of magic. Paraphrasing Benjamin, she writes that after the Fall, only a few languages, such as that of art, bear the trace of the magic language.¹⁶⁶ Since the language of sculpture and painting is a translation of the language of things into a higher language, literary language should have the same function. The language of Otilie and the Heidenröslein is magical because it aims at translating the language of plants into a literary language of mankind. Second, Tawada believes that a magical language should address the gaps in our current thought systems that are often perceived as unspeakable or nonexistent. In *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie*, she uses toys in German Romantic literature as examples to confront the gap between play and work, children and adults, the profane and the sacred. Tawada reads Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* as a historization of Benjamin’s theory of language, in which Foucault’s analysis of the shifts in the paradigms of thoughts between the classical and modern periods are read as concrete historical

¹⁶⁵ “Schrifttum überhaupt kann ich mit dichterisch, prophetisch, sachlich, was die Wirkung angeht, aber jedenfalls nur magisch das heißt un-mittel-bar verstehen.” Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966): 126.

¹⁶⁶ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 16.

examples of the ineffable gap in language, and therefore prompt readers to reconsider their understanding of language.¹⁶⁷

The two aspects of Tawada's response to Benjamin's theory of the magic of language are also reflected in her own literary practices. In her own writings, Tawada takes the translation of the language of things quite literally. In an essay entitled "The Writing Body and the Written Body" [Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper], Tawada tells a story about the creative power of language. It shows that "reality" is dependent on what is written, rather than the other way around.¹⁶⁸ The story is about an architect, who accidentally lets a drop of ink fall on his blueprint the night before he is supposed to hand in the work. Seeing this situation, the architect's wife decides to plant a tree on the spot where the ink fell. The second day, the architect's boss asks him about the drop of ink, and he responds that it is because a tree already stands here, and it should remain there for aesthetic reasons after the construction of the apartment block. In this story, a drop of ink in the realm of signs and words becomes a tree in the world of things, because the blueprint is supposed to faithfully reflect the environment in which the housing complex is built. What fascinates Tawada in the story of the architect and the tree is the unpredictable power of language that is often beyond the author's control: "an author does not describe a tree that is already there, but sets a sign, a character, or a punctuation mark, or perhaps an ink stain, on which reality is based."¹⁶⁹ The author/architect did not write about a tree, but a tree appeared where the ink dropped. An unintended sign literally grows out of the

¹⁶⁷ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 16. Tawada's response to Benjamin's theory of language is also mediated by Winfried Menninghaus's *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995).

¹⁶⁸ Yoko Tawada, "Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper," in: *Zuerst bin ich immer Leser: Prosa schreiben heute*, ed. Ute-Christine Kruppe and Ulrike Janssen (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000): 70-79.

¹⁶⁹ "Ein Autor beschreibt nicht einen Baum, der schon dort steht, sondern er setzt ein Zeichen, ein Schriftzeichen oder ein Satzzeichen oder vielleicht einen Tintenfleck, und die Wirklichkeit richtet sich danach," Yoko Tawada, "der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper." Tawada, "Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper," 74.

blueprint and becomes a living being. In the same way, written language could potentially shape reality in unexpected ways.

During the creative process of writing, new ideas appear, but they could not be fit into the text that is currently being written. These new ideas or texts are what Tawada calls “Überschuß,” or surplus of language, which, when left unattended, could be “harmful” to the original text—harmful in the sense that it may lead towards a different direction from that which the original text intends.¹⁷⁰ Authors often treat the surplus of language as waste, taking it out of the text, keeping it aside in the hope of recycling it in the future. The process of writing, according to Tawada, is like waste production [Abfallproduktion], in which every act of writing creates some waste that will be recycled and become another text.¹⁷¹ But unlike a traditional recycling process, in which dead, useless materials are converted into new, yet lifeless products, the recycling of language has the potential to create new life. In the architect’s story, a drop of ink becomes a tree. The drop of ink is an example of the surplus, a byproduct created in the process of writing (or designing) that the author tries to keep off the page. The excess of language “constantly tries to say something other than what the author means.”¹⁷² Not only does it have its own intention, but it could resist and distort the intention of the author. The surplus of language shows that language has a life on its own and could grow in unforeseen directions, and these parts of language are only considered a “surplus” because they cannot be deciphered by a readily available interpretive system.

¹⁷⁰ Tawada, “Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper,” 70.

¹⁷¹ Tawada, “Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper,” 70.

¹⁷² “Versucht ständig etwas anderes zu behaupten als das, was der Autor zu meinen meint.” Tawada, “Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper,” 70.

Tawada's poetological writings focus on the unexpected elements in language, towards which readers often turn a blind eye. The "vegetal" language of Otilie, the heather rose, the flower petals in Faust, and the architect's tree may sound "mute" to many readers. As we have seen in these examples, the "daemonic" is used as a placeholder for such an unknown, undercurrent voice that is not yet clearly defined. What may appear accidental, mysterious, or excessive in a text may turn out to be signals indicating an alternative way of reading that does not yet exist. This alternative reading may not be readily available to be discovered within the literary text (such as *Elective Affinities*). But we could, like scientists, begin by collecting samples and look at how plants, either fictional or natural, interact with each other and with their environment, and go on from there.

Chapter 2. Playing with Language: Tawada's *The Emissary* and a Future Poetics of Catastrophe

Yoko Tawada's plant writing is a process that turns words into word-leaves, which constantly metamorphose into different meanings, sounds, and shapes that could be interpreted in a number of ways depending on its temporal, spatial, or linguistic context. The previous chapter discussed the "daemonic" power of language, a concept that Tawada develops from Otilie's plant-like muteness, Goethe's "original word" [*Urworte*], and Benjamin's pure language. The "daemonic" releases language from its traditional task of communication and the constraints of meaning, making it possible for readers to hear the "mute" language of plants. I argue that Tawada's theory of language is a profanation of language that intentionally ignores any authoritative interpretation of language, taking it from the hands of the divine and claiming it for her own (and everyone's) right to use it freely. A political operation, Tawada's literary language plays a childish prank on the idea of a divine naming language, and imagines an absurd yet exciting world where animals, plants, puppets, and machines not only have equal access to language, but play with it freely. From Tawada's perspective, this free, playful language is essential for the displaced and abused who are no longer at home with their mother tongue, or the colonized and oppressed who are robbed of their mother tongue.

The central themes of Tawada's 2013 science fiction *The Emissary* [Kentōshi, 献灯使] include environmental crisis, forced migration, and censorship under authoritarianism. To adapt to the catastrophic political and ecological environment, language begins to mutate until it is released from the constraints of meaning and its duty of communication, obtaining a life of its own. If Celan's constant struggle with the German language marks his attempt to reawaken a language that has been "murdered" by the violence of Nazism and nationalism, Tawada imagines

a language that refuses to be appropriated at all by constantly growing or mutating into something else. Marked by its literary anarchism, this language “profanes” the traditional concept of language through two kinds of “play”: *iocus*, or word play, which refers to the odd neologism, disruptive syntax, and multilingual vocabulary that Tawada inherited from Celan, and *ludus*, or physical play, which refers to Tawada’s tendency to makes words into things, especially fruits and vegetables.¹⁷³ By turning words into edible plants, the “foreignness” of a non-native tongue is digested, consumed, incorporated, and transformed into the flesh of the body, an act that turns the exophonic language internal and challenges the physical threshold that separates the mother tongue from foreign language. What Tawada’s fictional language profanes is the imagination of nation and the native as distinguished from the foreign. Borrowing Giorgio Agamben’s political theory of profanation and play, this chapter analyzes how Tawada turns literary language into a playful weapon, a childish prank on the idea of meaning itself, which always hints at an authoritative interpretation.

1. Tawada’s Profanation of Language

In the Abrahamic tradition, language is normally considered to be created by God and handed down to humans. “Pure language” as defined by Benjamin is essentially the sacred language of names and the word of God. “The transparency of language, the groundlessness of every speech act, is the basis for both theology and history. As long as man has no access to the foundation of language, there will be a handing down of names; and as long as there is a handing down, there will be history and destiny,” Agamben comments in the 1988 essay “Language and

¹⁷³ My analysis of Tawada’s two kinds of “play” is based on Agamben’s theory of play, which will be further elaborated on page 75. See Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007): 75-76.

History in Benjamin.”¹⁷⁴ And as long as there is history and destiny, there are people who do not belong to history and are abandoned by their destiny. A sacred tongue is only handed down to men, not women, animals, plants, stones, or people who do not subscribe to the Biblical tradition. Written in 1940, Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” addresses a similar issue, as history at that time was the property and propriety of Nazis, who claimed the right to control and manipulate its discourse. The phenomenon of Hitler renders any existing discourses on history ineffective, and the victims of history repeatedly fall to silence.¹⁷⁵ Yet Benjamin hints that “pure language” might be located in the inexpressive emptiness of silence. In the expressionless [das Ausdruckslose], which we have seen earlier in the essay on *Elective Affinities*, the sublime violence of the true shatters the false, errant “absolute totality” that aesthetic representation formulates.¹⁷⁶ Citing Hölderlin’s writings on tragedy, Benjamin points out that tragical transport is “empty,” in the sense that it offers no “meaning” other than the one and same “meant” [das Gemeinte], namely, “pure language” itself.¹⁷⁷ As a “critical violence” against the storm of progress, an inexpressive, meaningless “pure language” may have the potential to arrest the flow of its narrative. Like Otilie’s expressionless face, pure language presents itself as a “caesura,” a “counter-rhythmic interruption, necessary, in order to meet the rush of ideas, at its height, so that not merely the change in ideas appears but the idea itself.”¹⁷⁸ It is easy to see the figure of Otilie as a pure, holy, virgin-like character struggling between her desire for a married man and the ethical issues that the relationship raises, who is eventually condemned to death by her guilty

¹⁷⁴ Giorgio Agamben, “Language and History in Benjamin,” *Differentia: Review of Italian thought*, vol 2 (Spring 1988):172.

¹⁷⁵ See also: Felman, Shoshana. “Benjamin’s Silence.” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 201-34.

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin, GS I, 181.

¹⁷⁷ Benjamin, GS I, 181.

¹⁷⁸ Benjamin, GS I, 181-182.

conscience. However, Benjamin's reading of Otilie's plant-like muteness and her expressionless face (and death) emphasizes the revolutionary spark within this silent figure that challenges the appropriation of her female body and refuses to be portrayed as a beautiful dead virgin caught between religion and the science of elective affinities. Calling Otilie a "martyr," Benjamin sees a revolutionary power in her suicide, which releases Otilie from constraints of scientific studies or religious beliefs, "enchants chaos momentarily into world."¹⁷⁹ The power in Otilie's suicide, from Benjamin's perspective, stems from her semblance-like beauty as a work of art instead of her conscious decision as a human being. For him, the violence remains in the possession of the divine, not mortal, as it appears as that which "determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world."¹⁸⁰ The divine order defines the limit of Otilie's critical violence, preventing it from stepping into the realm of the divine word (or pure language). What remains beyond the caesura of such expressionless violence is complete chaos and, perhaps, Hölderlinian madness.

From Benjamin's point of view, Tawada's theory of language may appear as youthful pranks or childish anarchism, as she avoids the irresolvable contradiction between unconditional freedom and categorical or moral command as well as the madness associated with the caesura between law and chaos by erasing order (moral or grammatical) all-together.¹⁸¹ While

¹⁷⁹ "Form jedoch verzaubert es auf einen Augenblick zur Welt." Benjamin, GS I, 181.

¹⁸⁰ "Im ausdruckslosen erscheint die erhabne Gewalt des Wahren, wie es nch gesetzen der moralischen Welt die Sprache der wirklichen bestimmt." Benjamin, GS I, 181.

¹⁸¹ What Tawada avoids here, perhaps intentionally, is essentially the complex concept of Hölderlinian (and Kantian) *Schwämerei* as a transgression of the limits of human reason as well as the measure (Maß) of order and chaos, lawfulness and madness, sobriety and enthusiasm. For a detailed discussion of the measure of enthusiasm and *Schwämerei*, see Peter Fenves, "The Scale of Enthusiasm," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60, no. 1/2 (1997): 117-52, Silke-Maria Weineck, *The Abyss Above: Philosophy and Poetic Madness in Plato, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), and Alexis C. Briley, "Hölderlin and the Measure of Enthusiasm" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2014).

acknowledging the daemonic power of muteness, Tawada imagines an alternative world where the top-down hierarchical structure of language is rendered dysfunctional, so that the concept of an authoritative interpretation becomes absurd. In this parallel universe of complete chaos, no one—not even the gods—could claim ownership of a language. She essentially “profanes” language, taking it back from the hands of gods and claiming it her (or our) right to use it freely.¹⁸² Tawada’s profanation of language is justified by her insistence that language has a corporeal reality. For her, words are self-generating, self-operating “word-leaves” with a life of their own and a daemonic power beyond the control of humans and gods. Like Benjamin, she defines “pure language” as a language free of “meaning” in the everyday sense, but unlike Benjamin, Tawada sees the driving force behind “pure language” as a daemonic power that sustains the livelihood and corporeality of language, allowing it to grow and operate independently. As words have their own “agency,” no one could claim ownership of language, yet everyone has equal access to it and are able to use it freely. In “Marseille,” an essay in Tawada’s 2003 Japanese-language essay collection *Exophony: Traveling Outward from the Mother Tongue*, she describes her experience at a literary conference in Marseille, where she feels the “corporeal entity” [実体] of language.¹⁸³ It was a conference conducted in French, a language that she does not speak. Her own presentation is translated into French, but other talks and comments are not translated into German, or any other languages that she speaks. For four

¹⁸² In Agamben’s definition, to “profane” is to return sacred things to the free use of men. See Agamben, *Profanations*, 73.

¹⁸³ Tawada Yoko 多和田葉子, *Ekusofoni-bogo no soto he deru tabi エクソフォニー——母語の外へ出る旅* [Exophony: Traveling Outward from the Mother Tongue] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 2012): 154-155. All Japanese translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. Here, Tawada is likely alluding to Benjamin’s drug experiences as described in his essay “Haschisch in Marseille” [Hashish in Marseilles], where he discovers that “space can expand, the ground tilt steeply,” and a familiar street becomes like a “knife cut” [ein Schnitt, den ein Messer gezogen hat]. Benjamin, GS IV, 409-410.

hours a day, she listens to the French language that makes no sense to her ears. Even so, it was a significant experience that offers her a new perspective through which to perceive language. One night after the conference, she had a dream in which language took up a physical identity:

At night, something strange happened. I kept having dreams that I have never seen before, almost as if I were on drugs. A serpent in primary colors crawled gently on the ground, and the buds of a tree were shining brightly. The greenness of the buds stretched beyond the distance between the seeing I and seen imagery, extending directly into my self. Moreover, I clearly understood that the corporeal entity [実体] of both the snake and the buds is language. Language is not something abstract. Gently, it approached my physical existence [肉体] to the point that it could not get any closer. Besides, my emotions lost their armor and stood there naked. With only a little trembling in the air, I feel the desire to cry, to scream, to kill someone. In any case, it was because the distinction between language and things was gone, and my nerves became exposed. I wonder if I was secretly wishing for a world like this. It felt horrifying, but at same time I have never experienced a living that was so dense. Perhaps the essence of language is drugs.¹⁸⁴

Language is as corporeal as plants and animals: the essence of the serpent and the buds is, as Tawada claims, language itself. In the world of reality, where the conference took place, the seeing “I” and the seen imagery dwell in two separate realms. But when she enters a dream or a hallucinatory state, the threshold between words and ideas no longer exists, and the physical

¹⁸⁴ Tawada, *Exophony*, 154-155.

existence of words, no longer mediated by the layer of meanings, comes directly at one's sensations and emotions. The all-French conference may not offer a non-French speaker any sensible information. But it is equally, if not more stimulating and meaningful, because it provides the participant a glimpse of what "pure language" [純粹言語] without abstract meanings could possibly offer.

When I think about it, I have never listened to any language other than French for such a long time without understanding its meaning. Thanks to that, French is about to occupy the position of "pure language" in my mind... when people are able to communicate in a language, they do nothing else with the language other than communicating. That alone is fine, but languages have more mysterious powers than communication. Perhaps I am looking for a language emancipated from the constraints of meaning.¹⁸⁵

Once released from the duty of communicating information, language could live freely like the bud of a tree, stimulating our sense with its color, smell, taste, touch, and sound as it trembles in the air. The threshold between mother tongue and foreign languages, between the original and its translation, between "meaningful" sentences and "meaningless" expressions no longer exist. What Tawada's poetic language seeks to abolish is this threshold of syntactic hierarchy that prevents language from accessing the position of "pure language."

Tawada's view of language is fundamentally shaped by her long-standing fascination with folk religions vernacular ritual practices. Because the plurality of ethnic spirituality and folk religions requires language to be intrinsically versatile, plural, and equally accessible, "pure language" in this context must not point towards a singular meaning ("das Gemeinte") that is

¹⁸⁵ Tawada, *Exophony*, 156-157.

only unmediated and fully intelligible in a single belief system. The “pure” in Tawada’s “pure language” refers to “pure means” rather than “pure meaning,” in the sense that it must be “neither sacred, nor holy, nor religious, freed from all names of this sort.”¹⁸⁶ Tawada’s view of language could be read as a feminist critique of Benjamin’s theory of language that treats the naming language of man and the mute language of things as subordinate to the creative language of God. Dale Spender’s critique of language questions men’s monopoly of naming in the *Book of Genesis* and takes issue with the fact that names are not just reflections of pre-existing realities or arbitrary labels, but a culture’s way of defining what will count as reality, which results in the erasure of a multitude of possible realities in our thought systems.¹⁸⁷ Feminist linguists show how the essentialist and hierarchical nature of mainstream and malestream discourse defines the essence of non-first-world-white-men by their *difference* from men.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Tawada’s critique of Benjamin’s theory of language seeks to break its scriptural and essentialist hierarchy by pluralizing and profaning it from within.

Borrowing Agamben’s theory of profanation, I argue that Tawada’s language is a profanation, that is, an entirely inappropriate use of language, which willfully ignores the caesura between humans and the divine. Insisting that language does not let itself be appropriated, Tawada intentionally ignores the complex entanglements of languages with religion, culture, and politics, and imagines a free language that can be used by anyone in any way. Agamben’s discussion of bare life and the state of exception is rooted in human beings’ constitutive relation

¹⁸⁶ *The Digest of Justinian*, trans. Alan Watson (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985): 11.7.2. Cited in Agamben, *Profanations*, 73.

¹⁸⁷ Dale Spender, “Extracts from Man Made Language,” in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron (London and New York: Routledge, 1998): 94.

¹⁸⁸ See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

to language and the traditional dichotomies language helps to shape. The idea that language belongs to God and is only handed to some men indicates a separation, and every separation, according to Agamben, preserves within itself a genuinely religious core, particularly the Abrahamic tradition. The apparatus that effects and regulates the separation is sacrifice, which sanctions (in both sense of the term) the passage of something from the human sphere to the divine, and therefore requires a caesura that separates sobriety from madness and chaos.¹⁸⁹ Sacrifice also demands its victims, who must cross the caesura.

Thus one of the simplest forms of profanation occurs through the contact (*contagione*) during the same sacrifice that effects and regulates the passage of the victim from the human to the divine sphere. One part of the victim (the entrails, or *exta*: the liver, heart, gallbladder, lungs) is reserved for the gods, while the rest can be consumed by men. The participants in the rite need only to touch these organs for them to become profane and edible.¹⁹⁰

The victim's life only becomes sacred through a series of rituals that aims at separating life from its profane context; similarly, the bare life that is announced to be originally sacred only becomes so through its subjection to sovereign power that aims at separating the sovereign sphere (where life may be killed but not sacrificed) from the religious sphere (where life may be sacrificed).¹⁹¹ According to Agamben, the political sphere of sovereignty is constituted through a double exclusion, which first excludes the victim from the religious sphere, then from law itself, while including them at the same time so that they could be executed legally. The double

¹⁸⁹ Agamben, *Profanations*, 74.

¹⁹⁰ Agamben, *Profanations*, 74.

¹⁹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998): 53.

exclusion functions as “an excrescence of the profane in the religious and of the religious in the profane.”¹⁹² Therefore, Agamben’s profanation is not a step towards the juridical or the political, but the complete neglect of the sacred, that is, “a behavior that is free and ‘distracted’ before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning.”¹⁹³ Such neglect ignores separation, and frees things from their sacred, “appropriate” use.

In the essay “In Praise of Profanation,” Agamben cites the Roman jurist Trebatius to define the profane act: “in the strict sense, profane is the term of something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men.”¹⁹⁴ Profanation is not secularization, as secularization leaves the separation intact and simply moves things from one sphere to another. For example, the political secularization of theological concepts displaces the heavenly monarchy in favor of an earthly monarchy while keeping its power intact.¹⁹⁵ However, profanation “neutralizes what it profanes,” erasing the religious “aura” of a divine object and returning it to common use.¹⁹⁶ Both secularization and profanation are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by shifting the model onto different realms, and the second deactivates the apparatuses of power all-together.¹⁹⁷ “Play,” as Agamben argues, is an entirely inappropriate use of the “sacred,” or that which is removed from common use and transferred to a separate sphere. He identifies two kinds of play that break up the unity of the myth and the rite that stages the myth: one as *iocus*, or word play, which effaces the rite but preserves the myth;

¹⁹² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 53.

¹⁹³ Agamben, *Profanations*, 75.

¹⁹⁴ Agamben, *Profanations*, 73.

¹⁹⁵ Agamben, *Profanations*, 77.

¹⁹⁶ Agamben, *Profanations*, 77.

¹⁹⁷ Agamben, *Profanations*, 77.

and another as *ludus*, or physical play, which drops the myth and preserves the rite.¹⁹⁸ Tawada's writings are filled with examples of these two kinds of "play": *iocus*, or word play, would refer to her bilingual puns, neologisms, and compound words; and *ludus*, or physical play, is reflected in Tawada's intention to turn words into things and play with them. On the one hand, Tawada is known for her wordplay, such as extending and deconstructing idioms and proverbs, creating neologisms, taking grammatical concepts literally, translating puns and Kanji scripts visually, and so on. These stylistic devices allow readers to question the unity of word and referent in our "natural" languages.¹⁹⁹ On the other hand, scholars emphasize the physicality in Tawada's writing, particularly concerning lineages, mothers, and siblings. Taniguchi Sachiyo and Tingting Hui emphasize Tawada's intention to turn words into things: for example, in *Nusumiyomi* [Reading Surreptitiously], the narrator defends herself by throwing words at the enemy instead of things, because, as Taniguchi argues, words such as "momo" (peach) and "kushi" (comb) were believed to have magical powers in Japanese mythology. Branding her deviant character as a creator of new rules and restructuring the rituals associated with traditional mythology, Tawada threatens the ideology of the Nation and ethnic culture that rests on myths, according to Taniguchi.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, by turning words into things, especially edible things, the "foreignness" of a non-native tongue is digested, consumed, incorporated, and transformed into the flesh of the body, an act that, according to Hui, turns an exophonic language internal and

¹⁹⁸ Agamben, *Profanations*, 75-76.

¹⁹⁹ See: Shani Tobias, "Translation as Defamiliarization: Translating Tawada Yōko's Wordplay," *Japanese Language and Literature*, vol. 54, no.2 (Oct 2020): 202, Chantal Wright, "Translating 'Portrait of a Tongue,'" in Yoko Tawada, *Portrait of a Tongue*, trans. Chantal Wright (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2013): 29, and Margaret Mitsutani, "Translator's Afterword," in Yoko Tawada, *Facing the Bridge*, trans. Margaret Mitsutani (New York: New Directions, 2007): 176-186.

²⁰⁰ Sachiyo Taniguchi, "The Destruction and Recreation of Japanese Mythology through Yoko Tawada's Literature," in *Tawada Yoko: On Writing and Rewriting*, ed. Doug Slaymaker (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020): 186.

challenges the physical threshold that separates the mother tongue from foreign language.²⁰¹

What Tawada's language profanes, as Naoki Sakai suggests, is the imagination of nation and the native as distinguished from the foreign. Tawada's writings and translations exposes the mythical origin of the Japanese language as a unity, as the native and the foreign could never be distinguished from each other.²⁰² Her protagonists seek to escape ethno-cultural, national, and racialized forms of identity. "In order to maintain the critical edge and imaginative space opened up by contingency," Yasemin Yildiz comments, "Tawada finds herself seeking out ever new transnational links and expanding into new linguistic, cultural, and geographical territories."²⁰³ Her constant reinvention and questioning of the differences between languages and identities articulates the challenge and struggle of going beyond the mother tongue in what Yildiz calls the "postmonolingual condition," namely the interaction and tension in the co-existing framework of multilingualisms and monolingualisms.²⁰⁴ I argue that Tawada's multilingual literary practice is a profanation of the complex entanglements of languages with religion, culture, and politics, because she intentionally ignores the tensions and struggles between languages and their ideologies, and insists on turning words into playthings. A political operation, Tawada's literary language plays a childish prank on the idea of a divine naming language, challenging the difference that renders the victims of history speechless. Like a child, she refuses to acknowledge the episodic character of "play" in our society: Tawada's literary endeavors never cease to make

²⁰¹ Tingting Hui, "Words That I Swallowed Whole: The Linguistic Edibility of Yoko Tawada's Exophonic Writings," in Slaymaker, *On Writing and Rewriting*, 200.

²⁰² Naoki Sakai, "Image and the Unity of a Language: Translation and the Indeterminacy of National Language," in *On Writing and Rewriting*, 44.

²⁰³ Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (Fordham University Press, 2012): 142.

²⁰⁴ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 3.

fun of signification, and the idea of a “normal” language as opposed to a “playful” style is simply not applicable in her writings. A never-ending game becomes absurd, uncanny, and surreal as the speaking toy-child in Hoffmann’s “Stranger Child” shows. By making language available for free use by anyone, Tawada imagines an absurd yet exciting world where animals, plants, puppets, and machines all have equal access to language, and everyone plays with it like an innocent child.

A number of essays in *Exophony* illustrate Tawada’s literary “play” with “word-leaves” (kotoba), treating them as living beings with a life of their own. Two metaphors best capture her relationship with words: “herbarium collecting” and “field work.” By collecting, touching, and giving them new names, the herbarium collector accomplishes the renewal of words’ existence, like the child collector that Benjamin describes in “Unpacking My Library.”²⁰⁵ The essential element that turns writing into a kind of field work is the action of digging, which is associated with the rhythm of poetic language and the accent of spoken language. In an essay entitled “Sofia,” Tawada refers to dictionaries as “anarchist institutions,”²⁰⁶ because dictionaries, by ordering words according to different systems, question the ideology behind national languages. Not all dictionaries are arranged alphabetically; there are also the so-called “reverse dictionaries,” including those that reverse words (that is, entries are alphabetized by the last letter first, then next to last), and those that reverse concepts (which refers to the dictionaries organized by concepts, phrases, or definition of words). One example of the reverse concept dictionary is the German conceptual dictionary that Tawada uses frequently (as did many German-speaking authors such as Thomas Mann and Paul Celan), *Der deutsche Wortschatz nach Sachgruppen*,

²⁰⁵ Original title “Ich Packe Meine Bibliothek Aus. Eine Rede über das Sammeln,” Benjamin, GS IV, 388-396.

²⁰⁶ Tawada, *Exophony*, 107.

published by Franz Dornseiff in 1933. According to Tawada, the entry “Ehelosigkeit” [which she translates as 婚姻関係の不在, or the absence of marriage status] is accompanied by a list of colloquial words and legal terms that signify the celibacy as well as words like Amazone (legendary female warriors), Blaustrumpf (member of the 18th-century Blue Stockings Society), Jungfrau (young woman, the astrological sign Virgo, or virgin), and Weiberfeind (misogynist).²⁰⁷ By exhibiting words according to their associations, this type of dictionary reveals the ideology according to which a “national language” is constructed: in this case, readers are led to realize that without the concept of marriage, words such as “virgin” and “misogynist” would be rendered meaningless, as these terms define womanhood solely in terms of women’s social and sexual relationship with men.

A more “anarchist” type of dictionary is perhaps the reverse word dictionary, which sorts each word entry based on its last letter and the subsequent letters proceeding toward the beginning of the word. Such a dictionary would be useful for poets looking for words ending with a particular suffix or sound. Tawada comments, “sometimes a dictionary plays the role of releasing words from ideology. A dictionary seems to be the thing that organizes words according to a correct order, but in fact, it is an anarchist institution. Things like a reverse dictionary sometimes gather things with similar meanings, other times completely irrelevant things—it’s quite frightening.”²⁰⁸ By simply taking words out of the ideological system according to which they are organized, a reverse dictionary emancipates language from its ideological constraints and communicative ends, making it available for new use.

²⁰⁷ Franz Dornseiff, *Der Deutsche Wortschatz nach Sachgruppen*, 8. Auflage (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 2004), 384.

²⁰⁸ Tawada, *Exophony*, 107-108.

“The feeling of a thesaurus collecting words is the same as collecting insects or plants. The chapter on “economy” has only 15 pages, whereas the chapters on plants and animals has 150 pages. I even think that, perhaps, the thesaurus is a kind of plants and animals dictionary, which collects normal words that live in our brain like insects or plants.”²⁰⁹ National languages, especially Indo-European languages, are overall linear and sequential in nature, because they unfold over time as they are spoken or read. When words are exhibited and pronounced simultaneously, or sequentially but out of order, they will likely fail to produce a meaningful sentence. A collection of plants, however, are not required to have a certain significance in its form or organization: “In the thesaurus, the order of words does not matter in each group of words or chapter, so it may be called a patchwork-like dictionary rather than a linear one. It is the same in our mind that, if anything, the order words might not be linear [線], but two-dimensional [面], or even three-dimensional [立体的].”²¹⁰ As a “patchwork,” herbarium could expand in all three spatial dimensions, and the viewer gets to decide the order in which she observes the collection. Similarly, a thesaurus has the potential to reshuffle the pre-determined law and order of a language system. According to Tawada, poetry and foreign languages have the same linguistic potential as a “three-dimensional patchwork” of words, which could systematically change the way a reader think about language and words:

When I look at a dictionary, I often think: what exactly is happening in mankind’s head?
How are words arranged and aligned? [...] What I am interested in is that, in the case of a
foreign language, the relationship between words and brain is different, and, in the case

²⁰⁹ Tawada, *Exophony*, 109-110.

²¹⁰ Tawada, *Exophony*, 110.

of poetic thinking, we see deliberate effort to re-arrange the categorization and implementation of words [...] Poets put together words that only foreigners would put together.²¹¹

What foreigners and poets do with language is “anarchical”: by putting together words in a surprising order, they free words from the function of communicating pre-existing phrases, meanings, and ideologies. Collecting words like plant specimens, they profane language by taking words out of their designated space and make them available for something else.

In another essay entitled “Oku Aizu,” Tawada introduces the work of writer and literary critic Mitsuhiro Muroi, whose work “picks out the connecting threads in the Japanese language that could only be seen from the outside, ties them together and spins them into a fantastic net. On top of that, he picks up expressions and usages that are only available in dialects, sow them in the work like seeds, and grows them.”²¹² Muroi’s work contains elements from German, English, and Russian literature, from comparative analysis of contemporary and ancient Japanese language to usages in dialects. According to Tawada, his writings focus on language itself rather than meanings and significances that language as a medium could carry. She refers to this kind of language work as “field work,” or the plowing, sowing, and cultivation in a linguistic field:

The fields of Oku Aizu are not as vast as those in California, but the the landscape is dense. Vegetables grow tightly in small fields. “The word ‘seminar’ in English is etymologically connected to the word ‘seed.’ Fieldwork [フィールドワーク] is also work on a field [畑仕事].” So told by Murai, we were immediately convinced [...] After

²¹¹ Tawada, *Exophony*, 112.

²¹² Tawada, *Exophony*, 55.

going to the library and coming back again to the field, one could read not only words, but sounds, objects, dirt, and water.²¹³

Located in the far west of Fukushima Prefecture, Oku Aizu is a remote place with no major international chain stores and a population of only 19,000. Growing up in Oku Aizu, Muroi is familiar with field work of the countryside of Japan as well as its language, culture, and customs. Before his career as a writer, Muroi worked as a librarian for years. The juxtaposition of research work and field work in Muroi's life experience offers him a new perspective of the "sounds, objects, dirt, and water" in language between isolate words and linear sentences.²¹⁴ The essential element that turns writing into "field work" is the action of "digging": writing as "field work" consists of unearthing, discovering, and re-discovering expressions and usages in language, as well as the preparatory work of plowing the fields before sowing and cultivating new "word-leaves."

As Tawada points out, Muroi's writing-as-fieldwork is reflected in both his cultural and literary research and his rhythmic, poetic writing style that Tawada associates with people from Japan's Northeast region, whose accent is distinctively different from standard Japanese, or *hyōjungo* [標準語]. As Tawada mentions in her interview with Robert Campbell, her understanding of accent and rhythm of spoken language is inspired by contemporary Japanese dance culture.²¹⁵ In "Oku Aizu," she compares the rhythm in Muroi's writing to Butoh dancer Hijigata Tatsumi's dance movement. Butoh is a form of avant-garde dance theater that first

²¹³ Tawada, *Exophony*, 55-56.

²¹⁴ Tawada, *Exophony*, 56.

²¹⁵ Campbell, Robert and Tawada Yoko ロバート・キャンベル×多和田葉子. "Taidan: Yagate "kibo" ha modoru: Tabidasu "kentōshi" tachi" 対談: やがて"希望"は戻る: 旅立つ『献灯使』たち [Dialogue: Eventually "Hope" Returns: The Departing "Emissaries"] *Gunzo*, 70.1 (Jan 2015): 219.

appeared in 1959 under the collaboration of Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo. The art form involves playful and grotesque imagery, taboo topics and crude physical gestures that directly assault both the refined traditional Japanese aesthetics and Western aesthetic standards. By introducing elements of grotesquerie, darkness, and decay, Hijikata aims at subverting conventional notions of dance and transmutating the human body into other forms. He also developed a poetic and surreal choreographic language called “butō notation” [butoh-fu] that uses words to create an imaginative time and space, physicalizing imagery through language. A highly complex collection of non-linear verbal and visual images, Hijikata’s butoh-fu offers the guidance of dance movement and choreography without showing the exact postures or movements, which is distinctively different from traditional dance notation and choreology.²¹⁶

Hijikata’s visual-poetic language aims at capturing the resonance between the movement of a dancer’s body and the expression of his surrealistic ideas. In the later years of his practice, Hijikata incorporated language alongside dancer Ashikawa Yoko, with Hijikata shouting words and Ashikawa interpreting these words on stage. Ashikawa’s movement was recorded as butoh-fu. Although his works frustrate many, Butoh practitioners generally claim that they experience a resonance with Hijikata’s words: Kurihana Nanako, for example, describes her conviction that Hijikata’s words “were an accurate expression of what he thought and felt.”²¹⁷ After hearing a taped version of Hijikata’s reading of the butoh-fu, Tawada was also introduced to the resonance

²¹⁶ Sondra Fraleigh’s book on Butoh dance traces the history and development of butoh as both an art form and an international movement. Chapter 2, “The Morphology of Butoh,” discusses the morphological potential of the body that constantly transfigures “from males to female, from human to plant life, disappearing into ash, animals, bugs, and gods.” Sondra Fraleigh, *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (University of Illinois Press, 2010): 45.

²¹⁷ Kurihara Nanako, “Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh,” *TDR* vol. 44, no.1 (2000): 16.

between the physical dance movement and the rhythm of language. As she argues, the work of digging up dialects and discovering words also extends to the sounds of words:

Many people from the Northeast region speak with a heavy accent. The “heaviness” can be thought of as something so heavy that it barely moves, which could also mean a steady way of speech that uses the weight like a pendulum. I realized that when I first heard the tape of Tatsumi Hijikata’s monologue entitled “Hijikata Butoh-fu.” Muroi also has this element in his way of speech. When he begins speaking, words rush out with a rhythm as if they are folding onto each other. Moreover, rather than continuing like a flat plate, it moves towards by digging the upper and under layers of the earth.²¹⁸

If dance movements could be expressed through a poetic language, could language become a type of dance? If the “heaviness” of an accent could be translated into the heaviness of steps or movement, could speech be transformed into the plowing and subverting of conventional notions of language? With his heavy accent and rhythmic writing style, Muroi shakes the ground of common knowledge and discovers unexpected gems in the realm of language. As field work, Muroi’s literary endeavor also plants and cultivates new “seeds.” Like Hijikata, who challenges contemporary dance with his highly erotic, grotesque, and subversive style, Muroi and Tawada change the way language is performed through their unique way of “playing” with language: the digging, unearthing, and cultivating of poetic language, or in other words, their “field work.”

²¹⁸ Tawada, *Exophony*, 56-57.

2. *The Emissary: An Interconnected World*

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, also known as the 3.11 earthquake, was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in the history of Japan. It triggered powerful tsunami waves, which caused nuclear accidents, primarily the level 7 meltdowns at three reactors in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex. The Japanese National Police Agency report confirms 15,896 deaths, 6,157 injured individuals, and 2,537 people still missing.²¹⁹ Immediately after the incident, the French and German Consulates in Japan messaged their citizens who were currently residing in Japan, urging them to evacuate. 3.11 not only brought the Japanese as well as the global community vision of destruction, damage, and devastation, but also the permeating fear of a massive, long-lasting radioactive contamination. A great number of literary works that deal with the topic of disaster and post-earthquake recovery began to emerge, giving birth to what is now commonly known as the post-earthquake literature [震災後文学]. Many of Japan's most prolific and most prominent authors have contributed to the post-Fukushima literature: Tsushima Yuko's *Wildcat Dome*, Yoshimoto Banana's *Sweet Hereafter*, Murakami Haruki's *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* and Oe Kenzaburo's *In Late Style* are among the most well-known examples. As a Japanese citizen living in Europe, Tawada wondered if she would ever be able to return to her home country.²²⁰ The first work she produces in this post-crisis context is "The Island of Eternal Life" [不死の島]. Written in 2012, the story

²¹⁹ National Police Agency of Japan -- Emergency Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters, "Police Countermeasures and Damage Situation associated with 2011 Tohoku district - off the Pacific Ocean Earthquake," September 10, 2018. Accessed April 11, 2021, https://www.npa.go.jp/news/other/earthquake2011/pdf/higaijokyo_e.pdf

²²⁰ Tawada, Yoko, 多和田葉子, Ryōichi Wagō 和合亮一 and Hiroshi Kainuma 開沼博, Berurin, fukushima: ano hi kara kotoba no akari wo sagashite ベルリン、福島：あの日から言葉の灯りをさがして [Berlin, Fukushima: searching for the light of words from that day] *Gunzo* 群像 (Oct. 2017.10): 156.

is set in 2017, when the word “Japan” no longer elicited sympathy, but only prejudice. The narrator feels ashamed when holding out her Japanese passport every time she crossed nation borders. In this fictional world, direct information from Japan was cut off, and rumor had it that the youth are frail, whereas the elderly are robbed of their ability to die. After “The Island of Eternal Life,” Tawada published another short fiction work in the fall 2014 edition of *Waseda Literature* entitled “The Other Side” [彼岸].²²¹ It tells an ironic story in which xenophobic, Sinophobic Japanese politicians who constantly insult Chinese people and their culture end up escaping disaster-torn Japan to seek refuge in China.²²² *The Emissary*, also published in 2014, is set in a similarly locked-up Japan as “The Island of Eternal Life,” in which seniors are unable to die, and the youth are too weak to survive on their own.

In a number of interviews, Tawada repeats her memories of the 3.11 earthquake and the nuclear disaster as a Japanese person living in Germany. “Without hesitation,” she said, “the German mass media described the worst scenarios. The Germans perceived the tsunami and the nuclear accident as if they happened to themselves, so they were terribly disturbed themselves. [...] “‘why didn’t the Japanese people escape?’” I was asked the same question every day.”²²³ Two reasons prompted such questions: first, it reflects the German public’s attitude towards nuclear power. In Germany, media had presented nuclear energy in an increasingly negative light since the early 1970s until the mid-1980s. Since the early 1980s, violent protests had been among the usual responses to the building of nuclear power stations. In a comparative study on media coverage of Fukushima in Germany, France, the UK, and Switzerland, the authors argue

²²¹ Both short stories are now published in *Kentōshi* 献灯使 [The Emissary] (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 2014).

²²² Yoko Tawada, “The Far Shore,” *Words Without Borders*, trans. Jeffrey Angles (March 2015). Accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-far-shore>.

²²³ Tawada, Wagō, and Kainuma, “Berlin, Fukushima,” 156.

that Fukushima was “instrumentalized and became a means in a mediatized public conflict. It was used to gather support for one’s side in the conflict about the future of domestic nuclear energy.”²²⁴ Second, and in contrast, the Japanese mass media’s presentation of this disastrous event was very controlled, to the point that it was criticized by some foreign media as “self-censored.”²²⁵ Japan’s national broadcaster NHK was said to be in favor of the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). In a study, the researchers Imtihani and Yanai argue that not only is the NHK’s selection of information sources biased, but the broadcaster also supported government policy through news framing. While most international news agencies such as the BBC, CNN, and Reuters showed the video footage of the first explosion at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, the NHK broadcasted the event without video scenes to “reduce people’s anxiety about the dangers of radiation.”²²⁶ Imtihani and Yanai’s study quotes an interview with a student from Fukushima, who claims that, at the time of the first explosion, she was standing in line waiting for gasoline around the gas station in Fukushima without any protection, completely unaware of the radiation around that place. Thus, residents like her were exposed to radiation for almost an entire day.²²⁷

Tawada does not fully agree with either side of this story. In an interview with Ryōichi Wagō and Hiroshi Kainuma, she admits that the German media coverage of Fukushima reflect Germany’s political stance, but it would be inaccurate to argue that their journalism lacks

²²⁴ Hans Mathias Kepplinger and Richard Lemke, “Instrumentalizing Fukushima: Comparing Media Coverage of Fukushima in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland,” in *Political Communication* 33, no.3, (2016): 365.

²²⁵ See, among others, Foreign Policy’s 2016 article, “The Silencing of Japan’s Free Press.” Accessed April 11, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/27/the-silencing-of-japans-free-press-shinzo-abe-media/>.

²²⁶ Najih Imtihani and Mariko Yanai, “Media Coverage of Fukushima Nuclear Power Station Accident 2011 (A Case Study of NHK and BBC WORLD TV Stations),” *Procedia Environmental Sciences* 17 (2013): 938-946.

²²⁷ Imtihani and Yanai, “Media Coverage of Fukushima,” 944.

objectivity.²²⁸ Tawada is aware of the convoluted social-political contexts of the apparent discrepancy between the German and the Japanese versions of the 3.11 event, including Germany's anti-nuclear movement and the then imminent 2011 Baden-Württemberg state election, as well as the limited press independence of Japan's mainstream media. Yet from her perspective as a writer, the fundamental problem of this gap perhaps lies in the (artificial) threshold that exists between the so-called "Japanese" language and the so-called "German," a problem illustrated by an exaggerated and humorous episode in her novel *The Fugitive's Night-Time Railway* [容疑者の夜行列車]. The narrator checks in at a cheap Bombay hotel, where she sees ballpoint pen scribbles beside the bed in both English and Japanese. The English says, "this hotel is great." The Japanese directly below it, which appears to be a translation, writes, "the owner of this hotel will come asking if you wouldn't like to buy a good camera for cheap; you should not buy it."²²⁹ This episode presents readers with evidence of the absurd fissures between languages without a verdict regarding which language to trust. Does the Japanese carry more reality because it offers more information? Can the traveler fully grasp the truth of this place by navigating between the two languages? What would fall in-between the two parallel statements that do not align? In *Exophony*, Tawada questions the inclination to trust one language over the other: "I'm often asked, which language do you dream in? It is a question that gets to me every time. The question suggests to me an implicit assumption: if a person speaks more than one language, then their true nature cannot be known. One may be the truth, but the other must then be false."²³⁰ The author herself, who exists in Japanese as "Tawada Yōko" and in German as

²²⁸ Tawada, Wagō, and Kainuma, "Berlin, Fukushima," 156.

²²⁹ Yoko Tawada. *Yōgisha no yakō ressha* [The Fugitive's Night-Time Railway]. (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2002), 145.

²³⁰ Tawada, *Exophony*, 46.

“Yoko Tawada,” resists the claim that there must be one single “truth” behind her multiple languages. She approaches the Japanese and German coverage of 3.11 and Fukushima with a similar attitude, seeing them as two parallel translations of the same event with no “reality,” no original, and no verdict.

The Emissary is written in this context, where gaps between truth-claiming languages and interpretations become all the more prominent after the disaster. Literature is particularly important at this moment, since literature

[...] does not begin with supporters and opponents, and therefore, it is rare that opinions diverge into two extremes where each abuses the other without carrying on a conversation. Yet I do not want to end with the comment “oh so there are many opinions.” We live on the same planet, and it is impossible to imagine that people with various positions would live in isolation. Literature must have a cosmic scale, where we can forget about each of our positions and think what is best for a global community.²³¹

For Tawada, literature confronts the authenticity of national languages and divergent opinions by emphasizing a global community and imagining a global language that is constantly growing and evolving. Literary language is not only used to communicate, which always requires an interpretation and a verdict, but to create a story for a global community.

The Emissary imagines a post-nuclear-fallout Japan with a strict isolation policy and severe censorship in the belief that “each country should solve its own problems by itself.”²³² Foreign languages are banned, foreign names and borrowed words usually written in Katakana—a script often used for transcription of foreign words or technical terms—are now written in

²³¹ Tawada, Wagō, and Kainuma, “Berlin, Fukushima,” 164.

²³² Tawada, *The Emissary*, trans. Margaret Mitsutani (Cambridge, MA: New Directions, 2018). Location 448. Kindle.

Chinese characters with roughly the same pronunciation, taking up new, unexpected meanings. For example, a Shikoku-style German bakery names its bread with German cities written in Chinese characters, so that “Aachen” becomes “pseudo opium,” “Hanover” is now “blade’s aunt,” and Rothenberg is written as “outdoor hot springs haven.”²³³ An annual holiday, the “off-line day,” is written as “honorable-woman-naked-obscenity.”²³⁴ Word like Hanover “mutates” to “blade’s aunt” because the language that people had in the past is no longer sufficient to grapple with new events and new species in this post-apocalyptic world and the post-disaster trauma. As the world drastically changes after the disaster, so does language:

Recently all dandelions had petals at least four inches long ... giving rise to a debate over whether it should be recognized as a chrysanthemum. “oversized dandelions are not chrysanthemums—merely mutations [突然変異],” asserted one faction, while another charged that “mutation” was a pejorative term, further enflaming the war of words. Actually, the word mutation was rarely used anymore, having been replaced by the more popular environmental adaptation [環境同化].”²³⁵

With its gigantic dandelions and bamboo as small as a person’s pinky finger, the post-disaster world forces human beings to reconsider their relationship with nature: what does one do with huge dandelions and tiny bamboo? The debate between the anti-dandelion faction and the Dandelion Support Association is centered-around the language with which we engage with the world, or in other words, the names of things. Both “oversized dandelion” and “chrysanthemum”

²³³ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 97.

²³⁴ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

²³⁵ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 69.

refer to the same plant, while “mutation” and “environmental adaptation” are different names of the same process. The inability to name (which would include both the “overnaming”²³⁶ and “undernaming” of things) reflects mankind’s incapacity to control and understand the new world. The seven-month-long chrysanthemum-dandelion controversy ended with the famous Imperial decree, “there is no such thing as a weed [雑草].”²³⁷ By definition, weed is a wild plant growing where it is not wanted and in competition with cultivated plants. The ability to distinguish cultivated plants from wild plants manifests mankind’s capacity to instrumentalize and cultivate nature according to their own needs. Claiming that “there is no such thing as a weed” erases the distinction between “useful” and “useless” plants and admits that humans must adapt to a mutated environment that no longer only serves the purpose of humanity. The mutative process of both the dandelion and its name not only destabilizes the taken-for-granted relationship between mankind and the environment, but also threatens the instrumentality of language as a way in which humans understand and attempt to control the environment.

Another vivid example of the environmental-turned-linguistic mutation is the case of nettles,²³⁸ a type of plant that, in a “normal” world, would rarely be considered edible. In the story, Tokyo and its surrounding areas are virtually deserted; with neither agriculture nor industry, it is growing poorer by the day. To “get back Tokyo’s thunder,” the city tries to rebrand

²³⁶ The term “overnaming” [Überbenennung] is borrowed from Benjamin’s essay “On Language as Such.” Benjamin, GS II, 155.

²³⁷ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 69.

²³⁸ The plant “tade” is commonly translated as “nettles,” but some may find this translation misleading. “Tade,” or persicaria hydropiper, is plant of the Polygonaceae family that is commonly known as “water pepper” or “marshpepper knotweed,” whereas “common nettle” or “stinging nettle” normally refers to *Urtica dioica*, a herbaceous plant in the Urticaceae family. The confusion is likely resulted from the popularity of Edward Seidensticker’s 1955 translation of Junichiro Tanizaki’s *Tade Kuu mushi* as *Some Prefer Nettles*. Seidensticker took the phrase from Kenkyusha’s *Japanese-American Dictionary*, but admits later that this is not a completely accurate translation. See Edward G. Seidensticker, *Tokyo Central: A Memoir* (University of Washington Press, 2011): 117.

itself by adopting the name “Edo” and named a number of “Tokyo specialties.”²³⁹ Nettles, traditionally unpopular and not grown anywhere else, are marketed as a Tokyo specialty, with posters showing the mayor of Tokyo happily munching away at a nettle salad. When the story’s protagonist, the 108-year-old Yoshiro, sees a bunch of nettles at a vegetable stand, the shop owner does not offer his usual pitch “this tastes really good,” but instead, he said: “those are the nettles everyone’s talking about. Why not buy a bunch, to cheer Tokyo on?”²⁴⁰ For those who market nettles as a Tokyo specialty, to pay for nettles is to support domestic production, and to vote for Tokyo over other regions such as Hokkaido and Okinawa. They see nettles as economic and political tokens that are only valuable because they are “made in Tokyo.”²⁴¹

Tawada is referring to the famous Japanese proverb, “some insects eat nettles and also like it” [蓼食う虫も好き好き], a phrase loaded with value judgement. Historically, nettles are widely regarded as poisonous around the world. Livestock tends to avoid it, too, because of its pungent taste. In Japan, nettles are sometimes used to make a type of spicy vinegar called Tadezu that goes well with sweet fish—as spicy flavor and pungent taste are appreciated in Japanese cuisine, the leaf is traditionally used to garnish sushi, similar to wasabi. The phrase “some prefer nettles” has created a “longstanding prejudice” that “not even the most eccentric farmers in other prefectures wanted to grow them.”²⁴² Although there was supposed to be no accounting for taste, the food that insects prefer could not possibly be popular among humans, especially the adults, who “arrogantly talked about whether food tasted good or not, as if a gourmet sensibility put you

²³⁹ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

²⁴⁰ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

²⁴¹ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

²⁴² Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

in a superior class of people.”²⁴³ The earliest version of this saying, which could be found in *Chu Ci*, an anthology of Chinese poetry from the Warring States period (c. 481 BC to 221 BC), already used the image of nettle-eating insects to judge a scoundrel from an honest man: “the smartweed bug shuns mallow and violet, and does not alight on them for it is used to bitter flavor. A petty person is by nature filthy and narrow-minded, how can he understand the heart of a man without restraint?”²⁴⁴ The insects that prefer nettles are used as metaphors for an unscrupulous man who is unable to appreciate anything truthful and genuine, and instead prefers a corrupt and filthy environment. Similarly, Tang poet Wang Yi (177-217) used this phrase to describe people who have become so used to pain and hardship, that they no longer feel them.

Yoshiro tastes the food and immediately regrets buying nettles. But after he apologizes to his great-grandson Mumei, the boy gazes up at him with a puzzled look and says, “whether food tastes good or not doesn’t really bother me.”²⁴⁵ His response makes Yoshiro feel ashamed of himself: “the boy had shown him his own shallowness when he had least expected it.”²⁴⁶ Mumei’s comment highlights Yoshiro’s generation’s tendency to impose hierarchy and prejudice onto everything from words to plants. Since the bitter taste of nettles is commonly associated with bad morals and the lower class, the older generation tries to reverse the association by branding it as a moral obligation to purchase nettles:

²⁴³ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

²⁴⁴ “蓼虫避葵藿，习苦不言非。小人自龌龊，安知旷士怀。” Zhao Bao 鲍照, “Dai Fang Ge Xing” 代放歌行 [Imitating “The Song Without Restraint”]. The English is translated by Robert Shanmu Chen. See Chen, “A Study of Bao Zhao and His Poetry: With a Complete English Translation of His Poems” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1989): 294.

²⁴⁵ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

²⁴⁶ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

Adults arrogantly talked about whether food tasted good or not, as if a gourmet sensibility put you in a superior class of people, forgetting that everyone was already sunk to the waist in a swamp of problems—how must they look to these children? Yoshiro asked himself. Poison often had no taste at all, so no matter how finely honed your palate, your taste buds weren't going to save your life.²⁴⁷

As it gradually becomes impossible to distinguish “bad” taste from “good” taste, everything associated with taste mutates accordingly, including morality and language. Yoshiro realizes that his responsibility is not to promote a vegetable’s “reputation” in order to “cheer Tokyo on,” but to develop a sustainable relationship with the mutating world to survive and take care of the youth.

With phrases like “blade’s aunt” or “honorable-woman-naked-obscenity,” Tawada invites readers to imagine a new language with words that no longer retain stable meanings, but instead have a prominent physicality that resembles that of a fruit. In *The Emissary*, we see a clear parallel between the trading market of fruits and languages:

South Africa and India ... kept to a policy of supporting their economies by exporting language alone, discontinuing all other imports and exports. [...] Like these two nations, the Japanese government had also stopped importing underground resources and exporting manufactured goods, but with no language to export, it had come to an impasse. So the government had hired a linguist to write a paper proving that the language Okinawans spoke was linguistically unrelated to Japanese, to promote its plan to sell the Okinawan language to China for a good price, but Okinawans refused to let

²⁴⁷ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 594.

this underhand scheme go through. They came back with an ultimatum: If Japan insisted on selling their language to China, then Okinawa would stop all shipment of fruit to the main island of Japan.²⁴⁸

Here, Tawada draws a surprising analogy between words and fruit in that they are both tradable in the global market. As words lose their communicability, they escape the control of humans and begin a life of their own: a life as “fruits.” In *The Emissary*, Japan adopts an isolation policy, and communication between countries have been cut off. Each language should only be spoken in one specific, confined geographical area, allowing them to be traded as a commodity. Buying a foreign language that is only spoken by people with whom one can never speak to is to invest in the characteristics of language beyond its communicability, which touches upon the paradoxical nature of Tawada’s concept of “pure language,” a language that can be used but cannot be owned. Since it is impossible to trade something that one does not own, the trade talk between Japan and China rapidly breaks down: like air, meadows, or wild berries, Tawada’s “pure language” is useful, but has no value in exchange.²⁴⁹ The linguistic exchange between South Africa and India, which involves neither labor nor value, becomes the only sustainable way to trade plants as “fruits.” But fruit as an agricultural product is labor-intensive; Yoshiro’s daughter and Mumei’s mother Amana works in an orchard in Okinawa, a place that Yoshiro calls a “fruit factory,” even though the word “orchard” is commonly associated with paradise.²⁵⁰ Selling language in exchange for agricultural products is not only selling something

²⁴⁸ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1093.

²⁴⁹ The labor associated with language only exists when someone begins to make it useful for herself, such as for communication purposes. In Marxist terms, this “pure language” would bear no value, as there is no labor and no surplus value involved in its production process.

²⁵⁰ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 680.

with no value in exchange for a valuable commodity, but also claiming private ownership of something that should be freely accessible to everyone.²⁵¹ This highly ironic account of Japan's failed attempt to sell language mocks the idea of a "national language," because in this mutating world, Japan has no authority to claim an official interpretation of a single word. The two nations with countless languages and dialects—South Africa has at least 35 indigenous languages, India 122 major ones and 1,599 minor ones—support their economy by "playing" with each other's languages, while Japan, whose a government attempts to forcefully claim ownership of Hokkaido's dialect, had nothing to export.

In a fruit factory, workers like Amana have no free access to language, a fact that frustrates Yoshiro. In her letters, Amana writes only about fruits, such as the latest red pineapple or square pineapple, products that would never ship to the main island.²⁵² Yoshiro senses something wrong with his daughter and worries that she might be brainwashed. "Either Amana's head was so full of fruit she could think of nothing else, or her mail was being censored, or she was hiding something from him. Her postcards were frustrating, as if the most important part was covered by the back of an invisible hand, making it impossible to read."²⁵³ Here, Tawada clearly voices her judgement of censorship and authoritarianism, which adopts an "environmentalist" language, as if the destruction of language would result in an environmental crisis. A novelist, Yoshiro writes a novel about the emissary to China [Kentōshi, 遣唐使], the

²⁵¹ Historically, Japan did the reverse, but with the exact same intention. When Ryukyu (now Okinawa) was annexed by Japan in 1879, the Japanese government began an assimilation policy of Japanization, forcing Okinawan children to speak Japanese and punishing them for speaking their native language. During the Battle of Okinawa, some Okinawans were even killed by Japanese soldiers for speaking Ryukuan languages. Okinawan, which was considered as evidence of spy activities and treason in WWII, has now become the potential bargaining chip for trade talks between China and Japan in Tawada's story.

²⁵² Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 680.

²⁵³ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 680.

namesake of Tawada's story.²⁵⁴ Due to Japan's severe censorship against foreign words, a historical novel that included the names of many foreign countries would never be published. The emissary was among the earliest accounts in the history of globalization. But when the routes from Japan to all foreign countries had been cut off and all foreign words were banned, Yoshiro can no longer feel the roundness of the earth beneath his feet,²⁵⁵ as if the lack of words has the power to alter the shape of earth.

Censorship not only leads to rumor and confusion, but also fundamentally changes people's perception of the world and their behavior: Yoshiro asked himself, "did [the Diet members] really exist, or were they simply photographs with names?" The Japanese legislature constantly changed the laws, but the public was never told who made the changes or for what purpose. "Afraid of getting burned by laws they hadn't heard of, everyone kept their intuition

²⁵⁴ The title of Tawada's book is written in different characters from the Japanese emissaries to China (遣唐使), even though they are pronounced the same. The literal meaning of Tawada's *Kentōshi* is "the emissary of light." Between the year of 630 and 894, in 19 occasions, the Japanese court (Yamato) appointed official envoys to Tang China to study its advanced science and technology, legal and political system, as well as its literary and religious culture. Among these ambassadors were also students, translators, musicians, craftsmen, doctors, priests and prophets. Roughly twenty missions were sent during the two centuries of *Kentōshi*'s history. Goods, especially raw materials such as amber, agate, and silk textiles, were gathered as taxes from all over Japan to be sent as presents to the Emperor of Tang; the Emperor returned the favor with Chinese goods and artworks, such as Tang three-color ceramics (Tang San Cai, 唐三彩), Buddhist sculptures, music instruments, and religious writings. The *Kentōshi* mission proved to be hugely successful and influential to the Japanese society: by the end of the 9th century, Japan possessed over 1,700 Chinese texts, including Confucian treatises, Buddhist scriptures, as well as works on history, poetry, and medicine. Robert Borgen points out that, the *Kentōshi* mission reaffirmed Japan's position as a member of the East Asian community of civilized nations. See Robert Borgen, "The Japanese Mission to China, 801-806," *Monumenta Nipponica* (Spring 1982): 24.

Despite the Chinese Court's potential sinocentric perspective, which saw the embassies from Kyoto as tributaries of Imperial China, the Chinese Emperor of Sui took the initiative in opening relations with Japan, claiming that he treats the sovereign of Wa (or Yamato) respectfully. The commercial trades and cultural exchanges between the two courts were overall reciprocal and mutually beneficial. Although some students and scholars remained on the continent for over 30 years before returning to disseminate the knowledge they learned, most of them do eventually return to their home country.

²⁵⁵ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 244.

honed sharp as a knife, practicing restraint and self-censorship on a daily basis.”²⁵⁶ Fifteen-year-old Mumei finds it genuinely confusing that Yoshiro knows many words that he never uses:

Great grandpa knows lots of words; he never uses lots of words he knows; he teaches me words he never uses; then he tells me never to use certain words he tells me about. Great grandpa blurred into several overlapping faces. Could clothes still be there, just as they were, even after the words for them had disappeared? Or did they change, or disappear, along with their names?²⁵⁷

Mumei’s innocent inquiry allows us to imagine a world where language becomes tangible and organic, with which our relationship constantly evolves. Like a piece of clothing, the name of clothes and Yoshiro’s relationship with it can be worn, washed, worn-out, and discarded. Words become fruit-like when they enter an “organic” process of constant self-translation. Like fruits, they grow, mature, age, perish, and spout again from the seed. Like the oversized dandelion, “Hanover” only becomes “blade’s aunt” to adapt to the post-apocalyptic environment. Responding to severe censorship, authoritarianism, and the climate of fear, even nature starts playing various tricks. “Enraged at humans disrupting her balance this way,” for example, “nature was making sure that no one stayed the same sex all their lives,” in responding to the decree that female fetuses should be aborted. “Everyone’s sex changed at least once, but people wouldn’t tell ahead of time how many times their sex would change.”²⁵⁸ The sex change appears to be nature’s stress response to human disturbances. Foreign words, dandelions, and the sex of

²⁵⁶ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1004.

²⁵⁷ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1122.

²⁵⁸ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1033.

humans are all part of this “nature” that can be used but cannot be tampered with; destruction of a single word may lead to natural disasters that affect everyone with no exception.

Ortrud Gutjahr, editor of one of Tawada’s speech collections, *Foreign Water* [Fremde Wasser], points out that “nature has no conception of catastrophes,” yet they are described as such because “the effects of extreme elemental activity can only be calculated and controlled by humans to a limited extent, and are accompanied by destruction and loss.”²⁵⁹ In *The Emissary*, humans learn to give up calculating and controlling nature. Tawada describes a world where children willingly adapt to the environment, both physically and mentally. Furthermore, the magical absurdities that fill the story—from Mumei’s mother who turns into a crane after her death, to Mumei’s capricious sex change—illustrate a world of radical interconnectedness and fluidity. As Koichi Haga suggests, the earth and the human body are closely connected throughout the text.²⁶⁰ One of the reasons that Mumei is selected to be one of the “emissary” children is because he could read topography through a map, with a sort of internal organ that sees in X-rays. His body is so deeply connected to the movement of the earth that, when he falls into the wide strait of the earth at the end of the story—a moment which, according to Haga, signifies the movement of the crustal shift caused by the 3/11 Tohoku earthquake—the shock induces such significant changes in his own body that he turns into a woman.²⁶¹ To borrow

²⁵⁹ Ortrud Gutjahr, “Vom Hafen aus: Meere und Schiffe, die Flut und das Fluide in Yoko Tawadas Hamburger Poetik Vorlesungen.” In Gutjahr, *Fremde Wasser: Vorlesungen und Wissenschaftliche Beiträge; Hamburger Gastprofessur für interkulturelle Poetik* (Tübingen: Konkursbuch-Verlag. Gehrke, 2012): 451-76.

²⁶⁰ Koichi Haga, *The Earth Writes: The Great Earthquake and the Novel in Post-3/11 Japan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019): 129.

²⁶¹ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1593.

Haga's words, Tawada "connects the movement of the Earth's crust and global climate change with the mutations of the human body, culture, and language."²⁶²

How do Yoshiro and Mumei survive in a constantly mutating world? How do they form a new relationship with words that have lost their meanings and lemons so sour that "it made you see blue"?²⁶³ Caring for Mumei made Yoshiro realize that the only way to make peace with nature is through "play." Tawada carefully illustrates the gradual change in Yoshiro's relationship with mutated fruits and his great grandson's mutated body. At first, he sees himself as the guardian of Mumei, and the fruit as an enemy that must be defeated and consumed in order to "save" him. In one of the earlier scenes of the story, Yoshiro makes breakfast for Mumei. He prepares bread, soymilk, and orange juice for the frail teenager, who has a lot of trouble eating:

Some might say it's silly to put so much energy into cutting up fruit, but Yoshiro had chosen not a fish or a piece of meat but an orange as this blade's first and fiercest adversary. His mission—to seek out the noble drops hidden deep inside the fruit, protected by impenetrable walls of fiber, and deliver them to Mumei—had him trembling like a warrior. Ah, this tough, unyielding rind, with its strong, white gloves of the noble citrus beneath, surrounding each section with its many juice sacs to hold the precious liquid, all determined not to let a single drop escape. Why must you put so many wrappings in the way, preventing my beloved great-grandson from enjoying the sweetness of your juice!²⁶⁴

²⁶² Haga, *The Earth Writes*, 92.

²⁶³ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

²⁶⁴ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 331.

This fruit has three layers: a “tough, unyielding rind,” also known in botanical term as the epicarp; “strong, white gloves of the noble citrus” that wraps around the juice vesicles, or albedo; and carpels, the part of the orange that we eat, made up of small, individual plant cells. Each layer is a barrier of resistance that protects the fruit from external invasion. Yoshiro respects the “noble citrus” as a worthy opponent of his new blade, because on the one hand, it has the sweet juice that is beneficial to his great-grandson’s health and life; on the other hand, its many wrappings seem to indicate its adamant resistance against humans’ teeth or blades. In this post-apocalyptic world where the youth are too weak to resist any external threats, humans and plants seem to have reversed their roles. Used to their role as dominant actors in the ecosystem, humans still act as if they were the sole operator of agency, struggling to turn non-human actors into symbolic objects or nutritious food. Although nonhuman actors have always posed a form of resistance—for example, they could change human behavior by determining production of wealth and inscribing power and economic value—these forms of resistance are often ignored.²⁶⁵ But in a world where humans are growingly weaker, the struggle between Yoshiro and an orange became a significant battle, and the feeling makes Yoshiro tremble with excitement like a warrior who is about to go to war. And it is not only fruit: from cabbage to burdock root, plants may look placid on the surface, but “they refuse to give an inch.”²⁶⁶ They force humans like Yoshiro to come to terms with the fact that plants are perhaps never born to be eaten by men; every attempt to eat a fruit or vegetable involves a targeted assault and an active resistance. Humans and plants become equal opponents and notable collaborators in this mutating world. Yoshiro silently chants,

²⁶⁵ Aloï, “Why Look at Plants?”, 33.

²⁶⁶ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 331.

Just wait, Mumei. Great-grandpa will cut through the jungle of vegetable fiber your teeth can't manage, carving out the road to health and life, I will be your teeth. Mumei, absorb the sun into your body. Imagine you're a shark, your mouth full of fine, white teeth, so huge and sharp that whoever sees them runs away in terror. Your saliva is at high tide, wave upon wave filling your mouth, your throat muscles so strong you could swallow the earth. Your gut is an indoor pool, full of gastric juices, and under its glass roof the sun soaks in your gastric pool. Unlike other planets, the earth is blessed with the sun's light every day. Thanks to Lord Apollo, it is full of strange and wonderful forms. Even now, jellyfish, octopi, frilled lizard, crabs, rhinoceroses, human beings, and a lot of other creatures live on the earth, changing all the time. Buds sprout from a bean-shaped embryo, which opens in the shape of a heart, tadpoles like little musical notes turn into frogs like round wooden drums you see in temples, caterpillars become butterflies, wrinkly newborns age into wrinkled old men. In the past ten years, lots of species have gone extinct, but the earth is still warm, and bright.²⁶⁷

Yoshiro asks Mumei to imagine another metamorphosis, in which the boy would become a shark with huge, sharp teeth, and Yoshiro himself would become Mumei's teeth, fighting through the orange's barricades of fiber. But this imaginary metamorphosis quickly grows out of Yoshiro's control: in the next sentence, the shark becomes so big that its saliva becomes the sea, and its throat could swallow the earth. The shark keeps changing, with its gut turns into a gastric indoor pool in which the sun soaks. At this point, readers (and perhaps Yoshiro himself) realize that the shark has turned into earth itself, "full of strange and wonderful forms": caterpillars, butterflies,

²⁶⁷ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 331.

and wrinkly newborn babies. The phrase “bean-shaped embryo” uses the characters for a human embryo [taiji, 胎児] to describe the embryo of a plant [hai, 胚]. The shape of an unborn baby is not unlike the seed of a bean, and that which “opens in the shape of a heart” could either refer to the first two leaves that grows out of an embryo, or a human baby’s heart, which begins to form around six weeks after conception. In this surrealistic world, buds sprouting from an unborn baby are just as common as caterpillars turning into butterflies, or Mumei becoming a shark that could swallow the earth.

By this point, Yoshiro realizes that his relationship with Mumei is more complex than the protector-protected one that he initially imagined. Mumei’s frail body is not a problem that must be fixed, but a form of life just as strange and wonderful as a frilled lizard and a bean-shaped embryo. He realizes that Mumei has a different understanding of and a different relationship with the world that he himself has ever imagined. While drinking the orange juice, Mumei is in such a good mood that he starts playing with the mandarin orange, “poking a section with his finger, which was about as soft as the orange.”²⁶⁸ And Yoshiro decides not to scold his great-grandson for playing with food. He says to himself,

playing with food was fine. He might even discover a new way of eating it. Play, play, play with your food! If Mumei were to ask him, “How do you eat a mandarin orange?” He would tell him to figure it out for himself. Any way would be fine with Great-grandpa. Thinking of a way as you play. But in the end, Mumei never asked. Yoshiro’s generation were brought up believing that there was a proper way to eat fruit: this was the way you peeled an orange; you used this sort of spoon to scoop out grapefruit sections.

²⁶⁸ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

They believed that by standardizing the eating process into a ritual, they could soothe their cells into ignoring the sourness of the fruit, which actually warned of danger.

Mumei's generation could never be deceived by such a silly trick, originally meant to fool children. No matter how they ate fruit, alarms went off throughout their bodies.

When Mumei ate kiwi fruit he had trouble breathing; lemon juice paralyzed his tongue.

And it wasn't just fruit. Spinach gave him heartburn, while shiitake mushroom made him dizzy. Mumei never forgot for an instant that food was dangerous.²⁶⁹

The standardized eating process helps people of Yoshiro's generation ignore any signal of resistance that the plant sends out, and reinforces their belief that plants are nothing but food.

Mumei's generation, however, see plants differently because of their frail bodies: kiwi, lemon juice, spinach, shiitake could all cause them serious allergic reactions: allergic asthma (trouble breathing), paresthesia (numb tongue), acid reflux (heart burn), and vertigo (dizziness).

Normally, allergies are caused by hypersensitivity of the immune system to typically harmless substances in the environment, and many of them could be managed by medication, allergen immunotherapy, or simply avoiding the substance that triggers the allergy; but everyone in

Mumei's generation suffers from such severe allergic symptoms that it becomes the new norm.

There is apparently no medication to treat or relieve these symptoms, and the standard medical advice for sick children is now that "children shouldn't be given medicine" to relieve pain or bring down fevers. "Mumei never forgot for an instant that food was dangerous."²⁷⁰ But the

²⁶⁹ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

²⁷⁰ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

danger would not stop him from playing with food, and he happily plays with the orange that could easily burn his throat.

Most benign allergies towards plants are simultaneously beneficial and dangerous, triggered from without but acting from within. In *Timaeus*, Plato discusses mankind's natural health and illness, advising that, diseases that are not very dangerous should not be irritated by medicines, for "every form of disease is in a manner akin to the living being, whose complex frame has an appointed term of life."²⁷¹ In his reading, Derrida defines the essence of the natural illness of the living as "an allergy," or "a reaction to the aggression of an alien element."²⁷² Just like a living being's health is autonomous, so is a normal disease; it defends itself to continue following its own course. As long as a living being has a relationship with the external world, disease cross its path. Natural illness and allergy are not a problem that must be fixed, but a reminder of the finitude of human beings and its relationship with its other. An allergic reaction, according to Derrida, indicates that the human body "has a limited lifetime, that death is already inscribed and prescribed within its structure, in its 'constitutive triangles.'"²⁷³ (Only God, who is immortal and perfect and therefore has no relation with any outside, has no allergies, but such omnipotent figures never exist in Tawada's works.) Suffering constantly from illness and allergies, Mumei's generation has a clear understanding of mankind's ephemerality and imperfection. For them, allergic reactions and pain are simply reactions they experience when

²⁷¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, Trans. Benjamin Jowett, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/physics/astrocourses/ast203/Timaeus.html>, 89 a-d. Quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): 101.

²⁷² Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 101.

²⁷³ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 101.

encountering elements from the external world, and they have learned to deal with the pain without associating it with suffering or lamentation. Yoshiro observes,

[Mumei] didn't seem to know what "suffering" meant; he simply coughed when food wouldn't go down, or vomited it back up. Of course he felt pain, but it was pure pain, unaccompanied by any "Why am I the only one who has to suffer like this?" sort of lamentations that Yoshiro knew so well. Perhaps this acceptance was a treasure given to the youngest generation. Mumei didn't know how to feel sorry for himself.²⁷⁴

Mumei not only treats fruits as their equal adversary, but he also understands that humans and plants will simultaneously benefit from and be harmed by the existence of the other. This is what Yoshiro called "play": to play with an orange is not to consume it according to a "proper way to eat fruit" that previous generations had standardized to minimize the feelings of danger.²⁷⁵ To play with an orange is to look at it, poke it with one's own fingers, penetrate its "jungle of vegetable fiber," and taste the sourness of its juice.²⁷⁶ "Play" de-instrumentalizes and de-normalizes the approach to consume fruits, freeing them from their appropriate use as food. "Lemon is so sour it makes you see blue," Mumei comments when he eats a lemon snow cone for the first time.²⁷⁷ Inspired by Mumei's heightened sensitivity, Yoshiro also changes the way he sees a lemon: "it seemed to him that blue was mixed in with the yellow [of the lemon]—and that made him feel that for just a moment he had touched the raw, spinning earth."²⁷⁸ This raw,

²⁷⁴ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 360.

²⁷⁵ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

²⁷⁶ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 331.

²⁷⁷ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 476.

²⁷⁸ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 506.

spinning earth is what Tawada imagines to be what remains after the violent destruction of normativity: “play” is the only way to experience the unknowable world at the other end of an environmental crisis.

Another thing that Tawada plays with in *The Emissary* is the concept of the proper name. Almost all characters in the story have plant names, which could be seen as a parody of God’s creative word that allows “man” to take possession of nature. In the story, it is the plants—unlike animals, there is no mention of Adam naming any plants in the Genesis—that “named” humans. For example, Yoshiro’s wife Marika’s name is written with two characters, “mari” [鞠], which means “to bow down,” and “ka” [華], a common character for female names which means “beautiful” or “brilliant.” But “Marika” could also be written in Chinese characters as “茉莉花,” or jasmine flower. The name of Marika and Yoshiro’s daughter Amana [天南, lit. Southern sky] is derived from Arisaema [*Tennanshou* 天南星, lit. the star of the Southern sky], a large and diverse genus of the flowering plant Araneae, with its species commonly known as cobra lilies or jack-in-the-pulpit. The pronunciation “Amana” [甘菜, *Amana edulis*] also resonates with the name of a small genus of flowering bulbs in the lily family, closely related to tulips. Amana’s son Tomo [飛藻] is a common name for boys,²⁷⁹ but the two characters literally means “flying algae.” Yoshiro’s neighbor Nemoto’s [根本] surname literally means “root origin,” and his daughter Suiren [睡蓮]’s first name means “water lily.”

With these plant-sounding names, Tawada creates a world where humans gradually lose their naming ability and their governing power over plants. By “naming” humans, plants insert their

²⁷⁹ The common choices of characters range from tomo [友], which means friend, to tomo [智], which means smartness, intelligence, with a number of alternatives with similar meanings in between.

power into the invisible corner of proper names. For a native Japanese speaker, the experience of reading *Kentōshi* may bear a resemblance to Tawada's own experience as a non-native speaker of German living in a German-speaking world. In *Exophony*, Tawada mentions the episode of her visit to the optometrist, whose name is "Hasenbein," or "rabbit's leg."²⁸⁰ Despite a common proper name, it strikes Tawada as something that stands out among common names. She argues that, when speaking a foreign language, we often memorize proper nouns along with common nouns, whereas in the case of the mother tongue, they are usually stored in completely different locations of our memory. To let plants "name" human characters is to challenge the existing linguistic order by re-arranging the categorization and placement of words and names, of common nouns and proper nouns. In the fictional post-apocalyptic world where a significant portion of our linguistic knowledge no longer "makes sense," Tawada introduces a playful scenario to cope with the situation, where the neighbor lady is a water lily, just like in real life, her German dentist is a "nail" [Nägel].²⁸¹

The name "Mumei" literally means "no name." If the other characters' plant-name is a parody of the hierarchical order of proper nouns and common nouns, naming a character "no name" is a quintessential example of Tawada's profanation of language. A "nameless" name, "Mumei" is not blessed by the creative power of God. In an analysis of Benjamin's view of language, Tawada argues that the language of things, a language she calls "puppet-script" that has the daemonic power to communicate with humans and trees alike, proceeds immediately

²⁸⁰ Tawada, *Exophony*, 111.

²⁸¹ Tawada, *Exophony*, 111.

through its material community, and is only readable through a “translation of the nameless into name”²⁸²:

The communication of things proceeds not verbally, but immediately [unmittelbar] through its material community. A toy bears the language of things in itself, which, however, only becomes readable for mankind in a translation. Literary text could, for example, perform such a translation task. The literary texts here are read as translations of the language of things.²⁸³

Citing Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and Sigrid Weigel’s “Communicating Tubes”

[Kommunizierende Röhren], a comparative study of Benjamin and Foucault, Tawada argues that Foucault’s study could be read as a historization of Benjamin’s theory of language, concretizing mankind’s break with the magic of language—which, as Tawada reads it, Benjamin associates with a mythical original scene—as a historical turning point during the Enlightenment.²⁸⁴ The magic of language is lost when instrumentalized reason demarcates the boundary between reason and foolishness, technological advancement and primitive nature, ignoring anything that fails to fit in the binary system. The children Felix and Christlieb in Hoffmann’s “The Stranger Child” can hear the stranger child’s puppet language because, not yet able to comprehend such a system, they understand language through “a system of direct similarities and connectedness between

²⁸² Benjamin, GS II, 151.

²⁸³ Tawada is responding to the following passage in Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”:

“There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be one of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication.” Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 15-16, Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996): 73.

²⁸⁴ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 16.

language and the world.”²⁸⁵ The task of translation, or literary texts in general, is to make these similarities and connectedness visible again, revealing the “daemonic power” inherent in language as well as in Enlightenment, nature, and technology.²⁸⁶

The character Mumei is an example of Tawada’s translation of the nameless into name: capricious, unpredictable, yet full of potential, Mumei cannot be “named”: born a human child, he has the “slender long neck” of a bird and the sick and frail body of an elderly man; he lives for 15 years as a boy but begins menstruating when he reaches adolescence. Mumei is Tawada’s version of Hoffmann’s stranger child, an androgynous spirit residing in a mechanical body, simultaneously mythical and modern. The story ends with Mumei, accompanied by the girl next-door, Suiren, plunging into the sea. Is he planning to travel overseas and become an “emissary,” or is he jumping to his death? As he turns into a girl, does Suiren become a boy? When he turns around to check, Suiren’s face “[blots] out Mumei’s sky,” her eyes blur and spread out into blotches, then a pair of lungs, then two familiar faces.²⁸⁷ Finally, “darkness, wearing a glove, reached for the back of his head to take hold of his brains, and Mumei fell into the pitch-black depth of the strait.”²⁸⁸ Is this pitch-black depth of the strait what the future of language looks like? Taking a leap of faith into the potential of language, Mumei plunges into the sea that separates him from an interconnected world of the future. This bizarre ending does not promise readers a better future, only an aesthetic appreciation of the world independent of any purpose or meaning. For Tawada, the radical changes caused by an environmental catastrophe—a mutating world with mutating bodies, the loss of “homeland” [Heimat] and “linguistic home”

²⁸⁵ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 16.

²⁸⁶ Tawada, *Sprachmagie*, 78.

²⁸⁷ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1593.

²⁸⁸ Tawada, *The Emissary*, loc. 1593.

[Sprachheimat]—inevitably leads to a borderless future of pure means, where all separations are deactivated and rendered meaningless.

Chapter 3. Speaking to Plants: Celan's Search for a Secret Echo

Paul Celan's poetry speaks about his "placelessness" [Ortlosigkeit] as a migrant who had never been granted a home and his "timelessness" [Zeitlosigkeit] as a Holocaust survivor who has been robbed of his personal time in history.²⁸⁹ His plant writing, especially the attempted conversations with plants, becomes a way to address issues of disjointed time and dislocated place. From "timeless" crocuses to "rootless" wandering perennials and "inverted" orchids, plants with their unique frame of temporality and spatiality offer a different perspective and invite a new poetic vision. This chapter mainly looks at three poems ("Memories of France" (Erinnerung an Frankreich, 1948), "Aspen Tree" (Esenbaum, 1952), "Radix, Matrix" (1963)) and two prose works ("Edgar Jené and the Dream of the Dream" (Edgar Jené und der Traum vom Traume, 1948) and "Conversations in the Mountains" (Gespräch im Gebirg, 1960)), all of which speak about or to plants as a way to re-establish a relationship with the poet's surroundings and relocate himself in a post-Holocaust world. What Celan hopes to find, as I argue in this chapter, is a "secret echo," a call released into the environment and returned from various nearby objects that allows the poet to locate himself. In other words, the attempted conversation with plants is part of Celan's "topological research" [Toposforschung] that constantly seeks another but only encounters itself.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ See Thomas Sparr, "Celan's Poetik des Raums," in *Celans Poetik des hermetischen Gedichts* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1989): 149, and Leonard Olschner, "Tief/in der Zeiteinschränkung: Reading Time in Paul Celan's Poetics," in *German Life and Letters*, 73, no. 4 (Oct. 2020): 642-658.

²⁹⁰ Celan, GW III, 199, 201.

1. Timeless Autumn Crocus

For Celan, disrupting the temporal constraints is not only a poetological experiment, but also a necessity required by his reality as a Holocaust survivor writing in German in the post-War period. In Derrida's chapter about the specters of Marxism, "the Time is Out of Joint," he claims that Hamlet is mad about the date (of the King's death) because his memory suffers from the death of the king and the father. To mourn for the dead father, to determine the time of mourning, one must know when an event took place, and if it indeed took place.²⁹¹ A date, Derrida claims, joins the material reality of the event with the psychic presence of the murder. The date is therefore the measure of time that should be used to decide the term of mourning and the violence of the murder.²⁹² Yet Hamlet does not know the date of his father's murder; even if they did know the exact date of the event, it would still be impossible to offer an "objective and stable reference to the violence of the founding event."²⁹³ Without a date, time loses its capacity for measurement and becomes paradoxically irrelevant. "As time passes, time passes. Instead of taking place, it disappears, it ceases to take place. It mourns itself. Instead of stretching out, instead of growing larger, it shrinks, it recalls mourning to the chronological paradox of its economy."²⁹⁴ Because of the inadequation that marks the dating and the calendar and the impossibility of assigning a real date to the event, the poet cannot find an external, objective reality against which all things could be measured. "Measurelessness thus becomes the law."²⁹⁵

²⁹¹ Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint," in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: NYU Press, 1995): 21.

²⁹² See also: Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: for Paul Celan," in *Sovereignties in Question: the Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005): 1-64.

²⁹³ Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint," 23.

²⁹⁴ Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint," 23.

²⁹⁵ Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint," 34.

Hamlet is immobilized and paralyzed not only because he sees absolute disorder in a world out of joint, but also because he sees the impossible:

After having seen the worst, after having been the witness of the worst disorder, of absolute injustice, he has the experience of surviving—which is the condition of witnessing—but in order to survive what one does not survive. Because one should not survive. [...] This is what one has to know: it is against the background of the disaster, it is only in the gaping and the chaotic, howling and famishing opening, it is out of the bottomless bottom of this open mouth, from the cry of this *khæin* that the call of justice resonates.²⁹⁶

Derrida's essay concludes with a quotation from Celan's poem "Ashglory" [Aschenglorie] which declares that "Nobody/ witnesses for the/ witness" (Niemand/ zeugt für den/ Zeugen).²⁹⁷ The witness, bearing witness to an impossible reality, is radically alone, and therefore is testifying to the impossible possibility of testimony. A witness himself, Celan survives but "should not survive," he has witnessed the worst but lacks appropriate language to speak about it. His situation is comparable to that of Hamlet: having seen death, he is "paralyzed," "turned to stone," "thunderstruck by the flash of lucidity."²⁹⁸ The theme of disjointed time is best captured in one of Celan's earlier poems, "Erinnerung an Frankreich": "we were dead and were able to breathe" (Wir waren tot und konnten atmen).²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint," 36-37.

²⁹⁷ Celan, GW II, 72.

²⁹⁸ Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint," 34.

²⁹⁹ Celan, GW I, 28.

The disjointed time—aging without progress, living without growth—is also reflected in the temporality of Celan’s plants. The flora, fauna, and trees in Celan’s poetry do not grow in an isolated, idyllic nature environment, but are highly reflexive of the historical periods in which they are situated. But as plants become witnesses to historical crimes, the survivor is forever stuck in the past. Amir Eshel’s chapter “Flower of History, Flower of Memory: Paul Celan and the Postmodern Discourse” argues that the flower of lupine, or “Wolfsbohne,” functions as a metaphor of the war of extermination (“Vernichtungskrieg”) against the Jewish people in the semantic realm.³⁰⁰ Celan’s flower is a “flower of history” and a “flower of memory” conscious of the immutable presence of the past; it blooms as a witness to what happened, in the knowledge that neither poetry nor language is possible without speaking of time and history.³⁰¹ Evelyn Dueck’s essay “A Conversation about Trees” offers an overview of Celan’s botanical symbolisms in both his early and late works.³⁰² She argues that Celan’s use of botanical concepts is developed from a generic vocabulary to a more precise use, until the publication of *Breathturn* (*Atemwende*, 1967), when he again shift emphasis to generic terms and names of trees, which may be dedicated to the lost memories of his hometown Bukowina, or “Buchenland.” Dueck associates much of Celan’s plant imageries with the dead, the Shoah, and contemporary antisemitism. She points out that, in contrast to Bertolt Brecht, who sees writings about nature as a kind of “escapism” in the post-1945 political context, Celan uses plant metaphors specifically to address historical and contemporary events as well as crimes:

³⁰⁰ Amir Eshel, “Blumen der Geschichte, Blumen der Erinnerung: Paul Celan und der postmoderne Diskurs,” in *Die deutsch-jüdische Erfahrung. Beiträge zum kulturellen Dialog* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2003): 136.

³⁰¹ Eshel, “Blumen der Geschichte,” 142-143.

³⁰² Evelyn Dueck, “Ein Gespräch über Blumen: ‘Wirklichkeit’ und botanische Begriffe in der Lyrik Paul Celans und Gottfried Benns,” in *Texturen der Wunde: Konstellationen deutschsprachiger Nachkriegslyrik*, eds. Thomas Boyken and Nikolas Immer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016): 213-242.

It is not enough—as Celan appears to be demonstrating—to simply stop speaking about “trees,” that is to say, either to ban certain complex motives from poetry or, on the contrary, to name the misdeeds directly. Both presuppose a separation between the conversation (about trees) and the crime. Celan negates such separation as his poetry underlines the proximity of the conversation to the crimes, when every conversation “includes/ so much said.”³⁰³

The botanic references in Celan’s poetry are not only fundamentally historical, they also formulate a different “natural” or ecological temporality dislocated from both historical time and personal time. Such a gap between natural time and the personal experience of time is a common theme in ancient Chinese poetry, such as the following poem from the Tang Dynasty about a disappointed civil service examination candidate’s love story. By juxtaposing an ancient Chinese poem with Celan’s unpublished, personal poem dedicated to his mother, I am also positioning myself as a Tawadian translator from Mars, offering an unexpected response from the future.³⁰⁴

On a brisk spring day, Cui Hu, who just failed his exam, arrives at a secluded village south of the

³⁰³ “Es reicht nicht—so scheint Celan vorzuführen—einfach nicht mehr über ‘Bäume’ zu sprechen, also einige Motivkomplexe aus der Dichtung zu verbannen oder, im Gegenteil, die ‘Untaten’ direkt zu benennen. Beides setzt eine Trennung zwischen dem Gespräch und den Verbrechen voraus. Celan negiert eine solche Trennung, wenn sein Gedicht die Nähe des Gesprächs zum Verbrechen unterstreicht, jedes Gespräch ‘soviel Gesagtes/ mit einschließt’” (Dueck, “Ein Gespräch über Blumen,” 229, my translation). The poem is cited from Celan’s “Ein Blatt, baumlos” (GW II, 385): a response to Brecht’s poem “An die Nachgeborenen,” where Brecht claims that it is almost a crime to speak about trees (“Was sind das für Zeiten, wo/ Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist/ Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!”) Celan’s response appears to be a revision of the original: “Was sind das für Zeiten,/ wo ein Gespräch/ beinah ein Verbrechen ist,/ weil es soviel Gesagtes/ mit einschließt?”

³⁰⁴ According to Leslie Adelson, the idea of “Marswesen” or extraterrestrials is also linked to the concept of futurity. She coined the term “new futurism” in contemporary German literature, which refers to a departure from a longstanding emphasis on the past and a focus on the imagination of a futuristic time. See Leslie A. Adelson, “Experiment Mars: Contemporary German Literature, Imaginative Ethnoscapes, and the New Futurism,” *Über Gegenwartsliteratur. Interpretationen und Interventionen*, ed. Mark W. Rectanus (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008): 23-49, and Yoko Tawada, “Zukunft ohne Herkunft,” in *Zukunft! Zukunft?* ed. Jürgen Wertheimer (Tübingen: Konkursbuchverlag Claudia Gehrke, 2000): 55-72.

Capital Chang'an. On requesting some water, he meets a girl with whom he immediately fell in love. Cui returns to the village again the following year, hoping to meet the girl of his dreams again, but he is only greeted by the same splendid scenery of peach blossoms as last year. Driven by melancholy, Cui inscribes a poem on the wall:

This very day last year, oh, at this very place,
 A pretty face mirrored the flowers of peach trees.
 I do not know today where shines the pretty face;
 Only the pretty flowers still smile in vernal breeze.³⁰⁵

A year passes but the flowers remain the same, as if nothing had changed. The peach tree here plays an important role as a point of reference: in the first two lines, a woman's countenance is reflected in the vivid pink color of the peach blossoms. A year later, when Cui returns to the village, the flowers are just as beautiful as last year, but the woman he was in love with is nowhere to be seen. From Cui's perspective, time is circular for the peach tree but linear for human beings. While time of this beautiful, dreamlike village appeared to be natural, seasonal, and circular, the woman's disappearance alerts him that this place is no paradise, and she, just like himself, is subjected to human fate. In contrast to the natural time of the peach tree, Cui's personal time is disoriented and unpredictable. A strong contrast between the seemingly permanent beauty of the peach blossoms and the fleeting beauty of the woman signifies the ephemerality of human life. Meanwhile, unaffected by an individual's personal history, the tree

³⁰⁵ “去年今日此门中,人面桃花相映红。人面不知何处去,桃花依旧笑春风。” Cui Hu 崔户, “ti ducheng nanzhuang” 題都城南庄 [Inscribed on Walls of a Village South of the Capital], *Quan Tangshi* 全唐诗 [Complete Poetry of the Tang], Trans. Xu Yuanchong 許淵沖, Ed. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求, vol. 11, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1960, 4147-8.

continues to “smile in vernal breeze” as it silently witnesses Cui’s fleeting love affair and his melancholy.

The contrast between the peach blossom’s natural time and the poet’s personal time is not simply a difference between circularity and linearity. In natural time, individual death (such as the death of a single flower) does not mark the end of the life cycle of a peach tree, but contains hope for a future renewal. Cui’s juxtaposition of natural and personal time emphasizes the poet’s deep awareness of the singularity of human death. The peach blossoms are introduced in the poem as a frame of reference that renders the time after death comprehensible and tangible. In Celan’s poetry, plants like autumn crocuses, aspen trees, and the blue panicle functions to signify an alternative temporal frame outside of both historical and personal time:

Espenbaum, dein Laub blickt weiß ins Dunkel.

Meiner Mutter Haar ward nimmer weiß.

Löwenzahn, so grün ist die Ukraine.

Meine blonde Mutter kam nicht heim.

Regenwolke, säumst du an den Brunnen?

Meine leise Mutter weint für alle.

Runder Stern, du schlingst die goldene Schleife.

Meiner Mutter Herz ward wund von Blei.

Eichene Tür, wer hob dich aus den Angeln?

Meine sanfte Mutter kann nicht kommen.³⁰⁶

Aspen tree, your leaves gaze white into the dark.

My mother's hair ne'er turned white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.

My fair-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, do you dally by the well?

My quiet mother weeps for all.

Round star, you coil the golden loop.

My mother's heart was seared by lead.

Oaken door, who ripped you off your hinges?

My gentle mother cannot return.³⁰⁷

“Eспенbaum” has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly its botanic references.³⁰⁸

In each couplet, Celan presents a similar contradiction between the natural time of an organism

³⁰⁶ Celan, GW I, 19.

³⁰⁷ Paul Celan, *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020), 15.

³⁰⁸ Some references include Leonard Forster, “Eспенbaum: Zu einem Gedicht von Paul Celan,” *Wissenschaft als Dialog*, eds. R von Heydebrand and K. G. Just (Springer Verlag, 1969), Elizabeth Petuchowski, “A New Approach to Paul Celan’s ‘Argumentum e Silentio,’” in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 52 (1978): 111-126, Jean Boase-Beier, “Translating Celan’s Poetics of Silence,” *Target* 23, no.2 (2011): 165-177. In terms of the metaphorical significance of the aspen tree, or trees in general, see, for example, Gerschom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken

or object and the mother's lost personal time. In the first couplet, the leaves' whiteness contrasts to the mother's hair, which will never become white. In the second, the green color of the dandelion connects to the mother's blond hair and the fact that she did not come home. Time continues for the dandelion, which turns green again after each winter, but it has stopped for the fair-haired mother. The ubiquitous dandelion may serve as a metaphor for homeliness, domesticity, or familiarity. The third and fourth couplets each contain an equivalence, one of the mother's weeping eye and the rain cloud lingering above the well, and another of the round star and the round lead bullet that killed the mother. In the final couplet, the system of contradiction or parallel turns into one of detachment. A door is a man-made tool or barrier that turns an ingress into an enclosure. Once unhinged, the door returns to its original status as a piece of dead wood; it no longer belongs to its natural environment. Neither a living plant nor an artificial tool, the unhinged door is detached from both nature and society and remains the corpse of a tree. The gentle mother could not return, not only because the door was unhinged, but also because, like the corpse of a tree, her existence was simultaneously detached from natural time and erased from human history. As Hugo Bekker suggests, the speaker first looks at the tree and dandelion and fails to derive comfort from them. He then looks to the cloud and stars to find solace on a higher level of the natural order but fails again. He finally turns to the man-made world as represented by the oaken door, where he may have finally found a sense of consolation.³⁰⁹ The unhinged door echoes with the line "we were dead and were able to breathe" in "Memories of

Books, 1996). In the Kabbalistic tradition, a tree usually symbolizes the power of life and the creative potential of God. In *Book Bahir*, God is said to have planted a tree that symbolizes the mythical structure of his creative powers: "All powers of God are disposed in layers and they are like a tree: just as the tree produces its fruit through water, so God through water increases the power of the 'tree.'" (*Book Bahir*, § 85, quoted in Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 92.) The Hebrew metaphor "tree of life," or "etz chayim," is usually applied to the *Torah*, so the aspen tree's turning white likely signifies the Jewish history that it has been witnessing since the beginning.

³⁰⁹ Hugo Bekker, *Paul Celan: Studies in His Early Poetry* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008): 137.

France,” which directly follows the scene where the figure of Monsieur le Songe left by the door: “He left by the door, the rain followed him out” (Er trat zur Tür hinaus, der Regen folgt’ ihm).³¹⁰ Monsieur le Songe, whose name signifies dream and perhaps utopian thoughts, went out of the house and left “us” in a zone of limbo between life and death. In “Aspen Tree,” the poet again ends up in a similar, timeless place.

Celan’s juxtaposition of contrasting temporalities also recalls that of some French Surrealist writings, with which Celan had been familiar since the late 1940s. An example is “L’Adieu,” a poem by the early French surrealist Guillaume Apollinaire that Celan translates as “Der Abschied”:

J’ai cueilli ce brin de bruyère
 L’automne est morte souviens-t’en
 Nous ne nous verrons plus sur terre
 Odeur du temps brin de bruyère
 Et souviens-toi que je t’attends

Ich pflückt den Halm vom Kraut der Heide.
 Der Herbst ist tot—sei eingedenk.
 Auf Erden scheiden wir nun beide.
 O Duft der Zeit, o Halm der Heide.
 Und daß ich warten werde, denk.

I pluck the stalk from herb of the heather.

³¹⁰ Celan, GW I, 28.

Autumn is dead—be mindful.

We now part on earth.

O smell of time, o stalk of the heather.

And I will be waiting, remember.³¹¹

This text speaks of a temporality that belongs to the plucked stalk of the herb. On the personal scale, autumn is “dead” as the lovers separate (“auf Erden scheiden wir nun beide”), and the speaker is left with “eingedenk,” or reminiscence. While he waits alone in limbo, the herb’s ecological time continues. The fifth verse “O Duft der Zeit, o Halm der Heide” renders this ecological time tangible through the smell and touch of the herb’s stem, as if, by plucking the herb, the poet was able to grasp onto a different temporality. According to Leonard Olschner, Celan generalizes his translation of the word “bruyère” (heather, Heidekraut) as “Kraut der Heide” but specifies “ce brin” (this small piece) with a definite article and a botanical term (“den Halm”)³¹². He also observes that, as the phrase is repeated in verse four, the Kraut disappears, and the phrase is shortened as “Halm der Heide” with no definite article.³¹³ Celan further generalizes the phrase “brin de bruyère,” emphasizing that this “time” is not of a singular stem, but of the entire heathland, perhaps even of the pagans on the land. Shifting the focus from the vegetative nature of an herb to its paganness demonstrates the poet’s inclination to drive two separate temporalities towards congruence. The extra comma and the “o” in the second phrase further contribute to the sense of equivalence.

³¹¹ Celan, GW IV, 790-791, my translation.

³¹² Leonard Olschner, “Anamnesis: Paul Celan’s Translation of Poetry,” in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 12:2 (June 1988): 186.

³¹³ Olschner, “Anamnesis,” 186.

Like Cui's love poem, Apollinaire's "L'Adieu" tells a similar story where the lover's singular departure is contrasted with the plant's plural temporality. With his decentralization of the "brin de bruyère" and the precise parallelism in verse four, Celan's rendering of this poem appears to be an attempt to re-establish some sort of connection between the two forms of temporality, implicitly offering a continuance after the end of the poet's personal time. The final verse also alludes to the last lines of Celan's earlier poem "Umsonst" (1945):

UMSONST malst du Herzen ans Fenster:

der Herzog der Stille

wirbt unten im Schloßhof Soldaten.

Sein Banner heißt er im Baum—ein Blatt, das ihm blaut, wenn es herbstet;

die Halme der Schwermut verteilt er im Heer und die Blumen der Zeit;

mit Vögeln im Haar geht er hin zu versenken die Schwerter.

Umsonst malst du Herzen ans Fenster: ein Gott ist unter den Scharen,

gehüllt in den Mantel, der einst von den Schultern dir sank auf der Treppe, zur Nachtzeit,

einst, als in Flammen das Schloß stand, als du sprachst wie die Menschen: Geliebte . . .

Er kennt nicht den Mantel und rief nicht den Stern an und folgt jenem Blatt, das

vorausschwebt.

,O Halm', vermeint er zu hören, ,o Blume der Zeit.'

For naught you draw hearts on the window:

The Duke of Stillness

recruits soldiers down in the castle courtyard.

He hoists his banner in the tree—a leaf that blues for him when it autumns;
 he shares the stalks of melancholy among the host and the flowers of time;
 With birds in his hair he goes forth to bury the swords.

For naught you paint hearts on the window: there's a God among the hosts,
 wrapped in the coat that once sank from your shoulders on the staircase, at night time,
 once, when the castle stood in flames, when you spoke as humans do: Beloved...

He knows not the coat and didn't call the star and follows the leaf that floats ahead.

"O stalk," he thinks he hears, "O flower of time."³¹⁴

In this poem, the "Duke of Silence" recruits soldiers and hoists his banners in preparation for the forthcoming combat, despite knowing that everything that he does is in vain, "umsonst." He recruits soldiers but buries the swords, as if the imminent future is never coming. A God appears, but the God is not his: he is unable to recognize the cloak that the God is wearing. Neither the divine nor the cosmic stars are able to guide the Duke forward. His personal time—religious or historical—abandoned him when the castle went down in flames. He is left alone, chasing the leaf that floats ahead of him [vorausschwebt], seemingly guided by the voice that says "O Halm, o Blume der Zeit" (even though the voice might have come from his imagination [vorschwebt]). The theme of disjointed time appears again in this poem, in a similar chant that echoes with the "Duft der Zeit" in "Der Abschied." The stem of the leaf that the Duke futilely chases is the tangible, material incarnation of an alternative temporality. Despite its title—that every effort will inevitably end in vain, "umsonst"—the poem ends in a moment of hopeless

³¹⁴ Celan, GW I, 13, *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech*, 7.

hope that, by (almost) grasping on this floating leaf, the Duke could for a brief moment share its “flower of time.”

Celan wrote “Umsonst” in 1945 and published it in 1948, first in the post-war Austrian journal *Plan*, and then in his first volume of poetry, *The Sand from the Urns* [*Der Sand aus den Urnen*]. A lithograph by Edgar Jené—who appears in “Memories of France” as the neighbor, “Monsieur Le Songe”—was published simultaneously in a collection of Jené’s lithographs in 1948 as the result of their collaborative work. Entitled “O Flower of Time” [O Blume der Zeit], Jené’s lithograph could be seen as a visual translation of Celan’s “Umsonst.” The lithograph portrays a desolate landscape with an object that



resembles an iceberg, with dark hair-like strands (either aquatic plants or water dripping down from the melting ice) hanging from the top of the iceberg. The silhouette of the iceberg vaguely resembles that of a person, with their head leaning left and a hand in front of the breast holding a wilted flower, likely an autumn crocus, cut or torn out from its stem. In contrast to the blooming water lily that grows in the foreground, the iceberg-human silhouette appears to be dark, lifeless, and wilted. Once again, we see a strong contrast between plant and human, light and dark, time and timelessness, and between life and death.

Such irreconcilable difference is again convened by a plant: the blooming water lily and the uprooted, wilted flower that the iceberg-human silhouette holds in hand form a dialogue, or at least an attempt towards a dialogue, between two worlds and two temporalities. The autumn

crocus is a recurrent theme in Celan's poetry since his time in Czernowitz, where he developed a particular affinity to the flower. It appears quite often in his poetry as a "flower of time" despite its "timeless" name. In "Loneliness" [Einsamkeit]³¹⁵ it is the only being left with time: "I robbed the hours of the sundials. / And I only gave the flowers their time." [Den Sonnenuhren raubte ich die Stunden. / Und nur den Blumen ließ ich ihre Zeit]. In "My wheelbarrow no longer creaks" [Mein Karren knarrt nicht mehr], it is the flower that brings the breath for a thousand autumns, offering a temporal link that connects a singular night with a thousand autumns to come ("Die Zeitlose holt / Atem für tausend Herbste"). This flower also appears in "I know about the rock" [Ich weiß vom Fels]³¹⁶, "Memories of France," "And with the Book from Tarussa" [Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa],³¹⁷ "Largo,"³¹⁸ and "The Syllable Pain" [Die Silbe Schmerz].³¹⁹ Among the Apollinaire poems that he translated is a 1958 poem "the autumn crocuses" [les colchiques], which includes an interesting verse: "They pick the crocuses which are like mothers / Daughters of their daughters and are the color of your eyelids."³²⁰ Celan translates these lines as the following: "The daughter is and mother, the autumn crocuses, who / Shimmering as your eyelid—the children pick them" ["Die Tochter ist und Mutter, die Herbstzeitlose, die / So schimmert wie dein Auglid - die Kinder pflücken sie"].³²¹

³¹⁵ Paul Celan, *Die Gedichte. Neue kommentierte Gesamtausgabe. Mit den zugehörigen Radierungen von Gisèle Celan-Lestrange*, ed. Barbara Wiedeman (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2018): 340.

³¹⁶ Paul Celan, *Das Frühwerk*, ed. Babara Wiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989): 82.

³¹⁷ Celan, GW I, 287.

³¹⁸ Celan, GW I, 356.

³¹⁹ Celan, GW I, 280.

³²⁰ "Ils cueillent les colchiques qui sont comme des mères/ Filles de leurs filles et sont couleur de tes paupières." Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956): 60. Paul Celan, "Vier Gedichte aus dem Französischen," in *Insel-Almanach auf das Jahr 1959* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1959): 33.

³²¹ Celan, GW IV, 793. Jason Kavett's essay "Celan and the Timeless. A Secret Echo Outside of Time: Paul Celan and the Autumn Crocus" provides a detailed discussion of Celan's translation of this poem. In *Self-Reflection in*

The autumn crocuses are equated with the epithet “mothers daughters of their daughters” [mères filles de leurs filles] because this plant reverses the common botanical cycle, bearing fruit in the spring and blooms in autumn. Its German name “Herbstzeitlose” also refers to its anachronistic life cycle. The crocuses’ reproductive cycle is of particular interest: its blossom has only stamens; the ovary is on the inside of the corm, buried four to eight inches underground, whereas the pollen can be found inside the perianth, which stands on a hollow stem six to eight inches long.³²² Although the colchicum blossom is technically a hermaphrodite, the male organ has to travel a considerable distance to fecundate the female part of the body, which makes sexual reproduction difficult. Therefore, the autumn crocus tends to reproduce asexually via corms once it has become adapted to its environment. Usually in September and October, secondary daughter corms will grow out and become independent of the mother corm. Roots will begin to develop on the daughter corm rather than the mother corm to supply water and nutrients to the future development of the leaves of the daughter corm, while the roots in the mother corm begin to die out. The mother corm will gradually reduce its size as the daughter corm continues its development, supplying oxygen and starch for both plants. Not only do the asexually developed mother and daughter colchicums look alike—they are essentially clones—they also switch roles by taking turns to supply each other with nutrients. In that sense, the mothers are indeed daughters of their daughter.

Literature, eds. Florian Lippert and Marcel Schmid (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 163-187. See also: Christoph Perels, “Zeitlose und Kolchis. Zur Entwicklung eines Motivkomplexes bei Paul Celan,” *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 29 (1979): 47-74.

³²² Regarding the reproduction of *Colchicum autumnale*, see Linda S. Jung et al., “Biological Flora of Central Europe: *Colchicum autumnale* L.” *Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics* 13 (2011): 227-244. The mother-daughter relationship is also elaborated in Claude Lévi-Strauss, “A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle,” *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss (New York: Basic books, 1984): 213.

Intrigued by the curious nature of the autumn crocuses, Lévi-Strauss devotes an entire essay to Apollinaire's poem, where he claims that there exist three kinds of shift in the colchicums' mode of reproduction: a vertical shift that characterizes the mode of fertilization (that the seed must descend vertically to fecundate the female organ); a horizontal shift that characterizes the mode of asexual reproduction; and a temporal one, since the blossom of a plant appears eight or nine months before its leaves.³²³ Meanwhile, Apollinaire's poetry presents a number of similar contradictions that further destabilize the poem. For example, he describes the crocus first as being "the color of a bruise" and then as "the color of your eyelids," essentially transforming the flowers from the signifier of the eyelids to the signified. Another example, which Lévi-Strauss analyzes in detail, is the relationship between the cows, children, and crocuses:

Les enfants de l'école viennent avec fracas
 Vêtus de hoquetons et jouant de l'harmonica
 [...]
 Le gardien du troupeau chante tout doucement
 Tandis que lentes et meuglant les vaches abandonnent

Children from school come with their commotion
 Dressed in smocks and playing the mouth-organ
 [...]
 The cowherd sings softly to him-self all alone

³²³ Lévi-Strauss, "A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle," 213.

While slow moving lowing the cows leave behind them.³²⁴

Picking the flowers, the male children appear to be active, harsh, and destructive; in contrast, the female cows are passive, slow, and will soon be slaughtered or poisoned. “Between these two slopes—the one ascending and the other descending—only the autumn crocuses will remain, on a horizontal level, both literally and figuratively [...] the crocuses figure as the stable and permanent element and, as such, gives the poem its title.”³²⁵ The crocus’s role in nature is constantly shifting: it is both the mother and the daughter, and it is constantly ascending and descending to maintain its reproductive cycle. Its symbolic value is also constantly changing: it poisons the cows yet is plucked by the children; they are the signifier of the lover’s eyelids and signified by bruises and lilacs. Yet it is precisely this dynamic symbolism that maintains the stable and permanent balance of this poem. Citing mathematician René Thom, Lévi-Strauss comments: “the signifier recreates the signified every time we interpret the sign... the dynamic of symbolism is the very image of life.”³²⁶ Although the prism “mothers daughters of daughters” first appears to be of certain mystical origin, it actually agrees with empirical observation. Lévi-Strauss concludes that the mythical poetic figure of the crocus moves us because “it offers on each level a specific meaning that nevertheless remains parallel to other meanings, and because we mysteriously seem to apprehend them all at the same time.”³²⁷

Celan’s translation of Apollinaire’s poem further explores this dynamic balance between mother and daughter. In Apollinaire, mothers are described as “filles de leurs filles,” with the genitive “de” indicating a temporal seriality and a framework of relationality. Celan’s translation

³²⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. Oliver Bernard (London: Anvil Press, 2004): 36.

³²⁵ Lévi-Strauss, “A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle,” 216.

³²⁶ Lévi-Strauss, “A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle,” 216.

³²⁷ Lévi-Strauss, “A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle,” 217.

“Die Tochter ist und Mutter” erases both the plurality of the original and the genitive, rendering both the daughter and the mother radically singular beings. Meanwhile, the two words, “ist” and “und,” simultaneously signify both an equation and a conjunction. Such co-existence might be hard to imagine logically or mathematically, even though it is precisely what happens to autumn crocuses: mother and daughter crocuses grow side by side with a uniquely reversible kinship structure. Celan’s translation highlights autumn crocuses’ ability to turn temporal and spatial hierarchies of relationality into a dynamic balance of co-existence, maintaining a number of parallel systems of meaning without self-contradiction. What is particularly significant for Celan is the flower’s singularity (“die Tochter ist”), which is always situated in a fluid network of temporal, spatial, and kindred plurality (“die Tochter ist und Mutter”). As Jason Kavett points out, Celan’s translation reformulates the kinship structure of the *Herbstzeitlose* into one of static and timeless displacement, turning the linear temporality of the original, which flows ineluctably towards death, into a halt.³²⁸ For Celan, the flower is “timeless” not because it is, to borrow Heidegger’s phrasing, “time-poor,” that is to say, that they are deprived of the ability to create and sustain a meaningful relationship with time and therefore never within time, but because it has such a dynamic relationship with time that the human interpretation of a linear, one-directional time is rendered irrelevant.³²⁹

Erinnerung an Frankreich

³²⁸ Kavett, “Celan and the Timeless,” 179-180.

³²⁹ Kavett reads the *Herbstzeitlose* as metaphorically both mother and daughter. He argues that Celan transfers the generational confusion of Apollinaire’s text to a “stable alternative kinship structure of identity between mother and daughter.” “Celan and the Timeless,” 180.

Du denk mit mir: der Himmel von Paris, die große Herbstzeitlose...

Wir kauften Herzen bei den Blumenmädchen:

Sie waren blau und blühten auf im Wasser.

Es fing zu regnen an in unsrer Stube,

Und unser Nachbar. Kam, Monsieur Le Songe, ein hager Männlein.

Wie spielten Karten, ich verlor die Augensterne;

Du liehst dein Haar mir, ich verlors, er schlug uns nieder.

Er trat zur Tür hinaus, der Regen folgt' ihm.

Wir waren tot und konnten atmen.³³⁰

Memory of France

Together with me recall: the sky of Paris, that giant autumn crocus...

We went shopping for hearts at the flower girl's booth:

they were blue and they opened up in the water.

It began to rain in our room,

and our neighbour came in. Monsieur Le Songe, a lean little man.

We played cards, I lost the irises of my eyes;

you lent me your hair, I lost it, he struck us down.

He left by the door, the rain followed him out.

³³⁰ Celan, GW I, 28.

We were dead and were able to breathe.³³¹

“Memory of France” is a poem dedicated first to Jené, who appears as Monseieur Le Songe in the poem, and then to Ingeborg Bachmann, who responded to this poem in her poems “Paris” and “Hôtel de la Paix.”³³² The ambiguous dedication leaves the pronouns “du” and “wir” deliberately ambiguous. Equally ambivalent is the final verse, “wir waren tot und konnten atmen,” which succinctly frames the survivors’ paradoxical situation of being both still alive after and already annihilated in the Holocaust. Negation and suspension between existence and annihilation is a recurrent theme in Celan’s works, including “Stretto” [Engführung] (“Nichts,/ nichts ist verloren”), “An Eye, Open” [Ein Auge, Offen] (“In der Mandel—was steht in der Mandel?/ Das nichts.”), and in “Psalm” (“Ein Nichts/ Waren wir, sind wir, werden/ wir bleiben, blühend:/ die Nichts-, die/ Niemandrose.”). Writing from a strange place of simultaneous survival and oblivion, Celan writes in a language of nothing, no one, and nowhere. Borrowing again from Heidegger, Daniel Feldman calls this strange abysmal perspective as “Being-after-death,” controverting Heidegger’s “Being-towards-death” [Sein-zum-Tode].³³³ Alienated from his own fate and surviving his own death, the survivor is now “timeless,” as he has lost the essentially human time, which is rendered meaningless since the condition of Being-after-death is one of no longer being able to die—only to persist or perish. But outside of the essentially human time,

³³¹ Paul Celan, “Memories of France,” trans. Michael Hamburger, in *Evidence of Fire: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century German Poetry*, ed. Rich Ives (Seattle: Owl Creek Press, 1988): 50.

³³² Regarding Bachmann’s response to Celan’s poem, see Corinna Caduff, “Erinnerung an Frankreich—Paris—Hôtel de la Paix: Die Paris-Gedichte ‘im Geheimnis der Begegnung’,” in *Ingeborg Bachmann und Paul Celan, Poetische Korrespondenzen*. Vierzehn Beiträge, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Sigrid Weigel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997): 151-166.

³³³ Daniel Feldman, “Writing Nothing: Negation and Subjectivity in the Holocaust Poetry of Paul Celan and Dan Pagis,” *Comparative Literature* 66, no.4 (2014): 446.

“dead while breathing” is not unrealistic for the timeless autumn crocus, which sends up its leaves in the spring and dies off in early summer to save energy and nutrients to grow its flowers again in the fall. The flower is “timeless” and “spaceless” because it is constantly shifting, metamorphosing, and changing, not because a tree must always be a tree on the ontological level and its essence never changes.³³⁴ Beyond the Heideggerian logocentric house of being and among the beautiful yet poisonous flowers, the survivor might find a place outside of space and a moment outside of time.

For the survivor, plants like the autumn crocus offer a quasi-solution to an ontological problem that being cannot come from nothingness. For the no-one’s rose as well as the nothing-flower, life and death, “being” and “nothingness” are not antithetical poles, but interchangeable statuses of a plant’s life cycle.

STUMME HERBSTGERÜCHE. Die
Sternblume, umgeknickt, ging
zwischen Heimat und Abgrund durch
dein Gedächtnis.

Eine fremde Verlorenheit war
gestalthaft zugegen, du hättest
beinah
gelebt.³³⁵

³³⁴ We are reminded again of Celan’s “also-tree” and “almost-tree” in “Edgar Jene and the Dream about the Dream.” GW III, 155.

³³⁵ Celan, GW I, 223.

Dumb autumn smells. The
 Starflower, unbroken, passed
 Between home and abyss through
 Your memory

A strange lostness was
 Palpably present, you would have
 almost
 lived.³³⁶

“Starflower,” a small bulbous perennial plant with narrow grass-like leaves and star-shaped white or blue flowers that bloom in spring. Perennials like the starflower bloom over spring and summer and, each winter, the top portion of the plant dies back and regrows the following year from the same root system.³³⁷ In the silent autumn smells—the poem is written in October 1960—the starflower would wither and return to its root in the ground “between home and abyss,” where “your memory” lies. Its bulb, comparable to an onion, is structurally a short stem with fleshy leaves that function as food storage organs during dormancy, which begins in late fall. Hirano Yoshihiko’s commentary on this poem underscores an ironic inversion, which is the fact that the flower, supposedly “unbroken,” has long since been bent, and only remains intact in

³³⁶ Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2007): 193.

³³⁷ Larry Stritch, “Starflower (*Trientalis borealis* Raf.),” United State Forest Service, Accessed April 11, 2021, https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/trientalis_borealis.shtml. The definition of perennial plant is cited from “perennial plant,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/science/perennial>.

memory.³³⁸ Werner Hamacher indicates a similar inversion, in which the distance that lies in the “strange lostness” is suddenly inverted into nearness (beinah). This inversion of distance is radicalized to the point where “absence turns into presence,” that the annihilated “we,” analogous to the “no one’s flower,” has changed into the ever-lingering constancy.³³⁹ The perennial plant’s life cycle does indicate a certain level of eternity, since it appears to be dying away before growing back the next spring. Hamacher compares this no-one’s starflower to the great flower in “The Whitest Dove” [der Taubern Weisseste], written by Celan ten years earlier in October 1950: “From my hand you take the large flower: / it is not white, not red, not blue—still, you take it.”³⁴⁰ This nothing-flower becomes positive with the “doch,” which Hamacher calls a “hole in the topological system of Celan” because it risks making nothingness into a positive, allowing for absence as the negative of presence, and wanting to change absence into ever-lasting Being by virtue of language.³⁴¹

The risk may exist on the philosophical and semantic level, but not on the natural and ecological level, for life and death could exist simultaneously in a perennial flower: during its dormancy, everything above ground—from the stem to the flower—is dead except the root system. Would the flower be considered dead during the winter, and would what grows from the same root system next spring be the same flower as last year? If the addressee “du” is the flower itself—the addressee remains ambiguous, as it could refer to both a subject who remembers the

³³⁸ Yoshihiko Hirano, 平野嘉彦. *Tseran moshiku ha kyōki no furōra—jojōshi no aregorēze* ツエラーンもしくは狂気のフローラー抒情詩のアレゴレーゼ [Celan, or the Lyrical Allegoreses of Wild Flowers], (Tōkyō: Miraisha: 2002): 171.

³³⁹ Werner Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion: Movements of a Figure through Celan’s Poetry,” *Premises. Essays on Philosophy from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997): 347.

³⁴⁰ “Aus meiner Hand nimmst du die große Blume:/ sie ist nicht weiß, nicht rot, nicht blau—doch nimmst du sie,” Celan, GW I, 62.

³⁴¹ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 348.

flower, and the flower itself—then it is not semantically dangerous to claim that “you would have almost lived.” As Michael Marder points out, in the plant kingdom, death is an event that neither integrates vegetable being nor necessarily spells out the end of its life.³⁴² The death of a particular flower could be survived by its roots and made useful for further proliferation and growth. By speaking to the starflower, the poet might have discovered a sense of hope from its alternative temporality, which does not live or die in the same way humans do. The “hole in the tropological system” that Hamacher locates in this poem is not Celan’s attempt to turn absence into presence by virtue of language, but rather an attempt to share the starflower’s temporality, and, to an extent, to reconsider the definitions of life and death by introducing a vegetal perspective.

2. Speaking to the Rod: An Echo

In a personal letter to his wife Gisèle Celan-Lestrange on September 30, 1962, Celan writes the following passage, accompanied by an autumn crocus that he plucked, dried, and pressed:

It was nice, very nice, to walk up here, at a certain moment, I was not expecting it at all, a flower appeared on my right: an autumn crocus. Do you remember the second-to-last poem: “Columbus, die Zeitlose im Aug, die Mutterblume” —? And there I had to think of my very last poem, written after the letters received from Moscow, in which Erich Einhorn told me that he was going to spend his vacation in “Colchis,” that is to say, on the Black Sea. “Kolchis,” this was, and I only first understood it yesterday, but a secret

³⁴² Michael Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (Columbia University press, 2014): 218.

echo of the “zeitlose,” stirred up by the real.—One would have to know how to content oneself with this kind of dialogue, a bit extra-human, don’t you think? And all the more so as I can communicate it to You, my Love, and, in another way, to our son, in such moving complicity with all that, for us, is the world and its truth.³⁴³

“Prenez cette fleur ‘hors temps,’ cueillie pour vous,” Celan writes at the end, translating the German term “Zeitlose” literally as “hors temps.” The flower becomes a material reincarnation of a time “out of time” and a place faraway yet reachable. While the name “Kolchis” is a “secret echo” of the name of the flower Colchis, the vibration of an “echo” reaches beyond the subject and the object so that “I” could communicate it to “You.” In this section, I will discuss a few poems in which Celan attempts to form a similar dialogue, perhaps “a bit extra-human,” between a human and a plant. One example of such an attempted conversation is the poem “Wanderstaude,” published posthumously in *Zeitghöft*, begins with the paradoxical image of a wandering perennial:

Wanderstaude, du fängst dir
 eine der Reden,
 die abgeschworene Aster
 stößt hier hinzu,

³⁴³ “C’était beau, très beau de marcher là-haut, à un moment donné, je ne m’y attendais point, une fleur a surgi à ma droite: un colchique. Te rappelles-tu l’avant-dernier poème: “Columbus, die Zeitlose im Aug, die Mutterblume” —? Et là j’ai dû penser au tout dernier poème, écrit après la lettre reçue de Moscou, dans laquelle Erich Einhorn me disait qu’il allait passer ses vacances en “colchide,” c’est-à-dire au bord de la Mer Noire. “Kolchis” c’était, et je ne l’ai compris qu’hier, qu’un écho secret de la “Zeitlose,” suscité par le réel.” Paul Celan and Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, *Correspondance* (1951-1970), vol I-II, ed. Bertrand Badieu (Paris: Éditions du Seul, 2001). Letter Number 145, 141-145. The English is cited from Paul Celan and Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, “Letter from Paul Celan to Gisèle Celan-Lestrange,” trans. Jason Kavett, in *Self-Reflection in Literature*, eds. Florian Lippert and Marcel Schmid (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 188-191.

wenn einer, der
 die Gesänge zerschlug,
 jetzt spräche zum Stab,
 seine und aller
 Blendung
 bliebe aus.³⁴⁴

Walking plant, you catch
 yourself one of the speeches,
 the abjured aster
 here joins in,
 if one who
 smashed the canticles
 were now to speak to the staff
 his and everyone's
 blinding
 would be revoked.³⁴⁵

As we have seen earlier, a perennial is a plant that retreats to its root system every winter and grows back in the spring. Most perennials, which have their roots system firmly grounded in

³⁴⁴ Celan, GW III, 69.

³⁴⁵ Michael Hamburger, "Walking Plant," in Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2007): 293.

earth, cannot “wander”; in fact, the etymological root of the word “Stauede” could be found in the Proto-Germanic “Stōwō” (place, storage) or the Proto-Indo-European “steh” (to stand, place, put), both of which indicate a clear sense of groundedness. Celan might have the tumbleweed in mind as he composed the poem—a plant that breaks away from its roots in the fall and is driven by the wind. Plants from the aster family—as the second stanza, “die abgeschworene Aster,” indicates—could form tumbleweeds, along with many others. The “Russian thistle,” an annual plant and perhaps the most famous kind of tumbleweed, breaks off at the stem base when it dies, and forms a tumbleweed, dispersing its seed as the wind rolls it along. Perennials can also form tumbleweeds. One of the most typical perennial tumbleweeds, *Psoralea floribunda*, is a crown-former with a very deep root which may be several inches in diameter, and a number of aerial branches that develop annually. The whole crown breaks off every year once the seed is ripe. Naturally, apart from the primary vascular system and roots that stayed in the ground, the tissues of the tumbleweed—the part that “tumbles”—are dead, because only so would the gradually degrading structure begin to fall apart to release its seeds or spores.

The wandering perennial could also be read as a reference to the exile of the Jewish people, and the renounced aster hints at the stigmatized Star of David, a reminder of the abandonment and renouncement of the Jews as members of the society. The “Stab” naturally reminds readers of the rod of Moses or a pilgrim’s staff. The draft of this poem was composed on February 25, 1969, or the seventh of Adar, according to the Jewish calendar, a day when Moses’s birth and death days were remembered.³⁴⁶ Next to the draft of the poem, Celan wrote down the

³⁴⁶ In the *Old Testament*, Moses’s rod is first mentioned in the *Book of Exodus* (Exod. 4.2), when God appears in the burning bush and asks what Moses has in his hand. Then God transformed it into a snake and then back into a staff. God intended to rescue the Israelites from the hand of the Egyptians by sending Moses to speak to the Israelites on behalf of God, but Moses was unsure about this endeavor, as he “had never been eloquent” and was “slow of speech and tongue” (Exod. 4.10). God then asked Moses to speak to his brother Aaron and put words in his mouth, “but

following notes: “Pindar: Sänger genährter Verse: Rhapsode,” “Chitón” (a traditional Greek form of clothing that the Rhapsode is known to wear), and then “Rhapsode: Sänger zum Stabe.”³⁴⁷

Rhapsode refers to professional performers of epic poetry, such as epics of Homer and poetry of Hesiod. They are often depicted in Greek art carrying a staff. Pindar was the among the first to use the word *rhapsōdios*, of which he provides two different interpretations: “singer of stitched verse” and “singer with the staff.” While the first is etymologically correct (the word rhapsode is derived from *rhapsōidein*, meaning “two sew songs together”), there is also evidences to support the second interpretation, since the singer was accustomed to holding a staff (*rhabdos*) in his hand to “emphasize the rhythm or to give grandeur to their gestures.”³⁴⁸

The rod, as we have seen, has a mediating function: when Moses mentions his uncertainty of language, God asks him to bring a staff through which God could perform miracles. While language is the medium through which humans express their thoughts and ideas, the staff is the medium through which God expresses himself. Unlike original reciters of epic, rhapsodes rely on the staff as a mediator between their language and the audience, as gestures help add emphasis, clarity, and emotions to the words. The fact that both the prophet and the wandering poet must carry a staff to speak in front of people indicate that language alone is not

take this staff in your hand so you can perform the signs with it” (Exod. 4.17). Aaron and Moses later performed several signs with the rod (although it remains debatable whether the brothers used the same rod), including turning the Nile blood-red and parting the Red Sea.

³⁴⁷ . “The blind one” that appears in the last stanza is likely to be Homer, since all the notes that Celan wrote in the margin can be found in Walter Schadewaldt’s book *Von Homers Welt und Werk* (1944) that Celan is likely to have read. See also: Werner Wögerbauer, “Textgenese und Interpretation zu Paul Celans Gedicht *Wanderstaude*,” *Dokument/Monument: Textvarianz in den verschiedenen Disziplinen der europäischen Germanistik*, eds. Françoise Lartillot und Axel Gellhaus (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008): 343.

³⁴⁸ Eugene Bahn and Margaret L. Bahn, *A History of Oral Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Burgess, 1979): 7. The staff also indicates that rhapsodes travels from town to town to perform their art. The rhapsode is comparable to the tumbleweed as they both travel from one place to another without settling down.

³⁴⁸ Martin Buber, *Werke*, Vol 1. *Schriften zur Philosophie* (Munich, 1962): 11.

enough, that another layer of mediation becomes necessary. The staff serves as a reminder of the power of God and of the legendary poet Homer, who could connect with the people in a way that neither the prophet nor the rhapsode ever could. The staff, usually made of wood—a porous and fibrous structural tissue in the stems of trees—has similar functions as the stem of plants that supports the main structure of the plant, keeps leaves in the light, and transports fluids and nutrients between the roots and the shoots. A staff supports the weight of a wanderer while connecting the detached individual to the ground beneath their feet.

Martin Buber, whose work Celan was quite familiar with, uses the image of a walking stick to introduce the significance of the dialogue as a form of language in his foreword to *Daniel* in 1913. After a long day in the mountains with little rest, he stopped and stood at the edge of a meadow. Since the support that the staff [Stab] offers was momentarily unnecessary, and he wanted to build some relationship or bond during his lingering, he pressed the staff against an oak trunk. Immediately, he perceived a kind of contact between two separate beings, the stick and the bark of the tree, and an awareness of self, which, he believed, is the same feeling produced by dialogical speech: “Apparently only where I was, I nonetheless found myself there too where I found the tree. At that time dialogue appeared to me. For the speech of a person is like that stick wherever it is genuine speech, and that means: truly undirected address.”³⁴⁹ The walking stick is the speech of mankind: it leans onto the tree, gently touches it

³⁴⁹ Buber, *Werke*, 11. The passage is quoted in full below. The English is cited from Martin Buber, *Meetings*, ed. M. Friedman (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1973): 41-42:

Nach einem Abstieg, zu dem ich ohne Rast das Spätlicht eines vergehenden Tages hatte nutzen müssen, stand ich am Rand einer Wiese, nun des sicheren Wege gewiß, und ließ die Dämmerung auf mich niederkommen. Unbedürftig einer Stütze und doch willens, meinem Verweilen eine Bindung zu gewähren, drückte ich meinen Stab gegen einen Eichenstamm. Da fühlte ich zwiefach meine Berührung des Wesens: hier, wo ich das Holz hielt, und dort, wo es die Rinde traf. Scheinbar nur bei mir, fand ich dennoch dort, wo ich den Baum fand, mich selber.

without pressing, engages with the tree and gestures towards it without expecting anything in return. Furthermore, the stick and the tree are two forms of the same thing: wood. The gesture therefore also indicates a sense of affinity between two things, one living and one dead, one natural and one artificial. This gesture is what Buber calls a “wahrhaft hingewandte Anrede,” a truly directed address that has the potential to form a dialogue.

Celan had read Buber in his youth, and he began re-reading and referring to the Jewish philosopher in his own work around 1958. His 1958 Bremen speech identified Bukovina as home to Buber’s Hasidic tales, and in August 1960, just a month before he finally met with the 82-year-old patriarch, he underlined passages from *Daniel* in his own copy of the book.³⁵⁰ His prose work “Conversations in the Mountains” was composed around that time in 1959, after the scheduled encounter with Theodor Adorno in Sils Maria on July 22, which did not happen. In this essay, a walking stick [Stock] appears over and again: “came, came tall, came to meet the other, Gross approached Klein, and Klein, the Jew, silenced his stick before the stick of the Jew

Damals erschien mir das Gespräch. Denn wie jener Stab ist die Rede des Menschen, wo immer sie echte Rede, und das heißt: wahrhaft hingewandte Anrede ist. Hier, wo ich bin, wo Ganglien und Sprachwerkzeuge mir helfen, das Wort zu formen und zu entsenden, hier "meine" ich ihn, an den ich es entsende, ich intendiere ihn, diesen einen unverwechselbaren Menschen. Aber auch dorthin, wo er ist, ward etwas von mir delegiert, etwas, das gar nicht substanzartig ist wie jenes Beimirsein, sondern reine Vibration und ungreifbar; das weilt dort, bei ihm, dem von mir gemeinten Menschen, und nimmt teil am Empfangen meines Wortes. Ich umfasse ihn, zu dem ich mich wende.

I stood on the edge of a meadow, now sure of the safe way, and let the twilight come down upon me. Not needing a support and yet willing to afford my lingering a fixed point, I pressed my walking stick against the trunk of an oak tree. Then I felt in twofold fashion my contact with being: here, where I held the stick, and there, where it touched the bark. Apparently only where I was, I nonetheless found myself there too where I found the tree.

At that time dialogue appeared to me. For the speech of a person is like that stick wherever it is genuine speech, and that means: truly directed address. Here, where I am, where ganglia and organs of speech help me to form and to send forth the word, here I ‘mean’ him to whom I send it, I intend him, this one unexchangeable person. But also there, where he is, something of me is delegated, something that is not at all substantial in nature, like that being here, rather pure vibration and incomprehensible; that remains there, with him, the person meant by me, and takes part in the receiving of my word. I encompass him to whom I turn.”

³⁵⁰ See John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 161.

Gross” [—, kam, kam groß, kam dem anderen entgegen, Groß kam auf Klein zu, und Klein, der Jude, hieß seinen Stock schweigen vor dem Stock des Juden Groß³⁵¹]. The curious command that the walking stick be silent indicates its potential to speak, since “silence” [schweigen] could only be applied to articulated sounds. Celan may have Buber’s walking stick in mind as he writes about the speaking cane. It is mentioned again in the fictional dialogue between der Jude Groß and der Jude Klein:

“Warum und wozu... Weil ich hab reden müssen vielleicht, zu mir oder zu dir, reden hab müssen mit dem Mund und mit der Zunge und nicht nur mit dem Stock. Denn zu wem redet er, der Stock? Er redet zum Stein, und der Stein—zu wem redet der?“

“Zu wem, Geschwisterkind, soll er reden? Er redet nicht, er spricht, und wer spricht, Geschwisterkind, der rede zu niemand, der spricht, weil niemand ihn hört, niemand und Niemand, und dann sagt er, er und nicht sein Mund und nicht seine Zunge, sagt er und nur er: Hörst du?“³⁵²

“Why and what for? Because I had to talk, maybe, to myself or to you, talk with my mouth and tongue, not just with my stick. Because to whom does it talk, my stick? It talks to the stones, and the stones—to whom do they talk?”

“To whom should they talk, cousin? They do not talk, they speak, and who speaks does not talk to anyone, cousin, he speaks because nobody hears him, nobody and Nobody, and then he says, himself, not his mouth or his tongue, he, and only he, says. Do you hear

³⁵¹ Celan, GW III, 169.

³⁵² Celan, GW III, 171.

me?”³⁵³

This conversation begins with a premise that the language that they, the Jewish cousins, speak, is not for themselves (“die Sprache, die hier gilt, das Grüne mit dem Weißen drin, eine Sprache, nicht für dich und nicht für mich.”)³⁵⁴ Yet they must speak nevertheless, to each other, not only with the stick but also with their mouth and tongue. This “green and white” language is the language of the folded earth (or glacier), of the Turk’s-cap lily [Türkenbund] and the corn salad [Rapunzel]. This language of nature that does not belong to either “you” or “me” echoes Buber’s “truly directed address.” It is a language addressed to the other, directed towards the other, a gentle touch like the stick’s leaning on a tree. To use Emmanuel Levinas’s words, this language is pre-syntactic, pre-logical, and pre-disclosing, “at the moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing.”³⁵⁵

But this language is perhaps far less attainable as Levinas might have hoped. He sees this language, which, according to him, Celan’s poetry strives to achieve, as a neutral, impersonal exchange, comparable to the beautiful road that “der Jude” came down from (“kam daher auf der Straße daher, der schönen”).³⁵⁶ The Jewish cousin stood on the road, with the Turk’s cap lily on his left, the corn salad on his right, and the dianthus superbus nearby. Although he was standing in the mountain, he had no physical connection with these plants, because “the Jew” and nature are strangers to each other [“der Jud und die Natur, das ist zweierlei, immer noch, auch heute,

³⁵³ Paul Celan, “Conversation in the Mountains,” in *Paul Celan: Selections*, ed. and trans. Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 151.

³⁵⁴ Celan, GW III, 170.

³⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other,” *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996): 41.

³⁵⁶ Celan, GW III, 169.

auch hier”].³⁵⁷ The truly directed language that Buber sensed between the walking stick and the tree is not easily accessible for “der Jude,” big or small, because he can never be one with nature. He is not only alienated from nature, but also from everything else: “the Jew, you know, what does he have that is really his own, that is not borrowed, taken and not returned” [“den der Jud, du weißts, was hat er schon, das ihm auch wirklich gehört, das nicht geborgt wär”].³⁵⁸ The Jewish cousin in Celan’s writing is expelled from the world; he does not own anything, and everything he has for the moment is borrowed from someone else.

If one is so detached from the world that he could neither touch nor grasp onto anything, how would a language that is at the moment of “pure touching” and “pure contact” be accessible to him? The only thing he could grasp on, the only object that is described as “his” (“sein,” and later, “mein”), is the walking stick, and as a mediated contact, it is by no means “pure.” The language of pure touching and pure direction belongs to the walking stick, “my stick which talked to the stones...is silent now” [“der hat gesprochen, hat gesprochen zum Stein... und schweigt jetzt still”].³⁵⁹ “Der Jude” stood on the beautiful road between the Turk’s cap lily and the corn salad and held onto a stick, not because he wanted to speak a language with his mouth and tongue to his cousin, who walked towards him. He could not speak—because language does not belong to him—and yet must speak, futilely. He stood there, between the Turk’s cap lily and the corn salad, in the hope that the directed language between the plants could one day touch him, through his walking stick. He is waiting for a language to come to him. But the voice

³⁵⁷ Celan, GW III, 169.

³⁵⁸ Celan, GW III, 169.

³⁵⁹ Celan, GW III, 171.

perhaps did not come to speak to his stick; his and everyone's "blinding" was ultimately inevitable.

As these examples show, Celan's attempt to "speak to" plants is by no means straightforward: it is a bewildering and frustrating struggle that almost always requires something intermediary, like the walking stick. Another example of such "extra-human" conversation displays how Celan addresses problems of spatial displacement through his conversations with plants. Deeply attuned to the experiences of expulsion and exile, Celan frequently addresses the issue of uprootedness in his poetry. The mystical idea of the Jewish people as a personification of the eternal wanderer and their intrinsic rootlessness partially contributes to the German blood-and-soil ideology and the National Socialist's systematic murder of the Jewish population.³⁶⁰ Along with the problem of timelessness—being "dead while breathing"—is the enforced physical and material uprootedness. The botanical metaphor of "uprootedness" is often used to describe human beings as firmly attached to their geographical, cultural, and ancestral belongings as their botanical peers to the ground. "Rootedness" as a metaphor is significant both temporally and spatially: on the one hand, the "family tree" offers a practical and mythological function to connect the living with their dead ancestors; on the other hand, "rootedness" designates the idea of "home," which insists on the physical and psychological associations with the homeland. But the concept of "home" is never natural: while the metaphor of rootedness speaks about places with a variety of functions, such as cultural identity, emotional support, and relational resources, it is also used to describe concepts such as exile, diaspora, emigration, and expatriation. Celan uses the idea of "uprootedness" quite literally

³⁶⁰ Liska, "Roots against Heaven," 44.

as being upside-down with roots exposed in the air. In “I heard it said” [Ich hörte sagen], he describes a poplar tree with roots pleading against heaven:

ich sah meine Pappel hinabgehen zum Wasser,
 ich sah, wie ihr Arm hinuntergriff in die Tiefe,
 ich sah ihre Wurzeln gen Himmel um Nacht flehn.³⁶¹

I saw my poplar go down to the water,
 I saw its arm reach down to the depth,
 I saw its roots beg skywards for night.

The poplar tree, turned upside-down, becomes an important motif in Celan’s poetry. It is the “Umkehr,” a transforming inversion, that turns poetry against itself, or to use Vivian Liska’s word, “estranged”: she argues that this estranging inversion is one of “verjuden,” of becoming Jewish, which, in Celan’s own words, is also “Andersweden,” becoming Other, or becoming stranger to oneself.³⁶² With this “Umkehr,” Liska continues, Celan’s language “uproots” itself, and her argument is obviously indebted to Werner Hamacher’s essay “The Second of Inversion,” where he argues that the radical inversion in Celan’s poetry leads to its own erasure, performs its own defeat, and liberate itself from its own language.³⁶³ And Celan indeed attempts to think of language as an inverted tree: in a note written as he was preparing the “Meridian” speech, Celan

³⁶¹ Celan, GW I, 85.

³⁶² Liska, “Roots against Heaven,” 51.

³⁶³ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 375.

turns the etymological “root” of a word upside-down: “There is also this etymon: not as one of those that has since long been no longer visible, not derived from the roots, but that which is perceived from the branch.”³⁶⁴ While both Hamacher and Liska see the image of an uprooted poplar tree as a moment of transformation and an active gesture of inversion that negativizes the negative, another perspective remains: the perspective of the inverted tree. For Hamacher, it is the fundamental alternation of the ground into groundlessness that makes language into the image of its own interruption, that puts its communicability into question.³⁶⁵ But what would “ground” mean for a plant that does not require soil to grow? For those plants that could grow literally upside-down like Büchner’s Lenz, who walks on his head with the sky below him as an abyss, its origin (“etymon”) is not derived from where roots normally grow, but from the “branches” that poke towards the sky.

Wie man zum Stein spricht, wie
 du,
 mir vom Abgrund her, von
 einer Heimat her Ver-
 Schwisterte, Zu-
 geschleuderte, du,
 du mir vorzeiten,
 du mir im Nichts einer Nacht,
 du in der Aber-Nacht Be-
 gegnete, du
 Aber-Du—:

³⁶⁴ “Es gibt auch dieses Etymon: nicht als das vom längst nicht mehr sichtbaren, nicht von der Wurzel abgeleitete, sondern das am Zweig wahrgenommene.” Paul Celan. *Der Meridian. Endfassung, Vorstufen, Materialien, Tübinger Ausgabe*, eds. Bernhard Böschstein and Heino Schmull (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999) 106.

³⁶⁵ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 361.

Damals, da ich nicht da war,
damals, da du
den Acker abschrittst, allein:

Wer, wer wars, jenes
Geschlecht, jenes gemordete, jenes
schwarz in den Himmel stehende:
Rute und Hode—?

(Wurzel.
Wurzel Abrahams. Wurzel Jesse. Niemandes
Wurzel—o
unser.)

Ja,
Wie man zum Stein spricht, wie
du
mit meinen Händen dorthin
und ins Nichts greifst, so
ist, was hier ist:

auch dieser
Fruchtboden klafft,
dieses
Hinab
Ist die eine der wild-
blühenden Kronen.³⁶⁶

As one speaks to the stone, as

³⁶⁶ Celan, GW I, 239.

you
 to me from the abyss, from
 a homeland, con-
 genial, cata-
 pulted, you,
 you to me long ago,
 you to me in the nothingness of a night
 you in the counter-night en-counterred, you
 counter-you—:

Then, since I was not there,
 then, since you
 paced off the plow land, alone:

Who, who was it, that
 race, the murdered one, the one
 standing black in the sky:
 rod and testicle—?

(Root.

Root of Abraham. root of Jesse. No one's
 root—o
 ours.)

Yes,
 as one speaks to the stone, as
 you
 with my hands over there
 and into nothingness grasp, so
 is what is here:
 even this receptacle gapes:

this
 Downward
 is one of the wild-
 blooming crowns.³⁶⁷

“Radix, Matrix” is another poem published in *Die Niemandrose* that explores the connection between the poet and his environment. The poem is addressed to a “du,” but the identity and location of the “you” remains unclear. “You” come to “me” from the abyss, from a “Heimat,” yet “you” paced off the land as “I” was not there. The vocabulary of temporal and spatial separation (vorzeiten, da, dorthin, hinab) and hyphenated (and thus separated) prepositional verbs (verschwindern, zuschleudern, begegnen) further distance the speaker from the addressee. The first line “Wie man zum Stein spricht” marks an impossible dialogue between the poet and the addressee (“du”), as if one is speaking to an inorganic stone. An inorganic stone would probably not respond, as Celan describes in *Conversations in the Mountains*, written around the same time as “Radix, Matrix”: The stones do not talk to anyone, they speak but nobody hears them.³⁶⁸ Yet like the wild-flourishing crowns that blossoms into nothingness and the “rod and ball” that stand black in the sky the stone remains unmistakably there (“was hier ist”).

Readers are presented two pairs of contrasting images: one is of empty nothingness against heaven, which includes the I, you, the murdered race, the roots of Abraham, Jesse, and “us.” The other is of productive “somethingness,” which include the field, the fertile soil (since

³⁶⁷ Translated by Peter Fenves. See Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 364.

³⁶⁸ “[Der Stein] redet nicht, er spricht, und wer spricht, Geschwisterkind, der redet zu niemand, der spricht, weil niemand ihn hört, niemand und Niemand, und dann sagt er, er und nicht sein Mund und nicht seine Zunge, sagt er und nur er: Hörst du?” Celan, GW III, 171.

“Fruchtboden” in botany also refers to vegetative tissues near the end of reproductive stems that encase the reproductive organs), and the wild-blooming crown. The two sets of contrasting images appear to be isolated, as the question “who, who was it” remains unanswered, “as one speaks to the stone.” Hamacher sees the relationship between the empty nothingness of the murdered race and the productive somethingness of the plant as a kind of inversion, a movement nicely captured by the plant itself, turned upside down, with roots exposed in the air, the crowns growing deeply downwards (“hinab”), and its rod and ball (Rute und Hote, which correspond to the radix and matrix accordingly) exhibited in the “erected abyss.”³⁶⁹ Christy Wampole points out that the roots exposed in the air is an appropriation of the derisory “Luftmenschen,” which Hitler used to describe the Jewish people as “unhoused creature of the air.”³⁷⁰ We see images of beings floating in the air including “we shovel a grave in the air there you won’t lie too cramped”³⁷¹ and “In the air, there remain your roots, in the air.”³⁷² The groundlessness of the Jewish people without a place, in juxtaposition with the groundlessness of the grave in the air, marks the intimate connection between the root metaphor and death.³⁷³ Wampole describes the root in the air as a kind of “zero-root,” a “botanical nothingness and interrupted fertility” that is infected by absence, matricide, and degenerated genesis.³⁷⁴ The inverted plant, with its root pointing towards heaven and crown embedded in the ground, also demonstrates Hamacher’s formulation, the “inversion of inversion,” not in the sense of a Hegelian dialectic that turns

³⁶⁹ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 295.

³⁷⁰ George Steiner, *My Unwritten Books*, (New York: New Directions Books, 2008): 122, quoted in Christy Wampole, *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016): 87.

³⁷¹ “Wir schaufeln ein Grab in der Lüften da liegt man nicht eng,” Celan, GW III, 61.

³⁷² “In der Luft, da bleibt deine Wurzel, da, in der Luft,” Celan, GW I, 290.

³⁷³ Wampole, *Rootedness*, 63.

³⁷⁴ Wampole, *Rootedness*, 62-63.

nothingness into something, but one that “[negates] the remainder of a positive which inhabits its negativity, thereby preventing any harmonizing mediation . . . the barren space cleared by a muteness lost in itself.”³⁷⁵

The “inversion of inversion” is crystalized in the image of the upside-down “Geschlecht.” The term “Geschlecht,” which could be translated as sex, race, or lineage, not only corresponds to the “rod and ball” at the end of this stanza as well as the title “Radix, Matrix,” but also emphasizes the genealogy of the murdered Jewish people. Felstiner argues that Celan’s choice of Rute is a pun on the name Ruth, father of King David and grandmother of Jesse: “since Rute means ‘rod’ and ‘penis,’ and in German the name Ruth is pronounced like the English ‘root,’ a triple play between languages unites—without at all reconciling—the murdered mother, the rod of miracle or anger, and a radically threatened people.”³⁷⁶ On the one hand, “Rute” corresponds to the “radix” in the title, which in Latin stands for vegetable root, origin, source, firm ground, as well as the masculine, such as in *radix virilis* (male root). On the other hand, Hode is derived from the Latin *cunnus*, or the female reproductive organ, and therefore corresponds to “matrix,” which, as the feminine equivalent of Rute, stands for progenitrix, womb, and uterus. The two words as a coupling “fulfill the figure of immanent inversion that the erected abyss presents,” as the couple of the masculine and feminine sexes make up the “Geschlecht” that stand black in the sky.³⁷⁷ The inverted plant, with its “Geschlecht” turned upside down, makes itself into an abyss

³⁷⁵ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 282.

³⁷⁶ John Felstiner, “Repetition and Restitution: Translating Celan’s *Die Winzer*,” *Prooftexts* 10, no.1 (Jan 1990): 177.

³⁷⁷ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 296.

that “renouncing any possible communality of language, of the race, and announcing nothing more than this renouncing.”³⁷⁸

But the almost automatic connection between an inverted “Geschlecht”—which could also be translated as a “genus”—with groundlessness and death may be the result of our anthropocentric prejudice. Despite our insistence in being “rooted” in the ground, there is also a type of aerial roots that are exposed to the air, some growing up and away from typical roots, others dangling down from the stem. Aerial roots could receive water and nutrient intake from the air, just as terrestrial roots rely on nutrients and water from the ground. Many orchids, such as epiphytic orchids, grow anchored to other plants and absorb their water and nutrients through aerial roots from the rain, air, and other debris nearby. Most epiphytic orchids are found in tropical areas that have adapted to the environment, attaching themselves high up in trees to obtain more sunlight, and storing water and nutrients in pseudobulbs to better tolerate drought conditions. These roots often look like string beans or tentacles growing in every direction. In response to stress conditions, such as flooding, nutrient deprivation, and wounding, adventitious roots may form from any non-root tissue that are critical for plant survival in shifting environments. In some plants, adventitious roots are a primary means of vegetative reproduction: for example, forests of quaking aspen are often a single clone spread by adventitious roots. If we consider the third stanza as a sincere question rather than a rhetorical one, the identity of the upside-down “Geschlecht” does not have to be limited to the human race. It could also refer to an orchid, like the orchid in “Todtnauberg” (“Orchis und Orchis, einzeln”),³⁷⁹ standing alone in the unlevelled forest turf (“Waldwasen”), with its roots growing adventitiously and upwards like rod

³⁷⁸ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 297.

³⁷⁹ Celan, GW II, 255.

and ball. The word “Orchis” in fact is derived from the Greek *ὄρχις*, or testicle, from the appearance of its paired subterranean roots; in German, the plant is known as “Knabenkraut” for the same reason.³⁸⁰ Thus, the third stanza may be presented to us as a question in the hope for more than one definite answer. Addressing the poem not only to the murdered Jewish people, but also to a kind of orchid that survives and thrives even when uprooted and upside-down, might offer the poet some comfort. If we read the upside-down roots in the air in *Radix, Matrix* as a movement of uprooting and orphaning (Deradizierung, Dematrizierung) that erases its own trope and opens itself to the unwritten, to the infinite void, the secret hope of speaking to an orchid can be understood as the hope to reach something entirely else with this newly crystallized language.

The task of the poem, then, is to translate the muted conversation between an indeterminate “you,” which exists only as an indeterminate addressee, a “but-you” [Aber-Du] characterized by its own negation, and the absent “I,” which speaks indeterminately about its own voiceless absence (“Damals, da ich nicht da war”), into a dialogue between a stone and a crown to make it audible. The poem mimics such an impossible dialogue with the structure of an echo: it opens with the line “as one speaks to the stone, as,” and the fifth stanza responds by repeating the same lines: “Yes, / as one speaks to the stone, as.” In Middle English, the word “echo” was used to refer both to the aural re-sounding phenomenon and a kind of flattery, a form of empty speech or sound without substance.³⁸¹ In Medieval literature, an echo verse usually contains repetition of the end of a line or stanza, which imitates an echo. The structure of “*Radix, Matrix*” could be interpreted as a kind of echo, with its babble-like repetition of certain

³⁸⁰ Otto Pöggeler links the plant to a number of other concepts in Celan’s poetry, such as the “Mandelhode.”

³⁸¹ Adin E. Lears, *World of Echo: Noise and Knowing in Late Medieval England*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 4.

phrases—“du, du, du, du, Aber-du,” “damals, damals,” “wer, wer,” “Wurzel, Wurzel, Wurzel”—and the ambiguous self-responding structure of the first and fifth stanza. Although Celan’s frequent repetitions and musicality are frequently mentioned in scholarly works, they are rarely, if ever, compared to (medieval, pastoral) echo. Felstiner argues that only repetition could expose the “mere adequacy and sheer inadequacy of words,” which would allow one to speak the unspeakable by way of a language that, “through its own answerlessnesses, passes through frightful muting, passes through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech.”³⁸² Felstiner points us towards the repeated “pass through” [hindurchgehen], for repetition “occurs with a thematic force and identity of its own.”³⁸³ In “Tübingen, January” [Tübingen, Jänner], the repetition of “käme,” “lallen,” “immer” and “zu,” as well as “Pallaksch” are often interpreted as baffled stuttering, as “Pallaksch” is a meaningless term that Hölderlin utters in his late deranged years: it sometimes meant “yes” and sometimes means “no.” The repeated force of repetition is particularly remarkable in “Stretto” [Engfügung]:

Kam, kam.
 Kam ein Wort, kam.
 Kam durch die Nacht,
 Wollte leuchten, wollt leuchten.

Asche.
 Asche, Asche.
 Nacht.

³⁸² “Aber [die Sprache] mußte nun hindurchgehen durch ihre eigenen Antwortlosigkeiten, hindurchgehen durch furchtbares Verstummen, hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede.” Celan, GS III: 185-6. Felstiner, “Repetition and Restitution,” 175.

³⁸³ Felstiner, “Repetition and Restitution,” 175.

Nacht-und-Nacht.—Zum
Aug geh, zum feuchten.³⁸⁴

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
came through the night,
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ashes.
Ashes, ashes.
Night.
Night-and-night. –To
The eye, go, to the moist.³⁸⁵

The repetition of singular words signifies an urgent motive to push through a violent, “deathbringing” German in the hope of grasping and validating another word simply through reinforcement. “Engführung,” as the title suggests, is a “straitening,” a way of pushing and passing through the mother-tongue-as-murderers’-tongue. This constant struggle, however, has never received its anticipated encounter. In his Meridian speech, Celan says, “the poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it.”³⁸⁶ Yet the search for an Other continues to end in disappointment. The conversation in the mountains between the big Jew and the little Jew begins and ends in silence: “Gross approached Klein, and Klein, the Jew, silenced his stick before the stick of the Jew Gross... he says, he says... Do you hear me, he

³⁸⁴ Celan, GW I, 195.

³⁸⁵ Paul Celan, *Selections*, 69.

³⁸⁶ “Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu.” Celan, GS III, 198.

says... And Do-you-hear-me, of course, Do-you-hear-me does not say anything, does not answer, because Do-you-hear-me is one with the glaciers, in three in one, and not for men..."³⁸⁷

Without a proper response—both the missed encounter with Adorno and the disappointing walk with Heidegger failed to yield any meaningful poetological encounter—Celan's poetry appears to have failed to reach the Other. "I encountered myself," ["Ich bin...mir selbst begegnet,"] he says.³⁸⁸ The response in the second half of "Radix, Matrix" is only the echo of his own voice.

Yet when poetry fails to find another human, be it big Jew or small Jew, it did find an "Other": the mountains. It encounters the beautiful road, the stones, the turk's-cap lily and corn salad, the folded earth that is not for humans. It encounters a language: "this is the language that counts here, the green with the white in it, a language not for you and not for me" ["die Sprache, die hier gilt, das Grüne mit dem Weißen drin, eine Sprache, nicht für dich und nicht für mich,"] the language meant for the earth ["eine Sprache...für wen ist sie den gedacht, die Erde"].³⁸⁹ The mountains responded with an echo, a sound that returns to its source like a boomerang from the void ("vom Nichts her, ein Wurfholz").³⁹⁰ Yet the echoic movement of the poetic word, as it "abandons itself to destruction, rejection, annihilation," may also be used as a productive path of navigation and location.³⁹¹ Poetry rushes ahead and tries to see his direction. To locate this place, the step, where the person was able to set himself free as an estranged I, poetry needs an echo, a

³⁸⁷ "Groß kam auf Klein zu, und Klein, der Jude, hieß seinen Stock schweigen vor dem Stock des Juden Groß... 'Sagt er, sagt er... Hörst du, sagt er... Und Hörstdu, gewiß, Hörstdu, der sagt nichts, der antwortet nicht, den Hörstdu, das ist mit den Gletschern, der, der sich gefaltet hat, dreimal, und nicht für die Menschen...'" Celan, GS III, 171.

³⁸⁸ Celan, GS III, 201.

³⁸⁹ Celan, GS III, 170.

³⁹⁰ Celan, GS I, 182.

³⁹¹ Hamacher, "the Second of Inversion," 305.

call emitted out to the environment and returned from various nearby objects.³⁹² Echolocation animals—bats, whales, dolphins—and echo-acoustic flowers (which communicate acoustically with bats) communicate with their environment with their own, seemingly meaningless sound. Poetry goes out for the sake of just such a turn, a turning of our breath, a “breathturn” [Atemwende]: the turn itself already provides promising evidence that the poetic sound has encountered something. With “echolocation,” the poem has, to a certain extent, succeeded in its “topological research,” and has found its place in the world despite its rootlessness and interrupted fertility.³⁹³ If “Conversations in the Mountains” [Gespräch im Gebirg] is simultaneously “Conversations with the Mountains” [Gespräch mit dem Gebirg], Celan’s poetic language might have already received its anticipated response: it has almost found something “earthly, terrestrial,” a place to which poetry belongs.³⁹⁴

³⁹² “Dichtung eilt voraus... Finden wir jetzt vielleicht den Ort, wo das Fremde war, den Ort, wo die Person sich freizusetzen vermochte, al sein—befremdetes—Ich? Finden wir einen solchen Ort, einen solchen Schritt?” Celan, GS III, 194-5.

³⁹³ Celan, GW III, 201.

³⁹⁴ Celan, GW III, 202.

Coda

In the “Meridian” speech, Celan admits that the place to which poetry belongs, the step towards which poetry moves, does not exist. Because the Other resides in an absolute alterity, a non-place, “none of these places can be found. They do not exist.”³⁹⁵ Despite the high hope that plants promise, its echolocation, like Celan’s boomerang or meridian, only marks another circular movement that returns without landing in a specific place. Scholars like Hamacher and Levinas acknowledge and accept poetry’s failure (the place of failure, Fehl-Ort) in locating a place, in reaching utopia.³⁹⁶ Despite its impracticability, Celan searches for the “absolute poem” that speaks the meaning of Being, the poetry *par excellence* that does not exist and cannot exist. Celan refers to his boomerang as “the/true” [das Wahre], a separation or “desevering” that Hamacher calls a “self-with-drawal,” a being-as-abandoning.³⁹⁷ For Levinas, Celan’s language speaks to the otherwise-than-Being and allows the most idiosyncratic quality of the other to participate in the conversation. It “fails” because the “true word” dwells in a modality “other than that of existence and nonexistence, other than all those that are to be found between these two limits.”³⁹⁸

Both scholars connect Celan’s “failure” to locate poetry to the separation from and avoidance of Being, because the addressee of his poetry, the “otherwise than Being,” cannot “be.” In other words, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to imagine an otherwise habitable world, a kind of poetically dwelling [dichterisch wohnen] without prior occupation and owes nothing to

³⁹⁵ “Keiner dieser Orte ist zu finden, es gibt sie nicht,” Celan, GW III, 202.

³⁹⁶ Levinas, “From Being to the Other,” 41, Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 305.

³⁹⁷ Hamacher, “The Second of Inversion,” 307.

³⁹⁸ Levinas, “From Being to the Other,” 41.

rootedness, or a homeless way of living. Levinas's critique of Heideggerian ontology and his development of ethical alterity offer little help for those who have already been designated, ontologically and politically, as the "Other," as they struggle between the search for "das Wahre" or the "true word" and the fact that they themselves, as an absolute "Other," are already "otherwise than Being" and never at home. The circular movement of Celan's poetry, be it a meridian, a boomerang, or an echo, has no home to come back to; it goes outwards from non-place and returns again to the non-place. What Celan faces is not only the aporia of language, a verdict that denies its reality and defines it as mere reference to or reiteration of reality, but also the "aporia" of himself as an absolute Other with no history, no home, and no language, as someone who lives but cannot "be."³⁹⁹ The returning of the meridian, the boomerang, and the echo from a non-place only confirms his own absolute alterity and unimaginable loneliness.

Tawada's *The Emissary* could be read as a response to Celan's situation as an Other searching for the Other. Her playful profanation of language is not a transgression of the threshold between the divine and the mundane, between "Being" and the "otherwise than Being," but a willful ignorance of such boundaries. She imagines a world where dogs, oranges, humans, and languages alike are constantly mutating, and nothing is capable of being experienced *as is*. In this world, where everyone's relationship with its surroundings is constantly changing, it is impossible for anyone to claim to have a history, a home, or a language, as "ownership" is a relationship that is no longer possible to be maintained. Tawada responds to Celan by creating a fictional community where everyone is always already an

³⁹⁹ Or, at least, he does not have the "way of being" as a human, who, according to Heidegger, "has world." For Heidegger, material most par like stones are worldless, the animal is "poor in the world" [weltarm], but he does not specify the situation of plants, which are neither animals nor material objects. See: Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 197-198.

absolute Other, taking Celan's unbearable loneliness and turning it into something slightly more liberating.

Her second response to Celan is a confirmation of the vitality of the seemingly vacant language that does not belong to anyone. As both Hamacher and Levinas would agree, the poetic language of Celan does not "exist" because it does not confirm any pregiven reality; without arguing against this statement, Tawada emphasizes that this language nevertheless "lives" and *will continue to live*. From her perspective, the ontological concept of being cannot explain the fact that Celan's absurd, unattainable, often incomprehensible words continue to be highly relevant and translatable in different time and space. In "The Crown Made of Grass" [Die Krone aus Gras], Tawada discovers the Japanese radical "kusa-kanmuri" (grass crown), which resembles the double-T in Latin alphabet, in the most unexpected places in Celan's poetry. Although Celan is known for his botanical, astrological, and mineral terminology, Tawada does not see these words as "terms": "Terminus was a Roman god of the landmark [Grenzstein]. The clarity of a scientific term is assured as long as its territory is marked with the landmark."⁴⁰⁰ The scientific terms in Celan's poetry, which often contain a multitude of meanings—"Kolon," "Radix," "Chymisch," to name a few examples—are not considered stones that mark the border of one discipline from another, but as living plants that grow regardless of any political, ontological, or physical borders. The "grass crowns" of Celan's poetry that continue to grow in the Japanese translation are signs that confirm the liveliness of this poetic language.

⁴⁰⁰ Tawada, *Sprachpolizei*, 63.

Perhaps what Tawada discovers in Celan's poetry are "weeds." Commonly defined as "a plant in the wrong place,"⁴⁰¹ a weed is the name of any unwanted plant in human-controlled settings, in gardens, parks, or between concrete slabs. Any plant can be a "weed" as long as it is unwanted in the context; the term is sometimes used to describe "invasive" plants which are non-native to the ecosystem and show a tendency to spread out of control.⁴⁰² Ontologically, a weed does not "exist," because the term is only meaningful when used to describe plants that are inappropriate, misplaced, inopportune at its given time at space. A name for everyone and no one, a "weed" is the botanical "Other" that does not exist (since nothing is intrinsically a weed) and cannot exist (it must be eradicated). But, perhaps paradoxically, no one could stop it from growing. A weed is the closest living organism to what Tawada imagines to be a constantly mutating language: it does not belong to anyone and nobody "wants" it; it is always evolving along with its environment; it has no ontological truth or pre-given reality; it lives and will never cease to live.

What Tawada seeks in Celan's poetic language is not an abstract concept of responsibility of the "I" for an absolute Other, but something in the voice of the absolute Other that allows it to be seen, heard, and touched right here, right now. What she finds is "mutation," or, as she ironically calls, "environmental adaptation," an incredibly powerful liveliness that drives language to survive, regardless of its environment. In *The Emissary*, dandelions grow to the size of chrysanthemums, allowing them—a common weed in gardens—to become the noble flower

⁴⁰¹ A. H. Bunting, "Some Reflections on the Ecology of Weeds," in *The Biology of Weeds*, ed. J. L. Harper (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1960): 11-26.

⁴⁰² Botanically speaking, weed is often categorized as native weeds, invasive exotic weeds, and non-invasive exotic weeds. Among the various kinds of weeds is the ruderal species that are first to adapt to and colonize disturbed environments, where soil or natural vegetative cover has been damaged. See Steve Sutherland, "What makes a weed a weed: life history traits of native and exotic plants in the USA," *Oecologia* 141, no.1 (2004): 24-39.

chosen for the Imperial crest of Japan. Some bamboos grow as small as a pinky finger. These mutations in themselves appear to be absurd, foolish, or merely an empty gesture; but they allow language to continue living, and for Tawada, this “daemonic” power is the essence of poetic language.

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