

Olschner, Celan, and the Meanings of Titles

Benton Pelczynski

11/23/18

HUM 103

Professor Ingram

When analyzing a poem by Paul Celan, one needs to have a clear plan of analysis in order to comprehend the full nuances of his disjointed, nebulous writing style. In the case of Leonard Olschner, the meaning of Celan's poems can be found through detailed, precise analysis of their words and titles, and what they may mean. Are these words meant to have any literal meaning, or are they just meant to invoke meaning through metaphor? Can both the literal and metaphorical meanings exist simultaneously? By answering these questions through the context of the poem and its tone, Olschner is able to look at the big picture of Celan's poems.¹

When analyzing *Todesfuge*, Olschner's first course of action is to look at the meaning of the title itself. If *Todesfuge* calls itself a fugue, does that mean it is literally one in written form? Olschner begins by defining what a written fugue would literally be - "a sequence of a dense semantic clusters."² At the same time, Olschner also notes that in calling his poem a fugue, Celan might "by analogy suggest fugal structures through use of motif, juxtaposition, variation and repetition" and that *Todesfuge* may also refer to "the original Latin meaning of *fuga* as 'flight' or even 'exile.'"³

Having determined the possible meanings of a fugue, Olschner then compares them to the structure of Celan's poem. He notes Celan's circumstances and mindset at the time of writing *Todesfuge*, as he claims this context gives *Todesfuge* "a significance beyond that of a simple musical metaphor."⁴ He then analyzes the text of the poem, paying attention to the repeated motifs, before concluding that according to its structure *Todesfuge* "is clearly not a fugue, but...it does have in common with fugal composition a highly disciplined...formal structure whose

¹ Randy Ingram, Email, November 21, 2018.

² Leonard Olschner, "Fugal Provocation in Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge' and 'Engführung'," *German Life and Letters* 43, no. 1 (October 1989): 79.

³ Olschner, "Fugal Provocation," 79.

⁴ Olschner, "Fugal Provocation," 80.

purpose is to achieve an impersonal or extrapersonal opposition.”⁵ This is why, ultimately, Olschner refers to *Todesfuge* as having ‘fugal provocation.’ While it may not literally have been a fugue, according to Olschner, Celan defined it as such to compare it to the cacophonous, chaotic melodies of a musical fugue. *Todesfuge* and other poems by Celan exist as a fugue “not in the texts they introduce, but as grids of expectation, as ordering principles in the reader’s mind.”⁶

Unlike the analysis of a deconstructionist critic, Celan’s intended meaning matters to Olschner.⁷ This is why Olschner looks at the context of Celan’s life, as well as the responses of other scholars and critics. In order to understand the proper definitions of Celan’s poems, one must understand what Celan intended them to mean, according to Olschner.

Using Olschner’s style of analysis, a close reading of Celan’s poem *Psalm* would begin with defining the title. What is a psalm, and why is it relevant that Celan calls this poem such? Psalms generally refer to the Book of Psalms, a section of the Old Testament comprised of song-like prayers in praise of God. Types of prayers in this Book include hymns (prayers in celebration of God) and laments (prayers to God asking for protection or relief from calamity). Given the importance of Celan’s Jewish heritage in his works, a connection between the Book of Psalms and the poem’s name is extremely likely.

With a connection now established, how does *Psalm* compare to a psalm from the Book of Psalms? Certainly there is a similarity in diction, as *Psalm* uses hymn-like phrases throughout such as “gelobt siest du” (blessed art thou) and “waren wir, sind wir, werden wir bleiben” (we

⁵ Olschner, “Fugal Provocation,” 87.

⁶ Olschner, “Fugal Provocation,” 87.

⁷ Michaela Gibbons, Email, November 20, 2018.

were, are now, and ever shall be.)⁸ However, unlike typical hymns which are addressed to God, *Psalm* is directed to “Niemand” (No One) who the speaker claims “knetet uns wieder aus Eus und Lehm” (kneads us again out of earth and clay) and “besprict unsern Staub” (incants our dust.)⁹ In *Psalm*, the role of God in both the prayers and beliefs of the speaker has been replaced with, literally, No One.

Despite containing the content of a lament, *Psalm* does not directly address its despair, and in fact reads more like a hymn than a lament. The seemingly content yet hopeless attitude of speaker extends to when they refer to themselves and their fellows as “die Niemandrose” (the No-One’s-Rose) which blooms in both the “zulieb” (sight) and the “entgegen” (spite) of No One.¹⁰ The speaker’s comparison of themselves to a beautiful rose is juxtaposed against the bleakness that treating No One as a god implies. Their blooming in No One’s sight (implying that No One is watching - protecting - them) is juxtaposed against No One’s spite (implying No One doesn’t care for or even hates them.) Further juxtaposition can be found when the speaker describes themselves as having a “Krone rot” (corona red.)¹¹ Taken metaphorically, this description implies beauty, furthering the comparison between the speaker and his people and red roses. Meanwhile, a literal interpretation implies violence, as it would mean their heads have been bloodied. This difference is especially significant when paired with a later mention of thorns - does the speaker mean the thorns of a rose, or is he referring to the crown of thorns Jesus wore that bloodied his scalp as he was crucified? It’s possible these antithetical implications to both beauty and violence refer to Celan’s struggle in creating art out of the Holocaust, which is a major theme in several of

⁸ Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 156.

⁹ Celan, *Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 156.

¹⁰ Celan, *Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 156.

¹¹ Celan, *Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 156.

his other works. By calling this poem *Psalm*, Celan invites the reader to compare it to a typical psalm, allowing the reader to better understand the horror that it implies.

Bibliography

Celan, Paul. *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Translated by John Felstiner.

New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001.

Olschner, Leonard. "Fugal Provocation in Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge' and 'Engführung'."

German Life and Letters 43, no. 1 (October 1989): 79-89.