“SCHREIBEN ALS FORM DES GEBETS” – AN IMPOSSIBLE FORM OF APOSTROPHES?
(“PS.” ON A FRAGMENT BY KAFKA AS ADAPTED BY CELAN)


“Writing as a form of prayer,” we read – seized – in Kafka. Though this does not mean praying in the first place, but writing; that cannot be done with folded hands. (Paul Celan)

That you cannot write with your hands folded and that you cannot pray by writing seem almost like theological axioms. The mutual exclusion of writing and praying is something like an axiom both theological and poetological: “Nemo religiosus et poetae est,” as Janus Pannonius wrote in the fifteenth century, “No one is both religious and a poet.” Not at the same time, at least. The time particular to a written address, this rather strange form of temporality, excludes, in principle, either the presence of the addresser, at the time of reading, or the presence of the addressee, at the time of writing, while a certain intimacy of presence, at least as the inseparable and contemporaneous union between a full intention and its vocal utterance, has been considered as a precondition for the act of praying, to the extent that “the distinction between vocal and mental prayer” has been seen to be “phenomenologically impure” (Chrétien 2000, 148). The concern of the present essay is not so much to answer the question arising from Celan’s response to Kafka’s fragment, namely “why can’t you write with your hands folded?”, than it is to forward the question as efficiently as possible, like a prayer apostrophised.

1 Celan 1999= TCA/M, Ms. 60/582; trans. P. R. Emphasis in the original; typography modified. The Tübingen edition of Der Meridian (Celan 1999) is henceforth cited as TCA/M (Ms.=Manuskript; T.=Typoskript; Endf.=Endfassung, i.e. final version; followed by the number given by the editors). Cf. Kafka 1998, vol. Hochzeitsvorb. auf dem Lande, 252; Kafka 1983, 149.
Celan's adaptation of Kafka's fragment (from 1920) is itself a posthumous note from the work in progress that eventually became his Büchner Prize speech (Der Meridian, 1960). The laconic remark that one cannot write with one's hands folded reduces to the absurd, not the striking sentence itself, but rather any rash interpretation implying the old Aristotelian acquittal of the poet as a natural man of resemblance and synonymy, who should not be reproached for ignoring the differences between the appropriate modes of addressing, such as prayer and command. In the final version of the Meridian speech, there is the famous indirect quotation of the sentence that comes to Celan through Benjamin's essay on Kafka: "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul." For Benjamin, the sentence that originally comes from Malebranche characterises Kafka, who "included all creatures" within the scope of this attentiveness, "as saints include them in their prayers." We don't know whether Kafka actually prayed or not, as Benjamin notes, but what we do know is that he wrote, thanks to Max Brod who refused to fulfil his friend's request to "burn it all." And therefore Kafka's "writing as a form of prayer" may still grip us today.

Prayers can be written down, of course, and they are. But a written record is liable to be repeated, copied, cited, and recited. Praying is not citing, at least if citing means quoting ("Praying is not citing, it is to be cited to appear by what one says before what one says, and in it" [Chrétiens 2000, 172]), and even if a prayer is written down for some reason, mere quotation does not reappropriate it as prayer. This is at least what we may gather from Jean-Louis Chrétiens essay "The Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer" (2000, originally in French 1992), a concise but also very rich phenomenologically oriented survey of the (mostly theological and very distinctly Christian) history of prayer. Let us summarise, in terms of introduction only, a few turns taken by this remarkable essay. Chrétiens decides to consider prayer only as a speech act, while "the guiding question will be that of the voice in this act" (Chrétiens 2000, 149). Prayer should be a speech act whose only signature is the full and unconditional presence

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2 Cf. Aristote, Rh. III.2.1404b37ff.; Po. 19.1456b7ff.; 22.1459a5ff.
4 I quote the translation by Jeffrey Kosky. When I asked him about this sentence, Mr Kosky kindly offered me a commentary on the text and its translation as follows: "To pray is not to cite [to quote, that is]; to pray is to be summoned to appear in the presence of that who gives the language to pray." (Correspondence with Jeffrey L. Kosky, Nov. 3, 2003.) The citation, the summons, the call to appear in the "presence to the invisible" is indeed "inscribed in the body" (Chrétiens 2000, 150), and this inscription must become manifest by voicing it.
of the speaker, in flesh and blood, in heart and soul. Reading the text, at first it seems that everything in this “phenomenology of prayer” tends to exclude all lip-worship, and to secure the distinction of real, authentic prayer against its “inauthenticity, writing” (166), while the authenticity of prayer means mental and vocal prayer (always vocal plus mental, inseparably united as the Christian form of prayer) and “self-manifestation before the invisible other” (154). This authenticity must be secured, as it seems, against “practices of reciting a formula or repeating a word, to the point of drunken stupor” (148), against appropriating literary verse for rhetorical or “particular stylistic” purposes (172) and, in general, against the possibility of citing others’ texts in prayer, or reading silently, as well as against mere “interior babble” (168). But then it turns out that written texts such as psalms may be appropriated in prayer by voicing them, even to the point of taking oneself to be their author (cf. 172–173). However, it also turns out that we can actually neither appropriate the language used in prayer nor invent it; rather, “[t]o say a prayer is to be appropriated by it, or to make oneself appropriate to it in a wholly other mode.” In addition, “the highest intimacy with God is said in the speech we do not invent, but which invents us” (172). And through all the difficulties of distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic prayer it finally proves to be the case that “the formulaic prayer, the prayer using traditional or scriptural formulae, is not a constraining prayer but the most free of all” (172).

“Prayer is prey to its addressee,” as Chrétien (2000, 161) writes, but is not prayer also prey beyond address, prey to the other who may be other than its intended addressee? Is this not perhaps one of the reasons why one is advised to pray in secret (Matt. 6:6) – sub tectis et in abditum, “under roof and in secret,” as the Church Father Tertullian writes (De or., 1.20f.)? According to Tertullian’s treatise on prayer, this is a demand upon man’s faith as well as his self-restraint, and eventually he defines prayer as “the wall of faith: her arms and missiles against the foe who keeps watch over us on all sides.” The addressee of prayer is omnipresent, has eyes and ears everywhere, but the non-addressee, the enemy who keeps watch on all sides, may always overhear the prayer, which is itself wall and shield and spear, all at once. It would seem that writing is more vulnerable and disarmed before the foe, without the presence of the speaker and his intention. But, on the other hand, is not every speech act haunted by the imminence of the other’s gaze? Isn’t every dialogue, too, liable to be interrupted? Might not each word be the last?

5 On Scarle’s objection to Derrida, that for instance a “shopping list” is a text that can be written in the presence of its addressee, cf. Derrida 1990, 95–100.
6 Oratio marus est fidei, arma et tela nostra adversus hostem qui nos undique observat: De or., 29.24f., trans. Thelwall.
Anyone who writes is exposed to the possibility that the words survive him and may also fall into the wrong hands. Max Brod tells us how Kafka often spoke of “wrong hands” that stretch themselves toward the one who writes, already in the midst of his writing. And in the very last entry of the diary published by Brod (dated June 12, 1923), Kafka writes of his anxiety over “the hands of the spirits” in whose twisting grasp every word “becomes a spear [Spieß] turned against the speaker.” Every word is exposed to this risk: “Most especially a remark like this. And so ad infinitum.” This is not sheer paranoia, but an insight into an irony for which there may be a consolation (that should indeed be more than irony, almost like the optative “Thy will be done”), on the one hand, and also something more than consolation, on the other: “The only consolation would be: it happens whether you like it or not. And what you like is of infinitesimally little help. More than consolation is: You too have weapons.” These weapons were never meant to harm anyone, as it seems. Kafka anxiously declared, in conversation with Gustav Janouch, that his “scribbings” should be “burned and extinguished” lest they should just “worsen the condition of the patient” (the surviving reader, as it seems, posterity beyond his help: “one must keep silent, when one cannot help”), since he supposed his written words to carry only his own “wholly personal nightmare” and his own “hopelessness.” But he had to partly concede when Gustav Janouch protested against his despair by asking: “Can you see in the future?” Perhaps he could, and perhaps that was just what so horrified him: “You are right. […] I shrink back from the truth.” The effect of these written missiles or missives is incalculable, for better or for worse. But while a prayer is a sentence that is neither true nor false, as we learn from Aristotle (De int., 17a), a poem may be written “dass bewahrt sei / ein durchs Dunkel getragenes Zeichen” (“so as to guard / a sign dragged through the dark”), while in this “bewahrt sei” something is not only to be guarded but is to become “true (wahr)” by being “enlivened (belebt)” in another time, an unknown time. A poem does not lay its claims to infinity by reaching above time and beyond it, as Celan said in his Bremen speech (1958), but through it (durch sie hindurch); it does not seek to transcend time but to traverse it. And on the other hand, in one of the notes for the Meridian,  


9 This conversation reported by Gustav Janouch is reprinted in Kafka 1983, 151–152; trans. P. R.
Celan writes: “In the poem, and the poem is, as written, ‘speech of an absent,’ an absent one sets out to encounter you, you who are even more absent. The thought that the encounter between the absent could fail to happen, is obvious.”

When thinking of Celan’s response to Kafka’s fragment, one must also consider their mother tongue, the German language that remained “not lost” (unverloren) for the Jew from Bukovina, in spite of everything, he whose mother and father were murdered by the Nazis. But it should be clear that the division into Muttersprache and Mördersprache (mother tongue, and murderers’ tongue; this often repeated juxtaposition is not, to my knowledge, originally Celan’s own) haunts, as a possibility at least, every language, every mundane language.

Anyone who takes the “step of writing (le pas d’écriture)” in spite of the hazard, for instance deciding to write down a prayer, is exposed to an apostrophe in spite of itself, a turning aside of its direct address. And any address, be it prayer or apostrophe, may give way to what should be alien to its singularity: “Naturally, the prayer, invocation, and apostrophe can also be mimicked.” This exposure “to repetitive technique” is a hazard, a risk, but “also a piece of luck” (aussi une chance), as Jacques Derrida has argued (1987a, 537; 1987b, 5). After being seized by Kafka’s fragment and by Celan’s response to it, my initial inspiration for trying to respond to this exchange of words came from Derrida’s “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (an address presented in Jerusalem in 1986) and especially from the “PS.” that concludes the text, the few pages that end with a series of questions, buts and perhapses, including the following:

Does one have the right to think that, as a pure address, on the edge of silence, alien to every code and to every rite, hence to every repetition, prayer should never be turned away from its present by a notation or by the movement of an apostrophe, by a multiplication of addresses? That each time it takes place only once and should never be recorded? [Que chaque fois elle n’a lieu qu’une fois et ne devrait jamais être consignée?] (Derrida 1987b, 62; 1987a, 594)

The term apostrophe, here in this passage that concerns our very right to confine prayer to its “only once” and to “the edge of silence,” applies to the deviation of the “pure

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10 GW I, 159; trans. Felstiner in Celan 2001, 101 (where “belebt” is translated as “quickened”); GW 3, 186; 2001, 396; TCA/M, Ms. 458; trans. P. R. (“Sprache eines Abwesenden” is a citation from Freud); cf. Ms. 456.

11 See Celan’s Bremen speech (1958): “It, the language, remained, not lost, yes, in spite of everything [Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem]” (GW 3, 185; trans. Felstiner, in Celan 2001, 395). This is a remarkable turn of phrase, with the double negation (unverloren, ‘not lost,’ ‘unlost’) and the ‘yes (ja)’ that follows it.

address,” to the diversion from speaking “alone to him alone [mόνους πρός μόνον].” In Quintilian’s definition, apostrophe is “a diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge.” If we transform this to the words addressed to God, apostrophe would name, formally speaking, any deviation, if not from the rectitude of prayer, then at least from its direct relationship between the I and the Thou, to address someone else, any other addressee or group of addressees that at least seem to be somewhat secondary as to the purport of the address. In this sense “apostrophe” might also characterise generally any such consignment to writing of a spoken direct address that may fall into wrong hands, whether in need of deciphering or not. By “apostrophe,” Derrida also refers to the incipit of the treatise Mystical Theology by Pseudo-Dionysius, who begins his discourse by praying (“O Trinity beyond being, beyond divinity”), and then turns to directly address his disciple Timothy (“And you, dear Timothy, be earnest in the exercise of mystical contemplation”). Derrida writes: “After having prayed (he writes, we read), he presents his prayer. He quotes it and I have just quoted his quotation. He quotes it in what is properly an apostrophe to its addressee, Timothy.” The purpose of the apostrophe here is agogic, a “pedagogy which is also a mystagogy and a psychagogy: here the gesture of leading or directing the psyche of the other passes through apostrophe.” Such an apostrophe can also be a way to “pass from one address to the other without changing direction,” as Derrida writes, addressing the other while never ceasing to address the Other of all the others. But the apostrophe is at least potentially multiplied when it is written down; the discourse (i.e. the prayer from Dionysius to the Trinity enclosed within the agogic apostrophe from Dionysius to Timothy, or the direct address to Timothy enclosed within the prayer to the Trinity, a double apostrophe or mise-en-abyme) may now become theology, and also literature – an exposure to the other’s word. (Or even to one’s own. Kafka wrote in his diary the following note: “Would you call it conversation if the other person is silent and, to keep up the appearance of conversation, you try to substitute for him, and so imitate him, and so parody him, and so parody yourself.” Doesn’t any piece of writing that anticipates the other’s reaction to it – that is, any piece of writing – imply such a parody? Must not every writer affirm this?)

13 The expression mόνους πρός μόνον is from Plotinus (Enneads 5.1.6), as cited by Chrétien 2000, 170.
14 Sermo11em a persona judicis aversum (apostrophe dictatur). Inst. or. 4.1.63.
Derrida suggests that an apostrophe, which “at least apparently” menaces the singularity of address by multiplying and repeating it, is perhaps the very condition of possibility for prayer: at least theology would not be possible without it, without the possibility of *initiation* (1987a, 594–595). So writing, a written record, repeatable as “speech of an absent” and also in the absence of the primary addressee, is a form of apostrophe that seems diametrically opposed to praying. (This notion of apostrophe, formalised on the basis of what Greek rhetoric understood by this term as described by Quintilian, also seems almost the opposite to what, for instance, Jonathan Culler means by the poetic figure of apostrophe, “perhaps always an indirect invocation of the muse” [1981, 143]. This is by no means a disagreement on what the term *truly* means or what it should mean, but what seems to be Derrida’s formalisation of Quintilian’s definition has in any case only an indirect relation to the usual literary tropology and its empirical concern over the vocative form or conative function.) Derrida urges us to question our very right to confine prayer to the presence and face-to-face of address without the possibility of multiplication, repetition, quoting, and writing. Without the apostrophe and its multiplication, without the *mise-en-abyme* of address.

Without the other’s word, without citing the other, one could not pray. Exposed in words, prayer is exposed to words, its singularity is exposed in the words and to them, in and to themselves, repeatable as if its address concerned every other, prey to its addressee, but also beyond address. Does not this “as if,” this *at least apparent* multiplicity apply to the singular address of a poem, too, as its necessary division? The division or interval is *temporal* as it cuts the expression apart from its presence and opens it to another, and the temporality that characterises the poem, according to the words that we may extract from the *Meridian*, is very peculiar, since what takes place in “the poem today” takes place “always again only for once [immer wieder einmal].”17 There is no more economical way to speak of both singularity and iterability at one stroke.

The address to the “deus absconditus of the poem” takes paradoxical forms in Celan’s poetry: one may think of the famous poems “Tenebrae” (1957), containing the lines “Bete, Herr; / bete zu uns, / wir sind nah” (“Pray, Lord, / pray to us, / we are near”), and “Psalm” (1961) with its address to Niemand, to No One. Indeed, even blasphemy, thematised by Celan himself as something he would like to “continue till the end (bis zuletzt lästern zu können),” could be prayer, if incrimination “can be a way of praying,” as Chrétien asserts (2000, 175). Praying all the way till the end, even while accusing the Other. Bis zuletzt.

How to avoid praying, then? If even blasphemy or perhaps any refusal to pray is exposed to the call and the hearing that always already precede prayer, as in Chrétien’s phenomenology; if praying is possible even indirectly and not in person, through another’s mouth and hands; if one’s utterance or posture or even silence, the rage of blasphemy or perhaps even indifference may seem to be a prayer, how to avoid praying? The call and the hearing always already precede prayer, they precede what Chrétien calls the “wounded word” because “it is always a tearing that brings it about that the lips open” (2000, 174) – man’s lips, human lips. Tertullian does assert that “every creature, beasts of the field and wild beasts pray and bend the knee,” and that birds spread their wings and “utter something that seems a prayer [oratio videatur]” (De or., 29.29ff., trans. Souter). But in Chrétien’s “phénoménologie chrétienne” the thought that such an assertion could be “just an example of someone getting carried away with himself” is dispelled by the reminder that such praying takes place, rigorously speaking, only through the human voice, “giving voice to all that has none,” to all that “remains mute or can only babble” (2000, 173–175). The prayer proper, while it remains always to be learned, is neither mute nor babble. But the one who would rather remain mute or would perhaps even prefer to babble would be exposed to, or through, the prayer of the other, who would give a human voice to those who have none, even those human beings who would have no voice for praying. Heeding such a “giving voice” might be an appealing way to read Celan, with regard to all-inclusive attentiveness as a natural prayer of the soul, but the situation is more complicated than that, to say the least. An earlier poem that begins “Welchen der Steine du hebst – / du entblösst, / die des Schutzen der Steine bedürfen” (“Whichever stone you lift – / you lay bare / those who need the

18 “Der Gott des Gedichts ist unstreitig ein deus absconditus” (“The God of the poem is undoubtedly a deus absconditus”) (TCA/M, Ms. 114).
protection of stones”), ends by saying “Welches der Worte du sprichst – / du dankst / dem Verderben” (“Whichever word you speak – / you owe / to destruction”). Violence is inevitable, even when speaking would be the least of all violations, but the debt, the waste of words must be acknowledged, and refusing to speak would be worse.21

Emmanuel Levinas opens his essay on Celan by evoking the poet’s words in the letter to Hans Bender: “I cannot see a difference of principle between a handshake and a poem.”22 You cannot write with your hands folded, but a poem is not different, in its principle, from a handshake. With a touch of irony, Levinas sees in Celan’s words “a most clumsy intrusion […] into the ‘house of being’,” a beggar’s entrance. I am not sure whether his sarcasm toward Heidegger and his Haus des Seins is quite fair, but Levinas certainly has a point in bringing the gesture back to the thematic of signalling sign-giving itself, sign-giving of; or as, “a saying without a said,” “a sign of nothing, or of complicity for no reason” (1996, 40–41). A thematisation of the athematic we could perhaps call it,23 since a handshake takes place between people and not only hands.

Celan’s book Lichtzwang (1970) closes with a very striking form of address:

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\begin{align*}
WIRK NICHT VORAUS, & \quad \text{DO NOT WORK AHEAD,} \\
sende nicht aus, & \quad \text{do not send abroad,} \\
sieh & \quad \text{stand} \\
herein: & \quad \text{in here:} \\
\text{durchgründet vom Nichts,} & \quad \text{deep-grounded by Nothingness,} \\
\text{ledig allen } & \quad \text{free of all} \\
\text{Gebets,} & \quad \text{prayer,} \\
\text{feinsfügig, nach } & \quad \text{fine-fitted to} \\
\text{der Vor-Schrift,} & \quad \text{the Pre-Script} \\
\text{unüberholbar,} & \quad \text{unoutstrippable,} \\
\text{nehm ich dich auf;} & \quad \text{you I take up} \\
\text{statt aller} & \quad \text{in place of all} \\
\text{Ruhe.} & \quad \text{rest.} * \\
\end{align*}
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23 Cf. OED, entry “athematic,” a: “2. Mus. Lacking, or not composed of, deliberate themes. […] 1959 Listener 22 Oct. 704/2 The symphony is described by the composer [sc. Gerhard] as ‘athematic’ (the literal antonym of ‘thematic’), from which it is obvious that each part, while indispensable to the whole, is meaningless when divorced from its context.” (OED Online, 10 Nov. 2004.) This is only one way to understand “athematic,” to be sure.
We may recognise several theologemes here, some of them with the help of Hans-Georg Gadamer who has offered a formidable reading of this poem in the essay “Under the Shadow of Nihilism” (1989/1992), and not only those. We may recognise several theological attributes denied to the addressee: first of all, predestination and the sending out of the apostles (Matt. 28:16–20) in the first two lines of the poem; and then we see that the supposition that the Old Testament has been superseded by the New may be alluded to at the end of the second “stanza” (line 10, unüberholbar: unsurpassable). But what Gadamer takes as an “audacious word destruction,” namely the verb durchgründen, is not altogether that; it is not necessarily a coinage which “permits two completely incompatible meanings to melt together,” namely “‘founded upon something’ [gegründet auf etwas] and ‘governed by nothingness’ [durchwaltet vom Nichts]” (1992, 117). Gadamer seems to ignore that the verb is quite lexical, albeit rare or obsolete. In the Grimm dictionary (DWB), durchgründen is referred back to the verb perscrutari, “to scrutinise thoroughly,” comprehender, and there many of the quotations for this verb refer to the examination of holy texts, such as the citation from Johannes Reuchlin’s Augenspiegel referring to the alleged penetration of the Kabbalah in the book Apologia by Pico della Mirandola. 24 So this verb could correspond to the denial of supercession that is named by the adjective unüberholbar, “unsurpassable,” and both words could even refer to what comes after the Pre-Script (nach der Vor-Schrift), namely: the Script, a scripture that is not superseded by another script. (The Pre-Script could, among the other possibilities that reside in the syntax of this poem, prescribe [a] that what comes after it, for instance the Script, will have been unsurpassable, and [b] that it itself must be unsurpassable, as a Pre-Script and also as a Script already in its own right.) We may see at first glimpse that nothing is quite univocal here (while the translation already tends to level off some of the equivocality, for instance by dropping the comma on line eight). The double entente in the capitalised Nichts, the initial we do not hear or that can only be “overheard,” so to say, adds yet another halt, besides the one between “steh / herein,” and before the one between the lines “statt aller / Ruhe” and the Ruhe statt (place of rest), that can still be overheard through its disruption. In the middle stanza, the grammatical and logical subject (we are not quite sure of the identity of this subject) is not simply “penetrated by nothing and no one,” which would amount to saying “not penetrated,” and also “penetrated by nothingness,” by (das) Nichts. Here, indecision occurs between “penetrated by nothing (or by Nothing)” and “penetrated [or deep-grounded] by Nothingness.” Why should we insist on the halt, the moment

24 Grimm attributes this perscrutation falsely to the Pope himself: “breve apostolicum Alexandri VI, darin er die bücher der cabala durchgründi REUCHLIN Augenspiegel 13” (DWB; cf. Reuchlin 1999 and 2000).
of indecision that already takes place between the lines “steh / herein,” “stand / forth”
or “stand / in here”: Because such indecision seems to characterise the whole poem,
and thematically too, if the syntax of a poem may be said to thematise by its very
equivocality.

Gadamer does identify the wholly other (der ganz Andere) that is addressed in this
poem as God, and this is legitimate enough, although “whether God is addressed or not,
is [...] left open during the first reading.” The God of this poem “should do nothing
– only stand forth in such a way that I cannot pass by you.”25 Gadamer’s expression is
ambiguous, and perhaps intentionally too, as it seems: God is spoken of in the third
person, He should just “stand / forth” so that I cannot pass Thee by, Dir with a capital
D. The scene of this address does not take place only between the I and the Thou, but a
He, that is, a Third has been involved from the outset, preceding the encounter between
the two, preceding and ceding them the very possibility of their standing face to face.
As if the capitalised Nichts even named such a recession, a retreat that leaves the space
open for an encounter.26 But if we accept this, if we accept that the “you” of the last
stanza could be other than God, we must either accept that the “you” of the first stanza
is not identical to the “you” of the last stanza, or that the “you” is indeed the same all
the way through, and thus might not have been God in the first place. Or we might also
suspend our decision upon this identity and consider any other that could be addressed
by this poem as wholly other. This (“any other is wholly other”) would of course be
only one way to read Jacques Derrida’s formula “tout autre est tout autre” (1999, 133).
These few remarks on Gadamer’s interpretation, in whose very heart is this gesture of
recession, are not meant to revise or to refute his reading, but rather to reintroduce
something of the newcomer’s bewilderment that the poem may still call forth, after its
first and second reading, over and over again.

Gadamer’s governing decision concerns the syntax of Celan’s poem, a single sentence
as it is. In Gadamer’s view, the colon at the end of the first stanza, separating the first four
lines from the rest, “speaks for” the fact that the second stanza already speaks of the I of
the poem and not to the Thou invoked in the first stanza. The attribute ‘unsurpassable’
(unüberholbar) is, for Gadamer, the “small problem [eine kleine Schwierigkeit]” that
does not fit into the description of the I, but that rather would suit the Vor-Schrift,
identified by Gadamer not only with the Holy Scripture but with something older,
or in Gadamer’s adaptation of Herder, “an experience which precedes what the Bible

26 On the Kabbalistic sense of God’s “nothingness (Nichts)” as a “residuum” left by God’s “withdrawal” into
himself, his “concentration” or “contraction (Zimzm)” into “his own depths,” cf. Scholem 1996, 84–89.
prescribes and nevertheless constrains like a rule (Vorschrift). It is called ‘unsurpassable’ – it will never be revoked,” a saying that precedes the said and what cannot be unsaid, to adapt a Levinassian way of speaking. This “small problem” is solved by Gadamer through recourse to the grammatical structure of apposition: “unüberholbar” can well be understood as attributed to “Vor-Schrift” by apposition, while the other attributes in the stanza such as the adjective feinfügig (“fine-fitted”) would describe the I of the poem, who in principle can be any one of us, as Gadamer claims. This principal possibility is, for Gadamer, constitutive of the poem. “It is a poem since we are this I” (1992, 118–119). This move, very characteristic of Gadamer’s many readings of Celan, requires differentiation. If the one who writes the poem has to give up his complicity (Mitwissenschaft) with the poem, while he still remains “mated with it” or endowed (mitgegeben) to it all the while it is “underway,” and also while the you of the poem is already endowed to it, already “given with” (mitgegeben) the poem, does not this abandoning of complicity also characterise my relation, our relation to the poem, as its readers? We already spoke of writing as a form of apostrophe, and of the at least apparent multiplicity in the apostrophe of prayer: the piece of discourse remains singular even while its direction changes, even when it turns to address all the other singularities: me, and you, and us. Let us quote one of Derrida’s formalisations of the phenomenon of prayer: “In every prayer there must be an address to the other as an other; for example – I will say, at the risk of shocking – God” (1987b, 41). If God is an addressee among others for prayer, likewise an addressee of the most intimately dedicated poem is still an addressee among others. And precisely for this reason I cannot appropriate the words of the other, even when they might appropriate me (like a prayer, as in our citation of Chrétien above). Even in their very intimacy, in the secret recesses of my heart, where I try to keep the words of the other as a secret I don’t know, they remain foreign, that is to say, words of the other. (I say “I” because I simply must refrain from saying “you” or “we” or “anyone” here. I must refrain from assuming the place of the other, even if I should be tempted to generalise this “I” to apply to any reader, which would indeed be a Hegelian condition for the truth of such assertions!) For Celan, writing poetry is to give the words the shade that they already have, to pay attention to the ashes of extinguished sense-giving, to their historicity or temporality, their shades and the ashes upon which anyone who speaks and hears must already stand.

27 Cf. Celan, GW 3, 177, 198; trans. Felstiner, in Celan 2001, 409; TCA/M, Endf. 34a; Ms. 489, 490.
28 This could be demonstrated by a remarkable anecdote that can be reconstructed from the published correspondence between Celan and Nelly Sachs (1996, letter 19, cf. pp. 40–47, letters nos. 38, 39, facsimile on p. 44, Celan’s note no. 43; cf. “Zürich, zum Storchen,” GW 1, 214).
29 This is a complex situation that cannot be further elaborated here: cf. Celan, GW 3, 157; GW 1, 135, 227.
The question concerning the syntax of “Wirk nicht voraus” remains, if we just let it trouble us, halt us for another moment: why is there the possibility of perplexity in the first place, namely of indecision arising from the possibility of reading the second stanza as still attributed to the “you” of the first stanza, the “you” implied by the imperative mode (or the preceptive or optative), indecision that also concerns the indicative versus imperative or preceptive mode of these predications in the sentence, the sole sentence of which the whole poem consists?\(^{20}\) Gadamer’s decision tends to exclude other options, in spite of the obvious equivocality as to the grammatical and logical subject of the second “stanza,” and he himself pointing out that “the German lyric speaks in a language where the freedom of word order is [...] only matched in classical Greek” (1992, 116). Why is the freedom of word order so efficiently put into practice in Celan’s poem? If the perplexity concerning the poem is not only correct as to its structural undecidability, but also true to the poem, could it be that its structure efficiently protects its appeal, not by being cryptic or hermetic but by openly bearing its seal, manifesting the non-manifest or divulging its secret as a secret, as Derrida would say?

For Gadamer, the “Pre-Script” named in the poem precedes any possible religion. The prayer without prayer in this poem, or the following of a Pre-Script more original and more unsurpassable than any possible religion, would exceed or rather precede the very possibility of religion. Perhaps such “prescription,” denoted by the very traditional metaphor of an incision into the heart or into the soul, to one’s innermost core, precedes and then cedes religion its possibility when it comes to writing – a radical step outside of one’s deepest intimacy within this intimacy already; an innermost, endless dialogue or prayer inscribed on the heart; an “obligation before the first word” (cf. Derrida 1987b, 3); a saying before the said, a letter before the letter. At the same time, perhaps no religion, or at least no theology, would be possible without the letter, without the exposure to the letter: “But if there were no supplement, if quotation did not bend prayer, if prayer did not bend, if it did not submit to writing, would a theology be possible? Would a theology be possible?” (Derrida 1987b, 70).

The “speech act” in “Wirk nicht voraus” is very peculiar. Its aporetic nature resembles that of “Sprich auch du,” in whose lines “Sprich – / Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom ja” (“Speak – / But keep yes and no unsplit,” as the ingenious translation by Michael Hamburger reads, repeating the ambiguity in its own way) the imperative seems to

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30 Anders Olsson points out the same “deeply problematic” character of Gadamer’s interpretative decision concerning the middle part of the poem. He also reads in the poem an appeal directed against all missionary spreading of one’s own conviction and dogmatic reliance upon the written word (Olsson 2000, 432–433). This aspect of his reading partly corresponds to Gadamer’s view, who, however, wants to see here only that the ‘I’ of the poem refuses to “follow any present belief as compelling” (1989, 241; 1992, 120).
cancel itself out, as it denies that the “no” should be kept apart from the “yes” implied by every imperative (or precative, or optative: the difference between these modes, or the choice of the pertinent modality, is not absolutely clear here, and I feel I should suspend any definite distinction in these cases).

Sprich auch du, Speak, you also,
sprich als letzter, speak as the last,
sag deinen Spruch. have your say.

Sprich – Speak –
Doch scheide das Nein nicht But keep yes and no unsplit.
vom Ja.


This poem voices the command or demand that precedes it and follows it, until the last man and perhaps beyond: “sprich als letzter” is not only to have the last word, but to speak as the last man would speak, even in the definite absence of an interlocutor. The last man, the last to cite the original command (such a citation may turn the imperative into an optative without changing its form, while the formula itself may be pronounced in several ways, of course) even in the absence of anyone to hear it, will still have followed this imperative, prayer or appeal, by giving it the voice it demands or even by falling silent. Silence (Schweigen) is a determined negation in relation to speech and, as such, is always readable as a manifestation in spite of itself. This imperative can only be obeyed, and cannot be avoided, since to remain silent is still to obey it; further, if not obeyed, it is still impossible not to affirm its precedence. Firstly, the imperative is in itself, in its very form as an imperative, ambiguous and aporetic – think of the lines “Sprich – / Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja” (“Speak – / but keep yes and no unsplit”). It is an aporetic imperative because it indefinitely suspends the distinction between the “no” and the unconditional “yes” that is implied by every imperative, implied by the conjunction dob itself. It is impossible to avoid this order, not only because of that aporia, namely because it turns out to be an order not to follow orders (or perhaps an optative?), but also, secondly, because the trace of the other, another language before ours, compels us to speak. Undeniably. The decision to remain silent is only possible with regard to this original imperative to speak. Here the imperative can be read in at
least two ways: both “keep firmly to the yes as well as to the no, do not split either one of them,” and “keep yes and no together, as one, unsplit in their unity,” which implies “speak — but you must also remain silent.” And it is also within the scope of this strange imperative that “you must split yes and no,” perhaps “you must know for yourself how to split them, how to share them, you must decide the when and the what, the time to speak and the time to remain silent, you must know how to speak and how to avoid speaking.” In a parallel manner, the sentence of “Wirk nicht voraus” may either state that its addressee, or its addresser, is “free of all prayer,” or it may demand its addressee — the Thou of the first stanza that may still be addressed in the second stanza — pray to the addressee, to be free of all prayer. As well, if it is the I and not the Thou of the poem who is or wants to be “free of all / prayer,” it is more than paradoxical that he demands or prays, prays without praying. As if the precative said: Pray, be free of all prayer.

In Rousseau’s Nouvelle Héloïse, Saint-Preux writes to Julie on the subject of prayer: “Ce n’est pas lui qui nous change ; c’est nous qui changeons en nous élevant à lui” (“It is not he who changes us; it is we who are changed in raising ourselves toward him”). But in the apostrophe of prayer, the change may happen, perhaps, in the hope of being repeated, and what Celan writes on the necessity of change with regard to the one who writes a poem may also concern the one who reads it: “Gedichte sind Engpässe: du mußt hier mit deinem Leben hindurch” (“Poems are narrow passes: you must go through here with your life”). And to write a poem might even be to free oneself from the burden of the prayer, to free the form of prayer for the other, for the other to voice it. To repeat Celan’s own words in translation, the form of the poem is the poet’s heart waiting for the poem. And what is a poem? In its principle, something not very different from a handshake.

Poems want to be understood, as Celan claims, and obscure poems want to be understood as obscure, in their obscurity, as opaque. “The poem has,” Celan writes in another manuscript fragment, “like man, no sufficient ground [Das Gedicht hat, wie der Mensch, keinen zureichenden Grund]” (TCA/M, Ms. 123). “Wirk nicht voraus” perhaps addresses the common principle — having no sufficient ground — of the poem and of the human person, of any human Thou, that is. It addresses how we might address (even if the alternatives are not exhausted by this possibility either) the poem itself,

31 Rousseau, La nouvelle Héloïse, VI.7 (1964, 684), trans. P. R. This “heresy” that Saint-Preux seems to have adapted from his prototype Abelard, “after imitating him in his conduct” too, is objected to in a footnote by the "editor," Rousseau himself.

32 Celan, TCA/M, Ms. 349; cf. Ms. 352, passim.

33 “Besetzbarekeit / Die Form – Leer<Hohl>form – des Gedichts, ist das auf das Gedicht wartende Herz des Dichters” (TCA/M, Ms. 777=504).
as its readers. What is a poem? What is man? Celan cites Whitman: “Who touches this touches a man” (TCA/M, Ms. 422). A response to a poem cannot be rigorously grounded on any immovable principle; its freedom of all prayer must be taken up in place of all rest. It compels us to do so.

The theological address to the wholly other in “Wirk nicht voraus” (it is atiological at least since the theologemes are denied to the addressee and perhaps also to the addressee) could concern, in principle, any other to whom these theologemes are not applied, anyone who does not “work ahead” or “send abroad,” and who could “stand forth” or “stand / in here,” who could arrive, who could neither be superseded by any other nor “fetched over” (überholen also means to fetch someone over, in a ferry for instance); and the one “deep-grounded by Nothingness” or “penetrated by Nothing” could be the I of the poem as well as its Thou, and therefore the address could be, in principle, directed from one mortal to another, or to an other who appears in the form of a mortal (while mortality, too, is an old theologeme that might be suspended) and who still can be, indeed who still is, wholly other. “Wholly other [ganz Andere]” who may always coincide with “not all that distant, a quite near ‘other’,” as Celan suggests in the Meridian.34 So the situation could well be a “beggar’s entrance.”

So what is named by the capitalised Nichts? Nothingness can always be understood as God or as the nothingness of God, or as the “nothingness of revelation” that characterises, according to Gershom Scholem, the world of Franz Kafka’s novels, a world “where the plenitude of meaning falls away” and becomes void. Nothingness could be taken as the nothingness of beings or of a being.35 But das Nichts seems to be also something that could be written in the heart, or on the soul: “schreibe das lebendige / Nichts ins Gemüt” (“scribe the living / Nothing on his soul”). In the human heart, on the human soul or, as it seems in the poem from which this appeal to Rabbi Löw is detached, into a heart that is not quite human, or maybe other than human (an uncircumcised heart, as it seems), a golem.36 Nichts, perhaps since humanity dwells in the trace of deity, in God’s retreat: and the trace inscribed in the heart could be seen as a hollow scar, a void left by an incision, the withdrawal of the Other, or in attendance to an Other to come.

Rachel Ertel has written about Celan’s Personne (Niemand) and Rien (Nichts) — I repeat her words in French, since as a Jew who also speaks Yiddish she conceives that she has never been able to properly learn German and has had to read Celan in translation.

34 TCA/M, Endz. 31d; GW 3, 196–197; trans. Felstiner in Celan 2001, 408.
saying that the figure of this No One and this Nothing is "the ultimate figure of an interlocutor which it is impossible for the poet to dispense with, because that would be to dispense with speech [car ce serait se priver de la parole]" (1997, 266). If language is what remains "not lost," unlost despite everything, this figure of the interlocutor, even as the figure of no one, also must remain. One may well see, in this figure, a certain remainder of religion in literature. But a poem speaks to no one alone. No one could assume the place of the sole addressee of the poem, no one could claim to know what it's like to be no one, or everyone.\footnote{Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has asked in a parallel manner, concerning Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*: "To have no character, to be no one -- or everyone. Who can know this? And who, above all, can say it?" (1989, 266).} No one could claim: *I am wholly other*, except in a strange parody of oneself, oneself as an other, and yet the designation *wholly other* applies to *every other*. In one of the poems from Schneepart (1971) we read

\begin{quote}
einer will wissen, \\
warum ich bei Gott \\
nicht anders war als bei dir
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
one would like to know, \\
why I by God abided \\
not otherwise than by you‘
\end{quote}

\footnote{GW 2, 363; trans. P. R.}

Besides the direct address to a singular "you" in the poem from which these lines are detached (not without violence), one must keep in mind that the phenomenon of prayer also includes, among other forms of address such as supplication and thanksgiving, incrimination or accusation as well, without being less than prayer. And as God is accused with regard to deity, a human being may be accused with regard to humanity, while both humanity and deity remain bespeakable,\footnote{I use the unusual adjective "bespeakable" rather than "addressable," because "to bespeak" has a larger variety of suitable connotations. It can be both "to speak against" and "to speak about," "to speak to (a person), to address" as well as "to bear witness to," "to exclaim" and even "to promise" (cf. OED); and what is more, I think it is by far the best translation for the verb *besprechen* in Celan's poem "Psalm" (GW 1, 225: "niemand bespricht unsern Staub," "no one bespeaks our dust").} even when they are questionable, and even in their absence. (Does not this absence characterise the essential loneliness and untimeliness of all true writing? Such as Kafka's.)

The name of God may name all the names, or their absence. It may name the absolute witness, as Derrida writes, the absolute superstes appealed to or accused in the name of the absent, all the absent singularities, those that should be addressed as the accused or as the victims or as the witnesses or as the judges. On the other hand, God is an addressee among others (Derrida 2001, 46, *et supra*). But as Derrida writes elsewhere,
the name of God may also name my capability of “keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior,” my ability to keep “the invisible word (parole invisible) [...] as a witness that others can’t see, and who is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself.” This means a secret that I am keeping, but one that can remain a secret even to myself, and also something like a promise, as for instance a formula learned by heart “beyond any semantic comprehension,” beyond knowledge. Derrida’s example of such a formula is the one repeated over and over again in Donner la mort: “tout autre est tout autre.” Perhaps an apostrophe of prayer could be an appeal to such unspoken words, not only in the secret recesses of one’s own heart, but also in the other’s.

Derrida’s Donner la mort is one of the books that are both explicitly, and even more so, implicitly engaged in conversation with words that come from Celan. Such an indication of interior dialogue does not consist of mere allusions. Derrida speaks of such an interior “uninterrupted dialogue” in his booklet Bélizers (2003), a text that reproduces his speech at a conference dedicated to the memory of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The speech was, and the book still is, a gesture of friendship and melancholy (melancholy as a refusal of the “normal” work of mourning that should interiorise its “object”) that almost from beginning to end consists of reading a single poem by another late friend, Paul Celan, a poem whose last line was an envoi of sorts: “Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen.” Such a verse or envoi is, to cite Derrida’s other texts, to be learned by heart, to be cited and recited, without the knowledge of its precise content or purport, but like a promise, like a prayer. As a book where Celan is never directly named or cited but where his words nevertheless resonate, sometimes in almost direct translation, we take Blanchot’s Le pas au-delà (1973) where anonymous voices seem to find themselves throughout the pages, over and over again, in conversation with Celan’s words, without ever directly citing or naming him. Toward the end of the book we read these words:

Nous devrions respecter en tous livres, en toutes paroles, quelque chose qui demande encore égards, une sorte de prière à la parole. – Je le respecte dans la moindre parole, seulement la moindre. [...] Viens, viens, venez, vous auquel ne saurait convenir l’injonction, la prière, l’attente.

40 GW 2, 97. An ad hoc translation of this verse would be “The world is away, I must bear you.”
41 Besides Bélizers (2003), cf. esp. “Che cos’è la poesia” (Derrida 1995a, 294, 295: “The memory of the ‘by heart’ is confided like a prayer [...] to a certain exteriority of the automaton, to the laws of mnemotechnics, to that liturgy that mines mechanics on the surface”); and Derrida 2000, 201, 205.
We should respect in all books, in every speech, something that still demands consideration, a sort of prayer to speech. – I respect it in the least speech, only in the least. [...] *Come, come, come, you whom the injunction, the prayer, the wait could not suit.*”42


