

NEGATIVITY IN ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET'S
JEALOUSY AND PAUL CELAN'S
"DEATHFUGUE" AND "STREAK"

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In his speech "The Meridian," Paul Celan suggests that art creates 'I-distantness,' that is, it demands a remoteness from what is familiar and what is comfortable: "perhaps poetry, like art, is going with a self-forgotten I toward the uncanny and the strange, and is again—but where? but in what place? but with what? but as what?—setting itself free?" (406). Representing facets of our existence that are beyond our grasp is a slippery and unstable endeavour. This instability is because trying to conceive of the idea that there may be spaces outside the confines of our perception is overwhelming and frightening. How can we represent—or at least learn to acknowledge—the idea of the infinite beyond us, which is fundamentally unknowable? This is the paradox that negativity in art tries to tackle.

The artist's reality, as will be discussed in the works of Paul Celan and Alain Robbe-Grillet, can be understood as the negation of the world they highlight; the very fact that the artist insists on weaving a 'human-less' world draws attention to the fundamental 'humanness' of art. This happens via a hermeneutic process: the reader's active role in reading completes the author's artistic circuit to bring about his reality. The 'negativity' of both Celan's poetry and Robbe-Grillet's novella *Jealousy* include the reader and author in a dialogue because they address the core issue of human perceptions and, more importantly, the limits of these inescapable perceptive abilities.

In his poetry, Paul Celan makes an attempt to take the reader 'outside oneself' by representing *das Unheimliche*, or "the uncanny," something that is familiar yet unfamiliar or other-like (see Freud's work). It is in this way, Celan

suggests, that we will come back into ourselves to be better acquainted with our existence. In order to bring this about, the poet essentially attempts the impossible: to use language to 'leave ourselves.' It is, of course, impossible to transcend the confines of our own senses into 'inhuman' realms; what we find instead is this idea of the uncanny, of the illusion of impartiality. This is by no means a failure at the 'distantness' that Celan says poetry must create. It is through this attempt that we can begin to understand and see the bars, or *grille*, that keep us bound to our perceptive abilities; the uncanny gives us a moment of temporary openness or clarity in understanding our own situation and the impossibility of transcendence above it. This is what Celan means when he says in his "Meridian" speech: "Ladies and gentlemen, I find something that comforts me a little at having taken, in your presence, this impossible path, this path of the impossible" (413). The ultimate goal, then, is not the tension and unease that comes with the uncanny but rather the acknowledgement of the limits of our finite existence through a glimpse of the infinite.

Celan's attempt at the impossible in order to draw attention to its very impossibility is shared by Alain Robbe-Grillet in his novella *Jealousy*. The narrative in *Jealousy* is geometric, static, and seemingly devoid of humanity. Objects are described in an excessively thorough way in terms of their position and location relative to the narrator. In contrast with the nineteenth-century conception of the novel, in which objects are described in human contexts, objects in the *nouveau roman Jealousy* exist solely for themselves and are never, at least explicitly, implicated in any human situation. A good example of this in Robbe-Grillet's novella occurs in a peculiar passage about a hanging photograph (94-95). The reader does not get a description of the unnamed character A... who is presumably the centrepiece of this photograph but rather an intensely elaborate description of the wire table that happens to be behind her.

What Robbe-Grillet attempts in the narrative of *Jealousy* is a humanless perception, a way of looking at the world that is free of the imposed meanings that humans attach to objects in order to give them a comprehensible function. However, instead of suggesting that this way of writing paves the path to truths, Robbe-Grillet is in fact suggesting that a 'negative image' of this text, created by the reader, is what is real. He does this by constructing a narrative that, precisely because of its lack of human psychology, invites

us to add this human psychology in and to artificially create connections. The reader finds himself or herself flipping frantically back and forth in the text, becoming more and more frustrated while trying to create a reasonable chronology and to see how each spatial description fits into it. Robbe-Grillet is intentionally pointing out the unbearable human need to comprehend and to categorize what we see and hear. If this is blurred or made difficult, as it is in *Jealousy*, the reader is overcome with a tenseness and irritation. A 'human-less' perception is impossible: we may try to strip down our observation and perspective to the bare minimum, as is attempted in the text of *Jealousy*, but we will never overcome the limits of our own senses in order to have a perception that is truly 'outside ourselves.' The following examination will attempt to show how negativity functions in Celan's and Robbe-Grillet's writing. In addition to excerpts from his speeches, two of Celan's poems will be used as examples: "Deathfugue" and "Streak."

Negativity in Celan's poetry has to do with speech and silence. By taking the reader into the realm of the uncanny and of silence, Celan propels us into speech and into the realisation that the only thing that is real and graspable, as far as humanity is concerned, is language itself. In his speech given upon receiving the Literature Prize of Bremen, Celan said:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language.

It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, "enriched" by all this. (395)

It is true that what Celan is referring to when he speaks of "the thousand darkneses" and the "frightful muting" is the Holocaust and the propaganda campaigns surrounding it; however, the way he addresses this attack on speech and language potentially has an even more universal meaning: language, in trying to transcend itself beyond its fundamental attachment to all that is human, makes itself mute. By thinning language out to its ends, into silence and the end of communication, Celan in fact sparks speech or dialogue in a kind of renewed hope.

To finally delve into the more specific, Celan's poem "Deathfugue" is a strong example of a representation of *das Unheimliche*. The poem is mechanical and rhythmic with its recurring sentences and fragments. There is a sense of ritual and repetition in the metre and the text itself, such as with the references to dancing. These are in reality the forced labour 'dances' of the Nazi concentration camps, which progress like clockwork to an inevitable demise. Passages such as "we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink" have a rhythmic pounding to them, especially in their original German: "trinken und trinken" (30-31). What Celan does in this poem, with a mechanical and almost artificial approach, is to quite literally 'thin' the language out by the end of the poem using striking musico-literary techniques. The tension created, and heightened, by the rhythm and the repeating words and groups of words take the reader into this unnerving place that he calls "the uncanny."

The mechanical and rhythmic nature of the "Deathfugue" is best described in reference to its 'fugal' structure. A fugue is a musical form which treats a subject in constant imitation in several 'voices,' or lines of music. The subject is repeated in succession by each of the voices: once the first voice has finished stating the subject, the next voice begins it, and so on. While each voice is completing its statement of the subject, the other voices play what are called 'countersubjects,' lines of music that follow the harmonies of the subject. After each voice has stated the subject, the composer may choose to write one or several 'episodes' as transition material before returning to the subject. These episodes do not have complete statements of the subject but often draw on fragments of musical material from either the subject or the countersubject. If "Deathfugue" is considered as an actual literary fugue, the passages that begin with "Black milk of daybreak we drink" could be labelled as the subject since it opens the poem and is restated, with some variation, in the second, fourth, and sixth stanzas; the third and fifth stanzas, then, could be considered as episodes since they do not contain the subject.

Celan structures his poem fugally. In the last two lines of the fourth stanza, "a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margareta / your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays with his vipers," Celan has rearranged the original two lines, "A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers" and "he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta / Your aschen hair Shulamith," from the second stanza (31). In addition to this, the

translator has juxtaposed the English and German versions of the poem, a technique further developed later in the poem. This kind of rearranging is a common musical technique, creating various links between subjects, countersubjects, and episodes in fugues and other forms, since music must be arranged spatially and temporally: it has no tangible referent. Invertible counterpoint allows the same musical material to take on new meanings by virtue of its arrangement. In literature, this remains striking as it does not address the meanings of the words directly: the stressing of certain words comes from their placement and, through this, their meaning is accentuated.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Celan's fugal poem is the idea of *stretto*. Like the German word *eng*, *stretto* is an Italian word meaning a kind of thinning or stripping to the essentials. In fugue terminology, a *stretto* is what refers to overlapping subject entrances: a different voice begins presenting the subject before an ongoing statement by some other voice finishes. *Stretto* sections are usually found in the second half or towards the end of a fugue. This is because they shorten the duration of successive subject statements and create a building tension in their overlapping and layering. The tension continues building and is often accompanied by an accelerating harmonic rhythm until the cadence, often finishing the fugue.

In the last stanza of "Deathfugue," Celan writes a kind of poetic *stretto* where lines from different parts of the poem interject and overlap each other as I have illustrated in the following paragraph:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday **Death is a master aus Deutschland**
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland *his eye it is blue*
 he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
a man lives in the house **your goldenes Haar Margarete**
he looses his hounds on us *grants us a grave in the air*
he plays with his vipers and daydreams **der Tod ist ein Meister aus**
Deutschland¹

¹The italicized text is the 'subject' from stanza one. Notice the rearrangement of times of day (morning, midday, night or evening) in each successive statement of the subject in each of the stanzas of the poem. This represents not only a deliberately confused chronology but is also an allusion to the technique of invertible counterpoint

Through his chosen fugal structure, Celan is thinning the poetic language to a minimum, concluding with the chilling two-line cadence: “dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dien aschenes Haar Sulamith” (33). The goal is not however to plunge the reader into silence forever, but to take us, with the mechanics of the poem and its disturbing content, through an unnatural, frightening silence and into an enlightened speech, which is prompted by a representation of its reverse. This idea is further developed in another of Celan’s poems, “Streak”:

Streak in the eye:
 so as to guard
 a sign dragged through the dark,
 quickened by the sand (or ice?) of a
 strange time for a stranger Ever
 and tuned as a
 mutely vibrating consonant (101)

This dense last section of “Streak” touches on many of the same ideas and themes as “Deathfugue” and Celan’s speeches. The idea of language being plunged into silence, “a sign dragged through the dark,” yet enduring, parallels what Celan said in his Bremen speech quoted earlier. Language must pass through this ‘answerlessness,’ silence or lack of dialogue, in order for it to emerge enriched by the “streak in the eye.” This “streak,” the *grille* through which we all perceive the world, is permanently there, but as long as we are aware of it language need not fall into a silent abyss; the conversation may continue: “a / mutely vibrating consonant.” In his poems, Celan provides that spark and hope to continue, even from the depths. We are marked by our human “streak,” yet we must suffer through it to seek reality, not trying to transcend it. Celan ends his Bremen speech describing the poet’s work as “the efforts of someone who, overarced by stars that are human handiwork, and who, shelterless in this till now undreamt-of sense and this most uncannily

mentioned above. The bold text is from stanza four. Note the translator’s choice to phase the fragment back into the German as the stanza progresses. The underlined italicized text is from stanza three and can be identified as an ‘episode’ since it does not contain the subject. The underlined text is from stanza two and the underlined bold text from nearly all the stanzas however only found in German in the fourth.

in the open, goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality” (396).

As discussed above, this idea of literary negativity and the uncanny is also present in Robbe-Grillet’s novella *Jealousy*. Similar to what we find in Celan’s poetry, Robbe-Grillet makes the attempt to create a distance between the reader and the real world, a sort of ‘coming out of oneself,’ in order to come back in with a different perspective. He weaves an ‘inhuman’ world that lures the reader to find links, attach meanings, and categorize the text into logical pieces in order to show that many of these ‘organizations’ are illusory simplifications. Robbe-Grillet is pointing out that ‘the world does not look back at us,’ that it does not acquiesce to exist like a human mind will organize it. Using the examples of the centipede and the character of A... from *Jealousy*, the following will discuss how Robbe-Grillet draws attention to flawed human senses by driving readers into a frenzy trying to understand what is going on within the text.

The recurring episodes involving the centipede on the wall represent much irritation and nervousness for the reader due to their lack of chronology. The whole series of events in the novella is out of order, making for much frustration and confusion; however, the centipede is a particularly striking case. The first encounter with the infamous centipede occurs when A..., the narrator, and Franck are sitting down to dinner. Straight ahead of A... on the wall is a centipede stain which appeared there at some unknown time: “a blackish spot marks the place where a centipede was squashed last week, at the beginning of the month, perhaps the month before, or later” (47). This lack of clarity is particularly irritating because the next time the centipede is hinted at, it seems as if the narrator is mocking the reader: “From the pantry door, the dining-room wall seems to have no spot on it” (59). Not only has the chronology been blurred but now the narrator mentions a stain that does not exist and has yet to appear.

An excessive description of the centipede, which follows a few pages later (62), convinces the reader that this creature is somehow important, thus luring us in to track its short and brutal life. Over a discussion of A...’s and Franck’s possible trip to the port, Franck kills the centipede with a napkin and by stepping on it on the baseboard (64). Later, after A... has apparently gone and returned from her trip, the centipede miraculously returns, and the episode with Franck is replayed (81).

In the next centipede episode, during the time of A...’s absence, the insect returns once again, mysteriously dies, and then the text goes on a long-winded description of how the narrator removes the stain off the wall. How did the centipede die if Franck was not there? Did the narrator kill it? When is this stain being removed? Nothing is clear. To further complicate things, the centipede is apparently growing. The stain described by the narrator during Franck and A...’s trip is larger than before and the insect no longer a mere centipede but a *Scutigera* (104).

The pinnacle of the centipede saga comes with the last escapade, in which the centipede is now the size of a dinner plate. Franck appears out of nowhere to kill it and suddenly, almost violently, there is a change of setting. The dining room becomes the hotel room where A... and Franck stayed, the napkin that A... clenches during the killing becomes the bed sheet, and the *Scutigera* is killed once again on the baseboard of the hotel room (113). Obviously, none of these events line up in a neat chronology: there are repetitions, omissions, and additions yet because it is repeated so many times, and in such an irritating way, the reader is convinced that it is important to figure out exactly when and where each instance happens in chronological order.

In addition to the centipede, A..., who cannot even be named, personifies the human desire to understand and find order in chaos. The fact that she is called A..., the first letter of the alphabet that could stand for anything, followed by an ellipsis, gives the reader the sense that she is incomplete, unfinished, or even dynamic. The narrator cannot bring himself to look at her straight in the eyes for most of the novella, neither can he give the reader any sense of who she is, even though he is presumably her husband. When A... leans out of the window one morning and says “Hello,” the explanations the narrator provides cancel each other out and, in the end, there is nothing more than that simple “Hello”:

She says “Hello” in the playful tone of someone who has slept well and awakened in a good mood; or of someone who prefers not to show what she is thinking about—if anything—and always flashes the same smile, on principle; the same smile, which can be interpreted as derision just as well as affection, of the total absence of any feeling whatever. (55)

She is completely unknowable, so much so that the narrator communicates that she has eaten soup, not because he saw her eat it, but because her empty plate indicates that “she has not neglected to serve herself” (46). Her actions and presence always seem to be accompanied by this haunting, static silence because she is at a distance. In fact, because of its ‘inhuman’ descriptions, the whole novella tends to shut out the reader. Regardless, the reader will force himself or herself upon the text, trying to make sense of it.

Perhaps the crackling of A...’s hair as she brushes it is linked to the crackling of the centipede’s body? These types of connections are suggested, but there is no confirmation, no acknowledgment that they are meaningful. The sentence strings lure the reader into thinking there will be a logical narrative, or at least a succession of ideas, even on the first page (39): “Now...,” “Since...,” and “So...” begin successive sentences, yet there is no grounding relationship that can be grasped between them, even as the chapter progresses.

As with Celan, Robbe-Grillet means to construct narrative in such a way as to make the reader understand and acknowledge the limits of our perceptions through *active* engagement with the text. In an essay on Robbe-Grillet, Roland Barthes writes that his “silence about the ‘romantic’ heart of the matter is neither allusive nor ritual, but *limiting*: forcibly determining the boundaries of a thing, not searching for what lies beyond them” (Barthes 13-14). The so-called ‘human-less’ descriptions can never be free of humanity simply because they are written and read by humans, and are therefore in every way ‘human.’

In *Jealousy*, Robbe-Grillet attempts to create a ‘human-less’ perspective and induces an obsessive mania that draws attention to the negation of this perspective. Similarly, Celan attempts to mute language precisely in order to spark a renewal of language in his poetry. With both writers, negativity plays a key role in interpreting and understanding their work. They both take the reader into the unnerving realm of the uncanny, a realm through which we must pass in order to orient ourselves in a fractured, disjointed reality. This process leads to the realisation of our perceptive shortcomings and our inability to transcend them.

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