

A Poetic Revolution of the Political

Derrida's Reading of Celan's "Meridian" in *The Beast and the Sovereign*

János Barcsák¹

Abstract

In this paper I attempt to give a reading of Jacques Derrida's second extended interpretation of Paul Celan's "Meridian." This second interpretation can be found in Derrida's "seminar," *The Beast and the Sovereign*, and differs from the first – which appeared in *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan* – in that it is placed in the broader context of the seminar: the deconstruction of sovereignty. In this context Celan's "Meridian" acquires a special status because Derrida can identify in it a "step," an act of freedom, a way, which can perhaps take us beyond all sovereignty by bringing about what Derrida calls "a poetic revolution of the political." In my reading of Derrida's reading of Celan I try to spell out the "structure" of this step as Derrida conceives it. I argue that it is ultimately in the difference between two poetic gestures, two equally necessary but still distinct acts, that the poetic revolution of the political and thus the step beyond all sovereignty becomes perhaps possible.

Keywords

Jacques Derrida, Paul Celan, sovereignty, The Meridian, poetry

1. The Implacable Contradiction of a Double Bind



ne of the most persistent themes in Jacques Derrida's "seminar," *The Beast and the Sovereign* (a lecture series he taught at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, in 2001–2003) (2009) is no doubt the deconstruction of sovereignty.² He formulates this theme first in terms of politics, as the task of the deconstruction of the sovereignty of the nation state. As he himself explains,

¹ Pázmány Péter Catholic University, barcsak.janos@btk.ppke.hu

² Derrida's own summary of what his seminar is about is reprinted in the editorial note to the published text (2009, xiii–xiv).

what I am seeking, elsewhere but in particular in this seminar, is a prudent deconstruction of this logic [that of Carl Schmitt's political philosophy (Schmitt 1996 (2007))] and of the dominant, classical concept of nation-state sovereignty (which is Schmitt's reference), without ending up with a depoliticization, a neutralization of the political (*Entpolitisierung*), but with another politicization, a repoliticization that does not fall into the same ruts of "dishonest fiction" [that Schmitt criticizes] ... (2009, 75).

The deconstruction of sovereignty, however, involves more than just the political; for, as Derrida recognizes,

sovereignty [is], even before defining politically the essence or vocation or claim of a sovereign of a nation-state or a people, the very definition of the juridical person, as a free and responsible person, able to say or imply "I, me," to posit itself as "I, me" (2009, 178).³

It is, therefore, ultimately this sovereignty, the sovereignty of "he who has the right and the strength to be and be recognized as *himself, the same, properly the same as himself*" (Derrida 2009, 66; italics in original) that is to be deconstructed.⁴ This, however, infinitely complicates the task of the deconstruction of sovereignty, or even renders it impossible. For by whom is such a task to be carried out? It is evidently just an "I," a "me" who can accomplish this mission, it is only from the position of a sovereign self that any discourse on the deconstruction of sovereignty can be broached.

This is what traps us in the "terrible logic" that Derrida analyses in the "Eleventh Session" of *The Beast and the Sovereign*: the terrible logic of a double bind (2009, 300). As he puts it,

we must not hide from ourselves that our most and best accredited concept of "liberty," autonomy, self-determination, emancipation, freeing, is indissociable from this concept of sovereignty, its limitless "I can," and thus from its all-powerfulness, this concept to the prudent, patient, laborious deconstruction of which we are here applying ourselves. Liberty and sovereignty are, in many respects, indissociable concepts. (2009, 301)

³This particular formulation occurs in the context of Derrida's criticism of Lacan and Deleuze's privileging of humans over animals on the basis of humans being free and sovereign agents, and therefore responsible for their actions. In other words, he challenges the validity of this assumption. However, he also recognizes the inseparability of the concepts of free agency and of ipseity, as will become apparent from the next quote and footnote.

⁴Derrida introduces the idea of this essential connection between *ipseity* (i.e. 'being oneself', 'being able to say "I"') and sovereignty on the basis of his reading of Émile Benveniste's essay, "Hospitalité" (1969) (Derrida 2009, 66–68).

What constitutes the aporia, the “implacable contradiction” (Derrida 2009, 302) here is that the liberty in the name of which we carry out the deconstruction of sovereignty inevitably entails a reliance on the very notion of sovereignty that is to be deconstructed.⁵ In other words, when one launches an emancipatory discourse to undermine the logic of sovereignty, one is inevitably speaking from a position of sovereignty and thereby re-inscribes and reaffirms the very concept which they have set out to undermine. It is enough to state that we *seek to achieve* or that we *apply ourselves to* a prudent deconstruction of the logic of sovereignty and we have already assumed deconstruction to be an act, which is then inevitably ascribed to a free, autonomous agent (*ipse*), and this will inevitably reinstate the discourse based upon sovereignty.

This problem of the double bind is formulated several times in multiple contexts throughout *The Beast and the Sovereign*. One could even say that this is one of the central aporias that organize the economy of Derrida’s arguments throughout the sessions of the whole seminar. It is formulated first in the political context, when he points out that

There is not SOVEREIGNTY or THE sovereign. There is not the beast and THE sovereign. There are different and sometimes antagonistic forms of sovereignty, and it is always in the name of one that one attacks another ... In a certain sense, there is no contrary of sovereignty ... (Derrida 2009, 76; emphasis in original)

It is only in the name of some sovereignty that any sovereignty can be contested. In this sense, therefore, there is no going beyond sovereignty, and while Derrida presents this insight (deriving from Schmitt’s political philosophy) as something that is itself to be deconstructed,⁶ he still clearly recognizes the ineluctable force of the argument, which renders the task of deconstruction “more than difficult” (Derrida 2009, 76).

This inescapable double bind, moreover, manifests itself not only in the sphere of the political, but also on the level of the talk about the political or indeed on the level of talk in general: it is the ineluctable foundation of formulating any meaningful utterance. For, as Derrida recognizes, sovereignty, the ipseity of self-assertion, of saying “I,” is in fact a precondition for any action: grand scale political action as well as minor actions, such as teaching a seminar. In teaching this very seminar, Derrida remarks in the “Third Session” of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, “I am here using, taking

⁵ In Derrida’s own words: “The double bind is that we should deconstruct, both theoretically and practically, a *certain* political ontotheology of sovereignty without calling into question a certain thinking of liberty in the name of which we put this deconstruction to work.” (2009, 301)

⁶ In fact, he even points out that “recognizing that sovereignty is divisible, that it divides and partitions, even where there is any sovereignty left, is already to begin to deconstruct a pure concept of sovereignty that presupposes indivisibility” (Derrida 2009, 76). Cf. also (Derrida 2009, 302).

account of, my accredited position as a professor authorized to speak, *ex cathedra*” (2009, 79); in other words, he is relying on a position of sovereignty assigned to him in “the noblest tradition of the university institution, a seminar” (2009, 34). He demonstrates the inevitability of this logic by analysing how he specifies the topic of this session (the “Third Session”). He points out that by announcing the theme of his discussion (the maxim from La Fontaine’s *The Wolf and the Lamb* that “The reason of the strongest is always the best”) and by making his audience wait for his demonstration of it (“As we shall shortly show”), he in fact assumes the position of the strongest (that is, the sovereign position) and performatively shows the truth of La Fontaine’s maxim (Derrida 2009, 78–79). As he himself puts it,

As the reason of the strongest is always the best, I authorize myself by the reason of the strongest (that I am here, by situation, by hetero- and autoposition) to defer the moment at which I shall show or demonstrate that the reason of the strongest is always the best; but in fact, I’ve already shown it, already shown it in fact by the very fact of deferring, authorizing myself to defer, I’ve already demonstrated this prevalence of fact over right. My demonstration is performative *avant la lettre*, as it were, and pragmatic before being juridical and rational and philosophical. I show by the very movement, by doing it, as I go along, by producing the event of which I speak and that I announce I shall speak of, I demonstrate that force wins out over right and determines right, and I do so without waiting. (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* 2009, 78–79)

There is no way to escape this logic, as he continues to explain; for if anyone were to challenge the position of sovereignty which he assumes, if anyone were to take away his right to speak, they could only do so from a position of sovereignty and thus they “will merely displace the site of the greatest force, and the reason of the strongest will (still and) always be the best” (Derrida 2009, 79).

When in *The Beast and the Sovereign* Derrida sets himself the task of questioning sovereignty, therefore, he embarks on an impossible mission. So much so that, when the problem of the double bind is formulated again in the “Eleventh Session,” he concludes that

If ever this double bind, this implacable contradiction, were lifted (i.e. in my view never, by definition, it’s impossible, and I wonder how anyone could even wish for it), well, it would be ... it would be paradise. (Derrida 2009, 302)

2. Poetry: the Step Beyond All Sovereignty

How does one then embark on this impossible mission of the deconstruction of sovereignty? How can we at least get a fleeting glimpse of the paradise we dream of? Apart from the many instances of “prudent, patient, laborious deconstruction” (Derrida 2009, 301) that he applies himself to in the sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida hardly gives any direct answer to this question raised by himself and arising from the very nature of his project. The only exception is perhaps his discussion of poetry in the “Eighth” and “Tenth Sessions”. In these he turns to Paul Celan’s famous speech/poem on poetry,⁷ “The Meridian” and on the basis of a thorough reading of Celan’s text outlines what he calls – after Celan – a *step*, which is not just a “prudent, patient, laborious deconstruction” that calls into question somebody else’s ideas, but a real act that can perhaps open a way, a path to move “beyond all sovereignty” (Derrida 2009, 273).

Celan’s “Speech,” “The Meridian,” as Derrida remarks, “was given in October 1960, in Darmstadt, on Celan’s reception of the Georg Büchner prize” (2009, 219). In his 1986 book, *Shibboleth: Pour Paul Celan* (Derrida 1986)⁸ Derrida had already published an extended discussion of this text. In this he highlights Celan’s presentation of the singularity of an encounter that is at the heart of poetry, and focusses primarily on the way in which the date of the poem (or rather its dating, or its belonging to a date) will, on the one hand, mark the singularity of the poem and, on the other, by its very inscription, “will have broken the silence of pure singularity” (Derrida 2005, 9).⁹ When encountering Celan’s text again in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida raises similar issues; however, his approach is primarily from the point of view of “majesty,” which, he points out, is “another name for the sovereignty of the sovereign” (2009, 214–215). In other words, the main concern in this analysis – just as in the other sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign* – is the deconstruction of sovereignty. However, unlike his other analyses, Derrida’s reading of Celan is not aimed at destabilizing, undermining, questioning, that is to say, deconstructing, the way the concept of sovereignty is invoked in “The Meridian”. As I have hinted above, he rather sees in Celan’s discussion the possibility of an act, a step, which – beyond undermining somebody else’s argument – might open a path, might show a way out of the “terrible logic” of the double bind in which we inevitably

⁷ In both his major discussions of “The Meridian” Derrida emphasizes that Celan’s text is not just a treatise, but also a poem on its own right. In *Shibboleth*, for example, he says “This speech, this address, this speech act (*Rede*) is not – not only – a treatise or a metadiscourse about the date, but rather the habitation, by a poem, of its own date, its poetic *mise-en-oeuvre* as well” (Derrida 2005, 10). In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, likewise, he refers to “The Meridian” as “this poem” (Derrida 2009, 227) and as “this poem on poetry” (Derrida 2009, 259).

⁸ When citing *Shibboleth* I will always use the English version published in *Sovereignties in Question*, which contains a translation of the whole of the French text (Derrida 2005, 173–185).

⁹ It is of course impossible and unfair to sum up Derrida’s complex analysis in a simple statement, and I will give some more details of Derrida’s interpretation of Celan in *Shibboleth*. In this paper, however, the main focus is on the reading Derrida advances in *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

find ourselves caught up as soon as we attempt to challenge sovereignty. Through poetry, by poetry, with the act of poetry, therefore, one can perhaps overcome the double bind. From the place of poetry, and from there alone, one might perhaps broach a discourse that, through doing justice to the claim of the Other, might put us in contact with what Derrida calls in *The Beast and the Sovereign* the paradise we dream of (2009, 302) and elsewhere “the democracy to come” (2018, 38).¹⁰

This is all the more important because of the explicitly political context that Derrida opens in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, a context in which he wants to overcome the Schmittean logic of sovereignty pitted against sovereignty. This logic, as Derrida makes it clear, inevitably leads to the conclusion that “the reason of the strongest is always the best”. To challenge such a logic the mere instances of “prudent, patient, laborious deconstruction” that Derrida performs in *The Beast and the Sovereign* are obviously insufficient, precisely because they are not acts in themselves. They lack the madness (and *bêtise*) of a decision¹¹ and thus they threaten with the danger of a depoliticization of politics. Challenging or undermining someone else’s logic is not in itself a step, it will not make a politics. It will at best provide a method, an imitable way in which arguments premised on sovereignty can be questioned or destabilized. This, however, would clearly reduce deconstruction to a methodology – an idea which Derrida explicitly rejected.¹² This is why it becomes crucial in the context of *The Beast and the Sovereign* that through his reading of “The Meridian” Derrida can outline a real act, a step that makes it possible for him to conclude at the end of his detailed analysis of Celan’s text that “we have now (perhaps) moved beyond *all majesty, and therefore beyond all sovereignty*” (2009, 272–273; italics in original).¹³ It is only with this step, that is, through a “poetic revolution of the political” that a real political revolution can be achieved. Any other act is just a continuation of the logic of sovereignty against sovereignty. As Derrida himself puts it, “a political revolution without a poetic revolution of the political is never more than a transfer of sovereignty and a handing over of power” (2009, 290).¹⁴

¹⁰ Derrida’s main discussions of “the democracy to come” are to be found of course in *Specters of Marx* (1993), *The Politics of Friendship* (1994), and *Rogues* (2005). It is, however, remarkable that before all these major expositions he uses this term in the interview with Derek Attridge in the context of specifying the “duty” of literature.

¹¹ In his discussion of Avital Ronell’s *Stupidity* (2003) (Derrida 2009, 170–175) Derrida remarks, “any decision (and sovereignty is a power of absolute decision) is both mad (every decision is madness, says Kierkegaard) and *bête*, or stupid, that it involves a risk of, or a leaning toward, *bêtise*” (2009, 173).

¹² In “Letter to a Japanese Friend”, for example, he clearly states that “Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one” (Derrida 1988, 3).

¹³ Derek Attridge points out that Derrida tends to respond differently to literary texts than to philosophical ones: “One striking feature of Derrida’s responses to literary texts is their predominantly affirmative mode.... By contrast, the mode of his writing on philosophical texts may seem neutral or even antagonistic” (1992, 20–21). This is perfectly instanced by how he treats Celan’s text in *The Beast and the Sovereign*: instead of undermining its logic, he affirms what he takes the text to be doing and tries to put its operations to work in the context of his larger project in the lecture series.

¹⁴ About the significance of literature in Derrida’s oeuvre see, for example, (Attridge 1992), (Attridge 2018), (Schuster 2018), (Zhuo 2018), or indeed the whole of (Rabaté 2018). Derrida’s own writings about literature have been collected in *Acts of Literature* (1992) and of course in *Sovereignities in Question* (2005).

In what follows, I will try to trace how Derrida uncovers this step in Celan's text, this step, which is poetry, and which alone has the power to bring about a true revolution and to overcome thus the "terrible logic" of sovereignty. My approach will of course inevitably be reductive, since I will confine myself to tracing this one strand in an otherwise extremely rich and multifaceted interpretation. Indeed, Derrida's reading of "The Meridian" is much like its source text; for, as Derrida remarks, Celan's "trajectory follows a line that defies all reconstitution in the form of logical or narrative exposition" (2009, 227), and this can equally justly be stated about Derrida's reading, as well. Focussing just on the *step*, trying to give a logical reconstitution of how poetry can provide us with a possibility to act, inevitably means, therefore, that I will be omitting a lot of important and indeed central questions that Derrida's reading of Celan raises. These omissions I can only justify by again citing Derrida's apology for his own reading of Celan: "I do not hold this interpretative reading to be the only or even the best possible one, but it doesn't seem impossible, and it is important to me in the perspective of this seminar" (2009, 225), or, in my case, in the perspective of this paper.¹⁵

3. "Long Live the King!"

So, how does poetry provide us with a position, a place from where we can broach a truly liberating discourse? How does a poetic act allow us to take a step beyond all sovereignty? Derrida's answer to these questions is that no *single* act can accomplish this. Reading Celan's "Meridian," however, he is able to identify *two* acts, *two* poetic gestures, *the difference between which* can still provide a position, a place – or rather a no-place, a u-topia (Derrida 2009, 234) – from where such a step beyond all sovereignty becomes possible. Neither of these two acts can in themselves accomplish the impossible mission of taking a step beyond the logic of sovereignty, but the two together – more precisely, *the difference between them* – can still open a space from where, or a way in which one may undertake such a mission. In the remaining part of this paper, I will try to identify these two acts and give an interpretation of their differential relation as the no-place from where a true revolutionary act can be launched.

The first act, then, which Derrida identifies on the basis of Celan's "Meridian" is an act of disruption, an act that goes against the grain (a *Gegenwort*) and thus cuts into the logic of sovereignty. Celan demonstrates such an act with his interpretation

¹⁵ In *The Beast and the Sovereign* Derrida offers a "less diachronic, more systematic reading [of "The Meridian"], which would be concerned, for the purposes of demonstration, to bring out a configuration of motifs, words, and themes, figures that usually do not appear in this order" (2009, 225). For a more linear presentation of Celan's ideas (in the context of Derrida's reading) see (Pasanen 2006, esp. 230–236), which also provides a profound insight into the philosophical context of both Celan's text and Derrida's analysis of it.

of Lucile Desmoulins's character in Georg Büchner's play, *Danton's Death*.¹⁶ The play is about George Danton, one of the major ideologists of the French Revolution, and in the last act Danton is executed under the guillotine together with his friend – another important figure in the Revolution – Camille Desmoulins. Camille's wife, Lucile is standing near the scaffold on which her husband is to be executed and – unable to bear the thought of living without her husband – suddenly and unexpectedly cries, “Long live the King!” This uncanny utterance – according to Celan – is a truly poetic gesture. He describes it as

a counterstatement [*Gegenwort*], a statement that severs the “wire,” that refuses to bow before the “loiterers and parade horses of history.” It is an act of freedom. It is a step.

...

That, ladies and gentlemen, has no universally recognized name, but it is, I believe ... poetry. (Celan 2005, 175)

Derrida explains that Lucile's poetic counterstatement can manifest for Celan an act of freedom precisely because it breaks the context of the discourse of sovereignty. As he puts it,

To support this claim, namely that this “Long live the King” ... is a “step” and an “act of liberty,” a manifestation without manifestation, a countermanifestation, Celan must withdraw this cry, this “counterword,” from its political code, namely its counterrevolutionary meaning, and even from what a countermanifestation may still owe to this political code. (Derrida 2009, 229)

Derrida is commenting here on the lines that I omitted from the Celan quote above. After stating that Lucile's statement “is an act of freedom. It is a step,” Celan continues with the following words:

To be sure, [Lucile's “Long live the King”] sounds like an expression of allegiance to the “ancient régime”... But these words ... are not a celebration of the monarchy and a past that should be preserved.

They are a tribute to the majesty of the absurd, which bears witness to mankind's here and now. (Celan 2005, 175)

And Derrida points out that what Celan emphasizes here is that in spite of the apparently political content of this utterance, it is in fact completely divorced from its immediate political context:

¹⁶ For simplicity's sake, I will always cite Celan's text in Jerry Glenn's English translation included as an appendix in *Sovereignities in Question* (Derrida 2005). Derrida himself used this translation when teaching his seminar on “The Meridian” in English (Derrida 2005, 188). However, in *The Beast and the Sovereign* there are some slight modifications of this translation and whenever the translation is modified, I will use the version as it appears in *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

the homage in this “Long live the King,” the taking sides, the profession of faith, the salute (*gebüldigt*) is not pronounced, politically speaking, in favor of the monarchy, of His Majesty the King Louis XVI, but in favor of the majesty of the present, of the *Gegenwart*. This *Gegenwort* speaks in favor of the majesty of the *Gegenwart*. (Derrida 2009, 229)

Lucile’s statement, therefore, withdraws itself from its political context – and thus disrupts the logic of sovereignty – because it is not simply an attempt at turning back the wheel of history. Her “Long live the King” does not express any nostalgia for a lost monarchic sovereignty, any allegiance to the *ancient régime*.

This, however, is just one half of how Lucile’s cry runs counter to the logic of sovereignty; the other half is that – while it is certainly not counterrevolutionary – it likewise disrupts the logic of the revolution, too. This is how it can become more than just the eloquence of such revolutionary leaders as Danton and Camille. For, as Derrida’s interpretation of Celan makes it clear, the revolutionary leaders in fact do not succeed in breaking the logic of sovereignty. In spite of their powerful and artful revolutionary oratory, they merely remain puppets or marionettes, and the strings are pulled by the same logic of sovereignty that they purportedly challenge and attempt to overthrow. This is implied, according to Derrida, by Celan’s allusions to Büchner’s play when, referring to Camille’s death, he uses the words “marionette” and “strings” in quotation marks. Derrida explains the context of this as follows:

The allusion, with quotation marks, to the marionette ... and the “strings” is a quasi-quotation from Büchner’s play (act 2, scene 5), where those condemned to death compare themselves to marionettes manipulated by history, by the sovereign powers of history: they no longer feel themselves to be responsible persons, free subjects, but figures, or even mechanical figurants in the invisible hands of those supposed to make history; but they suspect that there is not even a puppeteer and a subject of history to pull the strings in this theatre of political marionettes; and they say and think so at the moment they die, saying, “Marionettes, that’s what we are, pulled by strings in the hands of unknown powers, nothing by ourselves, nothing!” (Derrida 2009, 252)

The logic of the revolution is purportedly opposed to that of sovereignty. It is opposed, in particular, to monarchic sovereignty on the grounds of the necessity and justice of passing the power from the one to the many, from the monarch to the people. However, as Derrida recognizes already in the context of his analysis of Schmitt’s political philosophy in the Third Session, the gesture of challenging monarchic sovereignty in the name of the people cannot break the logic of Schmittian politics. As he puts it, “Even when the sovereign is the people or the nation, this does not

damage the law, structure, or vocation of sovereignty, as Schmitt defines it” (Derrida 2009, 77). This is exactly what the leaders of the revolution recognize in *Danton’s Death* when they step on the scaffold. They realize that with their revolutionary acts and fervent anti-sovereignty rhetoric they have merely perpetuated the very discourse from which they wanted to break away. For the sovereignty of the people is ultimately trapped in the same logic as monarchic sovereignty.

“One law for the lion and the ox is oppression,” says William Blake and the fate of the leaders of the Revolution in Büchner’s play is a good illustration of this insight: the former lion, King Louis XVI becomes the ox for the new lions of the Revolution who must, however, take their turn at being oxen at the hands of a newly emerging lion (Robespierre), while the discourse of oppression, of sovereignty, of war goes on without interruption.¹⁷

It is this uninterrupted discourse of oppression, of sovereignty, that Lucile’s cry “Long live the King” still succeeds in disrupting. And this it can do precisely because it goes against both monarchic sovereignty and the logic of the revolution. This is how it can be a “step,” an “act of freedom” that cuts into the seemingly unbreakable web of the discourse of sovereignty, that disrupts the logic that unites on a single platform (the platform of the executions under the guillotine) the old regime and the revolutionaries. And this is how Lucile’s cry “bears witness to mankind’s here and now” (Celan 2005, 175), or, to use Derrida’s phrase, to “*my* now-present, the punctual now-present of a punctual *I*” (Derrida 2009, 232). It is only by breaking the seamless continuity of historical process that a poetic utterance, such as Lucile’s “Long live the King,” can bear witness to the singularity of an event, the singular here and now of the human. Otherwise, all that remains is just a “theatre of political marionettes” (Derrida 2009, 252), with the invisible hands of an impersonal historical process pulling the strings. And it is only in this singularity, in “the punctual now-present of a punctual *I*” that an encounter with the other – with something wholly other, and therefore in no way trapped in the logic of sovereignty – where an encounter with this wholly other may perhaps become possible.¹⁸

¹⁷ Another aspect of the same logic is highlighted by Gilles Deleuze whom Derrida quotes in his discussion of *bêtise*. Deleuze points out that those who purportedly rule the logic of sovereignty, the tyrants, are also merely puppets, and the strings are pulled by the logic of the system they purportedly run. As he puts it, “the tyrant has the head not only of an ox, but of a pear, a cabbage, or a potato. No one is ever superior or exterior to what he profits from: the tyrant institutionalizes *bêtise*, but he is the first servant of his system and the first to be instituted, always a slave commanding slaves” (Deleuze 1968, 196) (qtd. in Derrida 2009, 155).

¹⁸ As Pasanen remarks, it is this “*einmalige, punktuelle Gegenwart*, of ‘the unique, punctual present,’ which lets what ‘the Other has as its most proper, its time, speak,’ that received most of [Derrida’s] attention” in the lectures that were published in *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Pasanen 2006, 235). I will not here be able to do full justice to Derrida’s analysis of the “structure of this now-present” (Derrida 2009, 232); however, I will have more to say about Derrida’s emphasis on the advent of the other in the following sections. For Derrida’s discussion of the other’s advent in the now-present see especially (Derrida 2009, 230–232; 270–273); for a discussion of the philosophical background of this, see (Pasanen 2006, esp. 224–227).

4. Walking on One's Head: Lenz's Terrible Silence

Lucile's cry, however, cannot in itself be this poetic encounter. It needs another act, one further step, without which the other could not be heard, without which it could not enter the dominant discourse ruled by the logic of sovereignty. Celan identifies this further step in another work of Büchner's, his unfinished novella titled "Lenz". The step or the act itself is when the eponymous hero of the story becomes uneasy because he cannot walk on his head. This act, walking on his head, according to Celan, is another disruptive act, another "Long live the King," for, as he explains, "whoever walks on his head has heaven beneath him as an abyss" (Celan 2005, 179). What is important in this act for Celan, what makes it the further step necessary for the encounter with the other, is that Lenz's act is no longer formulated in words, it is rather "a terrible silence".¹⁹ As Celan puts it,

Lenz ... has here gone one step further than Lucile. His "Long live the King" no longer consists of words. It has become a terrible silence. It robs him – and us – of breath and speech. (Celan 2005, 179)

And Derrida comments,

here is a sort of revolution in the revolution. You remember that Lucile's "Long live the King!" had been saluted as a counterstatement (*Gegenwort*) which was, perhaps ..., poetry, in which a homage was rendered, far from the political code of reactionary countermanifestation, to the (non-political) majesty of the absurd that bore witness to the present or the now of the human. Now another "Long live the King," the "Long live the King!" of Lenz ... is supposed to go a step further than Lucile's. And this is no longer, this time, a word, nor even a counterword (*Gegenwort* bearing witness to a *Gegenwart*), it is, more particularly, no longer a majesty but a terrifying silence, an arrest that strikes speech dumb, that cuts off breath and cuts off speech. (Derrida 2009, 269–270)

Neither Celan nor Derrida makes it quite explicit how Lenz's act is different from Lucile's or why a nonverbal "Long live the King" goes a step further than a verbal one. From Derrida's reading of Celan, however, we can attempt to spell out this difference. Lucile's cry is thus less than Lenz's terrible silence because it

¹⁹ It must be noted that Büchner's novella does not say anything further about Lenz's uneasiness as to not being able to walk on his head. Celan picks out this sentence and explains its significance simply by pointing out that "whoever walks on his head has heaven beneath him as an abyss." He says nothing further about why this is an act, why this is a disruptive act like Lucile's, or why it amounts to a terrible silence. He just takes these for granted and Derrida follows him in this, too. In what follows I will therefore likewise take it for granted that Lenz's uneasiness about not being able to walk on his head is an act of disruption and is a terrible silence, and I will only apply myself to explaining the significance that both Celan and Derrida attribute to this silent disruptive act.

is inevitably placed in the context of a power-struggle governed by the logic of sovereignty. We have seen that, according to Celan, Lucile's words "are a tribute to the majesty of the absurd, which bears witness to mankind's here and now" (Celan 2005, 175), and Derrida highlights Celan's use of the word "majesty" here which – as he points out – entraps Lucile's gesture in a discourse of sovereignty:

Celan's gesture in resorting to the word "majesty" ... is a gesture that consists in placing one majesty above another, and thus upping the ante with respect to sovereignty. An upping that attempts to change the meaning of majesty or sovereignty, to make its meaning mutate, while keeping the old word or while claiming to give it back its most dignified meaning. There is the sovereign majesty of the sovereign, the King, and there is, more majestic or differently majestic, more sovereign or differently sovereign, the majesty of poetry, or the majesty of the absurd. ... This hyperbolic upping of the ante is inscribed in what I shall call the dynamics of majesty or of sovereignty... (Derrida 2009, 230)

What Derrida is emphasizing here is the excessive, hyperbolic quality of the poetic gesture: poetry has the tendency of exceeding all hierarchies, of "upping the ante" infinitely and by this to call into question the value and legitimacy of any hierarchical structure.²⁰ As such, however, it inevitably claims for itself a position of majesty, and therefore sovereignty, above all majesty. With its excessive tendency it will of course attempt to go beyond all majesty, all sovereignty, it will try to change, to transform the rules of the game, the very meaning of the words "majesty" and "sovereignty," but – as Derrida's comment clearly shows – it will ultimately remain part of the dynamics of sovereignty, it will remain tied to a power struggle (Derrida refers in a parenthetical aside to the etymology of the term "dynamic" which derives from Greek *dynamis*, which means 'power' or 'potency').²¹ We may add to Derrida's analysis, furthermore, that albeit Lucile's "Long live the King" is a *Gegenwort* (a counterstatement), it is still *Wort* (word), and as such it will be caught up in an economy of words which is inevitably dominated by the dynamics of sovereignty.

Lucile's words, moreover, seem to be uttered almost mechanically. She utters them not because she wants to cut the strings of the puppeteer history, but because "she is blind to art" (Celan 2005, 175), she is deaf to the artful eloquence of the

²⁰ This is the first part of what Derrida calls the "double division, as it were, a division of division itself, in what I dare to call... Celan's discourse, the discursive logic or axiomatics, that underlies or scans his poem" (2009, 259): poetic majesty is above any political sovereignty. As he himself puts it, "this last majesty, this last sovereignty, poetic sovereignty is not, says Celan, the political sovereignty of the monarch" (Derrida 2009, 259).

²¹ In the Tenth Session Derrida identifies this excessive tendency as the most essential quality of sovereignty itself: "What is essential and proper to sovereignty is thus not grandeur or height as geometrically measurable, sensible, or intelligible, but excess, hyperbole, an excess insatiable for the passing of every determinable limit: higher than height, grander than grandeur, etc. It is the *more*, the *more than* that counts, the absolutely more..." (2009, 257).

leading figures of the Revolution.²² Consequently, although it cuts *certain* strings, her utterance itself is still little more than a mechanical reaction. What is more, her utterance is also repeatable, imitable, programmable and thus in some measure marionette-like. This programmable – and thus insufficiently poetic – nature of Lucile’s act is also indicated at the end of Celan’s speech when he admits that he intended with his talk to achieve a Lucilean disruption:

I also had an answer ready, a “Lucilean” counterstatement; I wanted to establish something in opposition, I wanted to be there with my contradiction. (Celan 2005, 183)

Lucile’s disruptive “Long live the King” can, therefore, be imitated, copied, repeated, counted on, calculated with and as such it cannot in itself be that singular present, that punctual here and now, in which alone an encounter with the other can take place.

This iterability, furthermore, traps us in the logic of ipseity and hence of sovereignty, as is emphasized by the repetition of the personal pronoun “I” in the quote above. The fact that the Lucilean gesture can be imitated implies that one can plan on repeating it, that an intention can be formed and carried out. Such a plan or intention, however, inevitably entails positing a conscious, free, sovereign self which is in control of these gestures. We find ourselves, in other words, in a discourse governed by the logic of sovereignty, which prevents from the start the singularity of an encounter with the other. Lucile’s counterstatement, therefore, cannot in itself bring about or attest to the event that is called poetry.

This is precisely how Lenz’s terrible silence is a different poetic act from Lucile’s counterword, this is how it can go a step further. For it is word-less: it is a total non-response, a total inaction, a pure letting be of the other, and thus, as Derrida emphasizes, “no longer a majesty” (2009, 270). This is how Lenz’s act, his terrible silence, finally succeeds in entirely dispensing with the “I” and thus with the logic of sovereignty. As Derrida makes it clear, any other act – even a Lucilian disruptive “Long live the King” – would inevitably prevent the other from coming, since any other act is necessarily an act of the will and as such inevitably the act of a sovereign “I”. As he puts it,

What I would *make* happen instead of *letting* happen – well, that wouldn’t happen. What *I make* happen does not happen, obviously, and one must draw the consequences of this apparently paradoxical necessity... (Derrida 2009, 234; italics in original)

²² Celan’s (and Derrida’s) treatment of the topic of art and of the relation between art and poetry is too complex to discuss within the confines of this paper. The distinction between the two is both made (as in the passage quoted here where art is opposed to Lucile’s poetic gesture) and erased (as for example where Celan says that “perhaps [poetry] ... travels the same path as art” (Celan 2005, 178); cf. also (Celan 2005, 180)).

Insofar as poetry is a singular encounter, it cannot be planned, repeated, counted on; it can only happen. One cannot *make* it happen; one can only *let* it happen. This means that one can only hear, accommodate, do justice to the other's claim in the event of an encounter insofar as one refrains from speaking, responding, reacting; for any speaking, responding, reacting is inevitably the conscious act of a sovereign "I" (which Derrida highlights in the quote above) and thus invokes the discourse of sovereignty from which the other is excluded from the start.

Lenz's total silence is thus a different poetic act from Lucile's cry; it is more than the latter in that it can let the other be, it can open the possibility of an encounter. On the other hand, however, total silence is not poetry. Or as Celan puts it "But the poem does speak!" (Celan 2005, 180)²³ A complete silence, a total letting be, would in fact even forsake the other, for it fails to provide a means for this other to come into "being"; that is, into the context of the dominant discourse. Lenz's "terrible silence" in itself is, therefore, not enough either. While it does provide the possibility of an encounter with the other, it provides it merely by an impossibility, by the impossibility of utterance, of responding, of reacting. It offers the possibility of an encounter precisely by effacing this possibility. Consequently, for this possibility to materialize, to be realized, to be marked – that is to say, for the poem to speak – another act, a Lucilian counterword is also necessary. Lenz's poetic act, in other words, needs Lucile's "Long live the King" – just as this needs Lenz's terrible silence.

5. "Distinguishing between Strangeness and Strangeness" (Celan 2005, 180)

How do these two acts, then, come together? How can they together open a place from where poetry can speak? Derrida's answer to this question is that it is in the gap between these two acts that poetry finds its place, or rather its way; it is from this difference that a truly poetic discourse, a discourse that goes against all discourse, that gives voice to the other, that lets it be – it is from this difference alone that such a discourse can perhaps be broached. As Derrida himself puts it referring to Lucile and Lenz's acts,

²³ In *Shibboleth* Derrida interprets this enigmatic statement of Celan's in relation to the singularity of the poem that is marked by its date: the poem, he explains, "absolves itself of the date so that its utterance may resonate and clamor beyond a singularity that might otherwise remain undecipherable, mute, and immured in its date – in the unrepeatable." Apart from marking this singularity, however, the date, as Derrida explains further, also opens the possibility of breaking the silence of pure singularity: "the date, by its mere occurrence, by the inscription of a sign "as a memorandum," will have broken the silence of pure singularity. But to speak of it one must also efface it, make it readable, audible, intelligible *beyond the pure singularity* of which it speaks" (2005, 8–9; italics in original).

Another passage in the "Meridian" that can perhaps explain this structure is where Celan states that

the poem takes its position at the edge of itself; in order to be able to exist, it without interruption calls and fetches itself from its now-no-longer back into its as-always.

But this as-always can be nothing more than verbal communication ... (Celan 2005, 181)

... in this division between two strangers, two ways of thinking the other and time, in this very division between the two “Long Live the King’s” – of which only the first is called *majestic*, of which only the first, Lucile’s, requires the word *majesty*, *poetic* and not *political* majesty – we have now (perhaps) moved beyond *all majesty*, and therefore beyond all sovereignty. (Derrida 2009, 272–273; italics in original)

The two acts are therefore equally necessary, though neither of them can in itself accomplish the impossible task of deconstructing sovereignty. One must, imitating Lucile, find a way of going against the grain; one must, in other words, find a mechanism, a *tekhnē*, an artistic technique, that can disrupt the mechanisms of the dominant discourse, that can cut the strings of the logic of sovereignty.²⁴ But this in itself does not guarantee success, for there is a difference between breaking the dominant discourse just for the sake of breaking it and breaking it for the sake of the other. And the problem is that since the disruptive gesture, Lucile’s “Long live the King,” can be imitated and repeated, it can easily become an empty form, a mere mechanism, a *tekhnē*, and can thus relapse into the dominant discourse where the logic of sovereignty pulls the strings.

The only way this can be prevented is by letting the Lucile-type disruptive act be guided by a commitment to a Lenz-type total silence, a complete letting be of the other. This commitment will not make the Lucile-type disruptive act in any way superfluous. In fact, the latter is the only form in which we can gain access to or at least get a glimpse of that other place, “that distant but occupiable realm which became visible only in the form of Lucile” (Celan 2005, 183). Lucile’s act, however, will provide this access or glimpse only if it does not lose its connection, its commitment to that other act, Lenz’s total silence. And this connection can be maintained by discerning the difference between the mechanical subversive gesture and the total non-response demanded by the other. In every Lucilean act, in every utterance of a counterword, of a “Long live the King,” one must remain aware that this act is “not yet ‘it’”; it is not yet Lenz’s total silence. It is in fact the awareness of this difference, this gap that can alone maintain the possibility of a Lenzian gesture and thus of an encounter with the other.

The problem is, however, that this difference will always remain totally indiscernible. Two subversive gestures – like two peas in a pod – will look exactly alike. There is no way of telling a genuine liberating act apart from a gratuitous

²⁴For Derrida’s discussion of *tekhnē* and art in the context of the “Meridian” see (Derrida 2009, 251).

repetitive one.²⁵ They will both be manifestations of the same recognizable technique, the same structure. One will thus never be able to prove, what is more, one will never even be able to know, that they are performing their subversive gestures for the sake of the other, that their act is ultimately liberating.²⁶ Yet it is still in this gap – indiscernible and undecidable, but imperative for those who embark on the impossible mission of counteracting the logic of sovereignty – that Derrida finally locates the place where poetry can sound the claim of the other.

This is what can, perhaps, bring about “the poetic revolution of the political” that Derrida calls for (2009, 290). In other words, we must keep on crying “Long live the King,” we must keep subverting, undermining, deconstructing the dominant discourse of sovereignty in the name of the ultimate authenticity of an infinitely deferred Lenz. We must act faithfully in the name of the paradise we dream of, in the name of the democracy to come.

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²⁵ As Derrida explains in a totally different context in the Second Session, every decision (by its essence a decision is exceptional and sovereign) must escape the order of the possible, of what is already possible and programmable for the supposed subject of the decision, because every decision worthy of the name must be this exceptional scandal of a passive decision or decision of the other, the difference between the deciding decision and the undecided decision itself becomes undecidable, and then the supposed decision, the exceptionally sovereign decision looks, like two peas in a pod, just like an indecision, an unwilling, a nonliberty, a nonintention, an unconsciousness and an irrationality (Derrida 2009, 33).

Similarly, in a Lucilean act it is always undecidable whether it manifests a Lenzian commitment and is thus a “deciding decision,” that is, “this exceptional scandal of a passive decision or decision of the other,” or just an “undecided decision,” that is, a mere indecision.

²⁶ Derrida comments on the repeated use of the word “perhaps” in the passage where Celan discusses how Lenz’s act can open the possibility of an encounter with the Other (Celan 2005, 179–180), emphasizing that the many “perhaps’s” “all ultimately aim to withdraw these poetic statements about the event of the poem from the dimension and authority of knowledge” (2009, 270). On the connection between knowledge and sovereignty see also (Derrida 2009, 278–281).

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