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Kaddish for Spinoza: Memory and Modernity in Celan and Heine

Jonathan Skolnik

The last absurdity is that the peacefulness of the void and the peacefulness of reconciliation cannot be distinguished from one another.

— Theodor W. Adorno

A “kaddish for Spinoza” is a paradox. Not only because a God-affirming Aramaic prayer for the dead in memory of the prophet of pantheism would attempt to reclaim the excommunicated philosopher for a Jewish tradition which his thought undermined, but also because Spinoza’s relevance for contemporary debates about Judaism and modernity make clear that he is obviously very much alive. Recent books by Yirmiyahu Yovel and Steven B. Smith are examples of very different attempts at a “kaddish for Spinoza,” attempts to claim Spinoza as the prototype of Jewish modernity.¹ But whether one agrees in these debates with Yovel’s position that Spinoza’s secularization of Jewish history is the harbinger of political Zionism, or instead sides with Smith, who points to Spinoza as the origin of a modern Jewish identity rooted in democratic liberalism and a universal faith, any inquiry into the meaning of Spinoza for Jewish modernity must take account of the

1. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) and Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997).

lost tradition of German-Jewish Spinozism, a tradition which both Yovel and Smith invoke. What did “Spinozism” come to mean for German Jewry? How did a literary image of a fusion of Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn find expression in Heinrich Heine’s nature poetry, and how did Jewish religious thinkers from Hermann Cohen to Leo Baeck invoke this constellation? Finally, how did Paul Celan, writing after the Holocaust, transform this tradition as he reworked Heine’s poems? If, for Heine, “Spinozism” offered the German-Jewish writer a vision of divine immanence that united Romantic poetry and Jewish thought, is this vision still tenable in Celan’s fractured lyrics?

In the age of emancipation, Spinoza became a touchstone figure for the representation of Jewish integration in German culture.² When Lessing’s play *Die Juden*, one of the earliest positive images of Jews on the German stage, was attacked by a professor of Oriental languages at Göttingen, who alleged that Lessing’s characterization of a moral Jew was implausible, the playwright responded with reference to his friend Moses Mendelssohn:

I foresee in him the glory of his nation, provided his cooreligionists permit him to mature, even though they have usually persecuted individuals like him. His honesty and philosophical mind make me think of a second Spinoza, equal to the first in everything but his errors.³

Lessing’s amalgamation of Mendelssohn and Spinoza set the stage for a discourse of emancipation and integration that would be decisive for nineteenth-century German Jews. As historian Michael Graetz has shown, Spinoza’s differentiation in Chapter 5 of his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* (1670) between truths of reason and revealed laws and ceremonies formed the background both to Kant’s dismissal of Jewish belief as the epitome of mere legalism and ritual in his *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793) and to Mendelssohn’s defense of historically determined Jewish practice in his 1782 treatise *Jerusalem*.⁴ The philosophical debate, centered on Spinoza, had consequences for the question of Jewish acculturation. In reaction to Kant, Reform Jewish

2. Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred. Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 104-05.

3. G. E. Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften*, eds. Karl Lachmann & Franz Muncker, vol. 17 (Stuttgart: G. J. Göschen, 1886-1924) 40, cited in Gilman 104. Translation by Gilman. All subsequent translations from the German are my own, unless noted.

4. Michael Graetz, “‘Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts’ und jüdisches Selbstbewusstsein im 19. Jahrhundert,” *Wolfenbüttler Studien zur Aufklärung* 4 (1977): 273-95.

thinkers recast Judaism as a religion of reason as they altered ritual practice to conform to the bourgeois German environment.⁵ And, in Spinoza, German Jews of widely varying religious orientations saw a moral ideal which held out the promise of acceptance in a new enlightened order.

In the 1780s, a controversy erupted in German intellectual life which was remembered by German Jewry more for Goethe's hopeful presentation of the affair in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, than for the disturbing questions it raised. The "*Spinoza-Streit*" brought issues of the reconcilability of faith and reason to the forefront of philosophical discussion in Germany. The controversy was ignited when Lessing gave Jacobi a copy of Goethe's poem "Prometheus." Jacobi, who believed that atheism was the necessary result of Spinoza's rationalist Bible criticism, instigated a public debate with the aim of forcing Mendelssohn to confess or deny his "Spinozism," his support or repudiation of the pantheistic views Jacobi saw in the poem. But Mendelssohn saw much more than an attack on reason in Jacobi's polemic. For Mendelssohn, the challenge to openly declare his views on the status of Christian faith was a recapitulation of the "Lavater-affair," another blunt attempt to confront him with the question of conversion. Goethe's reflections on the "Spinoza controversy" in Books 15 and 16 of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* testify to his revulsion at the tensions that lurked beneath the surface of the German Enlightenment:

[My poem] was gunpowder for an explosion which uncovered and gave voice to respected men's secrets: things which, unknown to even them, lay dormant in a highly enlightened society.⁶

Goethe remarks with sadness that the affair actually cost Mendelssohn his life and goes on to claim art, rather than politics, as the proper sphere for a philosophical debate which would have profound consequences for the question of Jewish acceptance into modern society:

Though one can consider this subject from a philosophical or religious standpoint, it rightfully belongs to poetry.⁷

5. Michael Meyer, "Reform Jewish Thinkers and their German Context," *The Jewish Response to German Culture*, eds. Jehudah Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg (Hanover: UP of New England, 1985) 64-84.

6. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 14 (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 1987) 696.

7. Goethe 696

The poetic project he means is discussed in the next section of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Goethe juxtaposes the “Spinoza controversy” with his plans for a never-completed epic poem about the Wandering Jew. Conceived as a means for presenting counter-currents in Christianity from Pelagius onwards, after recounting the Spinoza controversy, Goethe remarks that it was his intention to conclude the work with a meeting of Spinoza and the Wandering Jew. Full of praise for the calming effect which Spinoza’s apotheosis of nature evoked in him, Goethe suggests that his unfinished epic would culminate in an image of peace and reconciliation.⁸ Goethe’s text implies a utopia where Spinozism would lead not to failed Jewish acculturation and confessional antagonism, but to a harmony of human and nature, human and human, achieved through art.

Goethe’s musings on Spinoza, poetry, and the Jewish question took on new significance in the early nineteenth century. In the reactionary atmosphere of *Vormärz* Germany, where the first steps towards emancipation had been revoked in the wake of Napoleon’s defeat, German-Jewish authors saw in the travails of the Wandering Jew a symbol of their own struggle for integration. Heine, in an 1826 letter to Moses Moser, identifies the legend of the Wandering Jew with his own generation’s predicament: “We are the heroes of the story and don’t even know it.”⁹ It comes as no surprise, then, that in 1837 Berthold Auerbach writes his first novel as the epigonal continuation of Goethe’s incomplete epic. In Auerbach’s *Spinoza* novel, the Wandering Jew – *der ewige Jude* – perishes at the sight of the enlightened Spinoza. In an episode of pure melodrama, Auerbach’s Wandering Jew, old and spouting old-testament motifs of vengeance and national restoration, meets a Spinoza who, echoing Moses Mendelssohn, declares: “here, in the highest reaches of our reason, here is Sinai!”¹⁰ Awestruck, the Wandering Jew proclaims Spinoza the secular redeemer and drops dead. In Auerbach’s epilogue to Goethe’s open-ended epic, a fictional emancipation is achieved as an anti-Semitic topos is prematurely declared deceased, and Spinozism held up as the liberal banner of the *Kultur* nation’s true ideals.

The enthusiasm with which nineteenth-century Jewish authors embraced the notion of a Goethean Spinozism which could unite art with a religion of reason is nowhere as clear as in Heine’s *Zur Geschichte der*

8. Goethe 730.

9. Heinrich Heine, *Säkularausgabe*, vol. 20 265

10. Berthold Auerbach, *Spinoza. Ein historischer Roman*. 2.Theile (Stuttgart: Scheible, 1837) 262.

Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland. Heine declares:

Goethe's pantheism is different from the pagan variety. In short, Goethe was the Spinoza of poetry. . . . This Goethean pantheism is found in its purest and clearest form in his little songs. Spinoza's teachings have emerged from the cocoon and now flutter towards us as Goethean song. Hence the rage of our orthodox and Pietists against the poetry of Goethe. With their pious bear-claws they grab at this butterfly, which always eludes them.¹¹

Heine defines Goethe's pantheism as an ethical-aesthetic project which, unlike deism, does not reveal the divine in a "God-infused" nature but rather deifies the everyday. In 1833, Heine was at his most unironic and, despite the cloying rhyme of the fourth stanza, the following poem (composed at roughly the same time as *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*) should, I think, be read as Heine's sincere attempt at a pantheist anthem of his own:

Upon this rock we'll build a church,
All suffering transcended-
The church of the third New Testament;
The days of pain are ended.

Annulled the great Antithesis
That held us long deluded;
The stupid torments of the flesh
Are over now, concluded.

Do you hear God on his dark sea?
He speaks with a thousand voices.
And do you see how his sky overhead
With a thousand candles rejoices?

God dwells both in the heaven's light
And ocean's dark abysses;
God's spirit dwells in all that is-
He dwells in our kisses.¹²

11. Heinrich Heine. "Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland," *Heinrich Heine. Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, vol. 8.1 (Düsseldorfer Ausgabe), ed. Manfred Windfuhr. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1979) 100-02. All subsequent references to this edition will be provided parenthetically in the text.

12. *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, trans. Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982) 332.

Heine presents a pantheist panorama which corresponds to the sensualist vision that can be traced throughout his *oeuvre*, whether in the polytheist praise of Phoenician fertility gods in *Der Rabbi von Bacherach* or in the poetic persona of Jehuda ha-Levi in the *Hebräische Melodien*. Heine, of course, made no strong theoretical distinctions between pantheism, polytheism, or a Judaism that could recoup the sensual, and the vision he offers in this poem molds his familiar theme to the ideal of Goethe's Spinozism portrayed in *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*. Through the pantheist poem, Heine establishes himself as Goethe's heir. The link with Goethe roots the Jewish writer in a harmonious cultural landscape. Heine's embrace of pantheism in his most radical phase is most often portrayed as the purest expression of his estrangement from Judaism. Yet, in their search for a viable German identity, mainstream nineteenth-century Jewish thinkers saw no contradiction in claiming a pantheism validated by Goethe as a confirmation of their twin belief in Judaism and German culture. To see the ways in which they felt justified in doing so, I turn again to Heine's *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*. Forsaking both conceptual rigor and historical accuracy, Heine brings Mendelssohn into the equation, hailing him as a "Jewish Luther" who "overturned" the Talmud (8.1: 72). Heine lauds Mendelssohn as the founder of a "pure Mosaic religion" an institution, says Heine, which could serve as a "last bulwark of theism." That Mendelssohn's theism and Spinoza's pantheism could be reconciled is a theme echoed by countless German-Jewish thinkers. In his programmatic statement in the first issue of the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Immanuel Wolf pronounces both the monotheistic idea and Spinoza's system essential for an understanding of Judaism's "inner Spirit"¹³ and, in an 1867 essay entitled *Heinrich Heine und das Judentum*, the philosopher Hermann Cohen glosses the Heine poem previously cited:

No one has written more sublimely about the deity than Spinoza. . . .
The oneness of God is postulated in pantheism as well as theism.¹⁴

For the young Hermann Cohen, Spinozism and Judaism could fuse in Heine's verse. As Cohen's mature thought took shape, he would insist on a sharp distinction between Spinoza's thought and a rational philosophy rooted

13. Immanuel Wolf, "Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judentums," *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 1.1 (1822): 14.

14. Hermann Cohen, "Heinrich Heine und das Judentum," *Jüdische Schriften* vol. 2, intro. Franz Rosenzweig, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke, 1924) 19, 29, 30.

in Jewish tradition.¹⁵ Yet throughout the nineteenth century, in response to allegations that Jews did not show enough willingness to adopt German culture, even Jewish religious thinkers hesitant about embracing the radical bible critic Spinoza would point to his influence on German philosophy as exemplary of a spiritual affinity of Germanness and Judaism.¹⁶ Almost half a century later, in the frenzy of World War I, Cohen would apologetically argue for an intrinsic correspondence between the Hebrew psalms and Goethe's nature poetry.¹⁷ The rising tide of anti-Semitism would place the German-Jewish liberalism typified by Cohen under attack. The symbiosis Cohen espoused in 1867, as German Jews anticipated the full emancipation that would come with the founding of the Reich in 1871, was increasingly on the defensive as the Weimar Republic set out on its shaky course.

1932 marked both the 300th anniversary of Spinoza's birth and the centennial of Goethe's passing. The coincidence of a "Goethe-Year" with a "Spinoza-Year" on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power was the occasion for sober reflection about what remained of the nineteenth-century confidence in a harmony of German *Dichter* and Jewish *Denker*. Siegfried Hessing, a scholar from Czernowitz, published a Spinoza-Festschrift, with contributions from Martin Buber, Freud, Einstein, Jacob Wassermann, and Arnold Zweig.¹⁸ And, in an essay in a Berlin Jewish monthly, the leading rabbi Leo Baeck eloquently affirmed the Spinoza of Heine and the young Hermann Cohen, a vision of a God

. . . who is not merely the creator but the substance of all essence, its form, and its entire meaning. The religious, indeed the mystical content of Spinoza's conception of God now emerges. It is now no longer a mere abstract concept, but now signifies, to use the words Goethe employed to speak of Spinoza's God, the "most real active One [*das allerreellste tätige Eins*]," which speaks to itself: "I am who I am and shall be in all transformations of my appearance." Pantheism is not necessarily a contradiction of monotheism.¹⁹

15. See Ernst Simon, "Zu Hermann Cohens Spinoza-Auffassung," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 79 (1935): 181-94.

16. See the 1865 essay by Ludwig Philippson, "Judentum und Deutschtum" *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Gustav Foch, 1911) 161-70.

17. Cohen, "Deutschtum und Judentum," *Jüdische Schriften* 248-49.

18. *Spinoza-festschrift*: herausgegeben von Siegfried Hessing, zum 300. Geburtstage Benedict Spinozas (1632-1932) (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1933).

19. Leo Baeck, "Motive in Spinozas Lehre," *Der Morgan* 8.5 (Dec. 1932): 353-54. Baeck's essay appeared in a special Spinoza issue of *Der Morgan* alongside contributions from Ernst Cassirer and David Baumgardt.

Leo Baeck's invocation of Goethe as a proof-text for the reconcilability of Judaism with Spinoza's pantheism is testimony to his noble refusal to abandon the liberal German-Jewish ideal in its moment of crisis. Yet Baeck could see beyond the positive enthronement of Spinoza as German-Jewish culture hero and he goes on in his essay to approach the difficult question of the estrangement of the prototypical secularized Jewish intellectual from his people:

He recognizes, to use modern terminology, society [*Gesellschaft*] but not community [*Gemeinschaft*]. As much as he is aware of the I and the World and also of the Thou and the World, it eludes him to place I and Thou in a human relation and tension: the experience of the fellow human in happiness and sorrow, hope and fear. And thus the idea of family eludes him, as does any concept of the social or the messianic.²⁰

Leo Baeck's use of the language of sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (*Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*) situates the philosophical problematic which begins with Spinoza within the political crisis of the Weimar Republic that would ultimately degenerate into the Nazi takeover. In 1932, the Jewish intellectual who sought to transcend the *Glaubensgemeinschaft* for a higher cultural ideal would soon face a lonely struggle for survival in a world where politics were determined by the twisted logic of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which not only denied his/her place in that culture, but did its best to wipe him/her off the face of the earth.

Like no other event in human history, the wholesale murder of Europe's Jews poses a radical challenge to any attempt at theodicy. It is in this way that Paul Celan's poetry is often read, especially his 1963 collection *Die Niemandsrose*, with its sacrilege of a *Psalm* and its crystal-clear indictment of his dear friend Nelly Sachs's persistent faith in the poem *Zürich, zum Storchen*:

Of your God was our talk, I spoke
against him, I
let the heart that I had
hope:
for
his highest, death-rattled, his
quarreling word²¹

20. Baeck 355

21. Translated by Michael Hamburger.

But the struggle with a *deus absconditus*, the futile rage against a missing personal God, is only one aspect of the sinister predicament of the post-Holocaust German-Jewish writer. God's death was proclaimed already by Nietzsche's Zarathustra and estrangement from the strong intervening hand of monotheism is as old as Spinoza's secularism, a characteristic of the modern condition itself. The post-Holocaust German-Jewish writer faces an even greater form of rupture, an alienation from the language of poetic pantheism, the foundation of a cultural synthesis which no longer speaks. This dissociation from the language of Goethe and Heine is brought to bear in Celan's poem "Die Schleuse":

THE LOCK GATE

Above all this mourning
of yours: no
second heaven.

.....

To a mouth
for which it was one of a thousand
I lost -
I lost a word
that had remained with me:
sister.

To
the worship of many gods
I lost a word that was looking for me:
Kaddisch.

Through
the lock gate I had to go
to save the word back
to the salt waters and
out and across:
Yiskor.²²

"Die Schleuse" is a poem of a lost language. A parallel is formed between three words: "sister," and the Aramaic/Hebrew words *Kaddisch*

22. 1: 222. Translated by Michael Hamburger.

[sanctification] and *Yiskor* [may (God) remember]. Both are names of prayers said in memory of the dead. The first two of these words are “lost” by the poetic I, both, as it were, to multiplicity. It is said that “sister” was lost at a mouth to which it was a “one of a thousand words” [*ein Tausendwort*]. The usual positive sense of “thousand” in German is here given the sense of something anonymous, faceless, and unimportant to this mouth. Similarly, “Kaddisch” is lost to “the worship of many gods,” words which contains echoes of Heine’s polytheism, which, as I suggested earlier, is only another mask for a sensualist sensibility which embraces all forms of spirituality affected by the “born enemy of all positive religions.”²³

“Die Schleuse” contains a double reference to Heine. The oneness of God and nature which “speaks with a thousand voices” from the sea in Heine’s pantheist hymn is broken and now becomes a site of loss. Where Heine casts water as a cheerful chorus chanting “*deus sive natura*,” Celan’s mouth is a vortex which swallows words. “Die Schleuse” is a concrete poem constructed along a vertical axis. The ellipses divide heaven above from the waters below, encoded in “lock gate” [*Schleuse*] and “salt waters,” where the lost words have sunk. If “salt waters” is understood as a metaphor for tears, it resonates with Celan’s explicit image of Spinoza in the poem “Pau, später”:

that Baruch, the never-crying one,
grinds the misunderstood, edgy,
seeing tears until they are right.²⁴

This portrait of Spinoza the eye-glass maker transforming human sorrow through a clear philosophical vision sheds new light on the image of water in “Die Schleuse” and recalls Hölderlin’s narration of a language purified through “holy-sober water” in the poem *Hälfte des Lebens*. On the surface, it appears that the title “The Lock Gate” [“Die Schleuse”] suggests a vision of poetry as a redemptive and transcendent process, metaphorically raising water/tears/unrestrained sorrow to a higher level through the (impermanent, loose) imposition of form and the acceptance of a reduced, yet purer, language. What, then, to make

23. As Heine referred to himself in a letter to Moser (23 Aug. 1823). Heine *Säkularausgabe*, vol. 20 107.

24. 2: 126. See the discussion in Otto Pöggeler, *Spur des Wortes. Zur Lyrik Paul Celans* (Munich: Karl Alber, 1986) 110, 246.

of Celan's *Kaddisch*, the word which "seeks" the poetic I and is lost to polytheism? A simple opposition of a Judaism no longer accessible nor desirable to a privileged "worship of many gods" cannot be meant here, because the I feels compelled to rescue another mode of Jewish commemoration, *Yiskor*. The critic Peter Horst Neumann has interpreted this gesture as a sign for Celan's poetic project and validates this idea of poetry as memorial, calling the poem "Celan's equivalent to Hölderlin's *Mnemosyne*" and declaring "Yiskor" "a name for [Celan's] poetry."²⁵ But I would argue that consideration of a second intertextual reference to Heine dismisses Neumann's affirmative reading of Celan's poetry as an alternative "Yiskor" which could form a neat parallel with Hölderlin and shows instead the poem's deep apprehension at its own project of aesthetic commemoration. How is *Kaddisch* lost and what might be saved with *Yiskor*? The beginnings of an answer are found in Heine's 1850 poem "Gedächtnisfeier":

Not a mass will be sung for me,
Not a *Kaddish* will be said,
None will say or sing a service
On the day that I lie dead.

But on some such day it may be,
If good weather is foreseen,
Ma'm Mathilde will go strolling
On Monmartre with Pauline.

She will come to deck my grave with
Immortelles, and say with sighs:
"*Pauvre homme!*" and wipe a teardrop
Of damp sorrow from her eyes.

But, alas, I shall be living
Too high up — there'll be no seat
I can offer to my darling
As she sways on weary feet.

Of you sweet and chubby child, you
Must not walk home all the way;

25. Peter Horst Neumann, "Was muß ich wissen, um zu verstehen? Paul Celans Gedicht 'Die Schleuse,' ein Gedicht für Nelly Sachs," *Celan-Jahrbuch* 4 (1992): 27-38.

You'll see coaches standing ready
At the barrier gate that day.²⁶

"Gedächtnisfeier," as Heine scholar Siegbert Prawer notes, is a translation of "Yiskor" (not in its literal meaning of 'may [God] remember' but as the name of the commemoration ceremony of the same name).²⁷ Heine's poem narrates the wish not to be mourned in Jewish or Catholic fashion but to have his widow bring flowers to his grave and not dally, lest her feet get tired — a contented nod at the world of the living from beyond the grave in good pantheist spirit. "Yiskor" is far from an adequate name for Celan's poetry, indeed, the fact that Heine's title has capsized and sits at the bottom of Celan's poem suggests that the Heine tradition is not one likely to be recovered. If the poetic pantheism of Heine and Goethe once moved even Hermann Cohen to reflect on an organic connection of Judaism and a view of nature characteristic of German romantic thought, Celan's poems force us to reflect on their alienation.

Celan's "Die Schleuse" italicizes the two foreign words, emphasizing their separation from the rest of the text. Heine's "Kaddish," although inscribed as a negative in "Gedächtnisfeier," sits harmoniously in his rhyme scheme. The discomfort of Celan's "*Kaddisch*" in the German text is plain to the naked eye. My doubt that its counterpart in italic isolation, "Yiskor" might be rescued to revive a lost language of a Judaism transformed and united with pantheist panegyric begins with a closer look at "to save across [*hinüberzuretten*]." If this verb's prefix is separated, as suggested by its predecessors "*zurück-*" and "*hinaus-*," then the action of "saving to the other side" (with all of its transcendent connotations) is broken: "*hinüber*" in its adjectival meaning of "broken." This fracturing of the transcendent gesture seems on the surface to be fully in accord with Heine's pantheist form of poetic commemoration. Translated back from Heine's "Gedächtnisfeier" into the original Hebrew, "Yiskor" does indeed appear at first as a secularized form of poetic salvation, in accord with the first stanza's Spinozist denial of a dualist "second Heaven" beyond nature. But in Celan's post-pantheist poetry, a secular ode to a deified nature is no longer possible, for nature is always mediated through a broken language which is all the more treacherous to those whose foreignness it emphasizes. To show the way

26. 3.1: 114. Translated in Draper 643-44.

27. S.S. Prawer, *Heine's Jewish Comedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 537.

in which Celan's poetry subverts the synthesis of pantheism and Judaism through a notion of the foreign word which breaks apart the language of Heine, I turn to the poem "Le Menhir."

In his essay on the use of foreign words, Adorno makes clear that social ruptures are visible in the words themselves:

The more deeply society is cleft by the contradiction between its quasi-natural and its rational character the more isolated will foreign words necessarily remain in the arena of language, incomprehensible to one group of human beings and threatening to the other; and yet they have their legitimacy as an expression of alienation itself, and also as the transparent crystals that may at some future time explode human beings' dreary imprisonment in preconceived language.²⁸

It is at the level of language itself that reified social relations as well as the hope for reconciliation with nature can take place. Celan's poetry turns on this very notion of the foreign word, echoing Adorno's themes of alienation and mimetic reconciliation, while never losing sight of the rupture in language and history that the Holocaust meant for assimilated Jewry:

LE MENHIR

Growing
Stone-grey.

Grey figure, eye-
less you, stone-glance, with whom
the earth stepped forth to us, humanely,
on dark - , on white heath paths,
evenings, before
you, heaven's void.

Most shunted, carted forth, sank
away over the back of the heart. Sea-
mills ground.

Bright-winged you hung, early,
between whin and stone,
little phalaene.

28. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature* vol. 2 (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) 289.

Black, phylactery-
colored, thus you were,
you husks joined in prayer. (1: 260)

The problematic status of the foreign word is emphasized in the very title. The Breton word for a megalithic monument to the dead (men=stone, hir=long) stands out in French, its foreignness is exposed.²⁹ The first lines give an image of a color, not a thing, a metonymy of “Steingrau” for “Menhir.” The color gray sets a bleak mood and the adjective “growing” adds a time element, which, combined with the idea of stone, suggests extreme slowness. The monument has become a concrete manifestation of time. The German word for “moment,” *Augenblick*, is replaced by the “eye-less you, stone-glance” [*augen-loser du, Steinblick*]. This corresponds to the image of a menhir standing in the middle of the twentieth century: the remains of the crudest form of human religion, a simple stone to commemorate the dead. Yet just as the menhir can at once symbolize the contrast of the transience of human life with the apparent permanence of the inorganic, it becomes a figure of thought for linguistic sedimentation, an archeology of the incorporation and expulsion of the foreign word.

In the second strophe, most of the poem’s important contrast fields are introduced. Heaven is opposed to earth, and darkness to white. The gray figure which has predominated so far is brought into association with white and with the earth (on white heath paths), although, on a symbolic level, gray hovers between black and white. “Heaven’s void [*Himmelsschlucht*]” is connected with “dark” [*Dunkel-*] through a common vowel and a connotation of absence. The interplay of darkness, white, and gray should, however, suggest ambivalence and urge the reader not to interpret the poem’s oppositions schematically, for Celan is not working with “exact” opposites. This is especially important to consider when “*Heide*” [translated in the poem as “heath”], in its double meaning of “heath” and “heathen,” is set against Jewish monotheistic religious practice.

The rough gestures of “to shun” and “to cart forth” in the third strophe suggest that the invented compound word “*Herzrücken*” [translated

29. On the word “menhir” and its problematic incorporation into modern French via the nationalist archeologist Legrand d’Aussy, see the discussion in Krzysztof Pomian, “Franks and Gauls,” *Realms of Memory. Rethinking the French Past*, under the direction of Pierre Nora, vol. I (New York: Columbia UP, 1996) 33-40.

as “back of the heart”], which is almost at the poem’s center, should also be interpreted as a gesture of rejection, in the sense of “*den Rücken kehren*” [to turn one’s back]. The second compound word, “sea-mill” [*Meer-mühle*], is divided, emphasizing an interlingual homonym with the French words for “sea” and “mother” and recalling both Celan’s image of the “mills of death” in *Spät und Tief* (I: 35) and a German folk saying signifying faith in a divine plan not immediately accessible to humanity, “God’s mills grind slowly.” This unique, two-sentence strophe might suggest yet another poetic contrast: a human or anthropomorphic act of willed indifference is set against that of an equally indifferent nature as the female object, the mother, is degraded and rejected (*verkeksen* = “to make into a concubine” or “to cast out”) in a universe where neither God nor nature confers absolute meaning.

Celan returns to the stone motif in the third strophe, which is now seen, not against the more abstract and monumental background of earth and “heaven’s void,” but that of a simple shrub. That the “little phalaene” hangs “bright winged” may signal a “brightening,” a lightening of the mood in the poem’s imagery. Celan scholar Dietlind Meinecke has interpreted this passage as a “precision of the lost one” through the ancient symbol for the soul, the butterfly.³⁰ Meinecke, however, does not call into question the word “phalaene” [*Phaläne*], which is not found in any standard German dictionary. Celan scholars have tended to emphasize his precise use of naturalist terms,³¹ overlooking ways in which the poet’s profound grasp of the indissolubility of language, history, and the human perception of nature undermines any notion that Celan’s nature imagery conjures up a moral alternative to the realm of debased human language.³² Phalaene is an archaism, a term introduced by the eighteenth-century naturalist Linnaeus and which has long been in entomological disuse. The insect called *la phalène* in French is called *der Spanner* in German, a type of moth. Celan scholar Bernhard Böschstein has noted the frequent use of the

30. Dietlind Meinecke, *Wort und Name bei Paul Celan* (Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970) 134.

31. Compare the discussion of “Le Menhir” in Paul Requadt, *Bildlichkeit der Dichtung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1974) 248-49.

32. Cf. Bernhard Böschstein’s reading of “Le Menhir” and other poems: “It appears as if the impossible dialogue would only be possible in the lowest realm of stones, plants, and insects, for there the desecration of the true word through its abuse would be unimaginable.” Bernhard Böschstein, *Leuchttürme* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1977) 293.

term by Annette von Droste-Hülshoff,³³ whose poem “Der Hünenstein” also thematizes a pagan grave site, and whose poetry was more admonished than admired for employing obscure or archaic terms.³⁴ Phalaene thus points, not to an “exact” mimetic description of a natural landscape, but instead to an idiosyncratic landscape of intertext, one might say to a strange “metaphysical landscape” of black and white.

It is precisely through the notion of the “metaphysical landscape” that “Le Menhir” emerges as a reworking of the German-Jewish “Spinozism” articulated by Heine, Cohen, and Baeck. Margarete Susman’s early essay *Spinoza und das jüdische Weltgefühl*, published in a well-known Zionist anthology in 1914,³⁵ forms the background to Celan’s transformation of this tradition. Celan read and carefully annotated her work around the time of “Le Menhir”’s composition.³⁶ Susman’s essay is a notable exception to the rhetoric of German-Jewish spiritual affinity rooted in a harmony between Judaism and German romantic Spinozism. Her prose is laden with vitalist verbosity, distinguishing the “Dionysian . . . Indogermanic world-feeling” from a Jewish essentialism she locates in Spinoza’s “messianic” conception of human and divine locked in a system of absolute laws demanding “obedience . . . a burning power to sacrifice” (63,67). What is illuminating for a reading of “Le Menhir” is Susman’s poetic vision of Spinoza’s philosophy:

33. See Böschenstein’s notes in *Kommentar zu Paul Celans “Die Niemandsrose,”* ed. Jürgen Lehmann (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1997) 237-40 and his excellent discussion of Celan/Droste parallels Böschenstein *Leuchttürme* 273-98.

34. See the commentary in Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Winfried Woesler. Band 1.2 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997) 753. A full discussion of the Droste-Hülshoff intertext(s) is beyond the scope of this paper, but in this context, it should be noted that the contrasts between the two poems are significant. Droste-Hülshoff narrates a gothic tale of a Christian gentleman’s encounter with a prehistoric tomb on a rainy night, where the terror inspired by the strange monument is dispelled by the recollection of his baptism and the voice of his servant. Celan’s poem, on the other hand, subverts its own invocation of meaning-generating world views, whether monotheistic, pantheist, or pagan. The image of a twilight encounter with a megalithic grave was, incidentally, a Romantic topos: Droste-Hülshoff’s poem seems to have been inspired by a Caspar David Friedrich painting, “The Walk at Dusk,” now at the Getty museum in Los Angeles. I am grateful to Masha Belenky for this observation.

35. Margarete Susman, “Spinoza und das jüdische Weltgefühl,” *Vom Judentum. Ein Sammelbuch*, ed. Verein Jüdischer Hochschüler Bar Kochba in Prag (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff, 1914) 51-70. Subsequent references to this work provided paranthetically in the text.

36. Elke Günzel, *Das wandernde Zitat* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995) 51-53, 332-33.

We stand in . . . the colorless purity of a metaphysical landscape . . . that burns only in white light and black night like the great and frightful moonscapes, without atmosphere and its mediating forms. . . . We stand near to eternity itself, the colorless source of the last certainty. And from [this source] . . . pours . . . a new unfathomable power . . . which binds this stiff lifeless world of white and black with a magic living unity . . . [which] sets the cold logical nexus of laws aglow. . . .(65-66)

It is exactly this transfiguration of a barren chiaroscuro universe which refuses to take place in Celan's poetry. In "Le Menhir," the seductive gestures of both immanence and transcendence are undermined as nature is subordinated to a language fractured by history.

The bright-winged Phalaene is contrasted with "the color of phylacteries" as the poem's focus fades to black. "Phylacteries," although it comes from a completely different Greek root, has a sound which recalls "Phalaene" in the context of the poem. Like "Phalaene," "Phylactery" is itself another kind of linguistic displacement, a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "tefillin." Tefillin are religious objects consisting of prayers written on parchment contained in small boxes, which are connected by a leather band. Tefillin are then wrapped around hand, arm, and head during morning prayers. The word "tefillin" is derived etymologically from the Hebrew word for "prayer." The use of a Greek word for this Jewish ritual object could indicate a certain distance to it, as small as that of a believing cosmopolitan, or as great as that of an apostate.

It would be wrong, however, to interpret "Le Menhir" as a simple opposition of religious ritual to nature, for "husks" [*Schoten*] is a word laden with different meanings. "Schoten" could refer to the part of a plant that covers the seeds like a hood, or to a rope with which a sail is pulled. The former could be brought into connection with the moth motif of the fourth strophe, while the latter might, however tenuously, recall phylacteries. "Schote" has, however, a third meaning in German, derived from a Hebrew word for a fool.³⁷

Does Celan's "Le Menhir" give a Spinozist image of the silent prayer of nature in harmony with itself, or are the religious faithful scorned as

37. Amos Funkenstein argues that this word is an example of the subcultural language German Jews developed. Thus, a phrase for "a merry fool" – *ein Schaute mit vergnügten Sinnen* – referred both to the Hebrew word and to Schiller's "Der Ring des Polykrates." See Funkenstein's *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993) 258.

dupes in a world where God is painfully absent and the language of poetic pantheism no longer speaks? The poem turns on this linguistic rupture that divides the word “Schote.” In accord with Adorno’s dictum that the full power of foreign words lies not in their “toleration,” but in the acknowledgement of the full weight of their difference,³⁸ the foreignness and archaism of “le menhir” are brought into prominence. By contrast, the poem’s “Jewish” content is partly concealed and partly uncovered by the use of the Greek euphemism. But just as “*menhir*” is at once at home and not at home in modern French, the triple meaning of “Schoten” threatens to jump out and expose the foreignness of the Hebrew word, to render it vulnerable, and to condemn as fools those who trust in the symbiosis that the Greek word for “tefillin” implies. The language of Heine, where Hebraisms once flavored a light-hearted praise of nature, now turns bitter. Celan’s poem subverts its own image of a harmonious, reconciled nature by exposing the social and historical rifts implicit within language. If Neumann is right in claiming *Yiskor* as a name for Celan’s poetry, a secular form of poetic commemoration, then “Le Menhir” might well be termed a *Kaddish*, a *Kaddish* for the German-Jewish Spinoza.

38. Adorno 286.