

Speaking Shadows: justice and the poetic
by Gail Jones

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(i)

I have always been moved by the story of the poet, Paul Celan. A Jew, born Paul Antschel in Romania in 1920, he suffered the loss of both parents in the Holocaust in 1942 and was himself interned in a labour camp until the end of 1943. After the war he moved first to Bucharest, then to Vienna, then finally settled in Paris, in 1948, where he became a teacher of German literature at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He published eleven books of poetry and dozens of translations (including Pessoa, Mandelstam, Rimbaud, Valéry, Char), and wrote from a position paradigmatic of much twentieth century experience: exile, dislocation, a state of permanent mourning. Tormented by unassimilable loss, ruined by desolating sadness, Celan drowned himself in the Seine in his fiftieth year. He crafted his own extinguishment, he opened his mouth to suffocation, he became the hurt, forsaken body his own poetry was seeking.

Poetry did not, alas, save Paul Celan. But against depression, paranoia, breakdown and misery, he maintained a belief in the necessity to write and, indeed, to write *in German*. Celan wished to vouchsafe literary language against historical ‘darknesses’, to insist on its capacity to hold meaning even against the depredations of fascism:

Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it still had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through

the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave no words for what was happening, but went through it.”¹

Refusing Adorno’s famous dictum: “After Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric”, Celan fashioned poems of astonishing technical virtuosity and moral audacity. They are recondite and often bewildering poems, taut in their metaphysical stringency and challenging abstractions. I first encountered his work as a student, unaware of its complicated context and traditions, and now, years later and much more knowledgeable, I still open a volume of Celan with an expectation of puzzlement. Yet the poetry is oddly companionable in its resistance to easy decipherment: it will not summarize the world; it will not offer facile satisfactions; nor it will it admit us comfortably to the netherworld of the poet’s experience. It is, in short, beautifully and ethically difficult.

How might such high-literary labour address matters of justice? What might their relation be? And why should one bother with poetic indirection when the horrors of the world are so often blankly and brutally direct? Here is an extract from a poem, *Speak, you too*, which I discovered on my very first encounter:

Speak –

But do not separate the no from the yes.

Give your saying also meaning:

Give it shadow.

Give it enough shadow,

Give it as much

As you know to be parcelled out between

Midnight and midday and midnight.

Look around:

See how alive it gets all around –

At death! Alive!

Speaks true, who speaks shadows.²

¹ Quoted in Amy Colin Paul Celan: *Holograms of Darkness* Bloomington and Indianapolis ; Indiana University Press 1991 P49

As the poem proceeds, the ‘you’ of direct address seems to *become* a shadow, becoming thinner, stretching, merging into nothingness. Then air becomes water, and directions of ascent and descent collapse into each other. This is a poem in which the speaking voice and the addressee are in the end unlocatable. Even with all its ambiguity, the poet seems to be recommending an openness of expression and a preoccupation with interstitial forms of knowing, with the struggle to tell the tenebrous uncertainties of history. For Celan, too, Holocaust victims were like shadows because their ‘graves’ were in the ‘sky’; it is the smoky dissolution of humanity to which he returns, again and again, as an image for the anguish that can never be sited and therefore never wholly dealt with.

This wish to pay homage to the ‘disappeared’ – and in such paradoxical terms – is consistent with imagining the conditions for justice. Knowing the brute and material force of history, Celan nevertheless reminds us of what it is that the poetic can preserve: nuanced interiority, difficult understandings, a sense that the dichotomous forms we are taught to think with are never – *never ever* – the sufficient or efficient basis for a moral life. Speaking shadows is “thinking with grief”, as French philosopher Maurice Blanchot once put it, admitting into our judgement of rights and abuses the informed sorrowfulness of mourning.³

(ii)

All nations carry within them events and forms of injustice. There is no equivalence, of course, between specific catastrophes, nor would it be proper to speak of Celan’s Holocaust mourning as in any way transferable to Australia. Yet there is some understanding he offers, obliquely and *poetically*, that we might carry to our own country and our own comprehension of ‘darknesses’. In April 1997, a report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

² This is Pirre Joris’s translation. Paul Celan, “Speak, you too” in *Selections* Paul Celan ed. Pierre Joris Berkely: University California Press 2005 pp54-55

³ The phrase “thinking with grief” is quoted by Geoffrey Hatmann in *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* London and NY: Palgrave 2002 p83

(HREOC) entitled *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* was tabled in the Australian parliament. It is based on 777 submissions (of which 500 were confidential) inquiring into the forcible removal of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. It is a moving and distressing document of the emotional and physical suffering of the people who have become known as the ‘Stolen Generations’ and until the its tabling few white Australians realized the vast extent of the practice, or indeed, the ghastly dimensions of its damage. Apart from frontier violence, the invasion and the expropriation of Aboriginal lands, there was also this lamentable and ‘sorry’ practice, this decades-long destruction of indigenous families. It is estimated that “one in ten” children were removed from their Aboriginal families between approximately 1900 and 1970; the numbers are necessarily vague and the cause of dispute, but as Robert Manne has pointed out, an exact number is not needed to concede historical wrongdoing.⁴

The testimonies of the ‘stolen’ are texts of an especial kind, not ‘poetic’, but straightforward in their manifold grief, and often strikingly eloquent in their quality of anguished ineloquence. The testimony is in some ways opposite to the poem: it claims intimate referentiality, a singular, located voice, an immediate and intimate connection between statements and truths. And since the narrative force of testimony in this case can only ever be indigenous, non-indigenous writers wishing to engage with ‘stolen’ matters must write from another perspective and perhaps use forms of indirection which will signal a refusal to ‘claim’ the experience of others.

Speaking shadows is not just about the admission of mourning into history, but also, I believe, about the inclusion of time in one’s imagining of other people’s sufferings. Just as daylight moves, shifting the visibility of things, so too the wish for justice to prevail is linked with time past and time future, with imagining reparation for wrongs and the instauration of rights. This is the principal of engaged history-writing (such as we see practiced by Inga Clendinnen, Henry

⁴ Robert Manne, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right* Melbourne: Shwartz Publishers 2000 pp 15-21

Reynolds and Anna Haebich, to mention a few); it also works for even the simplest forms of imagining, for one's private memories, and the ways in which we might come to see the ethical failures and achievements within our own lives. Since we live backwards as well as forwards, matters of conscience essentially require this revision; to be self-critical is to be circumspect, to learn what might stand in the way of right or wrong actions and thinking. Writerly elaboration – *naming* the past, speaking of it, offering an account – is one of our forms of negotiation.

Two simple memories travel towards me as I contemplate these matters, both of which come accompanied by a swelling, inner bloom of shame, a sensation of discomfort and moral unease. As a child I lived for several years on the outskirts (five miles away) of the Kimberly town of Broome. This was a multicultural town, of which only about 400 of its population of 1,200 were 'white'; most of the community were mixed-race Asian or Aboriginal. Before its touristic expansion in the 80s it was a town in decline; the once busy pearling industry had subsided and Broome was a sleepy and remote backwater, distinctive, above all, for the racial and ethnic complexity of its population.

In my seventh year, the Governor General visited the town and there was to be a formal welcome and 'presentation' at the small state school I attended. I was chosen to give a speech, and an Aboriginal girl from the Catholic school (the only other school in the town) was chosen to present a bouquet of flowers. We were dressed similarly, each with stiff flared dress, held by a bow at the back, each with sandals and ribbons in our hair. We marched up the steps of a dias together, and together we curtsied. There was bunting, flapping in the breeze, and an Australian flag on the flagpole. I made my little speech, and the other girl presented her flowers. We did not speak to each other, nor did I ever learn her name: we were simply wedded in this task of symbolic obeisance to the Crown.

It is difficult now not to see this moment as a corrupt drama of the taken-for-granted privilege of whiteness. The ritual assumed that voice inhered in the white child, and that the task of the Aboriginal girl was to stay silent and hand something over. It is an embarrassing memory because, in a sense, I knew my own pre-eminence, because I too somehow assumed that the possession of words was the possession of value, and that I was the important one, selected to speak.

My second memory is also from my seventh year. A small indigenous family group 'walked in from the desert'; this was the phrase used in those days to describe the last pre-contact Aboriginal families who were then cautiously entering stations and towns. A boy about fourteen years old, tall, thin, arbitrarily given an English name – I shall call him John, just as arbitrarily, since his own tribal name is lost – was placed in my class in school. Too large for the school desks, he sat at a huge packing case at the back of the room, anomalous, lost, speaking no English. With him were three mangy desert dogs, which lay in the doorway of our classroom. Our teacher and the students were all a little afraid of John. Although he slept much of the time, his arms wrapped over his head on the crate, he seemed gigantic among the seven year olds and unpredictable in his behaviour. He was given no special teaching, or even attention; he was simply left there, stranded. He sang songs to himself, carved images on the wooden surface of the crate, and laughed at things we did not understand in a voice that was manly. John died in custody in Broome, in his early twenties. I do not know the reason for his imprisonment, or the means of his death, but it seems possible to me that sins of omission – failing to imagine his world and his exile, failing to grant or accommodate his precious otherness – may have contributed to the tragedy of him not finding another life in Broome, of not meeting a future that would make his existence possible.

One wishes one had been a wiser child – asked the name of the silent girl, or befriended the sad, stranded boy from the desert, whose isolation would eventually doom him. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben says that justice is not about repentance, so much as it is about recovering one's own and others' possibilities and potentialities – a kind of dream of plenitude for every life, one that requires imagining backwards (to regret historical mistakes), and forwards, to constitute a more-just future.⁵ So in these memories of happenstance encounters, I find myself riveted on ideas of time and responsibility. Our experience crucially pre-empts and constitutes us, but it also positions us in forms of address and response, some of which we may not be fully cognizant of until we are adults. An

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* trans. Michael Hardt Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993

aspiration to justice is an aspiration to full responsiveness to those forms of address that remind us that we exist in “a community of the question”.⁶

(iii)

It seems to me that there are two challenges here for the writer contemplating issues of justice. The first is that a kind of de-individualizing has to occur, something which might seem ill-fitting with the vocation and practice of writing. Ethical and moral laws are not mysteriously inscribed upon the singular heart, they occur in conceptions of public action and in social contracts. Value is in exchange, in dialogue, in complicated forms of reciprocity and redistribution. Much as we might admire what is often described as the individual ‘voice’ of a writer, it is their participation in cultural value, their more generalized contribution to the richly strange economies of imagination, that finally matters. The necessity of not ‘speaking for’ others, not assuming the predominance one’s own voice - possibly because it is louder, or more prestigious, or somehow more skilled - is part of this participation. In a multicultural community all voices matter, and none should be silenced. Speaking from within a premise of solidarity is of utmost importance. In an essay the Nobel Prize winning poet, Joseph Brodsky, talks of being shown a book of Robert Frost’s poems that had been retrieved from STALAG 3B, an Allied POW camp, somewhere in France. Across the poem “Happiness Makes up in Height What it Lacks in Length”, was a size twelve boot-print. Brodsky says the book needed to find its reader, “Otherwise it couldn’t be stepped on, let alone picked up.”⁷ The circumstances in which books are ‘picked up’, taken into another life and self, are trans-individual, historical and perhaps just lucky. In the best of all possible worlds writers may offer forms of circumspection that create the responsiveness at the basis of thinking justly; they

⁶ This is Jacques Derrida’s phrase, cited in Thomas Keenan’s book *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997 p37

⁷ Joseph Brodsky “An Immodest Proposal” in *On Grief and Reason* NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1995 P211

may also, of course, simply distract or entertain. Either way, the current cult of personality surrounding writers has little to do with their effects in moral and ethical dimensions, and the claim of being a ‘chosen’ voice is always already unjust.

The second challenge for the writer is not to succumb to luxurious – that is to say, debilitating – melancholy. Since the contemplation of justice and injustice is a serious matter and likely to lead to despair, there must be a way of entertaining the darknesses that is not pathological, but somehow creative and intrinsically resistant.⁸ This is not to discount the tragic melancholy of a figure like Celan, but to say that those who have suffered less ought not engage in self-gratifying victim-identifications.

Everyone has heard of Auden’s famous slogan (from the poem “In Memory of WB Yeats”): *Poetry makes nothing happen*; it is cited frequently as a kind of shibboleth of the inefficacy and futility of art. What is often forgotten is the poem’s closing line: *it survives/ a way of happening, a mouth*. The speaking of shadows is just this, the mouth that will go on shaping meaning in the face of senseless annihilation. Melancholy may be close, too close, to political quiescence: the insistence on affirming commentary, statement, symbol, voice, is fundamental, surely, to imagining other-wise.

(iv)

One of the recommendations of the *Bringing them Home Report* was that the government of Australia might offer a formal apology to the people whose lives were affected by the practices of forced removal. The establishment of ‘Sorry Days’ was a form of public speech act, as it were, that addressed the wish of many for an acknowledgement – at least – of the necessity of cultural reparation. Hundreds of thousands of Australians signed ‘Sorry Books’, offering statements of personal regret to be given to Aboriginal leaders, or signed with their bodies in marches of reconciliation. The culmination of this people power was a Sorry Day

⁸ This is a claim made for essays in the wonderful book *Loss* ed David L. Eng and David Kazanjian

event in which an estimated 250,000 people marched together across the Sydney Harbour Bridge on May 26th, 2000.

However, the Howard Liberal government famously refused to offer an apology, preferring a triumphalist view of history to one which might admit mistakes; it was also concerned with the cost of possible monetary compensation. Interestingly, in cases in which wronged peoples have been offered money but no apology, as in the relationship between the Japanese government and the Asian ‘comfort women’ of World War Two, it is characterized as “hush money”, and leaves the victims feeling trapped in a kind of immoral and destructive narrative. Compensation alone cannot perform the functions of an apology.⁹ Those with authority should be rendered “incapable of approaching the other with empty hands”, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas memorably put it. He meant that the generosity necessary for justice to prevail is a matter of presenting oneself humbly and apologetically, not just giving over material goods.¹⁰ Refusing even the utterance, the government failed to honour the power of the word to initiate restorative justice, to effect redress for wrongdoing at an initial, symbolic level, and to understand the forms of recognition and affirmation that can occur within words. And it refused, in Agamben’s terms, to acknowledge the damage done to the possible futures of others.

My own novel, *Sorry*, was written with some trepidation. It has a political-allegorical aspect – as one would expect, claiming such a title – but it is not centrally concerned with representing the Stolen Generations. As a white Australian, it would be presumptuous to do so and it would risk appropriation of others’ painful experience. Nevertheless, *Sorry* deals with culpability and the refusal to say sorry, the characteristics, as we now know, of a certain type of

⁹ This is the persuasive view of Kathleen A. Gill in “The Moral Functions of an Apology” in ed Rodney C. Roberts *Injustice and Rectification* NY: Peter Lang 2002 pp111-123

¹⁰ This is quoted in Jill Robbins’s essay “Visage, Figure: Speech and Murder in Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*” in ed Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, *Critical Encounters; Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1995 pp275-298

(persisting) dispossession. Forgetting, or guilty amnesia, is at the core of the text, yet so too is a loving friendship between an Aboriginal girl and a white girl, one which intimates a kind of ideal of community and reconciliation. Children are both more and less wise than we remember or suppose. The Aboriginal girl is not the ‘shadow’ of the white girl; rather she is a “surer presence.” It is also an anti-war novel, concerned with what children witness and the multiplication of levels of violence. In writing such a narrative I rehearsed my own concern that the reconciliation process not be forgotten – since it has certainly faded from the political agenda since the bridge walk of 2000; and also that the role of language, of what is said and unsaid, must be understood as contributing to the ethical life of individuals and of nations. This sounds a grand claim; in fact it is a modest story, and I know better than to over-estimate the role of the ‘literary’ in political change. It is, more simply, a cautious offering in the process of cultural contrition, and a wish, more personally, to see evident in Australian culture attempts at “thinking with grief.”

(iv)

Paul Celan’s most famous poem is “Todesfuge”, Death Fugue, written in the late forties, not long after the end of the Second World War. It begins like this:

Black milk of morning we drink you at dusktime

We drink you at noontime and dawntime we drink you at night

We drink and drink

We scoop out a grave in the sky where it’s roomy to lie¹¹

It is a heartbreaking dirge, an abstracted mourning-song. The graves in the sky, Celan insisted, are not a metaphor: they are an explicit reference to the crematoria at Auschwitz and the reason for this utter reversal of substances and feeling, for this haunting, darkening, pervasiveness of death. “Todesfuge” was a poem so widely known and anthologised, that Celan decided for a time to withdraw it from circulation. It seems he feared its codifying power, the sense in which it perhaps made too explicable something he wanted to remain within margins of

¹¹ This is Jerome Rothenberg’s translation in Pierre Joris’s Selection p 46

unknowing. Its popularity also made him worry about ‘literariness’, about the aestheticizing of catastrophe. He wrote:

*What matters for language is ... precision. It does not transfigure, does not ‘poetize’, it names and composes, it tries to measure out the sphere of the given and the possible.”*¹²

This is an anxiety, I think, for many writers, not just for poets. Although we deal with the symbolic and the metaphoric, although we wish privately, perhaps, to approach the ‘beautiful’ – whatever that is – we wish too not to ornament indulgently that which is essentially austere. That the signifying of loss might happen through elaborations of language seems a radically interesting conundrum for writing, but not insurmountable in ethical terms. And Adorno’s denunciation of poetry was, to do him justice, a kind of warning against the aesthetic refinement and assimilation of barbaric experience.

My response (not resolution) is to return to two metaphors. *Speaks true who speaks shadows* seems a counter-intuitive position: one is accustomed to the association of light and truth, to the idea of that which is unjustly degraded being “brought out of the shadows” (a phrase used by Paul Keating in his 1993 Redfern Speech to recommend social justice for Aboriginal people). Speaking shadows includes, I think, an admission of uncertainty, a calculation of difficulty, and awareness that justice – and human relations – is rarely written in black and white. It requires commitment to some state of thinking which radically oscillates across time, between past and future, and is therefore a condition of process and hope, rather than of certainty. It is linked, moreover, to what Martha Nussbaum calls ‘poetic justice’, the belief in ‘rational emotions’ as the premise for a judicious literary intelligence. Poetic justice, she claims, is not self-sufficient or a simple attesting of sympathies: it “needs a great deal of non-literary equipment: technical legal knowledge, a knowledge of history and precedent, a careful attention to

proper legal impartiality”¹³. The literary imagination is just one part, one small part, of public discourse.

The second metaphor I wish to revisit is the boot-print across the poem. This is a profoundly redolent image because it includes both the will to obliterate and the contradicting continuation of the humane. Books and words are less the possession of authors than they are of readers; and it is the reader’s ‘freedom’, not the writer’s authority, that finally allows images and narratives their motive force. Celan secretly translated Shakespeare as he worked in the labour camps. This is heart-warming not just because it is so unlikely a story, but because it is an act of preservation – indeed extension – of words in the most inhospitable of conditions. The poetic is not some supererogatory expressiveness that is ‘unrealistic’ or ‘out of touch’ or committed to hieratic exclusivity: it is part of the resources and pleasure of language and of telling to which every citizen deserves access.

¹² Celan quoted in Paul Auster “The Poetry of Exile” in *Paul Auster: Collected Prose* London: Faber and Faber 2003 pp 351-359; p354

¹³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) p121