

# **Time is a Word in Celan**

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**Abstract:** Across his mature poetry, Paul Celan makes attempt after attempt to suspend, in a phenomenological manner, the meaning and concept of time, so as to discover new temporal syntheses that are not equivalent to successivity. He does this chiefly through word-compounds, literal correlatives of temporal syntheses. By mixing the word time with other, more mundane words, time's purity is compromised. Through this method, he demonstrates that time is a way of saying how things have happened, re happening, and will happen, a modifier of existents, a determination of the manner in which things hang around, interact with one another, vanish. Celan discovers in Husserl's phenomenology a potential category name for time as manner, "Zeithof," "timecourtyard" or "timehalo."

**Keywords:** time, temporality, Celan, German poetry, poetry and philosophy, phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, Augustine

### 1. On the Timeword

The timeword in Celan, it is an obsession, a repetition, a worry, and, I think, a project. In certain locales it comes up, often near the end of a poem, just as frequently in conjunction with another word as on its own. How does Celan dare to conjoin the word time—*Zeit*—to other, lesser words, empirical words like "Staub," "dust"? *Zeitstaub*. How does he dare at other points to make time into a modifier, subordinate and ancillary to other operations, like "Zeitoffen,"<sup>1</sup> "open in a time-ish way" or "open to time"? We are used to time having aspects or parts—lengths, moments, periods. We are used to time being applied like a lens to areas of life: worktime and playtime, time to leave, time left.

A timeword is different than the concept of time. Of unique concepts of time there are indeed only a handful, distinct from one another and well-worked out, in the central strands of European-style thinking. Of writers who handle time as word, merely and purely a word but also boldly as a word, there seem to be even fewer. So far, the list includes two. Time is a word in Celan; and time is a word in Augustine, a word and not—yet, or not at all—a concept.

That is to say, Augustine on one hand and Celan on the other— not exclusively, surely, but explicitly and remarkably in ways I want to describe—stand toward time as Beckett stands toward consciousness.

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1 This can be read in a number of ways, and Celan himself does so. It can be an opening to an addressee who is not yet and still coming—"The poem waits (=stands open) to its absent – komming and thereby futural – you" ("Das Gedicht wartet (= steht offen) auf sein abwesendes – kommandes und damit künftiges – Du") (*Meridian*, 136). Or it can be an opening to time itself (*Meridian*, 113). In 2006, Sandro Zanetti asked what allows "the poem" to be spoken of "as a time-open shape" ("als einer zeitoffenen Gestalt") ("zeitoffen," 73). One answer he proposes is *Chronographie*, the particular way that writing, *Schrift*, is open to other times and receivers (119).

They decide not to believe in the thing, even if they keep on using it as a figure, as an empty figure. They refuse to believe, Augustine in at least one important textual moment, and Celan more and more across his poems I think, that the word says anything much, least of all that there is a concept somehow attached to it. Once they accept that the concept is empty, these two treat time as an empty figure, which, nonetheless, when it is said, is an event of language, as something that is said despite the absence of a concept.

“Time” is an utterly familiar thing to say and also a word from the highest orders of educated discourse. How many grand pronouncements of banal wisdom mention time? How many pedestrian clichés are there that depend on it? How many different day to day activities get attached to it in order that some sort of image can be associated with this thing that claims to regulate our activities? These are already, in everyday speech, before or beyond a concept. What do all these sayings do to time? How can it be separated from these uses and abuses and isolated into a metaphysical, mental, or physical thing? In American English at least, time flies. It also runs and flows and crawls. It is a quantity you can have too much or too little of, a stock you can save or spare or lose, and a place or position you can be ahead of or behind. It has a face and hands, it is ripe like a fruit, and full like a bottle, and pressed like a grape for its precious drops. Time can take almost any preposition as a determining particle: it can be out, off, in, to, ahead of, behind, on. It can be counted, marked, and, importantly, it can be told. Amidst the junk heap of culture in which time gets a mess of conflicting co-designations, one of the actions that is reportedly done with it is: telling. But telling time is not telling about time, is not saying “time” with any sense of its true meaning. Heidegger made this clear, as Husserl did as well, and Augustine too. Telling time does not require telling anything about time. Rather, you carry out an operation under the name of time, and this “carrying out” does not bring you any closer to saying what is designated under that name. The name flees from the named; it seems to speak on the condition that no one ask into the concept.

In philosophical writing, the word “time” on its own belongs to well-known conceptual circuits. Time stands alongside the other great philosophemes, holding its own with the likes of “space,” “soul,” “world,” “being,” “truth,” and “existence,” a list that in one philosophy or another comes at last to time. In some modern systems of thought, time is the single titan that holds all the others, that holds them in place or holds them together, depending on the system. Time is a medium, milieu, a principle of principles that since Kant is supposed to protect us against the metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties of the other great concepts, the ideas. It is momentarily supposed to ward off the greatest unknowables, like God and eternity. Time is the real for all these idealities, or so it seems. In critical philosophy, time accomplishes a number of

functions internal to the system. It reconciles the empirical with the intellectual world; it makes us believe that despite our finitude we can say true things about experience. What makes us able to say these true things is that the final basis of experience is time and we are made of time, we are the medium and the message. Saying time with modern philosophy, we seem to be saying quite a lot.

For example, when you ask the question of being and the question within that question is what is the meaning of being, the answer you want to give is time. There are deep reasons for wanting this answer, as deep as the reasons for which Heidegger cannot give the answer directly in *Being and Time*. He wants to say being means time, but in the end he finds he cannot. In the end, I think, to put it very coarsely and without going into the details, although they are truly interesting, the difficulty is that by Heidegger's own logic, "time" has neither being nor meaning, since it is the guarantor of the meaning and being of everything else, and so it stands at the edge of sense. It can't respond to philosophical questioning because it is the ultimate answer to all of them. Time gives sense to the modes of existence and the one position in existence that can't be given sense is time. Time gives meaning and leaves itself destitute. To add a sentence *apres la lettre* to *Being and Time*: *Der Sinn von Sein ist an sich sinnlos. Zeit hat keinen Sinn*. You cannot pretend time has a sense, because it is the sine qua non of sense; time is the non of sense, nonsense, in a way not so different from Kant's picture of time in the *First Critique*.

Time suffers from high indeterminacy, since it transcends all the other transcendentals. Time does have an explicit meaning — it means "succession." About this meaning, however, little else can be said, no other determinations can be given, because all other determinations are determined, in turn, by their relation to successivity. The only figure in all our known world that isn't subject to successivity is the concept, object, operation—time itself.

Our normal intuition of successivity is, however, spatial and not temporal. Kant notes this sentence in the margin of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: —"The schema of time a line" (271 note a). The image could not be clearer perhaps. But the sense could not be more obscure. Specifically, it is hard to see how a schema solves the problem of saying what time is, since a schema is itself supposed to correspond to "the transcendental time-determination." How do you make a line? You stretch a point in time. An argumentative circle ensues, which without serious interpretive labor leaves time rather less determined than more. The schema of time a line, the meaning of schema: time. Time is time is time. It cannot be described, analyzed, conceptualized, or modified by anything else. A similar difficulty can be glimpsed in Kant's discussions of the "inner sense," and also when he derives the table of categories from a table of judgments, whose specific characters derive in turn from

their relationships to successivity. Perhaps it is useful to represent the difficulty like this: it is easy to make an image for yourself of the manner in which something is “next to” something else, but it would not be not so easy, if you could shut off your spatial intuition, to make an image of something “after” something temporally.

Time is a hole in the philosophical tapestry of concepts. When time is spoken or written by philosophers, they may be pointing at experienceable effects, but the deduction of a form or concept stalls. This is not so dissimilar to moments time is spoken or written on the street or in the office. Time determines almost everything, but time itself is under- or undetermined. What are we doing when we say “time”? What is being said?

Let me say a few things about time as it is said at a few moments in Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology has as much claim as any school of thought to give content and meaning to time, and perhaps a bit more. Because its objective is to present the structure of human experience, which is to say experience tout court—in its estimation—without departing from human experience, whatever it does say about time has to be because the philosopher experiences time in some way. The great boon of phenomenology is its method, one instrument of which is the modification of attitude of the scientist that Husserl sometimes calls *epoché*. This often gets glossed as “suspension” in English, and this is not wrong, but in all its forms the epochal suspension is in service of leading back, *Zurückführung*, to the structure in question, to get a special experience of it. In his lectures on time, Husserl proposes to do what he does for other phenomena to time. But is time a phenomenon?

We seek to bring the *a priori of time* to clarity by exploring the consciousness of time, by bringing its essential constitution to light, and by exhibiting the apprehension-contents [*Auffassungsinhalte*] and act-characters that pertain—perhaps specifically—to time and to which the *a priori* temporal laws [*die apriorischen Zeitcharaktere*] essentially belong. Naturally, I mean by this laws of the following obvious sort: that the fixed temporal order is a two-dimensional infinite series, that two different times can never be simultaneous, that their relation is a nonreciprocal one, that transitivity obtains, that to every time an earlier and a later time belong, and so on. —So much by way of general introduction.

(*On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* 10)

In other words, the experience of time that you will have, if you learn with Husserl, along the course of the “Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness” of 1905 and its precursors and paralipomena, to go behind the everyday saying “time,” is an experience of a very determinate structure, already known in advance by the philosopher. This is the

complete antipode of what Augustine will say and Celan will say, when they say time. Augustine will say effectively the reverse: I can do time but I cannot think it. Celan will try to say time otherwise. Augustine's starting point will be to admit that the time-word is self-suspending. You say it and its sense goes away. You have its sense and it stops functioning. The going away of time's sense is my topic here.

It is not Husserl's topic however—whatever happens when you or I say time, a phenomenologist can suspend the saying and our everyday experiences tied to it and follow its "Auffassungsinhalte" back to their essential "Zeitcharaktere." True, this is the common way Husserl proceeds with any phenomenon. He moves from the way humans do some phenomenon day to day to its essential characteristics. The epochal movement strips away the emptiness or indeterminacy that marks the word in the mouths and pens of the masses. And yet, when it comes to time, the phenomenologist does not move from an experiential fullness and cognitive emptiness—the natural attitude—to an essence internal to the experience. When it turns its attention to time, phenomenology fills up or better fills in what is missing in the experience of time. Is this, I want to ask, still phenomenology? It is remarkable that Husserl, who mentions Augustine's famous passage on the self-erasure of time, and Heidegger, who makes even more of the passage, ignore this fundamental fact. Augustine tells us that the timeword says little to nothing. It is remarkable that an experience that is not an experience, a poor experience or an un-have-able experience should become so crucial to a philosophical movement that claims to move from experience back to experience in its essential outlines.

When Husserl gets to the determination of time, a frustration arises. It is not the only frustration in this long and complicated text but I want to let it stand as an example of a class of issues I have already named: time determines but is itself less than determined. The frustration about time in the fourth section of the 1905 lectures is the following. Husserl puts this in terms of what time determines, the temporal object. He calls the determinations of a temporal object, such as a musical melody, the object's "temporal determinations" (15). It is a little confusing to speak this way, but I want to recall that I am interested in the determination of time (in this case the consciousness of time, not time beyond consciousness, in an intersubjective zone or in "nature"). Husserl is interested in temporal determinations, that is, what are the determinate characteristics of a temporal object such that we can recognize it, think it, describe it, and be certain about its form, all the while conceding there is something doing the determining that is time. It should be obvious that what I want depends on what Husserl wants. The determination of "time" depends on the determinateness of the temporal object. That is to say, if time is consciousness of a temporal object, then the attributes of the object are the attributes of which

consciousness is conscious. Time consciousness gets its attributes from its objects. A more phenomenological way to say this is: time-objects are intentional structures.

The determinateness of time-consciousness depends on the determinateness of its intended objects. This dependency is what distinguishes phenomenology from psychology on one side, or pure logic on another, what makes it about experience in its fulness and richness, rather than about mere mental effects or consistent rule systems. Thus, if the object is not determinate, the consciousness of it will not be, and time—in my estimation—will be less than satisfying as a word—maybe not a word as we usually understand it.

Evidence is in the way Husserl presents a time object, early on in the lectures. A time object has a special kind of existence. It exists in such a way that its determinations alter. A time object can be distinguished from a non-time object (although ultimately all objects will have to enter the flow of consciousness) because its determinations “alter essentially.” We can make this adjustment. It isn’t hard to do. When we experience the essential determinations of something altering, it is a time object. So, a melody that starts on note A will by necessity change to another note, B; its determination as a particular position on a scale will give way to another determination. Here time is not empty — it is filled, with alteration. A becomes not-A, it is emptied out of a specific determination but always fills again with another, this the essence of music and by extension of all time objects. The frustration here is that you cannot ever say, under time-consciousness, that A has happened. There is no note A because in this picture of a continuum of alterations the transitions are utterly undetermined. This is not exactly how Husserl puts it, but the fact can be read between the lines.

Only the determination ‘now’ constitutes an exception. The A that now exists is certainly an actual A. The present does not alter, but on the other hand it does not determine either. If I append the now to the representation of a man, the man acquires no new characteristic thereby, nor is any characteristic designated in him. (15)

A continuum of alteration satisfies the requirement, for time objects, that their determinations alter, but you cannot say what is being altered, since a now is undetermined. Lacking here what is present, all-too-present in Hegel, a theory of determination through difference, Husserl loses the moment when he posits the continuum. A discontinuous object, in contrast, may be highly determined, but you cannot account for the transitions of its alterations. A is A while A is A and only while A is A. When A becomes not-A, then A cannot be said to be A in isolation. In other words, you can either see time as punctiform or as continuous, but not both. It can either be indeterminate, moving through determinations

that have no stability—which infinitesimal point between A and B would count as the right determinate point for measurement? – or determinate and motionless. Under the punctiform view, each note is an object with characteristics, but they do not alter themselves or transmute into one another. Under the continuous view, the notes move into one another but you can never isolate one or even really say “this experience is music.” This is not music’s problem of course, but philosophy’s.

These are examples of difficulties in the concept of time. To confront one of these difficulties, Kant in the First Critique attempts to add mathematics, to bring the metaphysical concept of time into line with the limits of cognition. He says: the intuition that corresponds to time is a line—here the image time takes for consciousness is geometric, and in this way it makes time space. Something similar happens when not the intuition but the concept of time is at stake, whose expanded logos is “succession.” Time here collapses into space before and after are essentially “next to” plus direction. But there are more difficulties around the concept as well. Where the image of time is a line, the concept of time is a number sequence, is pure and simple “successivity.” The next difficulty then is reflexive, to wit: you need time to construct succession. Successivity by itself is not enough to be the model or the transcendental meaning of time. It has to happen, and happen with restriction, that is with necessity. So there will always be a mysterious thing, time, that allows, no forces, something to follow another thing. So in fact, in the First Critique there are at least two difficulties, one where time is not itself, is really only space, and another where the concept time requires successivity in order to define itself, but the meaning of time, successivity, requires real existing time to put it into necessary motion. The first leaves time not fully individualized as a concept, the second leaves time in a kind of empty reflex, like a mirror before a mirror.

These divagations prompt me to ask: what does it mean to keep saying time, even though its metaphysical and theological stains have never been and perhaps can never be washed out? More than this, time has been the very concept upon which a theological view of reality was supposed to be overthrown, time, as opposed to eternity. It is obviously crucial for our self-understanding to be able to say, not just say but mean, not just mean but say with a history-bending gesture of strong meaning, time. Instead of doing this, the tradition stutters – keeps saying time – but in an unhealthy repetitiveness.

It may not be an accident that difficulties saying “time” are addressed explicitly somewhat outside the precincts of philosophy, strictly speaking. The first place stands beyond disciplinary or genre classification, that is, Augustine’s *Confessions*. The possibility of time’s meaninglessness, and the problematic gesture it is to say “time” anyway, gets addressed when a human subject confronts God. The passage is well known. It is less well known that it paraphrases Plotinus



at *Enneads* 3.7.1.1–13, and thus is invested in the source's Platonizing mood. "What therefore is time?" Augustine begins his inquiry with a "what" question—*quid est enim tempus* (*Confessionem*, XI.14, p. 236)—and such a beginning, such a way of starting to say "time," reinforces the conviction he already has when he begins to explore the topic, not a Platonizing conviction at all, that the problem and the solution lie with the understanding, and, again at the beginning of the investigation of time, the understanding is supposed to be of a thing, a what. Time's whatness is what is in question. "enim," "therefore" refers to previous talk about God and how God could have created time, since God is eternal, and given this absurd negation of his own mode, time, how it could itself be, in its essence, both eternal, that is divine, and passing. The conflict between regimes, divine and human, localize in this dilemma. Time should be human all-too human, but in order for it to be, it has to be itself eternal—an eternal medium of passing away. This is not the difficulty Augustine will address with his famous question, but it is the background for it.

We shouldn't forget the *Confessions'* structure of address. The book is a silent speech between Augustine's soul and God. Readers are not the addressees but interlopers. Only by virtue of having written down this silent, private, most private of all, one-sided dialogue, can readers overhear it, in a precarious and doubtless sinful position, as interlopers. What is first overheard by readers in this section is the question: *quid est enim tempus*, what therefore is time. Augustine's soul speaks this to itself, with confidence that God is listening. I would prefer to take this as a general image. Whenever a human being says "time," I would like to propose: there is this structure. The word is said like a prayer, in reality to oneself, in hopes of a confirmation, a confirmation on one hand that someone is listening, and on the other hand that the words are the right ritual words to propitiate the one, the real, the eternal. Whenever time is said, then, it is something like an offering, an obeisance, and at the same time a question—not "are you listening" but "is this the right word"? Or else it is a petition: please tell me what is being said when I say this word-nonword.

Note that the passage in the *Confessions* is not asking for an entity that would correspond to the name time. Augustine is not expecting an answer like the one Plato gives in the *Timaeus*, that time is a "moving image of eternity." Augustine discloses the kind of what he thinks it is. It is a what of sense, not an object to be pointed out; not a reference, but an explainable to be explained—at the extreme would be a worry that it was, in the end, unexplainable. Thus he follows the first question with a second: *quis hoc facile breviterque explicaverit* (236), who could easily and briefly explain it? "What is time" asks for compact material to be loosened up, the windings of a process to be uncoiled, a single word to be amplified with more, other words, a name to become a discourse. The second question deviates from the first also in asking not what but who,

who would be equipped to do the uncoiling? This is a more desperate utterance, more than a prayer—or along with a prayer it hints for a second at the passionate need motivating it. The question is a remark, a cry for God's help with a human predicament that only a super-human could teach them how to talk their way out of. The who also indicates an irony. Who could possibly—the answer is: not myself, and not you, readers. If you claim understanding already, you are probably not the one to respond to my cry. That is, the question also indicates that explanation might not be the right way to talk about time. This constitutes the confession: the thing that is so difficult, so contradictory, created, definitely, but impossibly created, can be brought into our lingua franca, can become fodder for a transaction between yourself and God and between yourself and others. It can come in, but only without explanation. His complaint is that, of all the words he can do this with, the founding concept of human existence will not yield to brevity or ease.

The solution is not long-windedness and difficulty. He does not offer, in place of a puzzle, a theory of time. The famous passage asks for the what and the who of explanation, but it indicates very soon that it is most concerned not with knowledge or understanding but with speech. The third question is decisive: *quis hoc ad verbum de illo proferendum vel cogitatione comprehenderit* (236). “Who could comprehend this even by cognition, uttering about that “ad verbum” (my translation). The condition for understanding time is a condition of speech, of saying. If you say it right, you can understand it. Understanding is only useful if it speaks “in precise words”— *ad verbum*. This is what is missing when Augustine, in the day to day, says “time.” Time's problem is that it has not yet been said *ad verbum*, to the word. Time may be said, but it is not yet a word, it has not moved toward words that will make it more precise. Augustine steps from understanding and explanation to words and the precision they bring. As he moves closer to the word, however, Augustine finds that comprehension moves farther from him. For the history of philosophical attempts to give “time” its words, this counts as a big discovery.

Augustine's discovery is not mentioned by Heidegger or Husserl, who cite this passage almost as a talisman—. Time has not or perhaps cannot be said *ad verbum*, unfolded in the right words.<sup>2</sup> You can say *ad verbum* a multitude of other doctrines, but “who can speak of that [time] *ad verbum*?” No doctrine of *tempus* is precise enough in its

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2The requirement to speak *ad verbum* can be understood here, I think, similar to the way it is used in the highly sophisticated treatise on language that anticipates semiotics, *De doctrina Christiana*. There the important phrase “ad verbum” is used several times in one of its more usual senses: to remember something “ad verbum,” to bring it back to mind to the very word, verbatim, meaning without loss. Knowing *ad verbum* is crucial for Christian doctrine, as you can imagine. Doctrine's truth lies in large part in not deviating from scripture. You can say something other than scripture, promulgate a doctrine, so long as it remains *ad verbum*, *ad scripturam*. So long as the words keep scripture strictly in memory. With that in mind, the discussion of time in *Confessions XI*, becomes more decisive. *De doctrina christiana* Book 4 §68.

saying. It will always be vague. Vague speech is the linguistic correlative of the emptiness or puzzlement in the metaphysics of time. Vague or imaginative—a movement *ad tempum* is a movement *ab verbo*, away from the literal, into flights of fancy that Augustine, already, wants to avoid. Nevertheless, we learn here that, as something said, time moves away from explication's strict requirement to add and not lose determination. Further, as if the requirement to move toward words, to speak of time while only adding determinacy, were not enough, Augustine makes the famous comment that nonetheless we talk about it all the time as though it were familiar and known, *familiarius et notius in loquendo* (236). There is no end to speaking and hearing about it, and yet, when someone asks, you cannot answer. Time is, for Augustine, something said and something heard, among people. But he stops here. He is one of the very few who refuses to give it an image, a concept, or a corresponding substance. What he does say is this: time wants to be spelled out in words to the precise length and breadth that would satisfy comprehension, and what it gets day to day is mere speaking without saying, much. When time is said, saying as determining withdraws. Saying time withdraws determination, leaving an under- or undetermined speech effect.

A movement *ad tempum* is a movement *ab verbo*, away from the literal, away from the precise, away from the punctiform identification of this with that, and towards language of a much looser sort. The easy speakability, yes, the downright loquaciousness of the timeword is, in the famous passage, an allegory of its unsayability. This is what everyday language knows. Saying "time," "tempus" talks a drifting speech, whose intention may simply be to fill the air. To approach time produces a retreat of the word from its designating or meaning function to its notional function, a word's way of being familiar and purely familiar, a purely practical maneuver, a placeholder for the lack of understanding that it represents and, as well, perhaps, a backdoor to God, as a prayer for meaningful existence, on one hand, and also as a nonsensical creation not even God could explicate, if explication, the opposite of creation, means making knowable instead of abandoning a *fictum* to be used by humans as they will. Instead of responding to his own questions, instead of proffering a who that could say time or a what that could uncoil time into its most literal literality, Augustine's immortal passage demonstrates the futility of the question form in proximity to time—a formal consequence of Augustine's prose to which the path of *Being and Time* testifies, even if it doesn't admit it. Time belongs to the everyday chatter that Heidegger claims to be canceling and raising to a higher meaningfulness through it. Yet questioning language will never approach the timeword, insofar as asking's intentional structure, to quote phenomenology, is to determine.

## 2. Unsayng Time

If someone asks me, I can't tell them what time is, but I can tell them what kind of time Augustine is worried about. He is worried about the kind of time that passes. What preoccupies him is the time that comes full of that peculiar, paradoxical phantom, the now, a now, nows, nows and more nows. "...if nothing passed there would be no past time; if nothing were approaching, there would be no future time; if nothing were, there would be no present time" (Hackett 242). In this part of the text, the concern is with the now in its fullness and vitality. Like Husserl, and for that matter Aristotle, "now" is a difficulty, perhaps the unique difficulty of time. There is some affinity between a "now" as a unit or element of time and the difficulty determining what time is *ad verbum*. If time is in the now, so to speak, if it is punctiform like this, it can easily be determined. If time passes, is in passing, there is little to hold onto that would be enough like an entity, that would have anything like a form that could be described or an essence that could be said, without having to constantly revise your saying. It would need a saying that passed as quickly and as constantly as it did, and not only a saying but a way of saying. Language, as speech, would pass as well, in a double movement with time—a particular madness that may be our everyday madness after all.

There is another choice, it's an obvious and probably silly one: to imagine time without a now. It is time to try this, time to give up on the phantasm, emanating from Aristotle and elsewhere, in the Kairos and its reflectionless seize-the-day-morality. Abandon the now, the instant, the present—this would entail never again saying "when" or "until," not to mention "now," or even "later," refusing point-like punctures in a flow, or an end or limit like a drawn line. These and other tools for determination would have to be allowed to fall away, permitting a caesura of time rather than banking on caesuras within it. It is time for unlimited time. Revisions of 'time' change it drastically, but to a one (Bergson excepted) they don't let fall the now and its troubles. Husserl and Heidegger don't drop it, even when they revise time as flow, the one adding a complex structure in which nows echo together into a flow, the other freezing the flow altogether but keeping its vectors, past, present, future. Inner time consciousness has a now without which the absolute flow of consciousness would have no impulses and no articulations, *Jetztpunkte, die herabsinken*;<sup>3</sup> and ecstatic time has a now that can be seized to take a stand on existence, *Entschlossenheit*. Now is decisive for both, and for each, all decisiveness and determination depends on the mysterious, troublesome entity, now.

Although they don't let the now fall away, both phenomenologists have a practice of avoiding the time problem that is in any case linguistic. They substitute other words for the simple timeword "time." This is an

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3 §9, p. 28 English

interesting phenomenon, to be studied. Unlike the metaphysical tradition, and even the critical tradition, phenomenology doesn't like to let the word "time" stand on its own, as though it were an old man in need of propping up. Husserl says *Zeitbewusstsein* and Heidegger says *Zeitlichkeit*. They sneak up on old man time through subtle modifications. They add it to compounds and suffix it with qualifying particles. I like to think of this as a kind of "epoché" of time, a suspension of the difficulty through mixing time with other things. Neither Husserl nor Heidegger thematizes these compound and extended timewords as part of a necessary epoché of time, a suspension of chatter to move toward the effects it tries to name. This is what Augustine does with time in *Confessions XI*, thematize the need for a suspension of the word in order to better assess the hopes pinned on it and the effects that its particular emptiness produces.

Augustine announces a suspension of time, Celan carries it out. Augustine points out the speaking without saying, and Celan does what could be called unsaying the timeword. Celan does not do this just once, but many times, and in a variety of ways. Saying time in a variety of ways is itself a mode of suspension of its univocity and an attack on the ontological oneness that the name connotes in its history. Augustine leads time the concept back to the timeword. Celan leads the timeword, or timewords, into other sayings and mode of saying. In this respect, Celan is doing something similar to what Heidegger and Husserl also began to do, to experiment with complements to time, to propose that there are flavors of time colored by experiences and objects.

I want to suggest that timewords carry out two main tasks across Celan's poetry, and in some of his prose as well. To say "time" without saying anything much and to imagine a kind of time without a now, that old difficulty of difficulties.

Scanning for timewords quickly across Celan's poems, in a type of attention we could call diagonal, produces dizzying but important effects. The first effect I would call allowing time to empty of meaning. Here *Zeit* is said, there it is mentioned, then it is quoted, then paraphrased, until at one point "speech gives way to sound."<sup>4</sup> These are procedures for suspending time. There are others as well. For instance, the statement "it is time," *es ist Zeit* in the poem *Corona* written in Vienna in the late 1940s, carries out an effective reduction of time to the timeword. *Corona* calls its own time; it calls time and calls for time as something that is called upon. *Es ist Zeit*. A notorious chant. *Es ist Zeit* is a quote from everyday speech, and also a version of the first line of Rilke's *Herbsttag* and its address to God, "Herr: es ist Zeit,"<sup>5</sup> which itself is a perversion of psalm 119.126, which in Luther's German says "Es ist Zeit, daß der HERR handelt" and

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4 Here I am quoting Michael Levine in an unpublished conference paper delivered at Hebrew University, in the conference *Caesurae: Celan's Later Work*, November 12-14, 2019.

5 Felstiner 1995, p.54

turns the supplication of a servant into a command-like statement to God to punish lawbreakers. Timewords are used for many things. Be that as it may, "it is time" is first a quote of a quote. Soon it becomes a mention of itself, in the very same poem. You could say the phrase is repeated, but I prefer to say it is "said." Said here means being enunciated a second time, since the first time something is spoken it may be uttered, but only the second time, when it is referenced as a saying, is it properly "said." Saying is referencing as a saying, as having been said before. Perhaps "time" the timeword is the epitome of this effect. So far from being a thing, a substance, a created medium, a meaning, a concept, time gets its force by lacking a referent or a sense but nonetheless being said again and again. Time is a pure saying. It is a loquacious saying, in Augustine's sense, something you do with words leaning on a legend of meaning, an archaism growing older as it is repeated, moving farther and farther from its possible explanation and gaining currency and power as it does. There is so much to say about this empowering saying, but let us keep on the diagonal path across Celan's poems.

In an early line of the poem *Corona*, Celan has a job for time. There "time" is young, a fledgling thing. It can hardly walk. At that age it can be used in a poetic figure. Time is cracked from a nut, taught to walk, and returns back into its shell, and this indicates a game of lovers, who have some power over time. They can start time at will; they can help it to move. What happens after that however does not seem to follow their plans.

Wir schälen die Zeit aus den Nüssen und lehren sie gehn:  
die Zeit kehrt zurück in die Schale

We shell time from the nuts and teach it to walk;  
time comes back again into its husk

Time is a hard nut. Even if you manage to crack it, and certainly lovers are more able to than philosophers or priests, if they manage to crack it, and as if it were a newborn, teach it to walk, rather than to run or fly, time has its own mind. It returns to its shell. Time prefers to hide.

The last cluster of lines in the poem *Corona*, come back to the hardness of the nut.

es ist Zeit, daß man weiß!  
Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen bequemt,  
daß der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.  
Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird.

Es ist Zeit.

It is time that one knew!  
It is time for the stone to get used to blooming,  
that unrest beats a heart.  
It is time that it becomes time.

It is time.<sup>6</sup>

The scene appears laden with import. Something is supposed to arrive, an object of time. Time's object is being called for. It is time that x. An event is supposed to happen, a now—at last. At last the now arrives, or is called upon. The word “time” in this phrase means “is supposed to.” Its meaning is an ought, not an is. “It is time that” communicates an urgency and points to the importance of an object for the speaker. It points to the need, the desire, it becomes a prayer for a medium of the object's coming. There ought to be a medium that ought to make the unnatural state of affairs, that stones bloom, the new nature; the human heart ought to give up its automatism and let itself be swung by unrest. While these objects are still on the horizon, events that are supposed to land on the time, happen on time, the call “it is time” is already also, in addition to calling for events to happen, calling for the medium—calling for time to happen, to be happening. It calls for a now of transformation, the elusive desideratum of theories of time. The repeated phrase, the call—“es ist Zeit”—is the calling of a now, a now called upon to happen, to come, to transit into being. Indeed, the little sign of a big transformation of nature, the moment when stones start to bloom and that becomes their habit, cannot happen until time happens. Then, almost as an aftereffect, the messianic urgency flows away. Said once, said twice, thrice, more—the phrase becomes a mention of itself. More than this, more than a demotion to a less forceful, less direct, mode of speech, the call gets answered by itself, as though it had an echo. It is time—it is time. Time is made in an unhealthy repetitiveness, but expressly so, in the poem.

This is the effect as the poem goes on, to empty out the messianic now until it merely echoes back our wishes. For anything to happen to us on earth, you learn that the now-time has to be called for, first. Now must come before the transformation comes. Now has to respond before anything else can be called upon. Now precedes even the messiah. This is a deeply categorial thought, almost on par with Hegel or Kant. The framework of transformation is the now that gives space for any happening, an apriori requirement without which nothing could ever be seen to be different. And, in this poem at least, the now does not come. Is this because the transcendental structure of timeliness is—out of service? absent? Or is it an old fantasy or legend whose time has, qua legend, finally come?

.....  
<sup>6</sup>Translations of Celan are mine—PN.



*Es ist Zeit, dass es Zeit wird.* Celan has the temerity to write this line, which is close in its form to a joke. What is intended in the first half is made into nothing in the second half. Any force left in the call for time, by this line, is gravely weakened. The call has fallen far from its initial high urgency. It has fallen from a call to a mention to a wish. It has fallen from a call for a state of affairs to a wish for a time structure in which states of affairs could come about cleanly. From a wish it has become a saying, the saying of a saying. The poem writes out in a repetition: here is where someone would want a “now.” Which reads as: this is the kind of thing someone says who has this view of time. Just here, that someone is left with the saying alone, a saying without a thing said.

What could be less urgent, less promising, than the final utterance, which works as a notification that the call has been spoken but whatever it wanted was not forthcoming. After all the calls, a whimper: “Es ist Zeit.” Although it may not have been the task, the effect, over the course of these sayings, is step by step to unsay the familiar saying. Unsayings is not saying. Not saying something preserves it in the inner chamber of a language for a future in which it can be brought out once again. Unsayings is a direct, rather violent act in which a word is said with the full force of its historical meaning, but what it says in a language’s archive of sayings is, through linguistic procedures alone, suspended. This at least is the hope.

Celan apes a history of time philosophy across the poem’s final lines: philosophy says it, and says it again, celebrating the discovery of time, each time definitively, each time awaiting another theory to unseat and best it. Looked at from galaxies away, this procedure of philosophy sounds like: here is time, here is time, here is time. In philosophy, it is always time for time. A cult with a single idol meets its exhaustion in the last line, which acts, as I said, like an unsaying. Although not codified by linguists, unsaying is a real mode of speech, though it is a highly negative one. Just as you can say, you can also unsay. In Celan’s practice, exemplified in this poem, unsaying uses a saying to bring to an end a particular use of a saying. This should not be confused with silence, or nonsense, although the latter is closer to what happens here. Silence is always metaphysical.

I want to turn, in this diagonal march across Celan’s corpus, to another poem, written much later, that expressly quotes a philosophical account of time. One way to address the empty, conflicting and at times contradictory, vague and still alluring talk about time is to unsay time as now. This Celan did, consciously or not, in *Corona*. Another way is to invest in other images, that conform neither to flow nor to punctiform punctures. One thing is true: under time philosophy that insists on the preposterous dichotomy and impossible union of flow and point, phenomena have to come either as determinate flows or as punctiform happenings. There are only rarely other alternatives (Bergson, again, comes to mind).



In a *Hof*, phenomena mill around, neither going nor staying, not fully happening, at least not in a blaze of intensity so that you could say they had definitively occurred, and not taking shape suddenly all at once at a particular impression or point. Importantly, the sovereign is excluded from Celan's *Hof*, a word that refers to the architectural space of an interior outside, the courtyard, and also to the political space of a royal court. No doubt, in temporal matters, the sovereign is "now." In a *Zeithof* the sovereign "now" is closed out, refused. Reading diagonally across Celan's archive, the *Zeithof*, this word, this evocation of another alternative shape of time, is written in poems very late. It comes up in two poems in the posthumously published collections *Lichtzwang* and *Schneepart*.<sup>7</sup> Variations on this word and this shape are also found in the late typescripts that together carry the title "Zeitgehöft," which also include poems related to his trip to Israel in October 1969.

Reading diagonally, one of the poems in this late typescript, "Erst wenn ich dich," could be said to rewrite "Corona." If it does, it also leads the earlier poem back to an intention it did not know it had. Pierre Joris translates "Zeitgehöft," the title of the typescript in which "Erst wenn ich dich" stands, as "Timehalo," which helps move the reading toward what *Corona* may have been after. In that poem, *Corona*, time had a halo, you could say, looking back from the far removed spirit of the late typescripts. "Time" was, in the earlier poem, the hallowed structure that preceded and made possible, paradoxically, the messianic arrival. More holy even than the messiah himself was time, then—the messiah depended on it to bring about a now, so that he could step into the world. Here, more than twenty years later, time has no halo, no corona. Time is a halo in the sense of being halo-shaped rather than a punctiform line. In being halo-shaped it has no halo itself, no more than it has a now or a flow. It comes in the shape of a halo, and not a holy one like a corona or crown, of thorns or light. A halo is a simple shape, but it is also somewhat less than a shape. It is a vague area, unevenly lit, trailing off at the edges, roughly hovering around something it is not. The timeword *Zeitgehöft* is never used in these poems, but *Zeithof* is. In a *Zeithof*, the halo shape overlaps with the political or architectural court. Hof implies a zone of secondary dispersion, a circumradiation, as Plotinus called the partly lit penumbra outside the One.<sup>8</sup> In both the corona and the court, royal power circulates in a dimmer, reflected mode. If the sovereign sits at the center, the Hof is everything that is not the sovereign; it is not power but conduits of power, it is not plenty but needs, wants, desires, not God but fallen angels. In "Corona," you could say, Celan was gesturing, before he knew it, toward a timepenumbra, which would light up once a substitute for "now" was found.

7 "Schwimmhäute" (GW Bd. 2 p. 297) and "Mapesbury Road" (GW Bd. 2 p. 365)

8 *The Enneads*, 5.1.6, p. 540; Loeb Greek edition, p. 30, line 28.

It has been noted that Celan read Husserl's lectures on time consciousness, edited by Heidegger, and he underlined the word *Zeithof* in §14 on the "reproduction of time objects (secondary memory)."<sup>9</sup> Without getting into the philosophical details of Husserl's invention of this word, it is important to say that Heidegger has no *Hof* for his concept of time. Heidegger says time without a halo or a court shape. Celan had to go back to Husserl to encounter this shape, and effectively then he writes Husserl back into the story of phenomenological theories of time after Heidegger had erased the inventor of phenomenology's time thought from the dedication to *Being and Time*. This is to say, also, philologically, that in the time of the *Hof*, the past does not go away, is not superseded, and the future does not dominate interpretations of the present as it does in ecstatic time for Heidegger.

Celan's procedure around this word, *Zeithof*, and its variations, involves, I believe, a reduction of Heidegger back to Husserl, reinscribing the teacher back into the rebellious student's work and the Jew back into the German. It also involves a return from ecstatic time to a less problematic and more promising revision of the time concept. It further lets fall away time as a concept, as a philosophical desideratum, through a special speech procedure: condensation. The condensation, or to speak with Celan, the *Engführung* of "Zeit" together with another word is not extraordinary. Quite the contrary, it is an absolutely common phenomenon among the loquacious speakers of German, it has to be said, which, if Heidegger had listened to this way of saying "time" he might have discovered a less heroic stance for Dasein. Agglutination of other substances to the mythical time substance, this possibility in the language, is recycled by Husserl from the natural attitude into a technical modification of time, first and foremost in the compound word *Zeitbewusstsein*, and then, in a much more minor train of thought, for him, in *Zeithof*. Two compounds, two condensations of alien substances. The condensation of words allows Husserl to imagine unholy mixed substances that stretch what "time" says. Each instance when this sort of condensation happens, in everyday talk as well as in philosophical discourse, the time's claim to mean something on its own is slightly diminished, its high reputation slightly tarnished. Old man time learns to lean on younger words.

The condensed form of the word *Zeithof*, although borrowed from Husserl, is not unique in Celan's poems. Across the corpus diagonally a string of time condensations shapes up: *Zeitrot*, *Zeitleer*, *Unzeit*, *Herzzeit*, *zeitstark*, *Zeitwort*, *Zeitkörnern*, *Zeitstaub*, *Sternzeit*, *zeithin*, *Zeitenschrunde*, *Zeithof* (3x), *Zeitwinkel*, *zeiteinwärts*—showing a playful

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9 See *La Bibliothèque philosophique* p. 422 and *Celan Handbuch* p. 127. Sandro Zanetti discusses Celan's encounter with the word "Zeithof" in Husserl (145-6) and lists the appearances in poems of that and similar words (note 94, 146).

and inventive attitude toward time's old problems. What can't be solved might become better in solution with another, diluting its potency while inventing other modes. Leaning on other words makes holes in the concept and the thing—*Zeitlöcher*—threatening time's independence from what is supposed to happen in it. This seems to be the procedure here, to contaminate time with other phenomena, which become qualities that interfere in its autonomy and reduce it itself from a substance to a quality of other things.

What is the quality to which time is reduced, through condensation with another thing, in Husserl's timeword *Zeithof*?

Anything, regardless of history or geography can clamber around in a *Zeithof* so long as it appears as a background, so long as a sovereign "now" is excluded. In the "Lectures on Inner Time Consciousness," Husserl is stingy with details. Every perception has a courtyard surrounding it of protentions and retentions, anticipations of future events along with memories of past ones. The courtyard or garden or halo in which protentions and retentions reside together is not itself a protention or a retention, thus not like a future or past supporting a particular now. To fill in the details on the Husserlian timecourt, *Ideen I* is helpful. For every experience of a thing, there is also the experience of a court surrounding and supporting it. "Every perception of a thing has such a courtyard/halo of background intuitions" ("Jede Dingwahrnehmung hat so einen Hof von Hintergrundsanschauungen (oder Hintergrundsschauungen)") (*Ideen I* §35 71). Husserl characterizes the *Hof* in two further ways in *Ideen I*, as a *Hof der unbestimmtheit* (§84 190) and a *Hof von Inaktuellen* (§35 73)—a court/halo of indeterminateness and a court/halo of untimely things. These regions contain "'implicitly' conscious objects" ("'implizite' bewussten Gegenstände") (§35 72), with the proviso that no two experiences have "an absolutely identical "court/halo" ("einen absolut gleichen "Hof") (§83 187). In terms of time, then, in the unfolding of the "Hof" image that Husserl gives in *Ideen I*, a *Hof* would attend any object, hold indeterminate, non-now-like, background phenomena and effects, without a flow and without the now to anchor them, floating around as it were. To repeat, what happens in the *Hof* is and stays in a state of non-currency, implicitness, and indeterminacy—the very qualities that made time inaccessible to phenomenology in the first place. If you want to put a fine word on it, this, the *Hof*, when applied to time, says what time had always been in the philosophical tradition: lacking an intelligible now, having no details that would be explicit or vivid, and fully, wondrously indeterminate.

This deep critique of the time idea still needs to be better described with reference to Celan's poems. An indication has to suffice here. Where "Corona" had

der Mund redet wahr.  
 Mein Aug steigt hinab zum Geschlecht der Geliebten  
 the mouth speaks true.  
 My eye climbs down to the beloved's sex  
 And  
 Es ist Zeit, dass es Zeit wird.  
 Es ist Zeit  
 It is time that it becomes time.  
 It is time.

The late poem “Erst wenn ich dich,“ from the *Zeitgehöft* typescript, has:

glaubst du mir meinen Mund,  
 der klettert mit Spätsinnigem droben in Zeithöfen umher,  
 believe you my mouth,  
 it clambers around with the late-sensed up there in the timecourt,

In the *Zeithof* of the poem, the plural *Zeithöfen*, at least two *Höfe* overlapping, where time is not halted, for that would imply an underlying now-flow, but is kept merely as whatever qualities go along with a haltless inner dispersion—which might include indeterminacy, out-of-date-ness, and merely implicit consciousness, that is, a species of unawareness, as phenomena from all dates clamber around, under an epoché of the now, signaled here by the lateness of what could sense it directly, *spätsinnig* with regard to the fullness of now, and regarding the other fullness as well, the fullness of decay. Nothing is now, nothing flows, either forward or backward. If someone asks, call the quality of what happens in *Hofzeit*: “umher”—“around-about-ish”—

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