

Meridians: the poem as a place of encounter in Paul Celan and J. H. Prynne

Nicola Thomas
University of Nottingham

Abstract

In his 1960 Büchner Prize acceptance speech, the poet Paul Celan used a series of spatial metaphors to assess the various ways in which the poem enables literary 'encounters'. Celan's speech is full of reflections on how language shapes relationships of distance and proximity, crystallised in the speech's concluding image of poetic language as a 'meridian' which serves both as a measure of distance and a marker of connection. This article compares treatments of the motif of the poem as a place of encounter in the work of Celan himself and his near-contemporary, the British poet J. H. Prynne. Although both poets frequently present the poetic text as a space of encounters, they also manipulate the connections and ruptures which poetry affects. Both can be seen as seeking proximity through communication while also conceding the inevitability of distance in intersubjective relations.

Keywords: poetry, meridian, encounter, Paul Celan, J. H. Prynne

This article examines the structural dyad of distance and proximity in the work of two post-war poets, Paul Celan (1920-1970) and J. H. Prynne (1936-). It examines how their interest in the poem as what Celan (2003: 54) calls a place of 'encounter' – a place which reconciles and 'concentrates' distance and proximity – is reflected in the image of the meridian, '[t]he great circle of the celestial sphere which passes through the celestial poles and the zenith of a given place on the earth's surface' ('Meridian'). Close readings of two poems, Celan's 'In the Air' ['In der Luft'] (orig. 1963; my edition: Celan 1988: 226-229) and Prynne's 'From End to End' (orig. 1969; my edition: Prynne 2005: 62-63) furnish examples of how the trope of the meridian functions in their work.

Both Prynne and Celan use the image of the meridian metalinguistically, as a construct which represents a particular understanding

of the communicative function of language. This reflects the fact that both are profoundly metalinguistic poets who see language as a material for investigation, a site of connection and communication, and also the locus of rupture and distance. For each, this interest takes a different form and is motivated by different biographical and literary-historical perspectives on the nature of language.

Celan's metalinguistic explorations are prompted by his fraught relationship with the German language. German was his first language, the language his parents spoke, but also the language in which many members of his family were condemned during the Holocaust. Celan suggests that German became 'greyer' after the Shoah, arguing that the language 'distrusts "beauty"' and 'has become more sober, more factual... concerned with precision... it names, it posits' (Celan 2003: 15). As Robert von Hallberg points out, Celan's engagement with the Shoah is fundamentally as a 'philological event' (von Hallberg 2006) which in my view, precipitates a form of *Sprachskepsis* (scepticism about language) by demanding new models of expression capable of expressing the consequences of an all-encompassing catastrophe.

Prynne's interest in the material of language is not directly motivated by the Shoah and its consequences, but his work nevertheless expresses a similar sense of linguistic crisis. Reeve and Kerridge have argued that Prynne's complex blending of perspectives at the extremes of scale, small and large, represents a critique of the fixed subject-position of modern liberal humanism: '[Prynne] immerse[s] subjectivity in the roar, not of different individual viewpoints, but of different social discourses' (Reeve and Kerridge 1995: 31). The synthesis of distance and proximity effected by the trope of the meridian can be seen in the context of this move to efface the liberal humanist subject.

Both Prynne and Celan often explore the productive problem of a language which is both precise and polysemous – a necessary yet problematic means of intersubjective communication – using tropes of text-as-place, of which the meridian is one. The image speaks specifically to the notion of the poem as a place of intersubjective encounter. This means, of course, not only in superficial terms the encounter between reader and poet, but also between various subject-positions adopted by the poet himself, and between the poet and other – real or imagined – subjects, not least the authors of other texts and other discourses.

Celan's Büchner Prize acceptance speech of 1960, 'The Meridian', is the genesis of this image. It begins with a discussion of the political and poetic commitment demonstrated by Lucile in Georg Büchner's play *Dantons Tod* [*Danton's Death*]. Lucile sacrifices herself to the monarchist cause during the French Revolution with an impassioned utterance - 'Es lebe der König' or 'Long live the King'.¹ Lucille's statement is taken by Celan as one model for poetic art, which can bridge the gap between language and action. Immediately the spatial metaphors appear: Celan says that 'Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road... art is the *distance* poetry must cover, no less and no more' (Celan 2003: 44-45; my emphasis). As it does so, Celan reminds us:

Das Gedicht ist einsam. Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Wer es schreibt, bleibt ihm mitgegeben. Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung – *im Geheimnis der Begegnung?* (Celan 1986: 198, emphasis in original)

[The poem is lonely. It is lonely and en route. Its author stays with it. Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, *in the mystery of encounter?* (Celan 2003: 49)]

Despite the profound awareness, situatedness (in space and time) and proximity inherent in poetry's 'bridging of the gap', there is also mystery, rupture, difficulty and distance embedded within poetic communication. The poem seeks to create a particular form of space where we can be both close and distant at once, in a condition of possibility. It is in this context that the image of the meridian is invoked, since it offers the possibility of reconciling closeness and distance, of linking while also acknowledging difference. Two people can stand on the same meridian at opposite poles of the earth. Celan writes:

Ich finde das Verbindende und wie das Gedicht zur Begegnung
Führende. Ich finde etwas – wie die Sprache – Immaterielles, aber
Irdisches, Terrestrisches, etwas Kreisförmiges, über die beiden Pole
in sich selbst Zurückkehrendes und dabei – heitererweise – sogar die
Tropen Durchkreuzendes -: ich finde ... einen *Meridian*.
(Celan 186: 202, emphasis in original)

[I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters. I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics: I find ... a *meridian* (Celan 2003: 55)]

The meridian is recursive and paradoxical, immaterial and terrestrial, crossing both poles and tropics. A meridian can be said to 'really exist' insofar as the land it transcribes really exists, but it is also obviously and inherently a cartographic construct.

Jacques Derrida has analysed Celan's perspective on the nature of the poetic utterance as expressed in the Meridian speech (Derrida 2005). Derrida focuses on the temporal 'concentration' Celan describes, positing the 'datedness' of the poetic text as part of network of ciphers or shibboleths which encode the specificity of the poetic utterance. All dates recur (annually) of course, and thus disparate events which occur on the same date are thrown into unlikely union: their anniversaries may be celebrated on the same day, even though they occurred years apart. These events become both close to and distant from one another in time.

This blend of singularity and connection defines the poetic 'encounter': 'heterogeneous *events*', Derrida writes, though we might just as easily say '*locations*', become 'suddenly neighbours to one another, even though one knows that they remain, and must remain, strangers, infinitely. It is just this which is called the "encounter"' (Derrida 2005: 10). Hence, according to

Derrida, 'the Meridian which binds ... provokes in broad daylight, at noon, at midday, the encounter with the other in a single place, at a single point, that of the poem' (ibid.: 14).

Like the cycle of years which unites dates, the meridian is a ring, a circle which binds and connects. But at the same time, it marks distance, singularity, situatedness – both in its capacity as navigational tool and also because, at a structural level, the meridian relies on the existence of two opposing poles. It is also no specific 'place', but rather represents a schematic linking of places, as Otto Pöggeler points out – it is at once (as Celan's description also makes clear) both earthly, terrestrial, and immaterial (Pöggeler 1962: 98). It is therefore able to absorb the contradictions of language 'after Auschwitz' described above: the precision, the power to name, to posit, exists alongside the reality of rupture and difficulty.

Celan's 'In the Air' enacts the creation of a new language through a mysterious intersubjective encounter which takes the form of a kiss. It describes a global space which blends the immaterial and the concrete, criss-crossed by lines, meridians and networks and framed by references to the Shoah and its consequences.

IN DER LUFT, da bleibt deine Wurzel, da,
in der Luft.
Wo sich das Irdische ballt, erdig,
Atem-und-Lehm.
Groß
geht der Verbannte dort oben, der
Verbrannte: ein Pommer, zuhause
im Maikäferlied, das mütterlich blieb, sommerlich, hell-
blütig am Rand
aller schroffen,
winterhart-kalten
Silben.

[IN THE AIR, that's where your root remains, there,
In the air.
Where the terrestrial rounds itself, clenched, earthy,
both breath and clay.
Unbowed
The banished walks up there, the
tranded, burnt: a man from pomerania, at home
in the cockchafer song, still motherly, summery, bright-
blooded at the rim
of all the harsh,
winter-hard-chilling
syllables.] (Celan 1988: 226ff)

The poem's opening recalls the idiom 'up in the air': rootless, disoriented,

without fixed purpose or expression. The allusion is also botanical, referring to the aerial roots commonly seen on tropical plants such as orchids. Both sets of connotations introduce the tension between earth and air, fixity and transience, which is a central theme of the poem. The capturing of the aerial roots in soil is equated with the creation scene, the ‘breath and clay’ of Genesis 2:7.

In the second stanza we are introduced to ‘a man from Pomerania’, an exile with no land who is only at home in the *Maikäferlied* of German folk tradition. In this children’s rhyme, the maybug or cockchafer is represented as a refugee from the Thirty Years War who has lost both home and family. As Winckler notes, this gives an ironic resonance to the adjective ‘motherly’, reminding us of the violence that Celan’s family endured (Winckler 1997: 369) The man from Pomerania’s home is in a poetic text as an autonomous space in a non-metaphorical sense: he exists only in words and is ‘at home’ in them.

Mit ihm
wandern die Meridiane:
an-
gesogen von seinem
sonnengesteuerten Schmerz, der die Länder verbrüdert
nach
dem Mittagsspruch einer
liebenden
Ferne. Aller-
orten ist Hier und Heute, ist von Verzweiflungen her,
der Glanz,
in den die Entzweiten treten mit ihren
geblendeten Mündern:

[Together with him
the meridians wander:
sucked
in by his sun-steered pain that makes brothers of countries
under
the noonday spell of a
loving
distance. Every-
where is Here and Today, by dint of despair is
the radiance
into which the divided step with their
blinded mouths:] (Celan 1988: 226-227)

Unlike in the Meridian speech, here the meridians (in the plural) are said to ‘wander’, remaining difficult and unstable in the context of actual poetic creation. The compound adjective ‘sun-steered’ invokes celestial and terrestrial networks of meridian, equator, zenith and azimuth, signalling that we are in the domain of an archaic science of navigation according to the sun and stars – ‘under the noonday spell of a / loving / distance’. The lineation here literally enacts the tension between connection and distance which it describes. The

assertion that 'Every- / where is Here and Today' can only be true if 'here' is the poem itself: the 'always en-route', embedded within a recursive, circular structure of both space and time.

der Kuß, nächtlich,
brennt einer Sprache den Sinn ein, zu der sie erwachen, sie -:
heimgekehrt in
den unheimlichen Bannstrahl,
der die Verstreuten versammelt, die
durch die Sternwüste Seele Geführte, die
Zeltmacher droben im Raum
ihrer Blicke und Schiffe,
die winzigen Garben Hoffnung,
darin es von Erzengelfittichen rauscht, von Verhängnis,
die Brüder, die Schwestern

[the kiss, nocturnal,
into a language brands the meaning they wake to, they -:
come home into
the uncanny banishment ray
that gathers the scattered, those
led through the star desert soul,
the tent-makers up in the space
of their gazing and ships,
the tiny sheaves of hop
in which there's a swish of archangels' wings, of doom,
the brothers, the sisters found] (Celan 1988: 226-227)

This theme continues through the subsequent stanza, where we encounter more images of celestial navigation of 'the tent-makers up in the space / of their gazing and ships'.

[...] die

zu leicht, die zu schwer, die zu leicht
Befundenen mit
der Weltenwaage im blut-
schändrischen, im
fruchtbaren Schoß, die lebenslang Fremden,
spermatisch bekränzt von Gestirnen, schwer
in den Unteifen lagernd, die Leiber
zu Schwellen getürmt, zu Dämmen, - die

Furtenwesen, darüber
der Klumpfuß der Götter herüber-
gestolpert kommt – um
wessen
Sternzeit zu spät?

[too light, too heavy, too light
on the scale of the worlds in the in-
cestuous, in the
fruitful womb, those life-long aliens
spermatologically wreathed with constellations, heavily
encamped in the shallows, their bodies
piled up into thresholds, embankments, - those

ford creatures over which
the club-footed god comes
stumbling across – by
whose
stellar time too late?] (Celan 1988: 229-228)

In the final two stanzas, this contraction (concentration) of distance and proximity reaches a grotesque climax. The poem juxtaposes the proximity of birth, conception and even incest against the distance of ‘strangers [...] wreathed with constellations’, implying the vast distances between stars and planets. The piling up of their bodies ‘on the thresholds’ and the neologism ‘Furtenwesen’, ‘ford creatures’, invoke liminality, another type of ‘concentration’ which mirrors that of distance and proximity. The shift to ‘stellar time’ – the temporality of deep space and stars – implies near infinite extension and distance, making it hard to logically resolve the possibility of the ‘club-footed god’ of the last stanza coming ‘too late’.

‘In the Air’ blends the terrestrial and the celestial, the concrete and the immaterial, the close and the distant. After reading Celan’s Meridian speech and in light of the central action of the poem whereby a mysterious encounter ‘brands’ new meaning into language, we can understand these motifs as a reflection of the qualities of poetry and its communicative possibilities: we are, in the poem, at once close and distant, exiled and at home, ‘in the air’ but also ‘rooted’, in a space which is ‘both breath and clay’.

Prynne’s ‘From End to End’ is equally concerned with the creation of a textual space, or place, of encounter. The poem has a clear central trope – that of ‘length’, the ‘line’:

Length is now quite another things: that is,
waiting or coming right up slap into the sun,
spreading into the land to cross, the smell of
diesel oil on the road. The friends there are,
as if residing in what instantly goes with it,
as if longer than the infinite desire, longer
and across into some other thing. Keeping
the line, running back up into the mountains,
denied. And so, in the actual moment dis-
honest, actually refusing the breakage, and
your instinct for the whole purpose
again shows

how gently it is all broken
and how lightly, as you
 would say, to come in.
(Prynne 2005: 62)

The line the poem describes cannot be read as specifically mimetic or even straightforwardly metaphorical. It is not merely used as shorthand for a road, a pathway, the meridian traced by the sun's trajectory across the sky, or a rainbow, although all of these readings are made possible by the poem's ambiguous syntax and rich imagery. Indeed, it explicitly recalls earlier examples of the trope of the 'line' in English poetry, such as Wordsworth's 'My Heart Leaps Up' and Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning', as well as mimicking their lyric tone.² But unlike these earlier 'lines', Prynne's line is neither straightforwardly mimetic nor wholly metaphorical. 'The smell of / diesel oil on the road', the presence of 'friends' and the journey towards the sun or mountains all suggest an adventurous road-trip or journey; but the motif of length also goes 'longer across into some other thing', before seeming to fragment and break in the final lines of the stanza, confounding any attempt to read the 'line' of the poem as the literal route of a journey.

'From End to End' also manipulates its own lines – the lines of poetic verse. There are no stanza breaks in the poem, but rather blocks of full lines followed by short sections of truncated, indented line-fragments. These are also semantically marked off as belonging to some kind of 'breakage': 'how gently it is all broken', we read in the first fragmentary interlude, 'down the cancelled line', in the third. Like the lines of paths and roads, which appear as fragile and temporary, the poem's form constantly interweaves union and schism, self-consciously manipulating the reader's path through the poem.

[...]

how strange to
say this, which abandons of
course all the joy of not
 quite going, so far.
I would not have recognised it if the sun
hadn't unexpectedly snapped the usual ride,
and with you a real ironist, your length
run off out into some other place. Not the
mountains, nothing to do with the sacred child.
(Prynne 2005: 62)

The poem repeatedly points beyond itself, allowing its line to run into the indescribable and intangible, and thereby giving a sense of infinite extension in all directions: 'length / run off out into some other place' / 'across into some other thing'. The vagueness of these two locations signals the metalinguistic nature of the line motif: as the lines being described 'run out', so too do the words to describe them.

The continued quality I know is turned down,
pointed into the earth: love is a tremor, in
this respect, this for the world without length.
Desire is the turn to a virtue, of extent
without length. How
I feel is still alone this path,
down the cancelled line and
even in the dawn
as almost a last evening, coming back the
day before. (Prynne 2005: 62-63)

‘From End to End’ measures and describes length in lyrical and expansive terms, but it also continually undermines and disorients this sense of infinite expansion. This is performed both by disrupting the actual *line* of the poem, and in the poem’s descriptions of breakage and contraction. Here, a lack of ‘length’ is equated with ‘love’, recalling the tension in Celan’s ‘loving / distance’. The desire to root and make concrete is implied by the ‘quality ... pointed into the earth’ and the geological term ‘tremor’. Extent ‘without length’ – the ultimate desire, the sought-after perfect synthesis of distance and proximity – is mathematically and geographically impossible. The yearning for extension and distance is undermined by a contrasting desire for proximity and connection.

[...] Lost it, by our joint throw,
and the pleasure, the breakage is no longer, no
more length in which we quickly say
good-bye, each to each at the meridian. As now
each to each good-bye I love you so. (Prynne 2005: 63)

The final lines of Prynne’s poem give a sense of something rapidly contracting and disappearing. Unlike in earlier sections of the poem, where the desire to be connected, to be linked by lines and proximate to one another, is continually frustrated by ‘broken’ syntax and lineation, here the syntax is naïvely paratactical, giving the impression of time running out in a fleeting encounter between lovers. That the declaration of love follows a ‘good-bye’ is testament to the temporary and fragile basis of the encounter.

Given Prynne’s sensitive readings of Celan’s work, it is possible to read these final lines as an intertextual reference: the ‘meridian’, the place of poetic encounter, represents both the place where ‘the breakage is no longer’ – that utopia of ‘extent without length’ – and the place where we say good-bye to each other at the same time as declaring our ‘love’.³ The poem, criss-crossed by lines and meridians, becomes a place where subjects can encounter each other, temporarily and mysteriously. The tension between distance and proximity which is at the centre of poetic communication is expressed and explored through the metaphor of the meridian, and the associated tropes of length, extension, measuring, navigating, traversing and transcribing the world with lines and networks.

Reading these two poems together alongside Celan's speech highlights many similarities, and sheds light not only on the undeniable influence of Celan's work on J.H. Prynne, but also (and more importantly) on parallels in the ways the two poets express the communicative function of poetry using spatial constructs. Both texts blend lyrical, concrete descriptions of landscape with geographical-cartographical abstraction, overlaying images of places with grids, lines and networks of co-ordinates and meridians. Both emphasise the relationship between the concrete and the immaterial, in space and language, and both describe dramatic encounters which have metalinguistic force as symbols of intersubjective communication.

Celan's schematic meridian, as described in his famous speech, performs precisely the same function, effacing the contradiction between distance and proximity by positing a schematic, immaterial space which both marks connection and measures distance. Both poets use the rich connotative potential of the meridian as a metaphor for poetic space. They do so because, for both, the poem is a particular kind of space where distance and proximity are concentrated, even synthesised – where we can encounter one another in the way which Celan's Meridian speech describes: spontaneously, as heterogeneous subjects; temporarily and mysteriously.

Endnotes

1 This phrase is also the title of a poem Prynne dedicated to Celan in his 1971 collection *Brass* (Prynne 2005: 169).

2 As Stanley points out, the poem's final line quotes 'My heart leaps up', which describes the poet's spontaneous overflow of emotion on observing a rainbow: 'And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety' (Stanley 2010: 12, Wordsworth 1869: 54). Given the prominence of motifs of lines and delineation and the references to a relationship between lovers, one can clearly also read echoes of Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning', which employs the conceit of two lovers joined like a pair of compasses, their interrelation characterised by spiritual proximity even under circumstances of physical distance (Donne 1994: 33). Unlike in the Donne poem, here the lines are faltering and broken.

3 Evidence of Prynne's extensive engagement with Celan's poetry and criticism can be found not only in his dedication of 'Es Lebe der König' but also in his essay 'Huts' (Prynne 2008).

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Biography

Nicola Thomas is a PhD student at the University of Nottingham. Her research compares approaches to space, place and landscape in post-war British and German poetry, with particular reference to the work of Paul Celan, J. H. Prynne, Sarah Kirsch, Derek Mahon, Helmut Heißenbüttel and Roy Fisher.

NICOLA
THOMAS