Dis-positions

Introduction

Kristina Mendicino and Dominik Zechner

Paul Celan's works emerged as zones of intersection between the extremes of poetic expression and philosophical reflection. In this way, they dwell in the space of a threshold that harbors the possibility for speaking otherwise than in a manner that could pretend to occupy a position within presupposed "genres" or "fields." Not only have philosophers and theorists from Theodor W. Adorno via Peter Szondi to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe engaged Celan's poems in profound and meaningful ways, drawing conceptual insight from the literary encounter—Celan's poems themselves mark critical turns in traditional philosophical aspirations, as recently shown by Werner Hamacher, who tracked the conceptual traces and import of Parmenides, Benjamin, and Heidegger within Celan's oeuvre.[1] The divergent poetic, philosophical, and critical idioms that have marked Celan's writing—and that Celan's writing has come to mark—thus solicit a philology that cannot be situated according to clearly demarcated areas of inquiry but instead explore the various ways in which the ambitions of poetic and philosophical writing meet in texts of and on Celan—pacing out his works as a borderland where the threshold between the literary and the philosophical is encountered, negotiated, unsettled, and *dis*-posed otherwise. This premise underpins and sustains the chapters gathered in *Thresholds, Encounters: Paul Celan and the Claim of Philology*, which all probe the consequences of Celan's poetry for thinking and writing, while inviting readers from diverse disciplinary

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directions to further the approaches that are traced through the liminal zones that Celan's oeuvre opens.

In articulating what is at stake in the polyvocal language of Paul Celan, as well as the philological attentiveness that his poems solicit, one would do well to begin by considering the fourteenth of Werner Hamacher's *95 Theses on Philology*, which reads: "Poetry is *prima philologia* [Dichtung ist *prima philologia*]."[2] Echoing the scholastic designation of metaphysics as *prima philosophia,* which was so called for its concern with first causes, the phrase not only alters what was—more than once—called "first," first with "poetry," and then with "philology"; it also poses no alternative. Rather, the notion of a "first" is here exposed—philologically—to radical indefinition through its parody or parallel, which at once renders it principally recognizable and remarkably unprincipled, an inchoate and anarchic alteration of "primacy," and thus one that fundamentally displaces the question of any first cause. Yet beside the unsettling consequences that the phrase "prima philologia" would entail for the thought of "first" principles, the formulation also—and perhaps before all else—raises the question of the place of poetry within and beyond the thinking on language that Hamacher traces in his text. Literally, "poetry" would seem to come first, but nearly as soon as it is said, the movement of the phrase troubles its apparent position as the "subject" of a "thetic" proposition. For the complexities of *prima philologia*—itself an instance of poetic *Verdichtung*, or "condensation"—render it impossible to determine, strictly speaking, which element of the syntagma should have priority; whether it should be understood as an assertion that "poetry is first philology," or whether "first philology" is instead said to be an instance of "poetry." Hamacher's minimal syntagm on poetry and philology does not *say*: it states no axiomatic premise, it forms no predicative proposition, and it pronounces no decision.

It is instead an exemplary instance of the threshold-language that philology will later be said to expose, as the comportment toward language that "emancipates the interval from its border phenomena and, going a step farther, opens up phenomena out of the interval between them," and it is in this way that philology might approach poetry, among other idioms, without confining the language that it addresses to a generic category or the object of a truth claim—and thereby falsifying what is at issue when it comes to language.[3] As Hamacher explicates in the following thesis, if

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poetry is "the factual ground for philology's gestures and operations," then the "*fundamentum in re*" for philology discloses itself as "an abyss," since neither the substantial *logos* of ontology nor the categorial forms of epistemology can be supposed as the basis for its speech: "Wherever there is no form of proposition, there is no ground of knowledge [Wo keine Form der Aussage, da kein Grund des Wissens]." Poetry and philology, that is to say, speak for language before every possible imposition of "firm contours," "constant form[s]," and "meanings fixed in advance."[4] They speak for language in its extreme possibilities and impossibilities, for language in and at its—abyssal—opening. This is why, when Hamacher returns to the affinity between poetry and philology in his essay, "For—Philology," it is an inclination toward the "openness of language" that they are said to share:

> Philology shares this *pathos* with everyone who speaks or writes, *a fortiori* with the poets, who speak of nothing other than this experience of the openness of language [*Sprachoffenheit*]: of the possibility of language under the conditions of its improbability, of the potency of language under the conditions of its impotence, of power in the horizon of its withdrawal. Poetry is the most unreserved philology, and only for this reason can it attract the privileged and arresting attention of philology.[5]

And it is also why the opening of Hamacher's essay is marked by a prepositional "for"-word, which returns in his commentary on a verse from Paul Celan: "Here, it unwords in the for [Hier, es entwortet im Für]." On that "first" word of his essay and this "unword" of Celan—and over the parodic-poetic displacement and condensation of yet another "first," namely, the prologue to the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word"—"for" will be said to signify that "in the beginning was not the word. . . . Whenever it comes into language [zum Wort kommt], it does so in each case from and to a *Für-Wort*. And even when it is a word for a word, it is still a word for an *other* word, *in limine* a wordless 'word.'"[6]

Hamacher's exemplary philological performances offer a point of departure for *Thresholds, Encounters*, whose contributors seek to address the ways in which the poetry of Paul Celan uncloses unforeseen threshold-spaces for encounters with the idioms of nature, philosophy, and literature, while opening those idioms, in turn, to possibilities for speaking otherwise. While many studies have sought to trace the intersections between Celan's poetry and the thought of Theodor W. Adorno,[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer,[8] Martin

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Heidegger,[9] Edmund Husserl,[10] and Emmanuel Levinas,[11] among others, it is seldom that scholars have proceeded from the thought of language as the shared if abyssal grounding for both modes of writing, and still more seldom that the practice of philology remains true to that thought, by exposing its own thetic and propositional gestures to those movements of language that undermine them. The recent monograph of Denis Thouard, *Pourquoi ce poète? Le Celan des philosophes* (2016), for example, revolves around the interest that Celan's poetry has inspired among divergent philosophers of the twentieth century, but when the author suggests that this phenomenon can be explained along the lines of a certain philosophical tendency that had emerged in the wake of Heidegger's thinking to view poetry as "a pre-ontological document, apt to reveal originary traits of the experience of time [un document pré-ontologique, apte à révéler des traits originaires de l'expérience du temps],"[12] then ontology, temporality, and the philosophical hermeneutics that would address them are presumed to be stable terms, exempt from the permutations and contingencies of the very language that permits them to be stated in the "first" place.

In contrast to more recent scholarship that would presuppose the disciplinary and categorial formations that Celan's poetry troubles, the contributors to *Thresholds, Encounters* advocate for the possibility that the poetic reinscription of overdetermined "philosophical" terms—like Hamacher's evocation of "prima philosophia," and Celan's "unwording" of the *logos* in his "for"-word—may not only affect and alter but also comment on and expose their implications with more precision than "philosophical" writing often acknowledges. Using a term that designated the particular threshold-space shared by Adorno and Celan, we explore gestures, moments, movements, and occurrences of poetic "Entsetzen" rather than confirming preconceived notions and normative positions and positings. Once again, the point is to show that Celan's poetry—and perhaps poetry as such—does not rely on presuppositions, nor does it serve to presuppose. When Adorno claims that Celan's poems would speak the utmost "Entsetzen" through their silence, it is critical to refrain from embracing the term's more usual translation as "horror" and its assignation of a referential function so as to expose how Celan's language registers a much more unsettling undoing or "de-posing" (*Ent-setzung*) of linguistic forms than any reduction to the terms of experience and cognition would allow.[13] Celan's work consists of topoi that cannot sufficiently be located in one preestablished conceptual register or another, unfolding instead a site for encountering the "not" of language that cuts across various discursive genres and their hybrids. The chapters in this

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volume collectively explore this very *not* and corroborate our claim that the pathbreaking critical interventions, which were begun through readers such as Hamacher, Derrida, and Szondi, do not offer closure but open thresholds that Celan-philology—in all possible senses of that pairing—fundamentally broaches toward the unheard-of dimensions of language and thought, ever for the "first" time.

The scholarship carried out in the volume is characterized by a split attention toward working through tradition and breaking off toward new entry paths into the rich and inexhaustible poetic threshold-language that is the work of Paul Celan. Reading specific poems and anthologies of Celan through his musicality, his understanding of history, and the role that nature plays in his poetics, the contributors to part 1 of our volume offer critical interventions that speak to larger interdisciplinary conversations ranging from the philosophy of music to ecocriticism. Part 2 of the volume broaches broader questions concerning Celan's comportment toward language. By emphasizing Celan's rhetorical gestures, the linguistic structures and shifts at work in his poetics, its contributors seek to continue and provide with new impulses a tradition of critical close reading that will have unfolded from Szondi to Hamacher and beyond. The volume ends with two chapters addressing translation and multilingualism in Celan, which draw out further ways in which Celan's writing not only "crosses through the interval" marking the threshold-space between idioms but also "opens and extends" that interval, exposing language as a "form for the opening, withholding, and wresting of forms."[14] Each part is composed of three pairs of texts that entertain a close correspondence; these pairs depart from a shared conceptual interest, such that the volume can be divided into six concepts worked through and differently accentuated by our contributors: while part 1 ("Ex-posing the Poem") speaks to issues of history, ecology, and aurality, part 2 ("Language Dislodged") inquires into Celan's articulations of encounter, positionality, and translation.

Penned by Michael Levine, chapter 1 in our volume consists of a masterful reading of Celan's poem "Sprich auch du" (1955). Approaching the poem through Derrida's approaches to Celan, and situating it in the context of Celan's own engagement with Georg Büchner, Levine's contribution can be read as a meta-commentary on Derrida's *Shibboleth*. In particular, Levine seeks to explore the *temporal* dimension of Celan's concept of the

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meridian at which Derrida's commentary only hints, but which it does not exhaustively analyze. The moment of the meridian, Levine maintains, opens up time in such a way that an address between a "you" and an "other" becomes possible—a process Celan termed "Mitsprechen lassen" ("letting the Other speak," as Levine translates). Chapter 1 goes on to explore this type of *speaking-with* through a reading of "Sprich auch du."

Following Levine, chapter 2 presents an equally engaging close reading of a single poem, as Simone Stirner develops a careful reappraisal of Celan's "Engführung" (1958), a text that has attracted a vast number of important commentaries, including Peter Szondi's essay "Lecture de strette: Essai sur la poésie de Paul Celan." The latter convincingly demonstrates how the poem actively undermines its referential function such that, instead of representing a certain reality, it traces its own textual *Wirklichkeit* in terms of a path that the reader is called upon to follow. Stirner compellingly builds on this insight as she inquires into the poem's imperative ("Schau nicht mehr—geh!"): "What form of relation does this way of walking with a text and its history imply? What kind of attention does it entail?" The chapter proceeds to argue that the specific type of poetic attention demanded by Celan's "Engführung" allows for an engagement with history on the basis of what the author (borrowing from Anne Carson) calls "withness."

Chapter 3, written by Jan Mieszkowski, considers the relation between language, the organic, and the inorganic as it manifests in Paul Celan's oeuvre—a problem that connects the discourse of Celan scholarship with the larger conversation concerning the environmental humanities as it has taken shape over the past decades. Mieszkowski's intervention is all the more important as it emphasizes a dimension of Celan's poetry that has often been overlooked: while many readings of Celan have identified the stone as a privileged object and site of poetic inventiveness, Mieszkowski's argument zones in on the figure of the flower, asking, "Who can speak the language of flowers?" His impressive tour de force leads him from a discussion of Rousseau's reflections on his experiences with flora and Kant's idea of natural beauty in *The Critique of Judgment* to a meticulous reading of Celan's poem "Blume" (1959).

Closely corresponding to the concerns raised by Mieszkowski, chapter 4, written by Natalie Lozinski-Veach, too probes Celan's relation to the natural. Lozinski-Veach complicates Adorno's assertion that Celan's poetry imitates "a language underneath the helpless one of the human, indeed underneath all organic language,"[15] and thereby approaches a language of the dead matters of "stone and star [Stein und Stern]." Through careful readings of Celan's

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notes for the *Meridian*, as well as his prose text “Gespräch im Gebirg” and his poem “Sprachgitter,” Lozinski-Veach suggests that the capacity of poetic language to involve others through mimesis allows for an affective relation to otherness that does not submit the other to the order of conceptual identity, such that even stones may come to speak.

Adding to Lozinski-Veach’s consideration of Adorno’s relationship with Celan, chapter 5, written by Michael Auer, also starts with a reference to Adorno. In particular, Auer is interested in Adorno’s critique of songwriting, as he seeks to locate in the work of Paul Celan a certain, albeit “othered,” continuation of the tradition of song. Defining the specific nature of Celan’s *Lieder*, Auer explains that they are marked by a special “allophonic strategy of musicality.” This strategy allows for a free variation of tonal elements beyond and before established semantic patterns. What ensues is a poetic play of assonance, paronomasia, alliteration, and slant rhymes, creating a type of song that particularly characterizes Celan’s anthology *Die Niemandsrose* (1963).

Musicality is also the theme chapter 6, by Naomi Waltham-Smith, which explores the reception of Celan in the French intellectual context, especially by thinkers associated with deconstructive reading practices. Centering on the work of Hélène Cixous, this chapter also tracks Celan’s impact on writers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and David Wills. Specifically, Waltham-Smith is interested in the way in which Cixous treats Celan’s poem “Cello-Einsatz” in her *Jours de l’an*. Cixous’s response to Celan’s poem, Waltham-Smith suggests, should be understood in the context of the quasi-methodological remarks to be found throughout her writings that often put the sonorous at the heart of the birth of writing. Hence, the detour via Cixous allows us to appreciate Celan’s *aurality* as an essential dimension of his poetic process.

Part 2 of the volume opens with a chapter by Kristina Mendicino, which retraces the liminal movements of language that Celan renders most pronounced in, among others, the collection of poems that he would call *From Threshold to Threshold* (*Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*). Already the title exposes each “threshold”-word to part from itself—“*from* threshold” toward the same “*to* threshold”—without coinciding with itself, collapsing into sameness, or coming to rest. Taking this minimal syntagm as her point of departure, Mendicino argues that Celan’s poetry exposes the self-alteration to which language gives way, with every term. These remarks prepare for a reading of the poem “Mit wechselndem Schlüssel,” whose title cites a central phrase from the *proemium* of Parmenides’s poem on being, initiating a poetic exploration of those traits from Parmenides’s threshold-scene, which show

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it to be no mere preliminary to a "steady way of being," but to mark a liminal site for alterity and alteration that there is no getting through with.

In chapter 8, Pasqual Solass builds on Celan's understanding of poetry as a site of encounter. Adding to Levine's meditation on Celan's "speaking with" and Stirner's emphasis on the "withness" invoked in Celan's poems, Solass's chapter offers a precise and rigorous investigation of the semantics and rhetoric of the preposition "with" ("mit"), locating in it a poetic principle that allows Celan to project the poem not only as the site of an encounter but as an encountering force itself. This reading opens up a new perspective into the poem, according to which it can be understood as an eventful polyphony, a contraction of multiplicities and voices that are put into relation; Solass calls it a "*con*versation/*Mitsprechen* . . . itself always already situated within a *com*plex of with-one-another/*Miteinander*."

With chapter 9, "Occupiability," Sarah Stoll explores a seemingly marginal term within Celan's poetics. In the notes to his famous *Meridian* speech, Celan claims that the poem is essentially "besetzbar." Translated as "occupiable" or "cathectable" (in the psychoanalytic sense), the term also partakes in the semantics of *Setzung*, which encompasses the ontological register of the creation and seizure of positions. Following Hamacher's seminal readings, Stoll argues that Celan's use of the term explicitly undermines this ontological mandate, arguing that, in Celan, "occupiability, even in its ostensible gesture towards occupation, . . . appears as dis-occupation." Stoll goes on to interrogate Celan's oeuvre looking closely at three examples (two poems and one passage from the *Meridian*) where the movement of occupiability is centrally at stake.

Intensifying Stoll's investigation of Celan's critique of the logic of positionality, chapter 10, by Dominik Zechner, adds to the discussion of *Setzung* and *Besetzung* the possibility of *Entsetzung*, that is, the undoing of all position, the sheer de-posing of what is posited. As his point of departure, Zechner picks a moment in Adorno's notes on Celan, where the latter's poems are described as a de-posing movement that takes place through deliberate silence ("to speak of the most extreme horror through silence [das äußerste Entsetzen durch Verschweigen sagen]").[16] According to Adorno, this collapse into silence is bound up with a certain *shame* that is carried by the artwork, elicited by the withdrawal of the experience it seeks to capture. Unfolding the concepts at stake in this assessment with precision and contextualizing them against the backdrop of Hamacher's recently published essay on Celan and Adorno ("Versäumnisse" [2008]), Zechner prepares a reading of Celan's poem "Vor Scham" (1966), demonstrating how

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shame, within Celan's poetics, is not reducible to the emotional function of an experiencing subject. Rather, it must be understood as a linguistic affect, detached from any kind of subject-centered psychology, that characterizes the expressive struggle of language itself.

The volume's concluding section is concerned with issues of translation. Chapter 11, written by Irina Kogan, develops a precise reading of Celan's radio lecture dedicated to the introduction of Russian poet Ossip Mandelstam to a German-speaking audience, while its wider argument branches out into a general reflection upon Celan's understanding of the relationship between poetry and translation. The central term around which Kogan's deliberations revolve is taken from a letter that Celan penned in 1959 where he speaks of translations as "Annäherungsversuche" (or "trials of approach," in Kogan's rendition). Unpacking Celan's essay in a remarkably attentive, slow-paced reading, Kogan argues that these "approaches," far from instantiating an accurately corresponding transmission, rely on modes of defamiliarization ("Befremden") and interference. This insistence on an irreducible foreignness further allows Kogan to conclude her chapter by shedding new light on Celan's complex relationship with Martin Heidegger, especially his critique of Heidegger's understanding of "Entsprechung" ("correspondence").

Seamlessly connecting to Kogan's analysis, chapter 12, by Christine Frank, also takes on the problem of translation. Adding to the vast array of philosophers this volume puts in conversation with the work of Celan, Frank invokes Derrida's engagements with the poet and puts a rare focus on French theorist René Girard. In particular, Frank proposes to recast Girard's narratological term "mimetic desire" (as developed in his *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* [1966]) as a concept to theorize translation. Completing the narrative arc we envision for this volume, Frank invokes and further complicates certain aspects also highlighted by Levine and Stoll, as she too advances an understanding of language "as always already occupied by the Other." For translation to be possible, Frank argues, the desire for language that becomes manifest in the speech of the Other has to be imitated. Such mimesis provides the basis for a poetic writing that unfolds as a translational process.

Thresholds, Encounters thus closes with another opening, true to the way in which it was composed from the outset. The volume itself marks the culmination of a series of events the co-editors dedicated to the work of Paul Celan over the past years: following a research seminar at the 2018 convention of the German Studies Association exploring "Celan and Philosophy," the conversation was continued in April 2019 at Brown University in the context

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of a conference titled "For—Paul Celan." The third event in the series took place at NYU's Center for the Humanities in October 2019, where we held a roundtable discussion devoted to Werner Hamacher's Celan studies. The collection of essays that took shape from these conversations brings together some of the most compelling interventions made at these colloquia in order to proffer a powerful and precise reflection of the readings that Celan made possible in the face of contemporary literary criticism, continental philosophy, and philological inquiry. But in speaking toward and for those possibilities, the editors and contributors to *Thresholds, Encounters: Paul Celan and the Claim of Philology* also speak for other conversations that may further the *dis*-positions toward language that Celan's writing will have marked, translated, and prepared thereafter: "From the outset, philology goes beyond to something other than that which it is; it is the way to that which it is not and thereby *is*—transitively—its not [Nicht] and its after [Nach]."[17]

Notes

1. See Werner Hamacher, *Keinmaleins* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2019).

2. Werner Hamacher, "95 Theses on Philology," trans. Catherine Diehl, in *Give the Word: Responses to Werner Hamacher's 95 Theses on Philology*, eds. Gerhard Richter and Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), xi–lvi, xvii.

3. Hamacher, "95 Theses on Philology," xxvi. In this sense, philology could be said to advance a sort of *Schwellenkunde*—a lore or science of the threshold—the way Walter Benjamin envisioned the term and Winfriend Menninghaus further unfolded it. See Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).

4. Werner Hamacher, "For—Philology," trans. Jason Groves, in *Minima Philologica* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 110; trans. modified; see Werner Hamacher, *Für—die Philologie*, in *Was zu sagen bleibt* (Schupfart: Engeler, 2019), 10.

5. Hamacher, "For—Philology," 124; see Hamacher, *Für—die Philologie*, 22.

6. Hamacher, "For—Philology," 146; see Hamacher, *Für—die Philologie*, 40.

7. These readings largely seek to describe the ways in which Celan's oeuvre answers Adorno's famous dictum on the barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz. See, for example, Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

8. See Denis Thouard, *Pourquoi ce poète? Le Celan des philosophes* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

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9. In addition to the bibliography on this relation that Denis Thouard offers in the monograph cited here, see James K. Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). The concluding claims of this book—such as "Celan seems to have profited from his acquaintance with Heidegger more than the philosopher did from Celan's poetry . . . and could be counted among his most serious students"—do not allow for the possibility that poems such as "Todtnauberg" may mark a decisive critique of Heidegger's thinking, without being reducible to the "scathing judgment of Heidegger" that Lyon rightly criticizes in others' approaches to that poem (Lyon, *Paul Celan*, 215, 178).

10. See, for example, Jean Greisch, "*Zeitgehöft et Anwesen:* La dia-chronie du poème," in *Contre-jour: Études sur Paul Celan*, ed. Martine Broda (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1986), 167–83; Roland Reuss, *Im Zeithof: Celan-Provokationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld Verlag, 2001), 103–5; Sandro Zanetti, *'zeitoffen': Zur Chronographie Paul Celans* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 2006), 143–48. Werner Hamacher's study, "Epoché. Gedicht. Celans *Reimklammer* um Husserls Klammern" in *Keinmaleins: Texte zu Celan* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2019), 143–79, offers the exception to readings that presume Husserl's thought to be unaffected by its evocation in Celan's poems. In his essay, Hamacher shows Celan to have extended the phenomenological *epoché* to the transcendental subject itself, with ruinous consequences for any egology or epistemology such as Husserl's.

11. Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

12. Denis Thouard, *Pourquoi ce poète? Le Celan des philosophes* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

13. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 322; Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 477.

14. Werner Hamacher, "Kontraduktionen," in *Transmission: Übersetzung—Übertragung—Vermittlung*, ed. Georg Mein (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), 13–33, 13; our translation.

15. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322; trans. modified.

16. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 477.

17. Hamacher, "95 Theses on Philology," xlv.

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