CHAPTER 6

Broken Singularities (Derrida and Celan)

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There is no systematic poetics in Derrida's work, no attempt at a total elaboration of the historical features and classifications of the mechanics of literary discourse. There is also no systematic philosophy proposed by Derrida, no attempt at elucidating the totality of the thinkable, and no definitive approach to his thought that can be codified in advance as an overarching method. Yet there might have been a moment in his early thinking when Derrida was tempted to offer systematic means for reading any text. As Catherine Malabou points out, Derrida's first major work, *Of Grammatology*, seemed to proclaim a general philosophy and interpretive method based on the study of all forms of writing as caught up in "arche-writing," subject to the trace structure, the logic of the supplement, and the dictum that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," there is nothing outside the text.[1]

Malabou remarks that Derrida did not cleave to the term "grammatology" for very long, nor did he elaborate on the systematic and general semiology that he proposed encompassed every kind of textuality. Instead of establishing a new general logic or system by which to interpret all texts, by the early 1970s Derrida's philosophical analyses focused on grappling with anti-systematic concepts, or on claims that are impossible to systematize, which can be found in the most prominent system-builders of Western philosophy such as Kant and Hegel. Also in this early period, Derrida's literary analyses never tried to establish a methodical means of reading literature or a structuralist poetics. Rather than codifying his thoughts or reading method in advance, Derrida stressed that each piece of literary or philosophical criticism must be seen as its own singular event, even as each work belongs to the general conditions of meaning-making

[1] Malabou inquires as to "why, despite Derrida's statements, has a scientific 'grammatology' never seen the light of day?" See Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 42.

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available in literature and language. Derrida called this kind of interpretation an attention to the "play of iterability in the singularity of the idiom."[2] This means no predetermined philosophical axioms (unlike, for example, with Alain Badiou), no elaboration of a theory ahead of time that fixes meaning, and no claim to ever having a finished reading. Philosophical and literary readings are *without guarantees*, before and after the act. If no reading can be either established in advance or definitively settled, then each reading must develop a way of knowing that also always makes room for further iterations, surprises, interruptions, unknowns, and new ways of reading in the future.

The study of philosophical and literary singularity – its idioms, conditions, and after-effects – in large part became the guiding challenge for Derrida. This motive inspired some of the best readers of Derrida to construct a poetics from this sense of singularity, especially in the versions developed by Derek Attridge and Jonathan Culler. Both Attridge and Culler attend carefully to the double practice of respecting and responding to an individual literary work while also recognizing that no work is genreless or wholly distinct from a history of literary practices and a formalized system of signification. Both theorists recognize that, strictly speaking, singularity is unreadable. If a work remained wholly singular, it would not be thinkable or readable since there would be no way for thought to have any access to the singular. The singular concept or literary work is only known because it is comparable. It is only readable because it is breakable: in Derrida's words, "There is no pure singularity which affirms itself as such without instantly dividing itself, and so exiling itself."[3] But, at the same time, every literary work entails a unique and singular world. Thus the singular must still remain singular, although to be read it must be broken. Every literary work must both retain and forfeit its singularity in order to be read. As Attridge remarks, "Singularity is not *pure*: it is constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization."[4]

In this chapter, I want to reflect a little further on what the cultivation and care of literary singularity have meant for Derrida and readers after. There has been certainly an immense amount written on the application of Derridean ideas to literary study, but I still think that several important aspects of singularity have been under-examined. First, the literary singular has profound effects both on the way we read and on the literary object

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 65.
[3] Ibid., 66. [4] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 63.

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itself. Just as there are no guarantees that any reading will have the final word or stabilize meaning, there are no guarantees that a specific work of literature or even the concept of the literary should retain its coherency. The implications of Derrida's turn to singularity deserves the utmost emphasis: it is not that Derrida elaborated a methodical poetics that first detected irony, error, play, trace, and difference and then treated these elements as the enabling and disabling features of a literary work (this was more Paul de Man's project); rather, for Derrida the pursuit of singularity involved a series of open-ended questions and entanglements that profoundly implicated both the work and the reader. How is a singular work made? How can one have a singular response to a singular work? In what ways can a singular work be broken yet retain a sense of singularity? How does its singularity endure? What happens to a work before and after it is read, and how are these issues of the comings and goings of a work built into its singularity?

For Derrida, one consequence of singularity – a concept or literary work without guarantees – is that there is always the possibility for the concept to no longer be effectual or for the literary work to not signify or be read again. The condition for literature to be without guarantees stands in sharp contrast to a certain tradition of philosophy according to which assertions of truth are bonded to a guarantee of universal applicability. Plato assumed that a truthful philosophical claim would be valid for eternity and certify itself in perpetuity. In *The Republic*, Plato in part dismisses poetry for its lack of guarantees, accusing poetry of being unreliable. As a secondary and mimetic knowledge filled with emotional instability, poetry confuses truth and opinion. Plato's polis allowed for only a thin sliver of poetry whose meaning could be fixed to the unambiguous praise of noble feelings and representations of good character. By contrast, Aristotle's *Poetics* makes an argument for the value of poetry largely contingent on its educational value for an audience because, since poems could not categorically fix their meanings or values, Aristotle envisioned a time when poetry could be abandoned.

The insecurity of address, interpretation, and readership of literature leaves it only to watch and wonder at philosophy's claims to universal relevance. Derrida sought a literary theory of singularity – and more broadly a commitment to reading the singularity of any text – specially attuned to issues of what it means to read along with these insecurities, rather than against them and toward a secured horizon of systematized interpretation. Thus, instead of systematically pointing out trace structures and arche-writing as features of constancy across texts, Derrida found

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himself more pressed to consider how these very properties of language led to the insight that literature is never sure of its archive and its structure, that what makes literature readable might also make it unreadable or unread. To follow a singular poetics after Derrida, then, would involve studying the path a literary work takes without a sense of its destiny or guarantee of interpretability. Specifically, I have in mind here a singular poetics that would not only emphasize the instabilities of signifiers and genres but would study, for example, how a poem could be involved in figuring its own unique paths of persistence, resistance, recitation, refiguration, and deterioration. Instead of concentrating on locating and pointing to the meaning of a poem with a formalist reading, or being content to point out the undoing of meaning-making in a poem, this poetics looks at the dramatization of meaning that happens when a poem is set adrift or "disseminated."

A singular poetics, a poetics without guarantees, is the inverse of the romantic notion of a literary absolute.[5] This poetics reflects on how the uncertainty of the future is built into texts and into readings, into modes of literary address, to the extent that the very address of literary works is that they have no fixed address. In this view, to be a poem is to continually be asking: how long will I be read, and what happens to my singularity with each reading? Derrida, in his idiomatic essay "Che cos'è la poesia?" does not offer an analysis of anthropomorphism as a supremely poetic device (unlike de Man) but fully anthropomorphizes the poem itself, in order to have the poem speak of its own desire to be read while it worries that it will be forgotten: "I am a dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me."[6] On an uncertain journey of dispersion, the poem keeps calling out to be remembered. Shifting to an address of the second-person "you" as reader, Derrida writes, "You will call poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the logos, ahuman, barely domestic, not reappropriable into the family of the subject."[7]

While Derrida sought to avoid turning deconstruction into a preprogrammed method, he also did not want to elevate singularity into a dictum by which a literary work would be placed on a pedestal for

[5] See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Phillip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

[6] Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 223.

[7] Ibid., 235.

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its uniquely expressive or existential qualities. Although many have accused Derrida of foregoing philosophical argumentation for poetic allusions in his writings, it bears mentioning that Derrida did not treat poetry in the grandiose way that Heidegger had advocated. Heidegger saw the non-rationalist, indirect yet intuitive, emotional powers of "the poem" as a necessary guide for thinking the truth of being in an age disposed to treating the entire planet as an instrumental object. Derrida does not choose to laud poetry for its expressive or existential superiority. Rather it can be said that Derrida pursues the existential issues concerning how a poem is made, read, and unread. This *existentialism of the literary device* appears when Derrida claims his reading is in "excess" of any formalism or hermeneutic method and instead follows "the trace of the poetic work, its abandonment or survival, beyond any signatory and any specific reader."[8] In using the term "existential," I am not referring to any school of thought initiated by Heidegger or Sartre. Rather I use the term to indicate how the properties of a poem have become ontological problems, in that many poems question whether they will continue to exist. Thus the poetics I am emphasizing after Derrida attends to the existential drama ("abandonment or survival") of the devices, tropes, and forms of poems as they circulate among writers and readers and inquires into the breakability and durability of singularities that comprise a poetic work. This approach builds on recent theorizations of singularity in poetics, but accentuates the ontological questions that are raised by the formal and material properties of poems in addition to the literary and ethical uniqueness promoted by previous readers of Derrida.

In Derrida's numerous writings on Paul Celan, the existential poetics of the device, combined with an assiduous heed for singularities, becomes a key issue. Derrida most certainly did not want to approach writing on Celan, with whom he had a brief friendship, as a mere demonstration of Derrida's own preestablished poetic theories. With regard to Celan, Derrida repeatedly emphasizes humility and uncertainty as a reading practice, which rejects any sense of theoretical mastery over the poems: "The certainty of a guaranteed reading would be the first inanity or the worst betrayal. This poem remains for me the place of a unique experience."[9] Derrida's first major essay on Celan, based on a lecture Derrida delivered in 1984, offers a series of reflections on figurations of

[8] Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 149.
[9] Ibid., 148.

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singularity in Celan's work, including references to circumcision, unique memorial dates, and the untranslatable utterance of a shibboleth (an arbitrary phonetical mark that only a certain community of people can pronounce). These are treated as exemplary instances of being "the one-and-only time" of an event.[10]

Derrida discusses the careful entangling of these singular figurations in several Celan poems, often fixating on lines where Celan inscribes the word "shibboleth," such as the poem "In Eins" ("In One"), published in 1963. The poem begins: "Dreizehnter Feber. Im Herzmund / erwachtes Schibboleth. Mit dir, / Peuple / de Paris. *No Pasarán*" ("Thirteenth of February. Shibboleth / roused in the heart's mouth. With you, / peuple / de Paris. *No Pasarán*").[11] This poem carries its date on its sleeve, although as Derrida notes, the year is not given, and the immediate importance of this date is not explained in the poem. Celan's "*No Pasarán*," a slogan used by Popular Front fighters against fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War, suggests the open-ended date is in solidarity with the tradition of leftist resistance. The figure of the shibboleth here gathers several languages that are left untranslated in the poem: German, Hebrew, French, and Spanish. Derrida points to the date as a kind of shibboleth as well, since it both marks the poem as highly specific and conceals the exact significance of this date. Derrida goes on to argue that the effect of the shibboleth can be seen across Celan's work, as a recurrent trope or figuration in which "a ciphered singularity . . . gathers a multiplicity."[12] Derrida treats the shibboleth as a figure of linguistic and poetic singularity, yet that also recirculates with and among other Celan poems, including his poem titled "Schibboleth" written in 1953–54. These poems tie together acts of solidarity, remembrance, various European geographies and languages, and attention to linguistic difference and poetic accent.

However, as both Celan and Derrida well know, the power of the term "shibboleth" comes from its brief mention in Judges 12:6 as the word used by the Gileadites to identify Ephraimites, who were defeated in their raid into Gilead territory. The Gileadites caught a number of fleeing Ephraimites, who were forced to identify themselves by trying to pronounce the word "shibboleth" (which refers to the part of a plant containing grains). The Ephraimites could not pronounce the "sh" phoneme. Once they were discerned, they were killed. The term "shibboleth" has

[10] Ibid., 2.
[11] Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1995), 210.
[12] Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 33.

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since circulated as a term that refers to the separateness and otherness of the Jewish people. The shibboleth is a linguistic marker of community that internally binds a people yet also externally distinguishes it as other.[13] In Derrida's reflections on shibboleth, he expands the term to be a signifier for poetry itself, which is comprised of marks that are singular and untranslatable, although they must be cited and recited to remain meaningful. "In a language, in the poetic writing of a language, there is nothing but *shibboleth*," asserts Derrida.[14] This statement echoes Celan's own declaration that "Poetry is by necessity a unique instance of language."[15]

Yet, bearing in mind the claims I made previously for considering the existential implications of poetic tropes, the shibboleth is also a mark whose utterance might unleash lethal violence. The shibboleth borders the different speech patterns of communities and necessitates acts of translation, but it also can end up being the distinction of otherness that condemns a community. A shibboleth is a sign of solidarity but also threatening difference, inaccessibility, and isolation. Celan's shibboleths participate in this solidarity with its linguistic, poetic, and political alterity and resistance, but at the same time these shibboleths can lead to the utmost dangers and military violence. Celan's poem "In One" ends with a phrase taken from Georg Büchner – "Peace to the cottages!" – but leaves out the other half of Büchner's phrase: "War on the Palaces!"

The "ciphered singularity" that Derrida points to also resonates with the notion of broken singularities – concepts and terms that register both uniqueness and destructibility. Derrida finds repeatedly that Celan's poetics is pitched carefully toward both these concerns. The poem "Psalm," one of Celan's most widely cited works, begins: "No one moulds us again out of earth and clay, / no one conjures our dust. / No one."[16] Borrowing from, but slightly altering, the tradition of negative theology that invokes an absent God, this poem is a prayer sent specifically to no one: "Praised be your name, no one. / For your sake / we shall flower."[17] The blessing of the poem is also offered to no one, placing the poem between utter

[13] An interesting usage of the term that condenses the connotation of insider status is found in Sigmund Freud's *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*: "Progress in psychoanalytic work has resulted in an ever clearer picture of the significance of the Oedipus complex; its recognition has become the shibboleth which distinguishes the followers of psychoanalysis from its opponents." See Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, trans. Abraham A. Brill (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962), 83, footnote 14.

[14] Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 33.

[15] Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 23.

[16] Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 179. [17] Ibid.

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abandonment and an appeal to any listener in particular. And yet, in the midst of this half-abandoned address, a "we" blooms. Derrida provides a poignant reflection on this appeal to no one:

> To address no one is not exactly not to address any one. To speak to no one, risking, each time, singularly, that there might be no one to bless, no one who can bless – is this not the only chance for blessing? For an act of faith? What would a blessing be that was sure of itself? A judgment, a certitude, a dogma.[18]

Prayers must be open-ended speech acts, which address an other but are never sure of reaching any audience at all. Just like there is no guarantee for a poem, there is no guarantee for a blessing. Again we see Derrida's attention to the impact of an address without assurances on the ontology of the poem. By speaking to "no one," "Psalm" points itself beyond any specific reader or any ultimate listener, but there may be no reader at all in that beyond. Yet, as Derrida points out, the poem still insists that an address be made: "Even if it does not reach the Other, at least it calls to it. Address takes place."[19] It is possible, then, to read this poem as also an address to the function of poetic allusion, which itself is barely functioning. The poem's address to "no one" occurs because the act of address is being pushed to its limit. The address of the poem is situated between no one and no address at all. Celan put so much pressure on the function of address in his poems that, as Gadamer wrote, reading his lines forces one to ask, "[W]ho am I and who are you?"[20]

Celan's poem addressed to no one resonates with a later poem where Celan creates the word "das Genicht," or the "noem." Celan writes between the poem and the noem, between address and the dissolution of address:

> Weggebeizt vom
> Strahlenwind deiner Sprache
> das bunte Gerede des An-
> erlebten – das hundert-
> züngige Mein-
> gedicht, das Genicht.
>
> Eroded by
> the beamwind of your speech

[18] Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 42. [19] Ibid., 33.
[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

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the gaudy chatter of the pseudo-
experienced – the hundred-
tongued perjury-
poem, the noem.[21]

The "noem" is a hollowed out poem, negated from within, yet still one hears the echo of a poetic utterance. The translation of "Mein-gedicht" is much thornier, as it could be either "my-poem" or, if "mein" is used as in the word "Meineid" (a false oath or perjury), a falsified or untrue poem. The "noem," not exactly a non-poem, suggests a poetic undoing of the poem.

Celan's poem teeters between the erosion of speech cast into the wind and the chattering of a hundred tongues. At the end of the poem, Celan locates what he calls a "breathcrystal" lodged "Deep / in the timecrevasse."[22] The "breathcrystal" could be frozen and likely archaic, but still has the potential to signify. There is a sense that breath must travel through the "noem," through the oblivion of ice and snow, and be dug out from the depths of time, and only then might it stand as "your unalterable / testimony."[23]

These poems by Celan and readings by Derrida are examples of what it means to attend to the formal existentiality of the poem itself. Such reading involves questions about the durability and longevity of singularities without guarantees and considers how a device or trope might maintain or fail to retain its functionality. This does not mean exactly that one correlates the poem to the existential drama of the human, which might imply that one would anthropomorphize every trope and the poem itself. To understand the existential conditions of how poems are constructed for different short and long terms, one need not assume that "the poem" has a special role in the fate of humanity. Rather, reading the existentiality of devices as they appear in the poem emphasizes how, in the longer history of the lyric as a genre, lyric poems can register the significance of such speech acts without guarantees and possibly without any readers. As we see in Celan and in Derrida's reading, the lyric as a genre must always grapple with being between poem and "noem." To be between poem/noem is the existential condition of the poem and requires readers to inquire at the same time into the meaning or "aboutness" of the poem and how long that aboutness can endure. I think this insight implies to the genre of poetry

[21] Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 19.
[22] Ibid. [23] Ibid.

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generally: it is the condition of the poem to be aware that there may a condition of no more poems.

Derrida's writings on Celan pursue the varieties of singularity in his poem and also what happens when those singularities are exposed to demands of repeatability and the transience of the archive. A singularity must lose itself, break itself, alienate itself in order to be knowable, but there are no assurances at all that this broken and lost figure will retain its sense of singularity or remain legible. Lyric poems are formally different in terms of the function of address from the epic, whose readership historically is tied to the fate of a specific people and a political institution, and the dramatic, which is constituted by its live performance for an audience. The structure of the lyric poem requires it to be open-ended, to always be in search of reader, to risk itself in the openness of an encounter, and thus to risk its own death, as Derrida realizes:

> I believe that all Celan's poems remain in a certain way indecipherable, retain some indecipherability, and the indecipherable can either call endlessly for a sort of reinterpretation, resurrection, or new interpretative breath, or, on the contrary, it can perish or waste away once more. Nothing insures a poem against its own death, either because the archive can always be burnt in crematoria or in flames, or because, without being burnt, it can simply be forgotten, or not interpreted, or left to lethargy. Oblivion is always possible.[24]

When does indecipherability enable the existence of the poem, and when does it annul it? Because poems retain some indecipherability or illegibility, they call for reading and interpretation in the first place. And because a poem cannot be exhausted in one reading or with one meaning, a poem always is marked by the question of when it will be read again. Writing that is completely legible and interpretable, if such a thing could exist, would present itself as instantly functional information and direct command. Yet even information must be moved, transferred, and stored, and none of these processes or archives can be said to be immune to error, perishing, or wasting away. Derrida's concept of "arche-writing" thus does not affirm that everything textual is retraceable according to the logic of the trace, but rather that the ontological condition of writing always takes on an existential risk, such that the interpretability and durability of any form or instance of writing will always be in question.

This argument for attending to the existential formalism in the poetics of Derrida dovetails with recent debates in poetics over what has been

[24] Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 107.

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called "New Formalism."[25] There is no one single argument for a return to formalist thinking, but a number of scholars have been attracted to issues of structuralist poetics, genre theory, and even New Critical close reading techniques in order to reinvent reading methods that have seemed devalued by literary critical methods that favored diagnosing a politics of the (human) subject or deferred literary context to historical context. Within arguments for New Formalism, a split has emerged between theorists of poetry who seek a historically specific and detailed account of poems and poetic models and theorists who seek a broader, transhistorical understanding of what poems are and can do. These different agendas have most often centered on whether to treat the specific genre of lyric poetry as fairly consistent in structure across more than 2,000 years of its usage. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, insist that the concept of the lyric elaborated in the twentieth century does not apply to how poets and readers in previous periods made and circulated poems. The task of a New Formalist, then, is to trace "the history of lyric reading,"[26] which primarily involves tracing the history of the usage of the term "lyric" and its implication in poems. However, from the opposite spectrum, Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* seeks to elaborate "the long tradition of lyric," by which "lyric forms are not confined to one historical period but remain available as possibilities in different eras."[27] Both of these arguments for New Formalism remain committed to new scrutiny of how poetic devices and tropes work, and both seek to attend to what Susan Stewart calls the "cultural work of lyric," although they differ in thinking how historically specific and delimited such study should be.[28]

What I have sought to develop here, through attending to Derrida's poetics of broken singularities in conversation with Celan, are some initial outlines for conceptualizing the transhistorical structures of lyric poetry along with an awareness of how lyric poems are maintained or abandoned in historical time. Jackson and Prins certainly are correct to see in a theorist

[25] See Frederic V. Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (March 2007): 558–69.

[26] Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., "General Introduction," in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.

[27] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3, 4.

[28] Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 13. Stewart's work also reflects on the existential formalism of poems as she writes that "the cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness. To make such a statement may seem more fancifully 'poetic' than true. But it is precisely in material ways that poetry is a force against effacement – not merely for individuals but for communities through time as well" (see pages 1–2).

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like Derrida a tendency to "lyricize" poetry, treating all poems according to a certain modern, twentieth-century view of the lyric. However, questions of lyric address, temporality, durability, and legibility are perennial in the lyric tradition, although the historical context and periodization of these recurrent lyric formal properties need careful articulation. Perhaps the more pressing problem for Derrida concerns the ontologization of the lyric, which becomes paramount for Heidegger, but figures significantly into the works of Adorno, Blanchot, de Man, Kristeva, and Lacoue-Labarthe, among other thinkers of the fate of the category of the poetic who intersect with Derrida's philosophy. Although Derrida at times elevates the power of the poetic into a special kind of transcendent speech act, pointing to, for example, the "hyper-majesty of poetry" and its capacity to perform as witness in a constitutively different way from the juridical witness, he generally does not follow many of his contemporaries in seeing the fate of poetry as indicative of the fate of all literature or of all human experience.[29] Yet poems do have ontological fates of their own. And certainly what happens to poems can provide a profound window for reflecting on the fate of the human, though in doing so we need not grant the abstract category of "the poem," usually assumed to be lyric poems, as ultimate barometers of being.

My argument for attending to the existentialism of the devices in poetics follows Derrida's work to think the ontological conditions of poems without granting them any special destiny for humans, while also welcoming new formalist considerations of genre and history. A study of the existential conditions for lyric poetic singularity takes up, for example, not just a consideration of how the address of "I" and "you" has been emphasized variously in the lyric tradition, but also how the longevity and destructibility of address haunts poems that are designed to appeal to momentary epiphanies or long-developing emotions recollected in tranquility. Arguments for New Formalism, while debating the relative importance of either historical context or transhistorical consistencies, also need to grasp the urgency of their own historical presence. We live in troubling times for much of the life on Earth, with global warming, increasing extinction rates, fossil fuel addictions, and massive inequalities of wealth and health. These are times of tremendous existential risk across the planet. Claims for the reading methods of poetry cannot take place in a vacuum; these methods need to incorporate self-reflexively an awareness of how a sense of the planet impacts a sense of the poetic. Combining New

[29] Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 117.

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Formalist reading methods with formalist existentialism foregrounds how the study of poetic devices and structures participates in and reflects on their own lack of guarantees on an exposed and precarious planet. And if concepts of the lyric are historically bound to specific periods, such an inquiry perhaps even can give us a glimpse into what a post-lyric poetry might be, one touched by the "noem."

These reflections can help us to better attend to some of Derrida's and Celan's statements on poetics as "ciphered singularity." In Derrida's meditation on dates in Celan's poems, he states that "Every hour is unique" but also "Every hour counts its holocaust."[30] The phrasing here is intense and dark, and it risks over-generalizing the historical event of the Holocaust to the irreversible process of temporality. Yet Derrida's statements specifically are directed toward trying to grapple with how "poetic writing offers itself up, through and through, to dating."[31] The concern for the double condition of singularity and destructibility in poetry is one that Celan shared. In his "Meridian" speech given upon receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, Celan states, "there can be no doubt that the poem – the poem today – shows a strong inclination toward falling silent ... [T]he poem takes its position at the edge of itself; in order to be able to exist, it without interruption calls and fetches itself from its now-no-longer back into its as-always."[32] Celan also had stated in earlier remarks that he thought that poems were like handshakes and a message sent in a bottle. The poem reaches out, extends itself, is set afloat in search of a reader, but it may not know who the reader will end up being, or if indeed the poem will reach any shore at all. The "Meridian" is the arc or line that a poem might take in search of a reader: "The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs a vis á vis. It searches it out and addresses it."[33]

Derrida came to see his own philosophical writings as susceptible to the same anxiety over readership as he saw in Celan's poetics. Each work, Derrida believed, needed to attend to the singularities of a text or argument, and also create a singular event for the reader.

> If I had invented my writing, I would have done so as a perpetual revolution. For it is necessary in each situation to create an appropriate mode of exposition, to invent the law of the singular event, to take into account

[30] Ibid., 46. [31] Ibid., 47.
[32] Celan's "Meridian" speech is provided as an appendix in Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 181.
[33] Ibid.

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> the presumed or desired addressee; and, at the same time, to make as if this writing will determine the reader, who will learn to read (to "live") something he or she was not accustomed to receiving from anywhere else.[34]

Philosophical concepts and arguments are also events beholden to the vicissitudes of dates. Derrida felt that philosophy too had to take it upon itself the act of leaving messages, as if in a bottle, for unknown readers. This did not mean one should collapse poetry and philosophy together, but rather one had keep sending bottled messages, to multiply exchanges between the two modes of thinking and writing to learn from each other's condition. Derrida saw the philosophical text as reaching out to readers while hoping to survive the author, a text taking leave of death while searching for life.

> The trace I leave signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me. This is not a striving for immortality; it's something structural. I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, "proceeds" from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing. It's the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs?[35]

Deconstruction's singularity remains both legible and still ciphered, that is, re-readable and perishable. Derrida did not tie his thinking to the task of how to systematize thought or provide a transcendental analytic for being. Rather, here thinking begins when being and meaning are not guaranteed, when the given is not always assumed to be given. Such broken singulars do not need fixing exactly, but they do need to be attended to by some reader somewhere.

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[34] Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 31.
[35] Ibid., 32–33.

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