

Reading Celan for a Hermeneutics of the Body: *Pneuma, Handwerk, and “Seelenblind”*

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Abstract

For Hans-Georg Gadamer and philosophical hermeneutics, Paul Celan’s poetry and prose have always been decisive in thinking through the possibilities and limitations of language and interpretation. Recently, important hermeneutic research has begun to point to an unavoidable liminal encounter between the body and language in Celan’s texts, which approaches an often-neglected theme in hermeneutic thought: the body and embodied experience. Yet in order for hermeneutics to engage Celan on matters concerning the body, language, and interpretation, it is necessary to understand the profound role that the body and embodied experience plays in Celan’s works. In this essay, I offer three prominent instances of embodiment in Celan’s texts that contribute to such an account. I turn first to his preliminary notes from his 1960 *Meridian* speech in which he discusses the poem as ‘pneumatic.’ Second, I read Celan’s letter to Hans Bender in 1960 in which poetry is both a tactile *Handwerk* and a handshake. Third, I engage Celan’s reading notes from two physiology textbooks from 1967 and his poem, “Seelenblind.” While the first two instances affirm the possibility of an embodied encounter with the singularity of the poet, the third instance considers the body as a site of interpretive breakdown.

Keywords: Celan, Gadamer, hermeneutics, language, embodiment, poetics

Introduction

Philosophical hermeneutics in the tradition of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer has often neglected the body as a site of interpretive possibilities.¹ Much of this lack of attention to the body may stem from the primacy of language in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. For Gadamer, language, or linguisticity, is the condition for the possibility of interpretation and understanding, a claim that is famously

captured in his statement from *Truth and Method*: “Being that can be understood is language” (Gadamer 2013, 490). The experience of embodiment, in all of its sensuous and pre-reflective immediacy, poses a series of challenging questions for hermeneutics regarding the linguisticity of the body: Is the body itself linguistic or is it something prior to linguistic expression? What are the interpretive possibilities of the body and embodied experience in its relation to linguisticity? A hermeneutics that attends to the body and embodied experience wrestles with the relationship between the body and language, and asks whether, and if so in what manner, the body finds itself in language or comes into language for interpretation and understanding.

In the last several years, important hermeneutic research has turned to questions about the body and language in an engagement with the works of Paul Celan. While Celan’s poetry and prose had always played a decisive role for Gadamer in thinking through the possibilities and limitations of interpretation and understanding in poetic language, the body remained largely absent as a central point of focus. However, recent work from hermeneutics scholars such as Alejandro Vallega and Dennis J. Schmidt begin to point to an unavoidable liminal encounter between the body and language in Celan’s texts. Vallega, for instance, details the close relationship between Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Celan’s poetry as one that emphasizes the “tactility” and “prelinguistic sensuousness” of words (Vallega 2009, 83). Dennis J. Schmidt notes a particular resistance to interpretation and meaning in what he calls the “carnality of language” that manifests in Celan’s poetry (Schmidt 2005, 99). Yet in order for hermeneutics to properly take on the difficult questions concerning the body, language, and interpretation in an engagement with Celan, it is necessary to develop a much more comprehensive account regarding the profound role that the body and embodied experience plays in his poetry and prose.

In this essay, I bring into focus the intimate relationship between the body and language in Celan’s works, one that informs and raises new questions for further hermeneutic research on the body. I show that Celan’s texts disclose the

relationship between the body and language as a decisive encounter with one's own singularity, that is, one's concrete, finite existence. Singularity marks the non-objectifiable, non-repeatable, mortal life of an individual as it comes to bear in the poem. Singularity, furthermore, does not close itself off from the world. For Celan, what is at stake in this encounter with one's singularity is a communion with others in a shared history or tradition. However, Celan's works also testify to the limits of this singularity as something that can be interpreted linguistically, that is, as something that can be brought into language or a horizon of understanding such that one can both interpret the other and be interpreted by the other. This, I claim, brings to bear the significance of the body for hermeneutic research in its long-standing encounter with the works of Celan, a significance that marks the body as necessary for the hermeneutic task of interpretation, but at the same time, as a site of linguistic failure and break down.

In order to show this, I trace three prominent instances of embodiment in Celan's poetry and prose that investigate the possibilities and limits of a hermeneutics of the body: poetry as pneumatic, poetry as *Handwerk*, and his 1967 poem, "Seelenblind." The first two instances speak to the possibilities of an embodied hermeneutic encounter with the singularity of the poet, namely, poetry as a pneumatic *Atemwende* (breath-turn) and poetry as *Handwerk* (craft). While much has been written about Celan's *Atemwende* from his 1960 *Meridian* speech, I focus here specifically on passages from his preliminary notes to this speech, whereby reading the poem as pneumatic invites the reader towards an encounter with the singularity of the poet. In turning next to Celan's letter to Hans Bender in 1960, poetry is *Handwerk*, a craft, and must emerge from out of the actual hands of the poet. Tactility in the poem not only implies one's own singular handicraft, but likewise the gesture of a handshake, extending an invitation to the reader to encounter the poet in the poem. Lastly, and more substantially, I turn to Celan's reading notes from two physiology textbooks from 1967 and his poem, "Seelenblind," in order to show that Celan likewise considers the body as a site of interpretive breakdown. While the breath and tactility of the poem suggest

a possible encounter and communion between the poet and others, “Seelenblind” shows how the body can likewise be a site of interpretive impossibility.

1. Poetry as Pneumatic

Aside from his early poem, “Todesfuge,” Celan is best known for his *Meridian* speech from 1960 and his suggestion that poetry is a breath-turn: “Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath” (Celan *Collected Prose*, 47). This notion of poetry as a breath-turn has sparked countless interpretations and is an unavoidable point of contact for scholars and readers of Celan. Within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer’s text on Celan, *Who Am I and Who Are You?*, offers one of the more influential accounts of Celan’s breath-turn. For Gadamer, the breath-turn indicates the “sensuous experience of the silent, calm moment between inhaling and exhaling” (Gadamer 1997, 73). It is in this moment that one hears or pays heed to a quiet stillness that is within the poem itself. For Gadamer, the poems in the opening sequence to Celan’s volume of poetry entitled, *Atemwende*, are “as quiet and barely perceptible as the breath-turn” (Gadamer 1997, 73). Yet Gadamer ultimately points to the linguistic character of this silent stillness in the breath-turn, whereby these poems-as-breath-turn “offer witness to a last constriction of life and, simultaneously, represent anew its recurring resolution, or better, not its resolution, but its elevation to a secure [*fest*] linguistic form” (Gadamer 1997, 73-74). Out of the quiet stillness of the breath-turn emerges something linguistically *fest*, that is, something secure, concrete, firm, or fixed in language. Furthermore, the title of the first cycle of poetry in the *Atemwende* volume, *Atemkristall* (Breath-crystal), points to the “sphere of breath and thus to the event of language formed by it” (Gadamer 1997, 73). For Gadamer, the breath-turn is certainly an embodied experience in the moment between inhaling and exhaling. However, its significance is that which ultimately precedes and engenders an instance of speech, language, or word.

While Gadamer focuses on the breath-turn as that which gives rise to verbalization or a linguistic event, I want to

emphasize instead that which is prelinguistic in the breath-turn, namely, a certain embodied investment that Celan has in his account of the poem as a breath-turn. That there is an inherently prelinguistic and pneumatic character at the heart of Celan's works (and especially in his *Meridian* preliminary notes) is not a new claim. Antti Salminen, for instance, argues: "In the poetry of Paul Celan (1920–1970) there is an invisible but essential form of materiality that signifies, on thematic, material, and presyntactic levels, breathing," whereby breathing is not merely understood as a "metaphor or a simile but as a force that animates both poetic and bodily *corpus*" (Salminen 2014, 107). Most recently, Maya Barzilai's work on Celan's engagement with Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig's notion of a "breath-unit" (*Atemeinheit*) shows "that the breath-unit represented for him [Celan] not merely the interval at which a line break should appear but also, more broadly, the singularity of the poem as a product of individual breath. . . Celan drew on this notion to suggest that the poem is an instantiation of the individual rhythms of human speech" (Barzilai 2019, 437). With this, my intention here is not to rehash these claims, but to further unfold the deep relationship Celan identifies between breath, breathing, and the poem that emphasizes an embodied significance in the poem itself, especially for the possibility of a hermeneutics of the body.

To do this, I turn now to some of his well-known preliminary notes and fragments to his *Meridian* speech: "What's on the lung, put on the tongue,' my mother used to say. Which has to do with breath . . . on breathroutes it comes, the poem, it is there, pneumatic: for everyone. . . The poem remains . . . pneumatically touchable . . . here, on breathroutes, the poem moves" (Celan 2011, 108).² In these notes, the poem is corporeal and tangible. It is a matter of lungs and tongues, able to be touched and encountered by anyone in a pneumatic way, as it moves itself along breath-paths. The poem is present with an embodied and ensouled vitality, and its accessibility for others is not so much a matter of linguisticity or conceptual understanding, but rather, it is a kind of tangible, tactile, and respiratory event that opens up the possibility of an encounter with both the singularity of one's existence, as well as the

binding of individuals to each other in a shared community, history, and tradition.

This claim hinges on the complex role that *pneuma* plays in Celan's works. Lydia Koelle, in her work, *Paul Celans Pneumatisches Judentum*, emphasizes the influence of Franz Rosenzweig on Celan's incorporation of *pneuma* in his poetry. According to Koelle, Celan marked the first page of his copy of Rosenzweig's "Geist und Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte," a section of the text which examines the German word, *Geist*, and its origins in both the Greek word, *pneuma*, and the Hebrew word, *ruach*. First, Rosenzweig notes that the Greeks and the Romans originally associated *pneuma* with both the "breath of the wind" and the living breath of an individual: "What they [ancient Greeks and Romans] called *pneuma*, *spiritus*, was directly just the breath of the wind, from which was derived the physical air of the human being, one's breath" (Rosenzweig 1984, 527).³ Rosenzweig's point is that contemporary usage of the word *Geist*, in phrases such as "*Geist der Zeit*" and "*Geist eines Volkes*," no longer points to the physical, psychical, or corporeal life of an individual human being, but rather, binds the individual to a much larger communal and historical context (Rosenzweig 1984, 527). Rosenzweig then notes that this idea of individuals bound together in a communal spirit likewise has its origins in the spirit of God (*des Geistes Gottes*) or the holy spirit (*des Heiligen Geistes*), as that which binds human beings to God as well as human beings to each other (Rosenzweig 1984, 527). This notion of spirit is yet still tied to an original sense of breath or wind in the Hebrew word, *ruach*, which appears in Genesis 1:2. However this association of *ruach* with mere breath or wind becomes quickly detached from this "sensory-all-too-sensory" meaning, insofar as the breath or wind that hovers of the water in Genesis 1:2 is a divine or godly (*göttlich*) breath: "Also here the word, *ruach*, originally means the breath of the wind, the air of one's breath. However, this divine breath, even because it is a divine breath, becomes detached from its sensory-all-to-sensory [*sinnlich-allzusinnlichen*] meaning" (Rosenzweig 1984, 527).⁴

This inextricable relationship between breath, divine breath, and wind is further discussed in Martin Buber's essay,

“On Word Choice in Translating the Bible,” in which the *Sinnlichkeit*, namely, the sensory, physical, or concrete character of breath and breathing is crucial to both *pneuma* and *ruach*. Buber, another thinker that Celan studied intimately, notes that German translators had translated *ruach* as either *Wind* (wind) or *Geist* (spirit), whereby most translators (most famously Luther) often chose *Geist*. Buber’s first point is that both *Wind* and *Geist* are integral to the meaning of *ruach*: “In this passage, however, *ruah* denotes not one of the two meanings but both together and undivided: the primordial surging from God, which takes on a natural form in ‘wind,’ a psychological form in ‘spirit’” (Buber 1994, 86).⁵ Buber then refers to the Greek, *pneuma*, as a word that still contains this primordial unity between what is spiritual (*urgeistig*) and what is sensory (*ursinnlich*). Buber’s second point is that the *naturhaft* and *sinnlich* character of *ruach* has been lost or has dissipated throughout the years in its translation into German as *Geist*. But to lose this *sinnlich* character of *ruach* is to lose likewise the *geistlich* sense of the word as well: “A word of this sort, with a ‘natural’ meaning and a ‘spiritual’ meaning, is not for us to split unbridgeably into two, as most translations do. Rather we must consider that the spiritual meaning is falsified when it loses its connection with concrete physicality” (Buber 1994, 87).⁶ Like Rosenzweig, Buber then accentuates an original sensory character to *ruach* and *pneuma* that has been forgotten, detrimentally, by translators time and time again.⁷ In relating *ruach* and *pneuma* to the divine breath of God, one which unites human beings with God and to each other, it is crucial to remember the finite, embodied character of breath and breathing as a human activity.

Celan himself notes the importance of the *Sinnlichkeit* of poetry in further fragments in his preliminary notes to the *Meridian* speech as that which speaks to the irrevocable mortality of the poet in the poem: “Language’s sensuality, its falling under the senses / *sinnenfälligel* is the secret of the presence of a voice (person) . . . language that actualizes itself and that, for the sake of its shape as it falls under the senses \Sinnfälligkeit\, sends itself into mortal conversation (mortality)” (Celan 2011, 114).⁸ In these fragments, language,

the body, and mortality all come together in the poem. What it means to be a poet is to bring one's own mortal singularity into the poem, a mortal singularity marked by the senses that opens one up to the possibility of a conversation likewise marked by mortality. The poem, as Celan continues to note, is the very "trace of our breath [*Atem*] in language" and the "aura \Hauch\ of our mortality" (Celan 2011, 115).⁹ It is in this breath or aura of our mortality in the poem that one's singularity manifests as a "radical individuation, i.e. the single, unrepeatable speaking of an individual" (Celan 2011, 117).¹⁰ Though the poem, for Celan, is a "witness of a singular existence" (Celan 2011, 117),¹¹ such singularity nevertheless points outward towards others: "In the singular the common speaks" (Celan 2011, 117).¹² The singularity of the poet in the poem is not merely an isolated, private affair, but calls out to others in a commonality and communion, broaching a mortal conversation with others.

When Celan tells us that a poem is pneumatic, that it arrives on the breath-routes of the poet, that it is able to be touched, pneumatically, by anyone, we should be attentive to an embodied character of the poem itself that cannot, and should not, be lost in one's encounter and interpretation of the poem. Yet to read or interpret the poem as pneumatic is not to reduce the poem to mere corporeality or materiality, but rather, to engage the bodily character of the poem as that which illuminates both the singularity of one's existence and one's inextricable relation to God, to others, and to a shared history. Breath is not simply or merely the air one takes in to continue living one's biological life, but is foundational in bearing witness to a primordial belongingness we have to the spiritual, to the breath of God, and to the origins of creation itself. In this way, Celan's use of breath and breath-paths to describe a poem intimately binds the poet not just to a sense of the spiritual, but also to the historical, as the very inheritor of a tradition since the beginning of creation.¹³ Celan's notion of a poem being pneumatic emphasizes, then, a turn to embodied experience as crucial for a hermeneutical approach to interpreting and understanding the poem. A pneumatic, hermeneutic interpretation involves something more than language and linguisticality. As Salminen suggests, such an interpretation

means that the poem must be inhaled, “drawn breath by breath inside the reader,” whereby breathing itself becomes a “bodily and tactile interpretation” (Salminen 2014, 120). In engaging Celan on language and the body, hermeneutics must approach the poem as that which runs deeper than language, down to the lungs and the tongue, the respiratory process of inhaling and exhaling, to the breath that marks the singular existence of both the poet and the reader, while simultaneously marking their communion with each other as members of a shared history or community.¹⁴

2. Poetry as *Handwerk*

Celan’s concern with singularity and embodiment in the poem also appears in a letter he wrote to Hans Bender in 1960, in which he relates poetry to a *Handwerk* and *Händedruck*.¹⁵ For Celan, *Handwerk*, craft, is the “condition of all poetry” (Celan *Collected Prose*, 25). Yet this is not a craft in the sense of merely applying one’s trade,¹⁶ but rather, it concerns one’s actual hands: “Craft means handiwork (*Handwerk*), a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to one person, i.e., a unique [*einmaligen*], mortal [*sterblichen*] soul searching for its way with its voice [*Stimme*] and its dumbness [*Stummheit*]. Only truthful hands write true poems. I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake (*Händedruck*) and a poem” (Celan *Collected Prose*, 25-26). Here, Celan’s poetic craft is not only a matter of lungs, tongue, and breath, but of one’s singular, *einmalig*, tactility: one’s own flesh and handiwork that marks one’s own mortality. The *Handwerk* of poetry is a testimony to the truth of human finitude, and only those poets that are willing to bring this truth to bear in their poetry write “true poems” with “truthful hands.” Such poets bring their singularity into play into the poem that reach out to others, offering a handshake to those willing to extend their own mortal, finite hands in communion with the poet. In similar fashion to the pneumatic character of poetry, the *Handwerk* of poetry both affirms the singularity of the poet while also reaching out to others in a gesture of solidarity. Though singular, we nevertheless come into communion with others through our embodied mortality, as finite beings finding our

way through the world in all of our communicative fragility, in both *Stimme* and *Stummheit*.

It is no easy task, however, to receive such a handshake offered through the poem. Celan tells us that poems are gifts, but that they are “gifts to the attentive. Gifts bearing destinies” (Celan *Collected Prose*, 26). As gift, *Geschenk*, that bears a destiny, *Schicksal*, the poem is given, sent, dispatched into the open without any guarantee of arrival. The poem may be, as he remarks in his *Bremen* speech, “a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward. Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality” (Celan *Collected Prose*, 35). The poem is a gift that is *en route*, *unterwegs*. It is an offering up of one’s lived, embodied, historical singularity with a contingent and precarious hope that this gift will be taken up by the truthful hands of another.

This is also why Celan is concerned about a contemporary focus on the poetic word as a kind of “word-material” one can experiment with: “And then there are, at every lyrical street corner, experiments that muck around with the so called word-material” (Celan *Collected Prose*, 26).¹⁷ As James K. Lyon points out, this is part of Celan’s critique against “art” (*Kunst*) in the *Meridian* speech: “Celan means all type of poetic ‘art’ grounded in the widely held modernist view that poems are ‘assembled’ or ‘manufactured’ from words, topoi, metaphors, stock rhetorical devices, or ‘word material.’ For him, this made poetic art little more than artifice, something artificial or synthetic, like a constructed automaton that appears to be human but where no human subject is present” (Lyon 2006, 125). It is part of Celan’s reaction against the “absolute poem” of Mallarmé, whereby “the human subject all but disappears behind what is primarily a word construct” (Lyon 2006, 125). For poems to be a handshake is to revitalize and reinvigorate the embodied singularity of the poet in the poem. Only words that are tactile, that are written by the true hands of the poet, can bring forth the breath-paths of the poet’s “unique, mortal soul.”

A hermeneutic interpretation of Celan's poetry then requires not only a pneumatic disposition, but also a tactile one. Such an interpretation demands physical proximity and intimacy. It demands that one not interpret the poem as a mere matter of intellectual investigation, in which a text can be unraveled or solved by applying a given interpretive method. The *Handwerk* of poetry demands that the reader bring their own finitude into play. To receive the handshake of the poem with one's own hands is to reckon with one's own singularity as an embodied, finite being desperately attempting to reach out to others. Such an interpretation demands, ultimately, that one approach the poem and the poet bearing witness to their own mortality and vulnerability, and in this way, come into communion with each other.

In considering poetry as pneumatic and as *Handwerk*, I put forward two instances in Celan's works that contribute to the interpretive possibilities for a hermeneutics of the body. However, as I will show in the next half of this essay, Celan's later poetry can also show the body as a site of hermeneutic impossibility as well. While Celan demands that one engage the poet and the poem through one's own breath and flesh, the body can also fail and reveal the inability or incapacity of interpretation in general, that is, of not only interpreting others but also of being interpreted by others. While breath and tactility can mark both the singularity of our own existence and the possibility of our communion with others, Celan will later expose the body as a site of isolation and alienation from others. In what follows, I first trace Celan's reading notes from two physiology textbooks during his stay at a psychiatric hospital in early 1967, and offer a reading of his poem, "Seelenblind," in order to emphasize this impossibility of the body as a site, or mode, of interpretation and understanding.

3. Tracing Celan's Reading of *Der Körper des Menschen* and *Leitfaden der Physiologie des Menschen*

Before reading his poem, "Seelenblind," it is crucial to follow Celan's reading notes for Adolf Fallers' *Der Körper des Menschen* (KM) and Hans Reichel's and Adolf Bleichert's

Leitfaden der Physiologie des Menschen (LPM), in which I claim that Celan is clearly focused on particular impairments concerning the brain that contribute to the breakdown of language and interpretation.¹⁸ Celan's engagement with KM and LPM began after February of 1967, when he was hospitalized at the *Psychiatrische Universitätsklinik* in Paris for a second murder attempt on his wife followed by his own attempted suicide (Celan 2018, 926). During his stay, Celan read and marked these texts as he was drafting much of the third cycle of poems for his volume, *Fadensonnen*. It is no surprise, then, that much of the medical and anatomical terminology that Celan incorporates into several of his poems in this volume can be traced back to various sections of these texts, and specifically, to Celan's markings in his own copies of these texts.¹⁹ While Celan takes note of several passages in both these texts that have to do with the functioning of internal organs such as the heart and lungs, the flow and movement of blood throughout the body, the respiratory system, and digestion, my focus in this essay will be on Celan's close interest in the many different impairments involving language and communication that are due to interruption or damage to various parts of the brain.

In KM, Celan shows interest in four pages of the text concerning the telencephalon, or cerebrum (*Endhirn*), and is focused specifically on the way this part of the brain attends to one's capacities for speech, language, and expression. In this regard, the first set of lines that Celan notes in KM are the following:

Die Hemisphären mit der grauen Rinde und den Basalganglien, sowie dem Riechhirn (Rhinnencephalon) sind die wichtigsten Abschnitte des Endhirns. Man stellt es als Hirnmantel (Pallium) den als Stammhirn oder Hirnstamm bezeichneten übrigen Hirnabschnitten gegenüber. An die intakte Struktur des Endhirns sind die wichtigsten Funktionen wie Bewußstein, Intelligenz, Gedächtnis und Wille geknüpft" (Faller 1966, 222).²⁰ (Celan's underlining)²¹

Here, Celan underlines *Hirnmantel*, the pallium or 'brain coat,' which refers to the "layers of gray and white matter that cover the upper surface of the cerebral cortex" (Pierre Joris in Celan 2000, 528), and underlines the many functions that

this cerebrum has control over, such as consciousness, intelligence, memory, and will. The pallium or brain coat is then that which covers, protects, or is at least integral for these crucial aspects of one's ability to identify, affirm, and express one's own consciousness or self. Further on in this section, Celan also underlines certain parts of the cerebrum that control motor functions, such as the corpus striatum (*Streifenkörper*) and lentiform nucleus (*Linsenkern*) (Faller 1966, 223-224). As Faller notes, these parts control one's ability to move and maintain various features of one's body, such that damage to these parts leads to impairments of one's motor functions: "Zerstörung des bleichen Körpers (Globus pallidus) führt zum Fehlen der Mitbewegungen und zu übersteigertem Muskeltonus (Maskengesicht bei Parkinsonismus). . . Eine Blutung im Gebiet der inneren kapsel von der Größe einer Haselnuß kann eine ganze Körperseite lähmen (Hemiplegie)" (Faller 1966, 224) (Celan underline).²² Here, Celan first underlines the 'mask face' or facial masking that can manifest in one suffering from with Parkinson's disease. In this condition, an individual experiences diminished capacity for facial expression and appears to others as emitting an expressionless visage. In the second part of this paragraph, Celan draws a vertical line in the margins next to this sentence concerning hemiplegia, namely, the paralyzing of one side of one's body.

Lastly, in this section in KM, Celan underlines several passages concerning the "speech center" (*Sprachzentrum*) in the cerebral cortex. First, he notes the close relationship between speech and motor functions in this part of the brain: "Beim Rechtshänder befindet sich links der Kopfmuskulatur vorgelagert das motorische Sprachzentrum oder Brocasche Zentrum, in welchem die für das Sprechen wichtigen Bewegungsabläufe repräsentiert sind" (Faller 1966, 226) (Celan underline).²³ Further down the page, he continues to underline words such as "*Sehrinde*," (visual cortex) "*optischer Erinnerungen*," (optical/visual memory) "*akustische Sprachzentrum*," (acoustic speech center) and "*optische Sprachzentrum oder Lesezentrum*," (optical/visual speech center or reading center) in order to bring together the optical, acoustic, and motor elements crucial for speech and expression.

He indicates this much in the margin at the bottom of page 226 in KM, in which Celan draws a freehand schematization of this speech center (represented below):

motorisches
akustisches > *Sprachzentrum*
optisches

Here, Celan is carefully noting that one's speech center is constituted by motor, acoustic, and optical elements that must work and refer to each other, that language and self-expression is intimately bound up with movement, motor skills, and gesticulation.

Celan likewise takes note of the "speech center" in LPM, yet here he seems more concerned with the various impairments one can suffer due to interruptions or damage to this part of the brain. In a section of the text that focuses on the central nervous system, Celan marks several words and phrases on page 141 that center on the breakdown or disconnection in parts of the speech center. First, and most notably, Celan underlines the term "*Seelenblindheit*; *visuelle Agnosie*," (Reichel and Bleichert 1966, 141), which the text explains as the loss of one's ability to know and distinguish visible objects, and is a term that will appear in the title of his poem, "Seelenblind." Further down this page, Celan underlines the following: "*motorischen Aphasie*," "*sensorische Aphasie*," "*Agraphie*," and "*Alexie*" (Reichel and Bleichert 1966, 141). First, Celan notes that the breakdown in the speech center, is accompanied by a motor aphasia, namely, the inability to control or operate the musculature necessary for producing speech. This form of aphasia is, as LPM suggests, often accompanied by agraphia, the inability to write or communicate through writing. Lastly, Celan underlines an entire sentence that discusses sensory aphasia, in which one's ability to understand words and to control one's own speech or language is damaged, and is often tied with alexia, the inability to read.

Before turning to Celan's poem, "Seelenblind," I want to first note the intimacy and fragility that he traces between language and the body in these particular markings in KM and LPM. First, he underlines the brain coat or pallium that is

crucial for one's capabilities for consciousness, intelligence, memory, and will, and are the very things that allow us to affirm and express a sense of self-hood or subjectivity. The brain coat likewise encompasses the speech center in the cerebrum, where language and the capacity for self-expression involves one's optical and acoustic abilities, to make visual and audible distinctions and associations, as well as one's motor skills, to move one's body and gesticulate. Impairments to these parts of the cerebrum result in a diminished capacity for language and self-expression, which we see in his underlining and marking of facial masking (*Maskengesicht*), hemiplegia (*Hemiplegie*), visual agnosia (*Seelenblindheit*), motor and sensory aphasia (*Aphasie*), agraphia (*Agraphie*), and alexia (*Alexie*). In all of this, one can trace a clear concern for the possibilities of language, from one's capacity for oral and written speech to the very bodily movements that are crucial for making oneself understood. In these examples, it is not so much about the possibility of meaning to emerge in a literary or poetic text, but of one's very physiological capacities to interpret others and to make one's own self legible and understandable to others. Language, in this instance, is not considered in the abstract, and does not exist in isolation from one's lived, incorporated, neural experience. With this, to understand and to be understood is fraught with vulnerability and contingency, and for some, it is a struggle that is fought on many fronts: from the written word in a poem to the speech center in the cerebral cortex.

4. "Seelenblind" and the Failure of Interpretation

In tracing these markings from Celan's reading of KM and LPM, I want to put forward a reading of his poem, "Seelenblind," which incorporates terminology from KM and LPM. "Seelenblind" was drafted during Celan's stay at the *Psychiatrische Universitätsklinik* on April 22nd, 1967:

SEELENBLIND, hinter den Aschen,
im heilig-sinnlosen Wort,
kommt der Entreimte geschritten,
den Hirnmantel leicht um die Schultern,

den Gehörgang beschallt
mit vernetzten Vokalen,
baut er den Sehpurpur ab,
baut ihn auf. (Celan 2018, 251)

SOULBLIND, behind the ashes,
in the holy-meaningless word,
the disrhymed one comes walking,
his braincoat draped lightly over the shoulders,

the ear canal irradiated
with reticulated vowels,
he deconstructs the visual purple,
reconstructs it. (Celan 2000, 176-77)

Like any poem from Celan, there are several points of departure available for interpretation. For example, as Barbara Wiedemann and others have noted, there are clear references in this poem to Ossip Mandelstam, Friedrich Hölderlin, and the trauma and victims of the Shoah (Celan 2018, 941). Perhaps most prevalent, and certainly not unrelated to these others, is Celan's use of medical and anatomical terminology from KM and LPM, which include *Seelenblind*, *Hirnmantel*, *Gehörgang*, *beschallen*, *vernetzten*, and *Sehpurpur*.²⁴ In the first stanza, one can trace the theme of impairment to the speech center in the cerebrum in the relationship between *Seelenblind* (soulblind), *Entreimte* (disrhymed), and *Hirnmantel* (brain coat). The first word in the first stanza, *Seelenblind* (soulblind), is a clear reference to the medical term, *Seelenblindheit* (visual agnosia), to describe one who has suffered neurological damage and has lost the ability to distinguish and recognize objects. In Derek Hillard's analysis of the poem, he notes that one who is *seelenblind* "cannot visually subsume an exemplary object under a general conceptual category. Objects exist solely as particulars; the framework into which they might fit is not available" (Hillard 2010, 148). It is important to note that here that one is not visually impaired, but rather, one is "incapable of either making visual distinctions or harmonizing perceptions with memory; it is the loss of a visual understanding and memory as the result of shock" (Hillard 2010, 148). One is able to see objects, but is unable to identify these objects within a context or horizon of understanding. One has the capacity for vision, but is unable to interpret or understand what one sees.

The one who is soulblind is the subject of this poem, namely, the disrhymed individual that comes walking with the brain coat draped lightly around the shoulders. The brain coat, the pallium, as that which safeguards the cerebrum and all of its important functions for subjectivity, has now been displaced, indicating a slipping away of protection and guarantee of any successful, coherent, or meaningful expression of oneself. The brain coat is now secondary, derivative, thrown casually over the shoulder of the one who is disrhymed, whereby one's "holy-meaningless" speech takes on a "sacral incomprehensibility" (Hillard 2010, 148),²⁵ and emerges from behind the ashes or traces of a traumatic past (Dimoula 2017, 153). Celan's use here of the adjectival noun, *der Entreimte*, instead of *der entreimte Mensch*, indicates a fundamental disunity or disharmony in the individual, such that one is not merely described as having the quality of a lack of rhyme, but embodies this disrhyme itself. In the poem, the disrhymed individual comes or arrives walking, *kommt geschritten*. Here, there is temporal ambiguity with the present tense, *kommt*, and the past participle, *geschritten*. While Pierre Joris translates this as "the disrhymed comes walking,"²⁶ one could read these lines as: the disrhymed comes or arrives as walked, having been walked, or as one who was able to walk in the past. In emerging from out of a traumatic past, we might even read this as the disrhymed one as having been walked on, stepped on, or trodden on to such an extent that the brain mantel has been loosened and now barely hangs on over the shoulders of the individual. In any case, the past is not in tune with the present. The individual makes their way to us, arrives or comes to us in the present tense, but as disrhymed, is not in 'step' or in 'stride' (*schreiten, geschritten*) with this present.²⁷ With this, it is not just one's visual or conceptual capacities that suffer along with soulblindness, nor just the sense of a coherent self that suffers from the displacement of the brain coat. As we saw, Celan was careful to note in KM and LPM the impairments to one's motor skills that are crucial for self-expression and communication. These impairments, such as motor and sensory aphasia, facial masking, and hemiplegia often accompany the various audio/visual impairments due to damage in the speech center of

the cerebrum. In this way, the physiological movement of the disrhymed individual is also present in the poem, arriving out of step, not in stride, perhaps paralyzed or no longer able to walk at all. As soulblind, one struggles to interpret the world and others. As disrhymed, one struggles to be interpreted by the world and others. It is here, then, in these first four lines that Celan bears witness to the spectrum of hermeneutic difficulties, namely, the struggle to both interpret and be interpreted, to understand and to be understood.

As Hillard and Dimoula point out, the second stanza of the poem moves to an emphasis on sound and vision, and continues to refer to KM and LPM. Hillard notes the connection of *Gehörgang*, *beschallen*, and *vernetzten* back to LPM, which details the networking in the ear canal that guards against damage to one's hearing by acoustic blast (Hillard 2010, 149). In this poem, the disrhymed individual's ear canals are exposed to an acoustic blast of a network of vowels that the individual, as disrhymed, receives as disconnected or without sense. The last two lines refer to the visual purple (*Sehpurper*), which Celan underlines in KM and is crucial for adjusting one's vision in darkness.²⁸ The visual purple in one's eye diminishes in the light and regenerates in the darkness, regulating daytime and nighttime vision. This last image in the poem of the disrhymed individual breaking down and building up the visual purple suggests, according to Hillard, an active subject "orienting himself through destruction and then visual recovery," (Hillard 2010, 150), and according to Dimoula, an act of poetic will or autonomy that allows poetry to "lay its own claims to the organs, against the medical descriptions of their functioning" (Dimoula 2017, 154). The disrhymed one is at the end of the poem able to "see in darkness, that is, in blindness" (Hillard 2010, 150). Yet one should be wary to attribute a "new vision in the face of damage to the eyes," or a "new singular vision" at the end of the poem, as Hillard does (Hillard 2010, 150-151). The features attributed to the disrhymed individual in the first stanza do not allow for such focus or uniformity. Soulblindness is not a matter of one's capacity for vision, but rather, the correspondence of objects in the world with concepts in the mind. The regulation of the visual purple does not necessarily

contribute to the interpretation and understanding of what one sees, but rather, merely to one's capacity for vision itself. It implies, I suggest, an empty mechanical process of the body that does not respond in a redemptive manner to the impairments of the disrhymed individual in the first stanza. Instead of a vision of hope and recovery and the end of the poem, Celan points to the physical, material, biochemical processes of the body that continue to run their course, automatically, and irrespective to one's soulblind, disrhymed condition.

The image that Celan presents in this poem is one who has undergone trauma that has affected one's ability for interpretation and understanding all the way down to the brainstem.²⁹ One's protective brain coat now hangs on in a delicate manner, and the individual lives a life exposed to the world without conceptual understanding or context and without a uniform or coherent sense of one's own self. In this state, one is accosted by sounds without meaning, and one's eyes continue to mechanically adjust and readjust to a visual field in lightness and darkness. As soulblind, disrhymed, and without protection of the brain coat, one's bodily senses are able to receive and adjust to stimulation, but are not able to interpret and understand. More than this, one struggles to speak a meaningful word, or make one's own self legible and understandable for others. While Dimouli and Hillard note a sense of hopefulness in the poem, I suggest that "Seelenblind" speaks to the body as a mere site of functioning mechanical processes, as that which bears witness to the *Stummheit* of the body just as much as its possible *Stimme*. In "Seelenblind," the body is no guarantor of a successful or meaningful hermeneutic encounter with oneself and others. Even more than this, it can foreclose the possibility of such an encounter.

5. Conclusion

As philosophical hermeneutics continues to develop a hermeneutics of the body, scholars should continue to turn to Celan as a crucial interlocuter for thinking the limits of linguistic interpretation and understanding in the body and embodied experience. In engaging Celan's work on poetry as pneumatic and as *Handwerk*, I suggest that hermeneutics finds

a compelling source for investigating the possibilities of the body as interpretive. As pneumatic and as *Handwerk*, the reader is invited to engage the singular breath and tactility of the poet in the poem. This, of course, is still no easy task and requires the most patient and attentive of readers to breathe in the poem and extend one's own hand towards the unique, mortal soul of the poet. As we saw in his *Bremen* speech, the possibility of a poem washing up on someone's shoreline offers only a faint and uncertain hope of success. However, despite this, the possibility of the poem reaching another is a condition for the possibility of poetry to begin with, as he writes in his *Meridian* speech: "The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it" (Celan *Collected Prose*, 49). This possibility is necessary for the poem to affirm the bond between one's singular existence and a shared history or tradition with others.

However, if hermeneutics wishes to consider the possibility of the body as interpretive, it must also reckon with Celan's poetic encounter with the body as a site of failure and fracture. In his reading of KM and LPM and his poem, "Seelenblind," the body can just as much deny, as well as affirm, one's singularity and communion with others. My claim is not that Celan's "Seelenblind" speaks to a categorical impossibility of the interpretive possibilities of embodiment. After all, the very fact that "Seelenblind" is a poem, as we just saw, affirms an *a priori* hope or possibility for the poem to reach out and communicate with others. However, "Seelenblind" makes it clear that the body offers no assurance of interpretive capabilities, and that the body in this regard can often fail us in dramatic fashion. If hermeneutics engages Celan in its attempts to consider the body as a site of interpretation, Celan would then disclose a deep truth about hermeneutic experience, namely, that every possibility for a meaningful interpretive engagement with oneself and others is grounded in fragility, interruption, and failure. Celan's work bears witness to the possibility of the body as silent, fractured, and incapable of the hermeneutic task of interpretation; that what speaks, when the body speaks, is finitude itself. In an encounter with Celan, hermeneutics must itself bear witness to this difficult

truth, that there are moments when the only testimony that the body can give is one that speaks to its own linguistic poverty.

NOTES

¹ For more on hermeneutics and the body, see Aho, 2009; Kearney and Treanor, 2015; Gadamer, 1996.

² The German reads: “‘Was auf der Lunge, das auf der Zunge,’ pflegte meine Mutter zu sagen. Das hat mit dem Atem zu tun . . . auf Atemwegen kommt es, das Gedicht, pneumatisch ist es da: für jeden. . . Das Gedicht bleibt. . . pneumatisch berührbar. . . hier, auf Atemwegen, bewegt sich das Gedicht” (Celan 1999, 108).

³ Translation my own. The German reads: “Was sie πνεῦμα, spiritus, nannten, war unmittelbar nur der Windhauch, in Ableitung davon wohl auch der physische Lebenshauch des Menschen, sein Atem.”

⁴ Translation my own. The German reads: “Auch da bedeutet das Wort, *ruach*, ursprünglich den Windhauch, den Hauch des Atems. Aber dieser göttliche Hauch wird, eben weil er göttlicher Hauch ist, von seiner sinnlich-allzusinnlichen Bedeutung losgelöst.” For more on *Atemwegen*, *ruach*, and the many different valences of breath and breathing in Celan’s work, see Salminen, 2014

⁵ The German reads: “Und doch beduetet an dieser Stelle *ruach* nicht eins von beiden, sondern unzerspalten beides in einem: jenes von Gott ausgehende brausende Urwehen, das im ‘Wind’ eine naturhafte, im ‘Geist’ eine seelenhafte Gestalt annimmt” (Buber 1936, 160.)

⁶ The German reads: “Wir dürfen ein Wort, das wie dieses zwei Bedeutungen, eine ‘naturhafte’ und eine ‘geisthafte,’ hat, nicht brückenlos, wie es allgemein in der Übertragung geschehen ist, in die zwei zerspalten, sondern müssen bedenken, daß die geisthafte Bedeutung sogleich verfälscht wird, wenn sie die Verbindung mit der Sinnlichkeit der andern verliert” (Buber 1936, 161-162).

⁷ This unity between the physical and the spiritual in the term *ruach* is also found, for instance, in Ronald L. Eisenberg’s *Dictionary of Jewish Terms*. The word, *ru’ach*, literally means ‘wind,’ but is translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘soul.’ While the word *nefesh* is the physical soul which human beings share with animals, and *Neshamah* is the spiritual soul which we share with angels, *ru’ach* is the “transitional soul that connects the two, since it would otherwise be impossible for the physical and the spiritual to co-exist in one body” (Eisenberg 2008, 378).

⁸ The German reads: “Das Sinnliche, sinnenfällige der Sprache ist das Geheimnis der Gegenwart einer Stimme (Person) . . . sich aktualisierende und um der Sinnfälligkeit ihrer Gestalt willen sich in das sterbliche Gespräch (Sterblichkeit) schickende Sprache” (Celan 1999, 114).

⁹ The German reads: “Das Gedicht: die Spur unseres Atems in the Sprache“; “der Hauch unserer Sterblichkeit” (Celan 1999, 115).

¹⁰ The German reads: “radikale Individuation, d.h. einmaliges, unwiederholbares Sprechen eines Einzelnen” (Celan 1999, 117).

¹¹ The German reads: “Zeugen eines einmaligen Daseins” (Celan 1999, 117).

¹² The German reads: “Im Singulären spricht das Gemeinsame” (Celan 1999, 117).

¹³ This is also indicated in the opening lines of Celan’s poem, *Benedicta*: Hast - /thou hast drunken,/what came to me from our fathers/and from beyond our fathers:/- - Pnuma” (Felstiner 1995, 178). Charles Bambach notes that this poem speaks to a “profound bond to the community of the dead, which could only be awakened through the living word that came through the fathers and beyond them, Celan forged his own pneumatic version of Judaism. A pneumatic Judaism implied not only a ‘breath turn’ toward a new possibility of communication and encounter; it also functioned as a turn to the community of ‘breath’ as *ruach* – the breath of communion that linked Jewish survivors to those lost in the flames of the Holocaust” (Bambach 2013, 234).

¹⁴ Both Salminen and Koelle note a similar hermeneutic dialectic between part and whole in Celan’s use of *pnuma*. For Salminen, “A singular individual is connected to common humanity (and also to nonhuman forces) by her breath, and the *Atemwende* is the very moment, in which this connection can be felt and realized” (Salminen 2014, 111). For Koelle, *pnuma* invokes a connection between transcendence and immanence in Celan’s works: “In der Vorstellung von ‘Pnuma’ und ‘Atem’ ist die Doppelbindung von Transzendenz und Immanenz bereits vorfiguriert.” (“In the representation of ‘pnuma’ and ‘breath’ the double-bind of transcendence and immanence is already prefigured.”[my translation]) (Koelle 1997, 71).

¹⁵ On September 13th, 1954, Hans Bender wrote to Celan inviting him to write a short essay on “*das Handwerk zum Gedicht*.” Part of Celan’s response to Bender in a letter from November 18th, 1954 is later quoted in the “Vorwort” to Bender’s text *Mein Gedicht ist mein Messer*: “es gehöre zum Wesen des Gedichts, daß es die ‘Mitwisserschaft’ dessen, der es ,hervorbringt,’ nur solange duldet, als es braucht, um zu entstehen” (Celan 2019, 984).

¹⁶ In Celan’s 1954 letter to Bender, he quips about the idea of poetry being a kind of craft: “Das Handwerk zum Gedicht’ . . . Wer den Beweis erbrächte, dass es dieses Handwerk tatsächlich gibt, der bewiese ja geradezu, dass dieses Handwerk, wie jedes andere, einen goldenen Boden hat! Ein Scherz, verzeihen Sie, und kein besonders gelungener . . .” (Celan 2019, 178). The adage, “*Handwerk hat goldenen Boden*,” is often used to suggest that learning a trade is profitable and is something one can rely on for financial stability. This, of course, is not the kind of *Handwerk* that Celan wants to associate poetry with, and he makes this point clear in his 1960 letter to Bender: “Dieses Handwerk [Dichtung] hat ganz bestimmt keinen goldenen Boden – wer weiß, ob es überhaupt einen Boden hat” (Celan *Gesammelte Werke*, 177).

¹⁷ We may also compare Celan’s refusal of “word material” to a passage in his *Meridian* preliminary notes which likewise emphasize the tangibility of the poem: “Poems are not accumulations and articulations of ‘word material;’ they are the actualizing of something immaterial, language-emanations carried through life-hours, tangible and mortal like us. These hours are, especially in the poem, our hours - this is one of them - ; hours have no phenotype; we still write for our life” (Celan 2011, 110). The German reads: “Gedichte sind keine Häufungen und Gliederung von ‘Wortmaterial;’ sie sind Aktualisierungen

eines Immateriellen, durch Lebensstunden getragene Emanationen der Sprache, dinghaft und sterblich wie wir. Stunden, das sind, zumal im Gedicht, unsere Stunden – diese ist eine davon - ; Stunden haben keinen Phänotyp; wir schreiben immer noch um unser Leben.” (Celan 1999, 110).

¹⁸ It is worth noting that Celan had an early interest in medicine. In 1938, he travelled to Tours, France in order to take preparatory classes for medical school at the *École préparatoire de médecine*. He only completed one academic year before war broke out in Europe 1939. For more, see Chalfren, 1991.

¹⁹ Celan’s fascination with medical and anatomical language in his poetry has been noted sporadically by many scholars, but only a few have attempted any kind of serious cataloguing of this terminology. James K. Lyon’s “Die (Patho-)Physiologie des Ichs in der Lyrik Paul Celans” (1986) is still perhaps the most direct scholarly work that attempts to identify and map Celan’s turn towards medical and anatomical language in his later poetry. Likewise, Barbara Wiedemann in her extensive commentary to Celan’s poems in *Paul Celan. Die Gedichte* (2018), notes of most of Celan’s relevant markings in these texts, but not all.

²⁰ My translation: “The hemispheres with the gray cortex and the basal ganglia, as well as the olfactory bulb (rhinencephalon) are the most important sections of the cerebrum. It is, as a brain mantle (pallium), juxtaposed to the other sections of the brain designated as the brain stem. The most important functions such as consciousness, intelligence, memory and will are linked to the intact structure of the cerebrum.”

²¹ All of Celan’s marginalia for KM and LPM noted in this essay are from my reading of Celan’s copies of these texts from the *Celan Bibliothek* at the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv* in Marbach, Germany. Some, but not all, of these marking are noted by Barbara Wiedemann in *Paul Celan: Die Gedichte* (2018). Unlike the previous sections of this essay, I keep the German in the body of the text in order to emphasize the German terms that Celan underlines.

²² My translation: “Destruction of the globus pallidus leads to the failure of mobility and to excessive muscle tone (facial masking of Parkinson’s disease.) . . . A hemorrhage in the area of the inner capsule the size of a large hazelnut can paralyze an entire side of the body (hemiplegia).”

²³ My translation: “For those that are right handed the motor speech center or Broca center is located to the left in front of the head muscles, in which the combination of movements important for speech are represented.”

²⁴ For other helpful readings of “Seelenblind,” see James K. Lyon’s “Die (Patho-)Physiologie des Ichs in der Lyrik Paul Celans” (1986); Vasiliki Dimoula’s “Affect and the Organ in the Anatomical Poems of Paul Celan: Encountering Medical Discourse” (2017); and Derek Hillard’s *Poetry as Individuality: The Discourse of Observation in Paul Celan* (2010).

²⁵ “*hinter den Aschen / im heilig-sinnlosen Wort*” is a reference to Osip Mandelstamm’s “In Petersburg,” which Celan translated. See Wiedemann in Celan 2018, 941; Felstiner 1995, 233. *Sinnlos* can also be translated as “senseless,” and echoes the physical senses of the human body as in Buber’s use of *Sinnlichkeit* and *ursinnlich*, and Rosenzweig’s use of *sinnlich-allzusinnlich* in referring to *ruach*.

²⁶ John Felstiner translates this line as: “the derhymed one comes striding” (Felstiner 1995, 234).

²⁷ Regarding Celan’s use of *Reim*, *Heim*, and *entreimt* in his poetry, see Hamacher 2019, 147; Wiedemann in Celan 2018, 942. Relevant poems from Celan that use *Reim*, *Heim*, and *entreimt* include: “Nähe der Gräber,” “Ein Wurfholz,” “Dein Heim,” “Sie Haben Dich alle Gelesen,” “Wohin mir das Wort.” See also Koelle 1997, 28-34, on “Die Unreimbare Zeile – Gott, Welt, Mensch.”

²⁸ “Vitamin A ist für den normalen Aufbau des Sehpurpurs in der Netzhaut des Auges verantwortlich. Eines der ersten Anzeichen der Avitaminose A ist Nachtblindheit (Hemeralopie)” (Faller 1966, 86) (Celan underline); “Die Rezeptoren enthalten den Sehpurpur, der unter dem Einfluß der Belichtung abgebaut wird und im Dunkeln sich wieder regeneriert. Für den Aufbau des Sehpurpurs ist Vitamin A sehr wichtig.” (Faller 1966, 243). My translation: “Vitamin A is responsible for the normal construction of the visual purple in the retina of the eye. One of the initial signs of avitaminoses A is night-blindness (hemeralopia);” “The receptors contain the visual purple, which is dismantled under the influence of exposure to light and regenerates itself again in darkness. For the construction of the visual purple vitamin A is very important.”

²⁹ John Felstiner mentions that Celan was receiving shock therapy during his stay at the psychiatric clinic in spring of 1967 (Felstiner 1995: 233-234). .

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