Not there any longer:
negation and working through trauma
in Robin Coste Lewis' "Lure" and Paul Celan's "Psalm"

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In a collection full of expertly crafted poems, Robin Coste Lewis' "Lure" was the poem that stayed with me long after I'd finished *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*. In part, it arrested me with the subject matter—incest poetry is a rarity in my reading life—but that alone couldn't be the reason for my obsession. "Lure" was hardly the only memorable poem on a provocative theme in that book. After re-reading and turning it over in my mind, the snag in my gut finally articulated itself in a question: why would a poet frame an entire poem in the negative? What would compel a poet to say "I am not," rather than "I am"?

Formally, "Lure" is framed by a simple statement, "I am not there...any longer," in which the poet nests a three page list of excruciatingly detailed denials. Indented from and parenthetical within that statement, the list begins: "We are not in that room. I am not sitting in your lap…" which at first reads as a series of denials. Both denial and self-doubt are classic symptoms of long-standing or repeated trauma (Terr, 15). Unsurprisingly, my research later pointed to denial as a popular mode of representing trauma in art. In Richard Read's "Representing Trauma: The Case for Troubling Images," he proposes four modes of representing trauma in visual art: transcendence, acting out (often (re)traumatizing the audience), denial, and working through. (Read, 227) Yet, labeling "Lure" as a denial poem undercuts the powerful reframing of the final phrase outside of the parenthesis: "any longer." There was something deeper than denial at work in this poem.

In the poetry world, tucked in the book *After Confession*, an essay by Louise Glück criticizes much of confessional poetry as exhibitionism rather than tragic art. Her two main objections seem to align with two of Read's modes of representing trauma that he also criticizes—work that leaves the poem and the reader stuck in the event ("acting out" in Read's terminology) and work trapped in rigid moral interpretations, through which the event is "transcended." (Gluck, 244-245) In a rebuttal essay in the same book, Judith Harris expresses reluctance to remove all moral interpretation from an abuse or to deny the survivor their story, both of which seem to be forms of what Read calls "denial." (Harris, 255) Where Harris, Glück, and Read might all agree, though in different terms, is in the power of art that "works through" a trauma with its audience by imagining other realities, engaging reader participation in that act of imagination, and pushing into complex questions that are larger than any one experience. I suspected that this was the

territory that “Lure” was operating in and that the framework of negation was crucial to this process—but how?

To ensure I was considering this question beyond the lens of incest, I sought out other negation poems that could broaden my understanding of its function in poetry. More and more of them found their way to me, and I was soon overwhelmed with examples—perhaps a classic case of looking for something and suddenly seeing it everywhere. In my ever expanding list, nearly a quarter of the examples came from one poet: Paul Celan. As a German Jew and survivor of the Holocaust, Celan spent much of his adult life physically in exile but writing in the language of the Nazis which was also his own. Here, I thought, is a poet, who in his very language would have to “work through” his trauma. His poems wrestle with what one literary scholar describes as “the survivor’s vertiginous experience of the impossible becoming possible, of non-being mingling with being.” (Feldman, 440) I decided to look at one of his poems to see how his work and experiences might inform my reading of Coste Lewis’ poem, as well as my understanding of negation beyond simple denial.

Celan’s “Psalm” incants the praises of a No One god and its Nothing creation. As translated by John Felstiner, it reads: “No one kneads us again out of earth and clay… Blessed are though No One… A Nothing we were, are now, and ever / shall be, blooming...No-One’s Rose.” At first reading the poem is a gut-wrenching and nigh-atheistic removal of the sacred name of a god who seemed absent to the Jews of the Holocaust. Yet again, in Celan’s hands, the negations are not purely the work of denial or removal. Through capitalization and definitive articles, the poem asserts a highly specific No One and Nothing. In working through the “why me/us?” frequent among survivors of singular traumas (Terr, 15), Celan has to strip away what he knows about that god and begin again. “Yahweh,” whose very name was synonymous with defending the Jewish people, would need to be removed to allow for a new understanding of god. The recreation of god and self would have to begin as the creation of the world had in Genesis—with the void. Thankfully, Celan had a rich history of apophatic poets, theologians and philosophers to help him build that void.

In fact both Coste Lewis' and Celan's poems, through their litany of negations, work in this apophatic mode. The poems seek to go "beyond the absence of what was, to what can only be known as absence, or what is inconceivable in terms of naming and knowing directly." (Gibbons, 87) Reginald Gibbons, in his book *How Poems Think,* lists many poets who work in this territory including Dickenson, Sappho, Darwish, and Brodsky, to which I would add Jorie Graham. These poets strip the names and perceptions that limit and define their knowledge in hopes of removing what "not only fails to evoke by name what is real but also substitutes for the real thing merely by name." (Gibbons, 95) "Psalm" and "Lure," both bear witness to places where naming and knowing fail. In so doing, both contain traces of what William Franke calls a "crisis of language" that can be seen widely in post-world-war poetry, as poets tried to write in a world "turned to absurdity." Much of contemporary American poetry, he asserts, has lost "faith in language and in the self that constructs itself in language." (Franke, 8-11) The only way for Celan and Coste Lewis to reconstruct the "I," which holds experiences it refuses to carry and yet must carry, is to negate the language that entraps it.

This act of stripping away through negation isn't done by the poets alone, though. "Creating meaning through the use of negation is a cooperative process between speaker and hearer or writer and reader [which] operates to activate implied rather than explicit meaning," Lisa Nahajec writes. (Nahajec, 109) In everyday language, as well as literature, this meaning-making process is complex when it comes to negation, which is seldom simply "truth-functional." (Hasson & Glucksberg, 1028) We use negation to affirm and affirmation to deny, i.e. *No you can't! / Yes I can*. We use negations to modify rather than oppose, i.e. *she's not the prettiest girl in the room*. We use negations that don't have functional opposites, i.e. *couldn't care less*. (Giora, 982-988) We can even fabricate an opposite by using a pair of non-polar terms in negation, i.e. *the best politicians are not aloof but human*. (Jeffries, 35-36) Processing a negation, then, is a sophisticated mental process involving the work of implication and sense-making through context. After all, if someone tells me the door is not open, instead of telling me it's closed, I might well wonder if the door was supposed to be open. (Kaup, Ludtke, and Zwaan, 1044) The complex, collaborative semantic process of understanding a negation slows the reader down and prompts them to consider alternative possibilities. (Hasson & Glucksberg, 1028)

One of those alternative possibilities is the counterfactual embedded in the negation. Numerous researchers have attempted to prove or disprove that this is, in fact, the cognitive process itself when a negation is evoked. Theoretically, if I tell someone, "I'm not an elephant," the listener first needs to construct a world in which I *am* an elephant and then suppress it or mark it as false. In the literary world, this is described as "negative world building" which allows for both the factual and the counterfactual to exist in the reader's mind simultaneously, enriching the context of the world as it is. (Nahajec, 116) In "Lure," the factual world and the counterfactual world are both present, but reversed from what one might expect. The list of denials following the "I am not" are so highly specific, so vividly detailed, that the reader must read them as either the work of a sadistic imagination or as the work of traumatic denial, where all that is being negated is precisely what happened. The reader's disbelief of the narrator's account (i.e. that none of this happened) opens the reader to even more possibilities—the "negative worlds" left by the negations color these imagined realities, without limiting them. Moreover, these realities can be constructed by the reader in a deeply empathetic, collaborative way.

The invitation into these poems happens both through the use of negation and their use pronouns. In "Lure," there isn't just an *I*—there is a *you*, bringing the reader right into the story it concurrently tells and refuses to tell. "I am not sitting in your lap… I am not three. / You are not seventy-nine." There is a powerfully implied *we* in this poem that cannot be sidestepped. In "Psalm" that *we* isn't implied, it's stated outright. "A Nothing / we were, are now, and ever… from the purpleword we sang / over, O over / the thorn." In these poems there is the speaker's pain, but there's also the pain of the *they* of relatives turning a blind eye to abuse, the *you* unable to face the abuse they've enacted, and the *we* who bloom and sing in the void after the Shoa. These pronouns don't stay neatly on the page, but spill out into the reader or listener. In this way, both poems do what Harris asserts is confessional poetry's strength: it addresses community consciousness by connecting private and collective realities. (Harris, 256)

Through the invitation offered by both the pronouns and the negations themselves, the readers (as both actors and witnesses) have the opportunity to listen to and maybe even step into the story. Recently I was discussing this paper with another poet whose unpublished manuscript centered around the stories of women who had been trafficked. One poem in particular, in the

form of a letter to the woman's past self, is full of "don'ts" and "say no's." We talked about numerous reasons for the use of negation in that particular poem, as well as others, but one of those reasons resonated with my own experiences. For those who have felt powerless to refuse the pain inflicted on them, often reclaiming the word No is an essential part of the healing process. In my own life, as a queer woman married to a man and deeply closeted in the evangelical church, I overrode my inner No for more than a decade. Since "The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband." (1 Corinthians 7: 4a), the No that screamed loudly in my head every time my husband made sexual advances was gagged over and over. If, in those circumstances, I felt unable to voice my No, how much more a three year old to her own grandfather or one Jew to the government and military of an entire country?

Both Celan and Coste-Lewis, in framing their experience in the negative, flex the hard-won muscles of the survivor's No. Through both the refusal to remain silent and in speaking in negation, "Lure" and "Psalm" are highly crafted examples of art that work through trauma. As Read concludes, "Though it would depend on the constitutions of particular communities of response, it seems to me that the value of troubling images [or poems] is that they transform and enlarge our feelings rather than perpetuate the trauma displaced by transcendence, repressed by denial, or merely repeated as secondary trauma in representations of violent acting out." (Read, 240) As a community of response, the reader of "Lure" or "Psalm" is pulled by negation into the unknown and the unnamed, where a different world can begin to form. In stepping past our own refusal to engage with the subject matter of these poems, we may find ourselves transported out of places familiar to us. Someplace where we can sing "over, O over / the thorn." Someplace "not there" in the endless cycles of pain in our families and communities "any longer."

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