

A Trauma-Theoretical Reading of Hugues C. Pernath's War Poetry

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Summary

Dominick LaCapra has pointed out that from a trauma-theoretical perspective definitions which are too generally formulated lead to an unstable distinction between victim and commentator. According to LaCapra, the idea that "contemporary culture, or even all history, is essentially traumatic or that everyone in the post-Holocaust context is a survivor" is dubious (LaCapra 2001: x-xii). If LaCapra's findings are interpreted in a narrow sense, only Holocaust victims meet the criteria for traumatic experience. The aim of this article, which focuses on the poetry of the canonical Flemish poet, Hugues C. Pernath (1931-1975), is to establish a pertinent definition that will justify the inclusion of literary projects by certain postwar poets within trauma-theoretical discourse. Pernath was so moved by visiting Auschwitz and living with a Jewish survivor that his notions about humanity were fundamentally shaken. This rupture in his world view, which is also reflected in his poetry, can thus be called traumatic. However, Pernath's poetry has never before been examined within this conceptual framework. Through the analysis of selected texts, this paper attempts to show how a writer who has not directly suffered the scarring consequences of war may nonetheless bear testimony to such a traumatic experience. The article argues that the specific idiom of the poet, with its interrupted syntax, elliptical sentence structures, semantic ambivalences, and various hitches in the text, as well as the handling of silences, reveals his central concern with problematising conventional communication in the face of trauma.

Opsomming

Dominick LaCapra dui aan dat definisies wat vanuit 'n trauma-teoretiese perspektief te wyd geformuleer word, tot 'n onvaste onderskeid tussen slagoffer en kommentator lei. Die idee dat kontemporêre kultuur en selfs die hele geskiedenis in wese traumaties is, of dat almal wat ná die Holocaust lewe, oorlewendes daarvan is, is volgens LaCapra twyfelagtig (LaCapra 2011: x-xii). As LaCapra se bevindinge in 'n beperkte sin geïnterpreteer word, voldoen slegs Holocaust-slagoffers aan die kriteria van traumatiese ervarings. Hierdie artikel fokus op die poësie van die kanoniese Vlaamse digter, Hugues C. Pernath (1931-1975). Die doel is om 'n gepaste definisie te formuleer wat die insluiting van literêre projekte deur sekere naoorlogse digters by die trauma-teoretiese diskoers regverdig. 'n Besoek aan Auschwitz en sy verblyf by 'n Joodse oorlewende het Pernath so ontroer dat dit sy idees oor die mensdom heeltemal omvergegooi het. Hierdie kentering in sy wêreldbeskouing, wat weerspieël word in sy poësie, was dus traumaties. Pernath se poësie is egter nog nooit

vantevore binne hierdie konseptuele raamwerk ondersoek nie. Deur 'n ontleding van sekere tekste poog hierdie artikel om aan te dui hoe 'n skrywer wat nie die bittere gevolge van die oorlog gedra het nie, nogtans van hierdie traumatiese gebeure kan getuig. Hierdie artikel voer verder aan dat die spesifieke idioom van die digter, naamlik sy onderbroke sintaksis, elliptiese sinne, semantiese dubbelsinnighede, hinderlikhede en benutting van stiltes, sy allesoorheersende erns met die problematisering van konvensionele kommunikasie in die aangesig van trauma weerspieël.

The canonised poet Hugues C. Pernath, one of the most influential authors of post-war Flanders, has testified to a sense of immensely traumatic experience in his work. Consequently, his constant thematisation of war, the Holocaust and feelings of a deeply traumatic nature have led critics to conclude that the war and its consequences have left a deep impact on his work. Nevertheless, caution is certainly necessary. Dominic LaCapra has pointed out the danger of neglecting the boundaries between actual victim and commentator: he regards the idea that “contemporary culture, or even all history, is essentially traumatic or that everyone in the post-Holocaust context is a survivor” (LaCapra 2001: x-xii) as too far-reaching. Therefore, it remains vitally important to reserve psychoanalytic concepts of trauma theory and those in the field of literary studies for circumstances in which they can be appropriately used. But when is this the case?

The Theoretical Context: Definitions and the Status of Poetry

Following LaCapra's definition strictly, only actual Holocaust survivors can be regarded as victims, since the terminology employed is far too problematic to allow for broad generalisations. The post-traumatic suffering of war victims cannot be reduced to ubiquitous mental dysfunctions. This article, however, will try to provide a first incentive towards expanding the definition and demonstrating how, by selecting proper tools and retaining a deep awareness of the precariousness of the matter, the literary projects of authors such as Hugues C. Pernath can also be inscribed in trauma-theoretical discourse. That is to say, it will aim to show how the literary work of those who have not themselves directly experienced the suffering of war can be assigned meaning from a trauma-theoretical point of view.

Even though Pernath himself was not a direct victim of the Second World War, the war in Korea, or the Vietnam conflict that raged while he was writing, his poetry could be considered as testimony of powerlessness, hopelessness and the disillusionment resulting from war stories and the accompanying failure of all major certainties. Throughout his entire body of work, the poet evokes, almost obsessively, a deeply negative, isolated and uncommunicative image of humanity. This preoccupation with the problematic nature of all human communication is deeply linked with his continuing

and ineluctable interest in the context of war. First, there are a number of biographical elements that point towards this constant fixation on the horrors of war and his awareness of the suffering caused by the impact of war on language and prevailing social circumstances. The testimonies of Holocaust victims and a visit to the extermination camp of Auschwitz in 1967 (a journey which not only proved to be a crucial factor in his personal experience, but also left its mark on his literary endeavour), render it plausible to conceive of Pernath as an author who is deeply concerned with the impact of war on the lived world, as well as on language as a tool for communication and personal expression. His reading of publications by Berthold Brecht and his adoration of Léo Ferré,¹ among others, problematised his understanding of mankind and disturbed his world view. Pernath functioned as a listener – an “empathic listener”, in terms of LaCapra’s concept – for Myra Vecht, his second wife who was a Jewish survivor of Theresienstadt. From this perspective, it is possible to investigate the ways in which a literary figure in post-war Flanders, who had not been a direct victim of events during the Second World War or the Jewish *Endlösung*, nevertheless testifies to the cruelty of the war through his writing. His poetry, which is characterised by motifs such as the failure of interpersonal communication, the destruction of language and the irreparable isolation of human beings, will be the subject of a close reading against the background of his biographical setting. The discussion will focus specifically on Pernath’s late series of poems, the “Auschwitzgedichten”.

Literary explications from a trauma-theoretical perspective have developed into a well-known and broadly applied method of research, above all – but not solely – in English-speaking academic institutions. The crafting of a balance between textual analysis and a more contextual approach that draws on medical and psychoanalytic research has led to a profound awareness of the importance of literature in dealing with deeply rooted suffering. It is important to note, however, that most of the commentaries that focus on trauma and the processing of war experiences are devoted to prose works. Authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss have for some time been the subjects of careful scrutiny.² In these instances, research focuses on the status of the victim, and the ways in which these authors use their creative insight to tell the narratives of their families, primarily with the objective of keeping them from vanishing. These authors long to testify

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1. Pernath read most of Brecht’s oeuvre and was fascinated by Ferré’s *chansons*. Lyrics taken from the song “Il n’y a plus rien” (1973) served as the epigraph for Pernath’s *Vijftig Index-gedichten*.
 2. Foer’s novels are discussed in Hudson (2005), Codde (2007), and Mandel (2012), to name a few sources. Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love* (2005) is, for example, analysed from a trauma-theoretical perspective in Lang (2009) and Codde (2011).

about events that unfolded in their personal past, while regarding their novels as the space in which these accounts can be preserved. They try to capture their past, not by simply retelling it, but by using literary and communicative strategies to convey the workings of trauma to the reader. Their protagonists are people deeply affected by traumatic events. In consequence of their preoccupation with these issues, the novels are turned into “traumatic histories that attempt to access and to represent a painful past that is by definition inaccessible” (Codde 2007: 241). The authors see their literary projects in the words of Foer as “filling a void – in fact, filling it with words” (Foer in Bouman 2002). They want to repair the sense of emptiness and loss that has resulted from being constantly enveloped in the retrospective pain of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Foer, for example, discusses his journey to the Ukraine, where he set out to find the family that had helped his grandfather to escape from the Nazis. Because his search ended in failure, the author identifies this unsuccessful journey as the key incentive to write his own novels, most importantly *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002).³ What is at stake is not the direct trauma of victims, but a so-called “secondary trauma”, as conceptualised by Dominick LaCapra (2001: 102). Such an understanding of the workings of a secondary trauma will prove crucial in addressing Pernath’s poetry too.

Contemporary trauma studies often focuses on projects such as Foer’s, where the therapeutic function of writing literature is sharply accentuated. The authors concerned are frequently the children or grandchildren of victims of the attempted genocide of the Jews. Their families have been so severely harmed that later generations become traumatised by listening to or living with the direct victims of the atrocities of war. Here, Marianne Hirsch’s concept of *postmemory* seems appropriate. Postmemory is not memory in the strict sense of the word, yet it has a disturbing impact on the upbringing of children and the atmosphere of family life, often prompting imaginative exploration and creative experimentation.

Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.

(Hirsch 2008: 122)

3. See, for example, his comments in “An Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer”, United Jewish Communities:
 <<http://www.ujc.org/page.html?ArticleID=42514>>.

By comparison with the analysis of novels, trauma-theoretical readings of poetry still occupy a marginal position in contemporary literary studies. Several critics have identified this discrepancy, arguing that the study of poetry can deliver equally relevant and enriching material. Ulrich Baer, for example, emphasises the importance of the analysis of poetry and contends that there is a noticeable parallel between intensely personal traumatic experience and the reading of poetry:

I want to insist on the parallel between this obligation to recognize another's experience of trauma or shock as irreducibly other and irreducible to generalizations, and the demands that poems place upon the reader. This is not to say that reading is akin to therapeutic intervention, or that a poem ought to be viewed as a component of a case study. Each poem, however, makes an uncompromising claim for its singularity; each poem demands to be read on its own terms. Yet at the same time and in the same words, each poem opens itself to iteration, understanding and address. Without opening itself to understanding, the very claim for singularity would remain unnoticed.

(Baer 2000: 11)

Yet, for Baer there is no such thing as an absolutely singular poem. A completely unique and self-referential poem would, of course, be unreadable. The autonomous and sovereign character of such a poem would cause it to develop into something that could not be approached, captured or understood; this means that the singularity of every poem must necessarily be sacrificed. And this, Baer suggests, is the very essence of every traumatic experience.

In poetic language, just as in dealing with a trauma, what is at stake is the precarious relationship between speech and silence, between illuminating and darkening. Suffering from a traumatic experience often entails the inability to talk freely about what has happened in the past: language and speech fail to externalise feelings and experiences of such an overwhelming nature. This is exactly what is at stake in the poetry of Hugues C. Pernath. The specific idiom of this author is characterised by syntactic interruptions, elliptical sentence constructions and semantic ambivalences, which are combined with the cultivation of silences and the problematising of conventional communication. The horror of the war has maimed the representational instrument that we humans need most: language. It has left scars, not only on the lives of victims, but on their means of communication as well. These wounds, these formal issues which have already been outlined, can be seen quite clearly in a cycle of poetry that explicitly considers the Holocaust: the so-called "Auschwitzgedichten". Even in the opening stanzas, the absurdity of the scene depicted is reflected in grammatical randomness:

Als vreselijke flitsen, de mestgeur van het lijden
 Het slijpen van de waarheid.
 En aan de andere kant een hemel.
 Ik ben genoeg.
 Mezelf genoeg en begraven in de zon.

(Pernath 2005: 372)

[Like terrible flashes, the manure-infused scent of suffering
 The whetting of the truth.
 And on the other side a heaven.

I am enough.
 Enough for myself and buried in the sun.]

Pernath links words that would not normally be found within the same semantic unit (“whetting of the truth”, “buried in the sun”); this results in an alienating image that reinforces the arbitrariness of the horror imagined. Elsewhere, grammar and syntax appear to have failed the author completely: “Verdwijnend./ Toevalligerwijs. Een voor een” [“Disappearing./ Coincidentally. One by one.”] (Pernath 2005: 372). There is no linking device, only the juxtaposition of words on a page. Conventional communication is no longer possible; we still have the words, but we lack the ability to make sense of them. These formal characteristics can be seen as manifestations of a certain kind of war experience that has found its way into the life and work of one of the major literary figures of twentieth-century poetry in Flanders. Together with the more thematically orientated issues addressed below, these formal traces of traumatic experiences come to shape Pernath’s poetry.

An Analysis of the “Auschwitzgedichten”: From Identification and Alienation to “Soil and Sun”

The “Auschwitzgedichten” were published posthumously in Pernath’s *Collected Works* which appeared in 1980. They immediately enjoyed praise and attention, but no exhaustive analysis of the text has as of yet been undertaken. In fact, with the exception of a number of fairly short articles, relatively little research has been devoted to these poems. Yet the “Auschwitzgedichten” deserve considered examination, especially from a trauma-theoretical point of view, because these poems evoke the moment when Pernath’s fascination with the war acquired an almost obsessive dimension: his visit to Auschwitz/Oswiecim in 1967. Pernath had lived in Poland for several months (cf. Jespers 2006), studying at the renowned school of theatre in Lodz. In various interviews he has elaborated on the feelings that he experienced while at Auschwitz, as he did to the Flemish writer and interviewer, Fernand Auwera in 1969, immediately after his

return to Belgium. He talked about the hopelessness that is symbolised by the camp, and about being struck by the destructive, random and horrible violence of mankind. These feelings of absolute solitude resonate throughout the cycle and stand at the centre of the poems contained in the volume. Pernath's lyrical persona is an isolated figure who, in the shadow of the crematoria of Auschwitz, subjects his own existence to philosophical and existential questioning. What stands out in the "Auschwitzgedichten" is that Pernath paradoxically identifies himself with the Jewish community (with his wife functioning as a particular symbol for the Jewish people). He often writes in the plural, referring to "us" rather than "I": "Dit benauwde in de borst, dit schreeuwen/ Om het einde dat men ons niet gunt" ["This anxiety in the chest, this screaming/ Against the ending that we are not granted"] (Pernath 2005: 372). This is also seen in "Zelfs het landschap behoort ons niet,/ nergens een werkelijk lied, een dreunen van de regen" [Even the landscape doesn't belong to us,/ nowhere a true song, a pounding of the rain"] (Pernath 2005: 373), or in:

Maar zelfs de zee kan ons niet horen.
En de monotone dagen brengen
Slechts de dood om de dood.

En wij vermoeden het licht.

(Pernath 2005: 374)

[But even the sea cannot hear us.
And the monotonous days bring
Only death because of death.

And we are suspicious of the light.]

Here, again, the interrupted syntax and the apparently arbitrary linking of words highlight the insufficiency of language. It seems as though the author considers the suffering of the Jewish victims as something to which he is so intimately connected that he experiences it palpably, as though he himself had lived through it. His witnessing the depressing topography of Auschwitz, where that suffering was amplified to enormous proportions, has resulted in an interiorisation of the grief and the horror that are still powerfully present in the remains of the camp. The meaning and magnitude of the genocide of the Jews are made tangible. Pernath's visit to the largest and most horrible symbol of the Holocaust prompts an even more intense experience of a particularly dark period in modern European history.

The *Index-gedichten* [*Index Poems*], taken from the volume *Mijn tegenstem* [*My Counter-Voice*] (1973), are marked by a different tone. The lyrical subject here seems to be mourning the endless continuation of time, which has turned the material remains of the camp and the memories of the Jewish victims into an artificially sustained tribute that appears to

undermine the authenticity of Holocaust experiences. In the first stanza, a depersonalised enumeration of mere facts (through the medium of museum objects) draws on the atrocities against humanity within the ambit of the ruined concentration camp. From a trauma-theoretical perspective, the three questions in the second stanza are of key importance.

Auschwitz 1967.

Het museum omvat de overgebleven barakken

Nummer 4, 5, 6, 7, 11 en 15

En alles wat nog gerestaureerd kon worden

Of de moeite loonde.

Het museum is dagelijks te bezichtigen

Vanaf acht uur tot achttien uur, behalve op maandag.

De toegang is vrij en er zijn gidsen beschikbaar.

Waar zijn de ogen waaruit de pijn tevoorschijn barstte?

Waar zijn de handen

Die in het beton hun nagelsporen trokken?

Waar drijft de stank die de dennegeur verdringt?

(Pernath 2005: 260)

[Auschwitz 1967.

The museum consists of the remaining barracks

Numbers 4, 5, 6, 7, 11 and 15

And everything that could be restored

Or was worth the effort.

The museum can be visited daily

From eight until six o'clock, except on Mondays.

Entrance is free and guides are available.

Where are the eyes that burst with pain?

Where are the hands

That scored nail marks in the concrete?

Where drifts the stench that stifled the pine scent?]

The Holocaust museum at Auschwitz seeks to commemorate the horrors of genocide and the inhuman suffering of the millions of victims who had been imprisoned, but economic and commercial exploitation seems inevitable in the contemporary climate. Pernath appears to be turning to strategies of objectification and rationalisation in his endeavour to lend even a vestigial sense of structure to unbearable despair and agony. The rather cynical tone in the first stanza is significant, for he seems to have lost all faith in the kindness of the human race. Moreover, he attempts to find a balance between losing himself in an overwhelming awareness of the horror of the disaster and acknowledging the distance created by the exploitation of the camp, after its being turned into a museum for tourists: “Ik weet nog/ De

omarming van de gruwel” [“I still remember/ the embrace of atrocity”] (Pernath 2005: 374).

In the poem “Alfabet” [“Alphabet”], the identification with the Jewish people is stated explicitly:

Injectiespuiten vernederen en verminken ons.
Ik zal niet schreien en ook niet meer bidden.
Bloedrood of goud, of kalkwit zijn onze aders.

(Pernath 2005: 369)

[Injections humiliate and maim us.
I will not weep and I will no longer pray.
Our veins are blood-red or gold, or white as chalk.]

De tijd zal beslissen, onze namen roepen,
En opnieuw wegglijden in het vuur.
Dit eiland heet schaduw, of treurnis.

(Pernath 2005: 371)

[Time will decide, will call out our names,
And again glide away into the fire.
This island is called shadow, or sadness.]

Het zuur dat ons uit bijt, dat ons bevriest.
Alle woorden blijven wenken en het donkere voorhoofd
Van de mens beveelt vrouwen en kinderen
Naar hun ondraagbare dood.

(Pernath 2005: 371)

[The acid that corrodes us, that freezes us.
All the words keep beckoning, and the dark brow
Of man commands women and children
To their unbearable death.]

Again, the incessant use of the “we”-form (or *pluralis majestatis*) stands out, giving the verses an incantatory character and rhythm. The lyrical persona presents himself as being part of the Jewish community, and no longer speaks only for himself: he represents a collectivity rather than a single individual.

The identification that stands out so prominently in these poems results from the author’s productive experience of trauma, to put the case literally. The combination of his own disturbing visit to Auschwitz and his deep personal connection with his Jewish wife, Myra, has led to “empathic unsettlement”. This concept is derived from the trauma specialist, Dominick LaCapra; it is used to describe the phenomenon of vicarious traumatising by listening to testimony about exceptionally violent and disturbing events, such as the Holocaust. The stories told are so haunting and so far beyond the

range of normal human experience that the listener/writer is infused with the victim's trauma as well. Through contact with the victim, the listener's empathy is thoroughly aroused, so that he or she becomes a "secondary witness" and lives through a "secondary trauma": "[b]eing responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement (LaCapra 2001: 41). It should of course be noted that there is no such thing as actual and full identification; some sense of distance must always be maintained:

[D]esirable empathy involves not full identification, but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims. Empathic unsettlement may, of course, take different forms and it may at times result in secondary or muted trauma as well as objectionable self-dramatization in someone responding to the experience of victims.

(LaCapra 2001: 102)

This is why we should be extremely careful when discussing "empathic unsettlement"; there is a very fine line between sincere distress and the superficial generalisations of emotional responses. Nevertheless, we deem it justifiable to regard Pernath as a victim in LaCapra's sense, bearing in mind the war-related events that dominated his life. Arguably these experiences are manifested in the feelings of isolation, fear and suffering that characterise his verse. Moreover, the obvious and explicit references in his poetry to genocide and life in the extermination camps testify to the author's profound (even obsessive) preoccupation with this subject matter.

Pernath's identification with the Jewish community gave rise to a painful sense of culpability for their anguish. The following stanzas from the "Auschwitzgedichten" provide an apt illustration:

Verwaarloosd kwam ik tot leven
In de velden van de onnoemelijke dood.
De velden temidden de velden
En ik alleen in plaats van u allen.

(Pernath 2005: 373)

[I came to life neglected
In the fields of unnamable death.
The fields amid the fields
And I alone instead of all of you.]

The poet has constructed a subject who experiences an overwhelming feeling of clarity while standing in the "fields of unnameable death". The loneliness of the singular subject is evoked by the solitary, rural atmosphere of the uninhabited fields surrounded by still more distant fields and

expanses. The desolate feeling of these natural spaces intensifies the loneliness of the persona, and brings to mind a comment that the author made in his interview with Fernand Auwera: "I have been to Auschwitz, all alone. That was a very significant event in my life" (Auwera 1969: 56). Pernath's guilt comes to the fore in the very last stanza, where he expresses his awareness that he is still alive and able to roam about the countryside, whereas numerous Jews had met their death in that very place.

The rustic and agrarian atmosphere of the poems is also conveyed by the sustained use of metaphors of soil and earthiness; these are, in turn, linked to many references to the landscape and grounds of Auschwitz itself. Nature appears in different forms, but is always shrouded in an aura of death and mass destruction. This is evident from the following verses: "De gladde, vette grond gedenkend en pijnen/ Schreeuwt het uit" ["The smooth, greasy ground remembering and aching/ Screaming it out"] (Pernath 2005: 373). Even more striking is:

Zelfs het landschap behoort ons niet.
Nergens een werkelijk lied, een dreunen van de regen.
Alles is stiller dan de stilte.

(Pernath 2005: 373)

[Even the landscape doesn't belong to us.
Nowhere a true song, a pounding of the rain.
Everything is more silent than silence.]

Een droom is zelfs geen fragment van leven,
Geen niemandsland, geen lip die prevelt.
Dit landschap is de aarde, doorbladerd
Door de razernij.

(Pernath 2005: 374)

[A dream is not even a fragment of life,
Not no-man's-land, not a mumbling lip.
This landscape is the earth, transfused
By rage.]

It seems as though Pernath turns upside down the metaphors of soil and earth, which take on negative and violent connotations within Nazi rhetoric. Pernath consciously adopts these figures as a starting point, thus taking what the German perpetrators claimed as their sole property and dedicating it to the Jews as a token of their suffering in commemoration of everything that has been lost. The landscape has mutated. It has been assaulted with no hope of recovery by the events that took place in the gas chambers and the barracks. The fields of Auschwitz are identified with the Holocaust itself, and the earth is portrayed as an accessory to the inhumanity of the crimes that were committed on that spot. These fields are no longer simply fields;

they have turned into the “fields of unnameable death”. This is why the Polish town of Oswiecim, named Auschwitz during the German occupation, will forever be linked to the horrors that took place there. Everything reminds the observer of the Holocaust and the unbearable suffering of the Jewish people, not only the buildings and the remnants of the camps, but also the surrounding natural phenomena, the earth and the air alike. The sky has turned into “an air that has changed” (Pernath 2005: 373); everything is affected by this horror.

What stands out even more strikingly is the presence of the sun, as this is explicitly foregrounded in the poems. Like the earth and the air, the sun too is no longer a familiar astronomical and culturally conceived sun, the symbol of fertility and existence. It is a transformed sun, compromised by the Holocaust. In the poem “En tussen de vertrapte bloemen van die korte zomer” [“And between the brief summer’s trampled flowers”], this motif is introduced for the first time:

Zoals een boer me zei:

“Dit is een zon, dit is dezelfde zon niet meer.”

Toen ik wegging, terug naar het koele kamp, riep hij me na:

“Dit is voor mij een verrekte zon.”

(Pernath 2005: 421)

[As a farmer told me:

“This is a sun, this is no longer the same sun.”

When I left, returning to the cold camp, he shouted after me:

“For me this is a damned sun.”]

This straightforward poem with its narrative line evokes a memory that captures Pernath’s visit to the camp. In this piece, the sun becomes the symbol of a changed world, one which has been attacked in so irreversible a manner that it can never be the same again. The extent of the damage is so shocking that the world can never return to its relatively innocent state prior to the genocide of 1940-1945. The persistence of this motif of a transformed sun is typical of Pernath’s literary production after his experience of 1967. In the poetry written before his journey to Poland, it has not yet acquired its disturbing philosophical connotations (van Bastelaere 2001: 163). In the “Auschwitzgedichten”, the sun symbolises the absolute negativity that governs a universe assaulted by the Holocaust that loses its light and vividness forever.

Ik ben genoeg.

Mezelve genoeg en begraven in de zon.

Tot zover de sporen, de zon gaat weg.

En opnieuw geketend aan de herinnering

Opnieuw verdwijnen in de muil.
Geen rozegeur hangt in de lucht.

(Pernath 1980: 382)

[I am enough.
Enough for myself and buried in the sun.

Thus far the tracks, the sun is leaving.
And again chained to the memory
Again disappearing into its jaws.
No rose scent is in the air.]

The utter negativity marking these stanzas can be regarded as symptomatic of a view of life that resonates throughout the poet's entire body of work. As early as 1980, Michel Bartosik, the author of one of the few scholarly articles on Pernath's poetry, asserts that "Pernath's world remains one of utter bleakness. Hypnotised by the decay and the notion of death, he is incapable of distinguishing a meaningful energy in the relentless progression of time" (Bartosik 1980: 8). The sun is presented as dominating a universe in which the subject is nothing more than a ghost, a figure who is alive and yet already buried. The heavenly body traditionally symbolic of life itself can now be associated with only the inescapable and horrible fate of the many Jews who lost their lives. In the excerpt cited above, the subject is also perceived as "chained to the memory". From this it can be deduced that the collective trauma has not yet been processed, and that the subject is forced to keep returning to the origin of such traumatic experience. In a milieu that has known the Holocaust, everything can – hyperbolically – be called traumatic. Everything has come to be intrinsically linked with the horror of the concentration camps and the knowledge that it was humanity itself which made all this possible. In these posthumously published poems, Pernath's focus seems to have shifted from exposing a failure of communication to unveiling a struggle with civilisation in its entirety. The crisis of communication appears to have expanded towards a comprehensive existential crisis. The core of that crisis is the failure of truth, which is perceived as the centre of this negative universe created by humanity, as in Pernath's other poetic cycles and collections.

Pernath's poetry could be described as the expression of unresolved dichotomies. Speech versus silence, truth versus lies: these contrasts stand at the core of a body of work that evokes a picture of humanity and the world, utterly torn apart by the Second World War. The author's poems can be seen as testimony to a trauma that has deeply affected Pernath's own psychology and life, while fundamentally undermining his relationship with the medium on which he relies for his creative work (and cultural identity) as a poet. Language, for Pernath, is no longer a straightforward means of communication, but the compromised result of a crisis. Language can no

longer connect people or simply express thoughts and feelings. According to Pernath, it can only contribute towards formulating a relevant answer to what continues to haunt him: the Holocaust's devastating impact on modern civilisation.

Conclusion: The "Breach in Language"

By using his characteristically unconventional and fragmented idiom in his poetry, Pernath tries to express the existential doubt that has taken hold of him. That results in his questioning of interpersonal relations and the possibilities of language itself. Even though this idiosyncratic use of language is more prominent in earlier cycles and volumes (see, for example, "Naamloos, een schedel" ["Nameless, a Skull"]), Pernath by no means adopts a commonly recognisable or uncomplicated idiom in the "Auschwitzgedichten". In this cycle too, the narrator significantly maintains a troubled, unconventional relationship with language and communication. Silence and the far-reaching difficulties besetting speech, which Ulrich Baer has called the "breach in language", stand at the centre of Pernath's poetic project. According to Baer, it is not the referential, descriptive function of language that has been corrupted in the wake of the violence of the Holocaust. Rather, the "failure of language" means that it has lost its capacity to fulfil the basic requirements of communication. It is, therefore, not communication itself that is completely lost, but rather the understanding and mutual obligations that are essential to every conversational situation. Language can no longer support the ethical consequences of engaging in contact and communication (Baer 2001: 195-196). In short, what is at stake for Baer is "[t]he lost link between speech and responsibility" (Baer 2001: 198). In the "Auschwitzgedichten", this results in the prevalence of words such as "yell", "shout" or "cry", which are indicative of the difficulties inherent in speech for every human being after the Second World War. The subject's powerlessness translates into desperate screams: "Dit benauwde in de borst, dit schreeuwen/ Om het einde dat men ons niet gunt" ["This oppressiveness in the chest, this screaming/ For the ending not granted to us"] (Pernath 2005: 372). Moreover, in the cycle's second poem, the subject's inability to speak is articulated in a striking image: "... de boeien van mijn mond [... the chains of my mouth]" (Pernath 2005: 373). All this indicates that, even at the end of his literary career, Pernath had not been able to conquer his existential anxiety and his loss of faith in the resources of communication. The suffocating atmosphere that pervades the concentration camp of Auschwitz seems to consolidate some of the central motifs in Pernath's poetry: the fundamental inadequacy of language and the relentless search for a truth that is ultimately unattainable:

De oude en ijdele woorden van de waarheid.
Een lucht die veranderd is.

De tweede komst, de boeien van mijn mond.

(Pernath 2005: 273)

[The old and idle words of truth.
An air that is changed.

The second coming, the chains of my mouth.]

* The extracts from Pernath's poetry have been translated by Lynn Custers.

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