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STARK, NECESSARY AND NOT PERMANENT: HUTS IN THE WORK OF PAUL CELAN AND J. H. PRYNNE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the motif of the hut in the work of Paul Celan and J. H. Prynne as a metaphor for poetry which also mediates the relationship between poetry, language and place. Both Prynne’s and Celan’s use of the hut motif intersects with the role played by huts in work by Martin Heidegger, but this article demonstrates, through close reading of poems by Prynne and Celan, that each develops Heidegger’s understanding of the hut further, with reference to the ethical imperatives which underpin linguistic (and especially poetic) production.


The Romanian-German poet Paul Celan’s remarks on the capacity of poetry to serve as a place of ‘encounter’ are well known. Rather than conceiving of language as a neutral and transparent tool for communication, Celan’s philosophy of poetry posits it as a meeting-place in which subjects and texts encounter one another in profound, mysterious and meaningful ways. These encounters are multifaceted: they occur between reader and text, between subjects in and outside the poem, and between subjects and objects (both animate and inanimate). In short, Celan’s concept of encounter describes a range of paradoxical qualities at the heart of poetry’s ability to communicate, and in his model the poem both demands and challenges understanding. He contends that despite a ‘starke Neigung zum Verstummen’, even the post-Holocaust poem affords the possibility of fleeting, indeterminate, inter-subjective contact:

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Steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung – im Geheimnis der Begegnung?
Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu.¹

The ghostly image of the meridian which Celan draws on in his famous speech is the defining motif of this model of encounter: it is both abstract and real, portable and precise.² But the terms and locations of Celan’s encounters are not always as intangible as the famous meridian image suggests. His work is also full of specific places which serve as sites of encounter between past and present, and of symbolic inter-subjective engagement: houses, courtyards, caves, graves and tombs.

One of the most persistent images of the poem as place of encounter which informs Celan’s work is that of the hut or simple dwelling. Several of Celan’s poems contain images of this kind of temporary structure, explicitly conceptualised as existing within and created by language, from ‘das Haus / wo der Tisch steht’ in ‘Hüttenfenster’ – also conceived of as the house of Greek and Hebrew letters ‘Aleph’, ‘Alpha’ and ‘Jod’ – to the ‘Zelt- / wort’ of ‘Anabasis’.³ Most famously, Celan’s ‘Todtnauberg’ recounts his meeting with Martin Heidegger at the latter’s Black Forest hut and explores the significance of that place for Heidegger’s own thought, for the intellectual and personal relationship between Celan and Heidegger, and for the conditions of poetic encounter more generally.⁴ This essay examines the hut motif in Celan’s ‘Todtnauberg’ and ‘Hüttenfenster’, tracing its significance not only backwards to the thought of Heidegger, but also forwards to the work of the British poet, J. H. Prynne.

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Prynne and Celan are writers shaped by quite different traditions, experiences and historical contexts, and such essential differences should not be effaced. Celan’s fraught relationship with the German language, prompted by personal and historical trauma, necessarily underpins his own ‘Sprachskepsis’.⁵ The murder of many members of his family, and the lasting psychological impact of his own experiences during the Holocaust, render his use of the German language both inevitable and problematic.

² Ibid., p. 44.

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For Celan, as Peter Szondi puts it, ‘nach Auschwitz ist kein Gedicht mehr möglich, es sei denn, auf Grund von Auschwitz’.  

Prynne (b. 1936), who has been called ‘Britain’s leading late-modernist poet’, was a major figure in the loosely defined Cambridge School of British post-war poetry. This group formed part of the British Poetry Revival, a resurgence of linguistically innovative and often self-consciously academic poetry from the 1960s onward, which arose in response to the perceived conservatism of much British writing of the 1950s and 1960s (i.e. the ‘Movement’). This provides the context for the ‘difficulty’ of his work and its stance regarding the communicative possibilities of poetry. Prynne’s major poetic influences include high modernists, particularly Ezra Pound, and American Objectivists, including Charles Olson and Ed Dorn. The influence of German poetry and thought on his work is undeniable: Celan and Heidegger are significant figures, as are Hegel, Husserl, and Hölderlin. Prynne is a life-fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and continues to publish poetry, including some work in classical Chinese.

Detailed comparative study of Prynne’s and Celan’s work is long overdue. Celan’s reception in British poetry and his relationship to Anglophone traditions remain under-explored, and Prynne’s engagement with Celan’s work has also received unjustifiably scant attention, given that Prynne is one of post-war British poetry’s major figures and Celan is a significant presence in his work. Reading Prynne’s and Celan’s huts comparatively can illuminate the relationship between poetry, place and language in the work of these two important post-war poets. Both use the motif of the primitive hut as an important site of encounter in their poems. Although both draw the motif of the hut from Heidegger’s work, each transforms and problematises it by considering its significance as a metaphor for language. Above all, for Prynne and Celan the hut reflects a series of ethical problems regarding the difficulty, and necessity, of encounter in language.

Heidegger’s relationship to his Black Forest hut is one starting point for both Prynne’s and Celan’s engagement with the motif. Adam Sharr has explored the extent to which the building and surrounding landscape served, for Heidegger, as ‘participants in active questions of presence […]

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empty vessels, allowing the powerful possibility of human occupation’.\textsuperscript{11} Sharr contests a simplistic reading of the hut as a provincial idyll in contrast to the ‘inauthentic’ suburban life the philosopher experienced at his home in Freiburg, on the basis that the upkeep of the hut was predicated on Heidegger’s salary and work schedule as an institutional academic, and that domestic luxuries such as electricity and a telephone connection eventually intruded on his isolation there. However, both Sharr and Andrew Benjamin, in his introduction to the same volume, ultimately conclude that the specific experience of life in the simple hut is a key factor in enabling Heidegger’s thought. ‘[T]here is an important link between geography (place) and modes of thinking’, Benjamin argues; life in Todtnauberg ‘demands a concern with the primordiality of time and being’.\textsuperscript{12}

Their argument is partly predicated on Heidegger’s description of the ‘Schwarzwaldhof’ in \textit{Bauen Wohnen Denken} as the exemplary form of ‘dwelling’, as well as on the short essay, ‘Schöpferische Landschaft: Warum bleiben wir in der Provinz?’\textsuperscript{13} In this latter early text (1933) the ethical problems inherent in Heidegger’s link between place and thought become evident. The essay takes to task city-dwellers’ ‘herablassende Anbiederung und unechte Volkstümelei’ concerning the provinces, arguing for the authenticity of Heidegger’s own engagement with rural life and its centrality to his ‘Arbeitswelt’.\textsuperscript{14} It is pointedly realistic about the hardships of peasant life, but positions these alongside and as equivalent to Heidegger’s own intellectual labour: ‘Und die philosophische Arbeit verläuft nicht als abseitige Beschäftigung eines Sonderlings. Sie gehört mitten hinein in die Arbeit der Bauern’.\textsuperscript{15} The essay does not acknowledge Heidegger’s status as ‘der Professeur’, an outsider in the community, cemented by the regular interruptions necessitated by ‘Verhandlungen, Vortragsreisen, Besprechungen und die Lehrtätigkeit hier unten’.\textsuperscript{16} The deixis is telling: ‘hier unten’ refers to Freiburg, while Todtnauberg is decentred as ‘dort oben’.

Moreover, Heidegger emphasises the connection between thought, place and ethnicity, arguing that ‘[d]ie innere Zugehörigkeit der eigenen Arbeit zum Schwarzwald und seinen Menschen kommt aus einer jahrhundertelangen, durch nichts ersetzbaren alemannisch-schwäbischen Bodenständigkeit’.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Ibid2006} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 18 and 21.
\bibitem{Ibid2006} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.
\bibitem{Ibid2002} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 11.
\end{thebibliography}
its relationship to his philosophical thought have been stridently debated in
the past seven decades, and the recent publication of the *Schwarze Hefte* has
provoked renewed controversy.\(^{18}\) It is not my intention here to intervene in
these debates. Instead, it is sufficient to note – as Celan and Prynne do –
that Heidegger’s understanding of the relationship between thought and
place is not ethically or politically neutral.

Heidegger does not explicitly connect the relationship between thought
and place epitomised by his Black Forest hut to ideas of language, but
there is a clear relationship between the three concepts. Certain kinds of
place facilitate certain kinds of thought, as do certain kinds of language;
language is thus the ‘place’ in which thought, and Being, most emphatically
belong. The concept of language as the ‘house of Being’ is a recurrent
theme in Heidegger’s work, and his view is neatly summarised in the ‘Brief
über den Humanismus’: ‘Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer
Behausung wohnt der Mensch.’\(^{19}\) Language and place are thus linked
by their intrinsic connection to particular modes of thought and Being.
However, although the emblematic place of Heidegger’s thought (i.e. the
hut) is humble and marginal, the same cannot be said of his understanding
of language, which is generally described as a permanent ‘house’ or even,
in one instance, a ‘temple’.\(^{20}\) This is significant because it implies certainty
regarding the centrality and communicative ability of poetry, a certainty
that is not shared by either Prynne or Celan in their representations of the
hut as the dwelling-place of language.

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Many of Celan’s poems display the influence of Heideggerian thought, but
his most famous exploration of his relationship to Heidegger himself and
Heidegger’s conceptualisation of place occurs in the poem ‘Todtnauberg’:

Arnika, Augentrost, der
Trunk aus dem Brunnen mit dem
Sternwürfel drauf,

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‘Schwarze Hefte’, see Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, IV. Abteilung, Überlegungen II–VI (*Schwarze
Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, IV. Abteilung, Überlegungen XII–XV (*Schwarze Hefte* 1939–
Nationalsozialismus, Weltjudentum und Seinsgeschichte’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 65 (2015),
379–410.

\(^{19}\) Martin Heidegger, ‘Brief über den Humanismus’, in *Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung, IX*, ed. Friedrich-

\(^{20}\) See Martin Heidegger, ‘Wozu Dichter?’, in *Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung, V*, ed. F.-W. von Herrmann,
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in der
Hütte,

die in das Buch
– wessen Namen nahms auf
vor dem meinen? –
die in dies Buch
geschriebene Zeile von
einer Hoffnung, heute,
auf eines Denkenden
kommendes
Wort
im Herzen,

Waldwasen, uneingeebnet,
Orchis und Orchis, einzeln,

Kruedes, später, im Fahren
deutlich,

der uns fährt, der Mensch,
der's mit anhört,

die halb-
beschrittenen Knüppelpfade im Hochmoor,

Feuchtes,
viel.21

Celan and Heidegger took a trip together to Todtnauberg in 1966, and Celan wrote in the guestbook of the hut there. The extent of their ‘reconciliation’ has been the subject of critical speculation ever since. Hans Gadamer’s ‘hagiography’ of Heidegger expresses a firm belief in the reconciliation between poet and philosopher, but has been criticised by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, among others. Lacoue-Labarthe, James K. Lyon and Martin Jörg Schäfer contend that the poem explores the tension between Celan’s deep sympathy towards Heidegger’s philosophy and revulsion at his politics.22 Otto Pöggeler and Lyon extend this argument by placing ‘Todtnauberg’ within the context of Celan’s long-term engagement


with Heidegger’s thought, which (as Pöggeler notes) continued after their meeting in 1966. In the light of this, Lyon is forceful in his assertion that there is no evidence to suggest Celan ‘condemned’ Heidegger.

The question of the extent of Celan and Heidegger’s ‘reconciliation’ (and, indeed, the extent of any hostility needing to be reconciled) is impossible to resolve, and one should be wary of reducing the poem to a biographical document. Given the emphasis throughout on place and nature – from the poem’s title to the plant-names and evocation of the ‘Knüppel / pfad im Hochmoor’ – we might instead ask what ‘Todtnauberg’ says about the role of place in Celan’s relationship with Heidegger, and how Celan viewed Heidegger’s attitude to the intersection between place and thought in a context where the place itself was profoundly problematic. In this context, Pierre Joris’s reading of the text and its translations is instructive, noting as it does the significance of a tiny shift from the expected ‘Waldwiesen’ to ‘Waldwasen’. This latter term, as Joris notes, contains various meanings. It is a variation on ‘Torf’, and thus ‘grounds’ the poem more persuasively in the soil of the mountainside: ‘Celan is not talking of some grassy surface, a pleasant meadow, but has in mind something that goes deeper and incorporates the network of underground roots. His thought is, as usual, directed below the surface.’

Moreover, Joris also points out that ‘Wasen’ is a regional dialect variation of ‘Schindanger’ or ‘knackers’ yard’, further cementing the move from tranquil glade to site of death and burial. Thus the poem reminds us of the connection between the German soil in the most literal sense, the nationalist myths which are predicated on it, and the violence these entail.

Like so many of Celan’s poems, ‘Todtnauberg’ is a profoundly grounded text. From the wildflower names at the outset to the soil of the forest floor, the twin orchids and the log-path across the ‘Hochmoor’, the poem explores the notorious encounter with Heidegger using images which relate to the primal hut and its situation in the landscape. However, far from serving as benign images of primitive rural existence, these references to the hut and landscape reflect a lack of healing (as in ‘Arnika, Augentrost’), the trauma of violence (‘Waldwasen’), and the absence of mutual understanding between isolated interlocutors who are as remote from one another as ‘Orchis und Orchis, einzeln’. The poem thus refuses to subscribe to a Heideggerian vision of the unity of place and thought, or to acknowledge the necessity of German ‘Bodenständigkeit’ for full understanding of being and dwelling. Instead ‘Todtnauberg’ expresses an implicit critique of such conceptions of the relationship between

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23 Otto Pöggeler, Spur des Worts: zur Lyrik Paul Celans, Freiburg 1986; and Lyon (note 22).
24 Lyon (note 22), p. 169.
26 Ibid., np.
geography and modes of thinking. Rather than enabling or demanding a mode of thought which is purely concerned with the primordial nature of time and being, the poem is disrupted by the acknowledgment of violence and trauma, and it calls into question the ethics of Heidegger’s relationship to his hut.

Prynne reflects on Celan’s poem and its consequences for ‘poetic dwelling’ in a 2008 essay on the subject of huts, which makes explicit the significance of this motif in his work. In it, he traces the history of huts in English literature, from the eighteenth-century poet William Collins to Shakespeare, probing the persistent appeal of this image. He gathers examples of symbolic huts, drawing on his own memory of performing National Service in the 1950s, the temporary office structures at Bletchley Park, and the huts of nomadic tribespeople in the Kudinsk Steppe. What emerges is a conceptualisation of the hut as a ‘marginal world’, a place which permits a certain kind of poetic reflection – just as, for Heidegger, the hut demands engagement with our primordial existence.

As far as ‘Todtnauberg’ is concerned, Prynne follows Lyon in rejecting the suggestion that Celan was hostile towards Heidegger, arguing that later interpretations of the encounter are motivated by ‘cultural pressure’ to insist that there should be ‘no surrender and no compromise, the poet shall have clean hands’. Prynne’s interest, though, is clearly in the nature of the place in which this encounter occurred and the associated relationship between geography and thought. Moreover, he takes the motif a step further into the realms of linguistic reflexivity. With the help of Heidegger’s conceptualisation of ‘[d]ie Sprache [als] der Bezirk [templum], d.h. das Haus des Seins… [der] Tempel des Seins’, a passage underlined by Celan in his edition of Heidegger’s work, Prynne approaches the notion of language-as-dwelling-place, asking under what conditions and in what philosophical and ethical contexts we might speak of (poetic) language as a kind of dwelling-place. He concludes:

The house of language is not innocent and is no temple. The intensities of poetic encounter, of imagination and deep insight into spiritual reality and poetic truth, carry with them all the fierce contradiction of what human language is and does. There is no protection or even temporary shelter from these forms of knowledge that is worth even a moment’s considered preference, even for poets or philosophers with poetic missions. Because the primal hut strips away a host of circumstantial appurtenances and qualifications, it does not represent an elemental form, a kind of sweat-lodge; but it is confederate with deep ethical problematicis, and not somehow a purifying solution to them. Yet the hut presents always a possible aspiration

28 Ibid., 628.
29 Ibid., 627.

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towards innocence, residual or potential, and towards transformation, so that a cynical report would be equally in error [...] The house of language is a primal hut, is stark and is also necessary, and not permanent.  

This paragraph is illustrated with a photograph of a military watchtower hut, behind barbed wire. The image, along with examples of other squalid, violent or otherwise degraded ‘huts’, such as those at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, offers a key touchstone for Prynne’s reading of the hut as a place of poetic encounter. The ‘hut’ is no provincial paradise – as, arguably, it is for Heidegger – but rather a scene of ‘deprivation and violence and psychic disorder, of crushing poverty and exclusion from the ordered domains of humankind’. These qualities, however, are balanced against the appeal of isolation and the ‘aspiration towards innocence’.

For both Prynne and Celan, this dynamic inherent in the hut’s primordial nature – its stark, temporary and isolated status on the one hand, and its appealing capacity to shelter and transform experience on the other – are also the qualities of poetic language. According to Prynne, poetic language is capable of expressing the symbolic significance of the hut in all its ethical complexity, where philosophical language like Heidegger’s falls short. The language in which Celan’s ‘encounters’ occur – fraught, fragmented, in extremis – reflects the qualities of the primal hut as it provides shelter in challenging terrain. Heidegger’s philosophy, in Prynne’s view, mistakenly elevates language to a ‘temple’ which appears to transcend these ethical problems, and therefore also fails to engage with the complex connotations of the hut as a place of temporary shelter under difficult circumstances.

Prynne’s poem ‘Chemins de Fer’, published some forty years before the essay described above, explores this aspect of the hut motif in poetic form. The text is clearly identifiable as a poetic engagement with the Holocaust, and with Celan:

> It is a forest of young pines and now we are eating snow in handfuls, looking at the towers which when the light topsoil is warm again will carry the firewatchers. From here there is no simple question of preparing to leave, or making our way. Even the thinnest breath of wind wraps round the intense lassitude, that undeniable political centre keeps watch; the switch of light and shadow is packed with foreign tongues. I shall not know my own

31 J. H. Prynne, ‘Huts’ (note 27), 631.
32 Ibid., 629.
33 Ibid., 630.
conjecture. The plants stare at my ankles in stiffness, they carry names I cannot recognise.\footnote{‘Chemins de Fer’, in J. H. Prynne, Poems (note 7), p. 123.}

From the opening image of prisoners ‘eating snow in handfuls’ in a ‘forest of young pines’, to the ‘double eagle’ of the third stanza and the ‘machine gun in / a Polish scenario’ of the final stanza, the poem is scattered with oblique references to concentration and prison camps. The ‘hut’ in this poem, as in one example used in Prynne’s ‘Huts’ essay, is a watchtower ‘which when the light topsoil is warm / again will carry the firewatchers’. The difficulty of the terrain, and the need to take shelter, are reflected in the assertion that ‘From here there / is no simple question of preparing to leave, or / making our way’ and the sinister undertones inherent in the final lines of this stanza, which seem explicitly to refer to Celan’s litany of flower-names in ‘Todtnauberg’. In the final stanza, the scenery changes to a ‘Ruhrgebiet’ landscape, where the relationship between industrial power, violence, and warfare is alluded to:

And so slowly, still, draining gradually into the Rhine, the huge barges freeze in the heat of trade. How much power, the machine gun in a Polish scenario, black and white fade into those passionless excursions of childhood. The small copse, water rusted in, an adventure! With which the flimsy self pivots in wilful envy and lusts after its strange body, its limbs gorged & inert.\footnote{Ibid.}

Once again, the connection between place and thought cannot escape traces of violence. We might conclude that the ‘passionless excursions of childhood’ mentioned here involve rural landscapes, isolated huts, and places of shelter in ‘small / copse[s]’. But as with Celan’s pointed shift from ‘Wiesen’ to ‘Wasen’, the ‘copse’ in this text becomes uncannily close to ‘corpse’ in the context of the subsequent lines, reminding us of the violence and ‘deep ethical problematic’ associated with withdrawal to a ‘primordial’ dwelling-place. The self is ‘flimsy’ and requires protection. The ‘warm’ topsoil of the opening lines does not suggest a pleasant vernal atmosphere, but rather a shallow grave. The appeal of ‘a possible aspiration towards innocence, residual or potential’ (to return to Prynne’s own turn of phrase) is denoted by the childish exclamation ‘an adventure!’ – but this innocent vision of boyish escapades in the woods is punctured by the obvious grotesqueness of the ‘strange body, its limbs gorged & inert’.

‘Chemins de Fer’ explores the relationship between two places and modes of thinking. Unlike Heidegger’s twin poles of suburban
confinement and rural primordial ‘dwelling’, neither place is idealised as the natural, unproblematic home of deep philosophical engagement with the nature of time and being. Rather, the two places are the industrial centre, representing inhuman processes of manufacture, trade and power – and its counterpart, a place of isolation in a snowy forest, identifiable as a ‘Lager’ of some variety. The two are inextricably linked, both conceptually by the inhumanity of mass production and industrial processes; and literally, by the ‘Chemins de Fer’ which give the poem its title. These are in turn reminiscent of the train-tracks of Holocaust deportations, and many other uses of railways in the service of death and destruction since the end of the nineteenth century.

Crucially, the poem demonstrates an awareness of the instability and ethical questionability of its own form: ‘The approach here, of streamy recall / seems like the touch of Europe, an invert logic / brought in with too vivid a pastoral sense’. The disrupted syntax, mingling of familiar collocations (such as ‘black and white’, ‘light and shadow’), with unfamiliar vocabulary (‘intense lassitude’), obscure imagery (‘the heat of trade’), and lack of clear poetic narrative – all of which are typical of Prynne’s work – are features of a poetic language which undermines attempts to access superficial meaning. The poetic language of ‘Chemins de Fer’ is no grand, beautiful temple: it is a challenging poem in which the very idea of ‘meaning’ is put under pressure.

In the primitive and isolated hut, the primordiality of time and being can be contemplated – but this contemplation demands an awareness of the conditions of isolation, and a language which both acknowledges its own fragility and contains regular reminders of the violence inscribed in the landscape by nationalist discourses and historical events. In short, ‘Chemins de Fer’ shows a connection between place, language and thought, which is not morally neutral.

Prynne’s ‘Huts’ essay briefly mentions Celan’s ‘Hüttenfenster’, a much earlier poem than ‘Todtnauberg’, as exemplary of the unique ability of poetic language to succeed, where philosophical language fails, in capturing both the crucial function and ethical problematic of the primal hut. In the context of a collection which explores the author’s complex relationship to questions of Jewish identity, and interrogates both Eastern and Western European cultural and literary traditions of Jewishness, ‘Hüttenfenster’ can be read as a meditation on the fragile space (both literal and metaphorical) which Jewishness occupies.\(^{36}\) It invokes the figure of Marc Chagall, the Russian-French-Jewish artist who created stained-glass windows for several prominent buildings in the early 1960s. The window with which the poem opens reveals the ‘placeless’ condition of the Jewish people:

Das Aug, dunkel:
als Hüttenfenster. Es sammelt,
was Welt war, Welt bleibt: den Wander-
Osten, die
Schwebenden, die
Menschen-und-Juden,
das Volk-vom-Gewölk, magnetisch
ziehts, mit Herzfingern, an
dir, Erde:
du kommst, du kommst,
wohnen werden wir, wohnen, etwas
holt
Alpha Centauri herunter, Arktur, holt
den Strahl hinzu, aus den Gräbern,
geht zu Ghetto und Eden, pflück
das Sternbild zusammen das er,
der Mensch, zum Wohnen braucht, hier
unter Menschen37

‘Hüttenfenster’ is regularly translated into English as ‘tabernacle window’, probably because this is a more recognisable architectural term in English than ‘hut window’. This translation clarifies what is otherwise an implicit reference to the Jewish tabernacle or sukkah, a primitive, portable place of worship used in the Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorates the forty years the Israelites spent wandering the desert.38 The hut or tabernacle window here ‘gathers’ the stateless, placeless Jewish people in its gaze, under the aegis of ‘ein Atmen? ein Name?’ The poem expresses a conflicted homecoming and diasporic identity. Various images of desertion, abjection and suffering are interrogated alongside the spaces and places of myth and history: ‘[das Gedicht] schreitet den ganzen Bogen jüdischer Zeit aus: Eden, David, Witebsk, Ghetto, Aleph, Beth, Jod’.39

In the final stanzas, this search for a home-space is characterised in specifically meta-linguistic terms:

schreitet
die Buchstaben ab und der Buchstaben sterblich-
unsterbliche Seele,
geht zu Aleph und Jud und geht weiter,

37 Celan, ‘Hüttenfenster’, Gedichte, pp. 157–9, (pp. 157–8).

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baut ihn, den Davidschild, läßt ihn
auflammen, einmal
läßt ihn erlöschen – da steht er,
unsichtbar, steht
bei Alpha und Aleph, bei Jud,
bei den andern, bei allen: in dir,
Beth, – das ist
das Haus, wo der Tisch steht mit
dem Licht und dem Licht.\(^{40}\)

The letters of two alphabets are named here as the precursors of an eventual dwelling-place and place of worship where the candles of \textit{Shabbat} are lit: ‘Alpha’, from the Greek alphabet, and ‘Aleph’, ‘Jod’ (or, significantly, ‘Jud’) and ‘Beth’ from the Hebrew. ‘Beth’ is the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the letter with which the Bible starts and the first letter of the Hebrew word for ‘house’.\(^{41}\) John Felstiner refers to these different alphabets as the orientation points for a diasporic experience of European space, arguing that both should seem ‘fremd, nicht heimatlich’.\(^{42}\) On the contrary, I would suggest that only the house of language, invisible and ‘sterblich-unsterblich’, can withstand the trial by fire described in these final stanzas to offer a temporary shelter, place of refuge and worship.

The form and poetic language of ‘Hüttenfenster’ reflect this conception of language as a temporary home for the displaced. The poem consists of one long sentence with complex punctuation sustaining a series of syntactical twists and turns, mimicking the never-ending search for a resting place which is described. Frequent repetitions, particularly of verbs of movement and of dwelling, emphasise the dynamic between stasis and movement: ‘geht, geht umher / sucht / sucht unten’. As in Prynne’s poem, there is no single identifiable subject position, but rather a mixture of second-person singular and first-person plural pronouns which give the impression of multiple voices speaking in chorus or harmony. Finally, as in Prynne’s text, there is a high level of semantic and syntactic ambiguity and polysemy, partly created by irregular line divisions which interrupt semantic units. In the phrase ‘das er, / der Mensch, zum Wohnen braucht, hier / unter Menschen, / schreitet / die Buchstaben ab’, one is forced to continually reappraise the syntax of the sentence as it unfolds. It is

\(^{41}\) See \textit{ibid.}, p. 708.
\(^{42}\) Felstiner (note 39), p. 252.

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unclear whether ‘unter Menschen’ is related to ‘zum Wohnen braucht’ or ‘schreitet ab’.

In Celan’s ‘Hüttenfenster’, the literal search for ‘home’ is reflected in a search for meaning in language. ‘Das Haus, wo der Tisch steht’ with which the poem concludes can only be seen as offering temporary shelter under these circumstances, since Celan’s poetic itself represents language in the condition of breaking down, through ever-shifting syntax, unstable allusions and complex subject positions. Like Prynne’s ‘Chemins de Fer’, the poem does not reassure us with a simple transparent narrative meaning. It does not elevate language to the status of a permanent, stable structure in which we may ‘encounter’ one another. Instead, poetic language is like the tabernacle or hut – a place of dwelling or worship which is necessary and appealing but also unstable and challenging. Geoffrey Ward has described the similarities between Prynne’s and Celan’s effacement of the subject position in their poetry, describing how this leads to a dynamic in which home and estrangement ‘seem to move like a Möbius strip’. It is this quality of their poetics which most clearly reflects the significance of the remote and primal hut in their work as the paradigmatic place of encounter in poetry – where thought, place, and language coincide most adequately, because all are placed under a high degree of strain.

Both Prynne and Celan, for different reasons and in different contexts, are interested in examining what kind of place poetry can be or can create, and what kind of structures it can construct and occupy. For Celan, the aporia of the Holocaust’s empty Cenotaph is the motivating factor behind this drive to shape a place of encounter in language which extends beyond the abstract metaphor of the meridian. Prynne approaches the question more dispassionately, but nevertheless with a powerful ethical imperative. He is aware of what is at stake should poetry conclude that its rightful place is in some grand palace or opulent museum – but also of the necessity of preserving a place for encounter in language, however fraught and fragile. The peculiar qualities of the ‘hut’ – stark, necessary, and impermanent – serve well as a symbol of both writers’ belief in the possibilities and challenges of poetic encounter.

Although they draw on Heideggerian thought, neither Prynne’s nor Celan’s huts conform to Heidegger’s model of the hut as the idealised home of being, the location where one might live in the immediacy of natural rhythms and thus see the sense of a philosophy which ‘[demands] a concern with the primordiality of being’. Instead, both Celan and Prynne render the relationship of thought to place ethically problematic: they examine the conditions of extremity and difficulty which force the construction of huts, and they ‘ground’ language and experience not in

44 Sharr and Benjamin (note 11), p. 18.
the pleasant soil of a home landscape, but in a soil inscribed with violence and trauma.

Adopting the motif of the hut as a place of encounter reflects Prynne’s and Celan’s belief – shared by Heidegger – that place is central to language, poetry and thought. The hut, as a place, possesses an enduring appeal, since it seems to offer a simple, stripped-down means of contemplating the primordial nature of being. However, in the post-war era, neither the hut and its surrounding landscape, nor the language in which the relationship of thought to place is expressed, is innocent and primitive: all are fraught with deep ethical problems, and it is this difficult terrain which these two writers seek to navigate in their poetry and critical writings. Poetic language serves as a kind of dwelling-place or place of encounter which, like the primitive hut, is ‘stark, necessary and not permanent’. No association between thought and place is devoid of ethical and political considerations; the role of poetic language can and should be to reveal the full complexities of such associations.