

ENCOUNTERS: AMERICAN POETS ON PAUL CELAN

All poets may not be Jews (assertions to the contrary, including one here by David Meltzer, notwithstanding), but they are all poets, an affinity that often has a similar function in transcending limits of mother tongue and nationality. Something in Celan's poetry drew American poets to him almost as soon as he began publishing, and today there is scarcely one unfamiliar with him, at least by reputation. To explore what it is in Celan's works that attracted them, Jerome Rothenberg assisted the editor of this issue in putting three questions to a dozen American poets familiar with Celan (several had translated him): 1) What was it about Celan's poetry that caught your specific interest? 2) What makes it stand out from the mass of poetry currently produced? and 3) What, if anything, has it done for or to your poetry? Each poet was invited to respond in any form he wished. The seven contributions that follow, each published without abridgement, constitute the responses we received. (JKL)

THE POETRY OF EXILE

PAUL AUSTER

A Jew, born in Rumania, who wrote in German and lived in France. Victim of World War II, survivor of the death camps, suicide before he was fifty. Paul Celan was a poet of exile, an outsider even to the language of his own poems, and if his life was a paradigm of the destruction and dislocation of mid-century Europe, his poetry is defiantly idiosyncratic, always and absolutely his own. In Germany, he is considered the equal of Rilke and Trakl, the heir to Hölderlin's metaphysical lyricism, and elsewhere his work is held in similar esteem, prompting statements such as George Steiner's recent remark that Celan is "almost certainly the major European poet of the period after 1945." At the same time, Celan is an exceedingly difficult poet, both dense and obscure. He demands so much of a reader, and in his

later work his utterances are so gnomic, that it is nearly impossible to make full sense of him, even after many readings. Fiercely intelligent, propelled by a dizzying linguistic force, Celan's poems seem to explode on the page, and encountering them for the first time is a memorable event. It is to feel the same strangeness and excitement that one feels in discovering the work of Hopkins, or Emily Dickinson.

Czernovitz, Bukovina, where Celan was born as Paul Anczel in 1920, was a multi-lingual area that had once been part of the Hapsburg Empire. In 1940, after the Hitler-Stalin pact, it was annexed by the Soviet Union, in the following year occupied by Nazi troops, and in 1943 retaken by the Russians. Celan's parents were deported to a concentration camp in 1942 and did not return; Celan, who managed to escape, was put in a labor camp until December 1943. In 1945 he went to Bucharest, where he worked as a translator and publisher's reader, then moved to Vienna in 1947, and finally, in 1948, settled permanently in Paris, where he married and became a teacher of German literature at the École Normale Supérieure. His output comprises seven books of poetry and translations of more than two dozen foreign poets, including Mandelstam, Ungaretti, Pessoa, Rimbaud, Valéry, Char, du Bouchet, and Dupin.

Celan came to poetry rather late, and his first poems were not published until he was almost thirty. All his work, therefore, was written after the Holocaust, and his poems are everywhere informed by its memory. The unspeakable yields a poetry that continually threatens to overwhelm the limits of what can be spoken. For Celan forgot nothing, forgave nothing. The death of his parents and his own experiences during the war are recurrent and obsessive themes that run through all his work.

With names, watered
by every exile.
With names and seeds,
with names dipped
into all
the calyxes that are full of your
regal blood, man,—into all
the calyxes of the great
ghetto-rose, from which
you look at us, immortal with so many
deaths died on morning errands.

(from "Crowned Out . . ."; 1963;
trans. by Michael Hamburger)

Even after the war, Celan's life remained an unstable one. He suffered acutely from feelings of persecution, which led to repeated breakdowns in his later years—and eventually to his suicide in 1970, when he drowned himself in the Seine. An incessant writer who produced hundreds of poems during his relatively short writing life, Celan poured all his grief and anger into his work. There is no poetry more furious than his, no poetry so purely inspired by bitterness. Celan never stopped confronting the dragon of the past, and in the end it swallowed him up.

“Todesfuge” (Death Fugue) is not Celan's best poem, but it is unquestionably his most famous poem—the work that made his reputation. Coming as it did in the late forties, only a few years after the end of the war—and in striking contrast to Adorno's rather fatuous remark about the “barbarity” of writing poems after Auschwitz—“Todesfuge” had a considerable impact among German readers, both for its direct mention of the concentration camps and for the terrible beauty of its form. The poem is literally a fugue composed of words, and its pounding, rhythmical repetitions and variations mark off a terrain no less circumscribed, no less closed in on itself than a prison surrounded by barbed wire. Covering slightly less than two pages, it begins and ends with the following stanzas:

Black milk of dawn we drink it at dusk
 we drink it at noon and at daybreak we drink it at night
 we drink and we drink
 we are digging a grave in the air there's room for us all
 A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
 he writes when it darkens to Germany your golden hair
 Margarete
 he writes it and steps outside and the stars all aglisten he
 whistles for his hounds
 he whistles for his Jews he has them dig a grave in the earth
 he commands us to play for the dance

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night
 we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
 we drink you at dusk and at daybreak we drink and we drink you
 death is a master from Germany his eye is blue
 he shoots you with bullets of lead his aim is true
 a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
 he sets his hounds on us he gives us a grave in the air

he plays with the serpents and dreams death is a master from
Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamite

(trans. by Joachim Neugroschel)

In spite of the poem's great control and the formal sublimation of an impossibly emotional theme, "Todesfuge" is one of Celan's most explicit works. In the sixties, he even turned against it, refusing permission to have it reprinted in more anthologies because he felt that his poetry had progressed to a stage where "Todesfuge" was too obvious and superficially realistic. With this in mind, however, one does discover in this poem elements common to much of Celan's work: the taut energy of the language, the objectification of private anguish, the unusual distancing effected between feeling and image. As Celan himself expressed it in an early commentary on his poems: "What matters for this language . . . is precision. It does not transfigure, does not 'poetize,' it names and composes, it tries to measure out the sphere of the given and the possible."

This notion of the possible is central to Celan. It is the way by which one can begin to enter his conception of the poem, his vision of reality. For the seeming paradox of another of his statements—"Reality is not. It must be searched for and won"—can lead to confusion unless one has already understood the aspiration for the real that informs Celan's poetry. Celan is not advocating a retreat into subjectivity or the construction of an imaginary universe. Rather, he is staking out the distance over which the poem must travel and defining the ambiguity of a world in which all values have been subverted.

Speak—
But keep yes and no unsplit,
And give your say this meaning:
give it the shade.

Give it shade enough,
give it as much
as you know has been dealt out between
midday and midday and midnight.

Look around;
look how it all leaps alive—

where death is! Alive!
He speaks truly who speaks the shade.

(from "Speak, You Also," trans. by Michael Hamburger)

In a public address delivered in the city of Bremen in 1958 after being awarded an important literary prize, Celan spoke of language as the one thing that had remained intact for him after the war, even though it had to pass through "the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech." "In this language," Celan said—and by this he meant German, the language of the Nazis and the language of his poems—"I have tried to write poetry, in order to acquire a perspective on reality for myself." He then compared the poem to a message in a bottle—thrown out to sea in the hope that it will one day wash up to land, "perhaps on the shore of the heart." "Poems," he continued, "even in this sense are under way: they are heading towards something. Towards what? Towards some open place that can be inhabited, towards a "Thou" which can be addressed, perhaps towards a reality which can be addressed."

The poem, then, is not a transcription of an already known world, but a process of discovery, and the act of writing for Celan is one that demands personal risks. Celan did not write solely in order to express himself, but to orient himself within his own life and take his stand in the world, and it is this feeling of necessity that communicates itself to a reader. These poems are more than literary artifacts. They are a means of survival.

In a 1946 essay on Van Gogh, Meyer Schapiro refers to the notion of realism in a way that could also apply to Celan. "I do not mean realism in the repugnant, narrow sense that it has acquired today," Professor Schapiro writes, ". . . but rather the sentiment that external reality is an object of strong desire or need, as a possession and potential means of fulfillment of the striving human being, and is therefore the necessary ground of art." Then, quoting a phrase from one of Van Gogh's letters—"I'm terrified of getting away from the possible. . . ."—he observes: "Struggling against the perspective that diminishes an individual object before his eyes, he renders it larger than life. The loading of the pigment is in part a reflex of this attitude, a frantic effort to preserve in the image of things their tangible matter and to create something equally solid and concrete on the canvas."

Celan, whose life and attitude towards his art closely parallel Van Gogh's, used language in a way that is not unlike the way Van

Gogh used paints, and their work is surprisingly similar in spirit.* Neither Van Gogh's stroke nor Celan's syntax is strictly representational, for in the eyes of each the "objective" world is interlocked with his perception of it. There is no reality that can be posited without the simultaneous effort to penetrate it, and the work of art as an ongoing process bears witness to this desire. Just as Van Gogh's painted objects acquire a concreteness "as real as reality," Celan handles words as if they had the density of objects, and he endows them with a substantiality that enables them to become a part of the world, his world—and not simply its mirror.

Celan's poems resist straight-forward exegesis. They are not linear progressions, moving from word to word, from point A to point B. Rather, they present themselves to a reader as intricate networks of semantic densities. Interlingual puns, oblique personal references, intentional misquotations, bizarre neologisms: these are the sinews that bind Celan's poems together. It is not possible to keep up with him, to follow his drift at every step along the way. One is guided more by a sense of tone and intention than by textual scrutiny. Celan does not speak explicitly, but he never fails to make himself clear. There is nothing random in his work, no gratuitous elements to obscure the perception of the poem. One reads with one's skin, as if by osmosis, unconsciously absorbing nuances, overtones, syntactical twists, which in themselves are as much the meaning of the poem as its analytic content. Celan's method of composition is not unlike that of Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. But if Joyce's art was one of accumulation and expansion—a spiral whirling into infinity—Celan's poetry is continually collapsing into itself, negating its very premises, again and again arriving at zero. We are in the world of the absurd, but we have been led there by a mind that refuses to acquiesce in it.

Consider the following poem, "Largo," one of Celan's later poems—and a typical example of the difficulty a reader faces in tackling Celan.** In Michael Hamburger's translation it reads:

*Celan makes reference to Van Gogh in several of his poems, and the kinship between the poet and painter is indeed quite strong: both began as artists in their late twenties after having lived through experiences that marked them deeply for the rest of their lives; both produced work prolifically, at a furious pace, as if depending on this work for their very survival; both underwent debilitating mental crises that led to confinement; both committed suicide, foreigners in France.

**I am grateful to Katherine Washburn, a scrupulous reader and translator of Celan, for help in deciphering the German text of this poem and suggesting possible references.

You of the same mind, moor-wandering near one:

more-than-
death-
sized we lie
together, autumn
crocuses, the timeless, teems
under our breathing eyelids,

the pair of blackbirds hangs
beside us, under
our whitely drifting
companions up there, our

meta-
stases.

The German text, however, reveals things that necessarily elude the grasp of translation:

Gleichsinnige du, heidegängerisch Nahe:

über-
sterbens-
gross liegen
wir beieinander, die Zeit-
lose wimmelt
dir unter den atmenden Lidern,

das Amselpaar hängt
neben uns, unter
unsern gemeinsam droben mit-
ziehenden weissen

Meta-
stasen.

In the first line, *heidegängerisch* is an inescapable allusion to Heidegger—whose thinking was in many ways close to Celan's, but who, as a pro-Nazi, stood on the side of the murderers. Celan visited Heidegger in the sixties, and although it is not known what they said to each other, one can assume that they discussed Heidegger's position during the war. The reference to Heidegger in the poem is underscored by the use of some of the central words from his philosophical writings: *Nahe*, *Zeit*, etc. This is Celan's way: he does not mention anything directly, but weaves his meanings into the fabric of the language, creating a space for the invisible, in the same way that thought accompanies us as we move through a landscape.

Further along, in the third stanza, there are the two blackbirds (stock figures in fairy tales, who speak in riddles and bring bad tidings). In the German one reads *Amsel*—which echoes the sound of Celan's own name, *Anczel*. At the same time, there is an evocation of Günter Grass's novel, *Dog Years*, which chronicles the love-hate relationship between a Jew and a Nazi during the war. The Jewish character in the story is named *Amsel*, and throughout the book—to quote George Steiner again—"there is a deadly pastiche of the meta-physical jargon of Heidegger."

Toward the end of the poem, the presence of "our whitely drifting / companions up there" is a reference to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust: the smoke of the bodies burned in crematoria. From early poems such as "Todesfuge" ("he gives us a grave in the air") to later poems such as "Largo," the Jewish dead in Celan's work inhabit the air, are the very substance we are condemned to breathe: souls turned into smoke, into dust, into nothing at all—"our / meta- / stases."

Celan's preoccupation with the Holocaust goes beyond mere history, however. It is the primal moment, the first cause and last effect of an entire cosmology. Celan is essentially a religious poet, and although he speaks with the voice of one forsaken by God, he never abandons the struggle to make sense of what has no sense, to come to grips with his own Jewishness. Negation, blasphemy, and irony take the place of devotion; the forms of righteousness are mimicked; Biblical phrases are turned around, subverted, made to speak against themselves. But in so doing, Celan draws ever nearer to the source of his despair, the absence that lives in the heart of all things. Much has been said about Celan's "negative theology." It is most fully expressed in the opening stanzas of "Psalm":

No One kneads us anew from earth and clay,
no one addresses our dust.
No One.

Laudeamus te, No One.
For your sake would we
bloom forth:
unto
You.

Nothing
were we, and are we and
will be, all abloom:
this Nothing's-, this
no-man's-rose.

(trans. by Katherine Washburn)

In the last decade of his life, Celan gradually refined his work to a point where he began to enter new and uncharted territory. The long lines and ample breath of the early poems give way to an elliptical, almost panting style in which words are broken up into their component syllables, unorthodox word-clusters are invented, and the reductionist natural vocabulary of the first books is inundated by references to science, technology, and political events. These short, usually untitled poems move along by lightning-quick flashes of intuition, and their message, as Michael Hamburger aptly puts it, "is at once more urgent and more reticent." One feels both a shrinking and an expansion in them, as if, by travelling to the inmost recesses of himself, Celan had somehow vanished, joining with the greater forces beyond him—and at the same time sinking more deeply into his isolation.

Thread-suns
over the gray-black wasteland.
A tree-
high thought
strikes the note of light: there are
still songs to sing beyond
mankind.

(trans. by Joachim Neugröschel)

In poems such as this one, Celan has set the stakes so high that he must surpass himself in order to keep even with himself—and push his life into the void in order to cling to his identity. It is an impossible struggle, doomed from the start to disaster. For poetry cannot save the soul or retrieve a lost world. It simply asserts the given. In the end, it seems, Celan's desolation became too great to be borne, as if, in some sense, the world were no longer there for him. And when nothing was left, there could be no more words.

You were my death:
you I could hold
when all fell away from me.

(trans. by Michael Hamburger)

PAUL CELAN: A MEMOIR AND A POEM

JEROME ROTHENBERG

My sense, circa 1958, was that I was the first poet to translate Celan into English.* We exchanged a sketchy letter or two, but I didn't meet him until 1967, while I was traveling with my wife and son in Europe. For me, Celan was clearly the great one among those "new young German poets" I had translated, but his continuing work seemed so intrinsically locked into its own language that I held off from anything past *Mohn und Gedächtnis* and *Sprachgitter*. Still, there had been some questions about taking it further, and when it was again suggested by Alan Brilliant and Teo Savory of Unicorn Books, I took it as a chance to be in contact with Celan again and possibly to meet him.

*Jerome Rothenberg (ed.), *New Young German Poets* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959).

I believe I made the arrangements from London, where we were staying with Stuart and Deidre Montgomery. I really wanted to meet Celan, and he seemed easy enough about it, so we made plans that when I came to Paris, I would drop over one afternoon to the École Normale, and we would spend some time together. My only discomfort was that I wasn't serious about translating him at length, while fearing that he probably only knew me as a translator.

My own poetry at that time was moving into the ancestral work of *Poland/1931*—the very beginnings of that. But Celan, although he was kind enough to acknowledge one of my earlier books, would have had no way of knowing about “The Wedding” or “The King of the Jews” or the “Satan in Goray” poem for Isaac Bashevis Singer, which I had then written and had been performing for the first time in London. For my own part, I wasn't yet aware of the turn towards visionary and brilliant judaisms his work had taken in *Die Niemandrose* and so on. It is important to say that, because the Jewish thing was what we largely spoke about—with more ambivalence on both sides than I can summon up by way of concrete recollection.

I don't know what café we went to from the École, but we stayed there for two or three hours, drinking wine and speaking. He was—as I knew he would be—different in appearance from the American and British poets I knew, who in the now distant 1960s were glowing in the extravagance of new-found beards and shining flower shirts. Celan's whole manner was conservative, even (dare I say it?) drab. Dark and catlike, he spoke softly, nervously, in German and in broken English, as we tried to find a common language.

I kept no record of the conversation, which accordingly has been reduced to stories told over the intervening years. A part of the time we ran over the names of poets we knew in common—with Celan, I remember, very edgy about his German contemporaries and their too easy relation (I think the point was) to the language and the culture. We spoke about America and his desire to visit—not only to read his poetry here, but to visit an old relative who was then living in Chicago. He wasn't aware of much recognition in the States (just the opposite: he thought he had been snubbed here), and he was certainly suspicious of most poets who had approached him with proposals to translate his work.

But the burden of the conversation fell increasingly on the idea of “jewishness”—his discovery of his own and his concern about his translators' ability to share or understand it. We exchanged some

Jewish stories. He spoke about the war and the camps—and very glowingly about the poetry of Nelly Sachs. I told him I had been asked to do some versions of Yiddish poets, and he suggested that I try the work of Eliezer Steinberg. I mentioned meeting Singer, but my recollection is he drew a blank on that one.

The talk on both sides was punctuated by questions and clarifications—the need to speak more clearly or more slowly, since what we were doing was a combination of German and English (clear German, clear English, halting German, halting English). It is a common enough experience, but it stands out sharply from that day because at the end of it—as we were leaving the café—I thought to ask him if he spoke Yiddish. His reply was that while he had not been raised as a Yiddish speaker, he learned it during the war. I, on the other hand, had grown up in New York City but I had spoken *only* Yiddish to the age of three or four. So, after all that stammering talk about Jewishness and language, we did in fact have a common (Jewish) language that we could speak, although we hadn't tried to speak it.

I never saw Celan after that, and I don't remember if we communicated further. The following year I dedicated the early poems of *Poland/1931* to him, and five years after his death, I wrote the following poem, which incorporates some of his own words, including the Yiddish one that ends it. Now as then, I find Celan's relation to language marvelous and shattering. I trust that the anecdotal tone of what I've written here doesn't in any way detract from that.

* * *

12/75

a letter to Paul Celan in memory

of how your poems
 arise in me
 alive
 my eye fixed on
 your line
 "light was • salvation"
 I remember
 (in simpler version)

Paris
nineteen sixty seven
in cold light of
our meeting
shivered to dumbness
you said "jew"
& I said "jew"
though neither spoke
the jew words
jew tongue
neither the mother language
loshen
the vestiges of holy speech
but you said
"pain"
under your eyebrows
I said "image"
we said "sound"
& turned around to
silence lost
between two languages
we drank wine's words
like blood
but didn't drink toward
vision still
we could not speak
without a scream
a guttural
the tree
out of the shadow of
the white cafe was not
"the tree"
roots of our speech
above us
in the sun
under the sewers
language of the moles
"who dig & dig
"do not grow wise
"who make no song

“no language
into the water silence
of your death
the pink pale sky of Paris
in the afternoon
that held no constellations
no knowledge of the sun
as candelabrum
tree menorah
“light knotted into air
“with table set
“chairs empty
“in sabbath splendor
the old man stood beside
in figure of a woman
raised his arms to reach
axis of the world
would bring the air down
solidly
and speak no sound
the way you forced
my meaning
to your poem
the words of which still press
into my tongue
“drunk
“blesst
“*gebentsht*

The poem, “a letter to Paul Celan in memory,” is reprinted from Jerome Rothenberg’s *Vienna Blood* (New Directions, 1980), by permission of the author.

PAUL CELAN

JED RASULA

Celan's writing is one of the clear, unarguable limits of modern poetry. In all its facets it composes one single sign, a solid piece of rock bearing the inscription, "Past this point your language disintegrates from anguish." Its relation to a broader tradition of European nihilism is minimal, as Celan's work is closest to the tiny gestures—the shrug, the loose wave of a hand—that indicate with awesome peremptoriness "this one lives, that one dies." Except for a few of the earlier poems there are not even cries of anguish or lament. The later work shows Celan conscientiously applying himself to the German language as an instrument, as though it were an instrument since it has been used as such, of terror. He elected to write in German, while being Rumanian and living in France, because his affinities with the victims of the Holocaust declared themselves most explicitly in the smaller linguistic gestures with which he *executed* the language from within. His work is radical insofar as it is a helpless conscious choice. Very few writers have so openly allowed the language of their poems to be helpless, to be written from a condition of abrupt syntactic disintegration *consciously* attended to. The great difficulty—and thus his greatest example for later poets—is in practicing a craft on material that disappears in proportion to the success of the poet. Celan's invasion of the German language is only possible after the second World War. The First had incited violence of a different kind: the medium, the language, was a means and not the object of attack. With Celan, the German language itself becomes the means of its own disembodiment. In his hands, more and more of the language simply goes up in smoke. There is nothing at all like it in any other language that I know of.

There is certainly nothing to compare with it in English. For all the interesting graphic propositions (still largely unexamined) in Cummings, there is no ground for comparison. Jack Spicer's abandonment to the pronoun disfigurements of an Orphic underworld are comparable only in isolated lines. And so far as I can discern, the work of the younger poets publishing in the magazines *This*, *Hills* and *L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E* shows no indebtedness to Celan, though some of their polemic suggests he would be central to their concerns. I suspect

the lack of absorption of Celan into American idioms and attentions arises from a simple enough error, which is the assumption that every notable poet has some kind of "equivalent" in another language. So the more profuse records of verbal injury in such poets as Vallejo and Artaud possibly disguise the distinctness which is Celan's. It may also be that Celan is not fun to read. His poetry may be the most singular contemporary instance of the harrowing, unreadable, prototypical "modern poem" that had manifestations for earlier sensibilities in such work as *The Waste Land*, Dada sound-poems and simultaneities, Expressionist works and more. The singularity of Celan's images, the sensual purity and the sense of hermetic or private meaning, also make his work less approachable in the richly imagistic public domain of American poetry.

In my own case, Celan was unavoidable. I lived in Germany in the late sixties, so the bias of my attentions was toward European poetry anyway. Rilke was then, and remains, for me, synonymous with the notion of German poetry. And what is most conspicuous for someone disposed to hold Rilke so highly is the fact that Celan's attraction to the German language is bilateral. On the one hand he is decomposing the language of the barbarians from within; on the other, he is conducting a hermetic (*tightly sealed*) passage toward the inviolable hieratic visionary language within German that Rilke made his own. It is as if Celan, in order to come into his own as the German poet after Rilke, could only approach the realm of such a practice by passing through many rings of enemy lines drawn around it. So Celan's work is full of stealth and intentional sabotage. And by the time—or in those instances in which—he is close on the Rilkean purity, the scars of what he has experienced en route peel off in scabs indistinguishable from the exaltation of being there. A prick from a rose killed Rilke. Celan writes as if an entire crown of roses were being held in place in his mouth. Beauty is bloody.

So the position of Celan is in the end twofold. He marks a certain boundary to horror, the response to horror in language, and the assimilation of it in a poetic practice. On the other hand, he is always approaching a beauty which it is terrible to contemplate. This has been the substance of much melodramatic poetry and fiction, but Celan writes with the massive historical evidence pervasive in his chosen language and racial affiliations. And I would suggest that it was as a poet that he most clearly gravitated toward the holocaust as inevitable topos. Each slightest sound of German resonated with bone and ash. Suffocation the condition of the script. Every poem written as the last word, terminus of a race.

PAUL CELAN

CID CORMAN

● “What in Celan’s poetry makes it stand out from the mass of poetry currently produced?”

First of all—it wasn’t *produced*; it was elicited. Elicited by a life which was drawn into the vortex of Holocaust—from which there was to be no escape—but only a deepening loss. The poetry is more than vent (from the pyramidal memory)—it is a revenge—a movement towards “justice”—playing the avenging angel. Hebraic in that.

Others have remarked the surrealist fragmentation (which goes well beyond Goll)—the spitting-out of the beloved and hated language. *Odi et amo*. The self-hatred—the eroding—corrosive—undeniable and undenied—guilt. To HAVE survived. To have been born for this!

He has tasted the ash of language. And used it to write on the forehead of Hölderlin and Rilke and Trakl and Heidegger and Benn and others in other tongues. An unrelenting poetry—a suicidal poetry.

A poetry OF language—but of language AS livingdying—inextricably meaning parsed into meaninglessness. A tale told by an idiot.

It has an inexorable logic about it. A poetry that seems—now that we have it—had to be. A sixpointed star etched into our minds—a splintered star.

How could it not “stand out”?

● “What was your own response to Celan’s work and has it affected your practice?”

In 1955—as I have written elsewhere (*SULFUR 2*)—I met Celan through a mutually dear friend (Edith Aron). She helped me make the first translations of his work into English (perhaps into any other language). The first poem we did was—of course—the DEATH FUGUE. I ended up translating ALL his books as they appeared—until the posthumous work. The first two books—apart from the obvious intensity and ring of the work—didn’t excite me *particularly*—beyond a handful of poems. But from *SPRACH-GITTER* (*Speechlattice*, 1959) I WAS impressed profoundly. It was a direction I myself was moving in—the probing of every word—every syllable—every pause and silence—questioning meaning and trying to discover it IN THE EVENT. He didn’t alter my practice—he helped confirm it.

For me the Holocaust is human existence—trying to livedie poetry at a time when most regard it as either indolence—evasion—or at best amusement. Self-indulgence. Celan's "work" undermines such regarding.

● "How does Celan's poetry relate to earlier and contemporary movements in 20th Century poetry and art?"

Only as the Holocaust does: as the cry of a child in a room full of dying people as the cyanide reaches them and they realize they are immediately doomed by a cruelty that is both human and so the more inhuman. A cry whose "value" is only the valor of cry. To reduce it to some literary or art movement is to belittle what is little enough anyhow—but all.

A NOTE ON PAUL CELAN

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

While living in Sherman Oaks, California, in the spring of 1970, I had the following dream: a man whom I recognized as Paul Celan walked to the bank of the Seine in Paris and stepped up on a stone which I also recognized as the Vallejo stone. Celan stood there for a moment—then leapt into the river.

When I mentioned my dream to someone a week or so later I was informed that the poet had just drowned in the Seine, an apparent suicide.

The Vallejo stone refers to a poem that César Vallejo wrote while living in Paris, in the mid-thirties. Like many of the poems that Vallejo wrote during these years, it records his acute sensitivity to suffering; this particular untitled poem is, on one level, a stay against suicide. Vallejo still believed that a humanitarian revolution would occur, but this belief was growing very weak, and was rapidly being overwhelmed by the suffering he found everywhere daily.

The poem, too long to quote in this context, opens with the following two stanzas:

Idle on a stone,
unemployed,
scroungy, hair-raising,

at the bank of the Seine, he comes and goes.
Conscience then sprouts from the river,
with the petiole and scratches of an avid tree;
from the river the city rises and lowers, made of
embraced wolves.

The idle one sees it coming and going,
monumental, carrying his fasts in his concave head,
on his chest his purest lice
and below
his little sound, that of his pelvis,
silent between two big decisions,
and below,
further down,
a paperscrap, a nail, a match . . .

One might think of this stone as a location at which lamentation is tested. Rilke, in the 10th "Duino Elegy," evokes the crisis of lamentation for the 20th century. This is where, as a young woman, Lament responds to a young man's questions, saying:

"We were a great clan, once, we Laments. Our fathers
worked the mines in that mountain range. Sometimes
you'll find a polished lump of ancient sorrow among men,
or petrified rage from the slag of some old volcano.
Yes, that came from there. We used to be rich."

In attempting to read my dream in the light of Vallejo's and Celan's lives and poetries, I see that Vallejo, still weighted with some of the riches of lamentation, could address the misery of men from his stone pedestal in a poem and turn away from the river to other poems. For Celan, writing after Auschwitz, his family having been murdered in the camps, lamentation was not exactly empty, but was so distorted by the absurdity of praising anything, that its riches had been, in effect, undermined. It may be putting it too strongly to say that he could no longer, at a certain point, feel sorry for himself, but I suspect that something like this was true, and that it pushed him over the edge.

In the two quoted stanzas of Vallejo's poem, I find a curious balance between what the poet sees over the Seine and what he sees on its bottom; the "above" and the "below" seem to be held in this

balance by his body, specifically by his genitals ("his little sound, that of his pelvis, / silent between two big decisions,"). If we read "two big decisions" as "testicles," then "pelvis" reads as "penis." The sense seems to be that given the nature of the world, he cannot decide whether to have children or not and, caught on the horns of the decision, as it were, he remains "idle," out of work as a man as well as a worker.

The movement of words and lines in Celan's poetry from *Sprachgitter* (1959) on has a strong, twisting, downward propulsion, like strands of a rope that is, at the same time, tightening with increasing weight *and* self-destructing through torsion into cast free strands. A good example of these contraries in motion is found in "The Syllable Ache" (from *Die Niemandrose*, 1963) of which I quote the last half:

Forgotten grabbed
 at To-be-forgotten, earthparts, heartparts
 swam,
 sank and swam. Columbus,
 the time-
 less in eye, the mother-
 flower,
 murdered masts and sails. All fares forth,
 free,
 discovering,
 the compass-flower fades, point
 by leafpoint, an ocean
 blossomed to height and to day, in blacklight
 of wildrudderstreaks. In coffins,
 in urns, canopic jars
 awoke the little children
 Jasper, Agate, Amethyst—peoples,
 stock and kin, a blind

Let there be

is knotted in
 the serpentheaded free-
 ropes—:

By modifying “*Let there be*” with “blind,” freedom and license twist into each other, and for a moment Aleister Crowley’s “Do what thou wilt” shows its lust-deformed face. By putting it that way I mean to indicate to what an extent Celan’s poetry contains a pronouncement of creation emptied of meaning. When “Do what thou wilt” becomes the only law, there is no meaningful creation. God is exterminated, one is no one, unity equals nothingness.

On another level, Celan’s contraries were “I” and “Thou,” and in his mature poetry they grow unbearably close, closer than contraries can to function; one might say that they gnaw into each other, the living become the dead, the dead the living, and out of such a conjunction a grand but terrifying vista opens, in which Celan’s own voice is finally consumed in a “we” which is the living and the dead singing a song of praise to “no one.” Under the stress of such a vision, nothing is forgotten: memories of the death camps, the inhuman rot in the mythic structure of Christianity, and insignificant slights have hundreds of low doors opening on each other. This can be a condition in which while poetry is meaningless the sense of soul-destruction is so gaping that only a poetry in which life itself is pulled inside out is a possible response.

I believe that in reading and thinking about Paul Celan today, we must meditate on the stamina of his wound. Not that he allowed it to flow at full vent, or that he brilliantly cicatrized it at the right hour. Rather, he worked it as a muscle as long as there was any strength in it. He knelt at its altar alone, and thus did not set other possibilities in motion that might have given him reasons to continue to live at the point that the wound ceased to ache.

Then there was only numbness—and the “uncontestable testimony” of one who did not come in to the hearth when the snow began to fall but stayed outside to disappear in the deepening particles of annihilated millions, a single “we” that you and I can pronounce.

Note: the Vallejo translation from *César Vallejo: The Complete Posthumous Poetry*, tr. by Clayton Eshleman and José Rubia Barcia, 1978, pp. 78-81; the Rilke from *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, tr. by A. Poulin, Jr., 1977, pp. 72-73; the Celan from *Caterpillar #8/9*, tr. by Cid Corman, 1969, pp. 17-18.

JACK HIRSCHMAN

Paul Celan, a Rumanian who wrote in the language that stood for the oppressor of Europe, but who would never pledge allegiance to its flag, relates to us with all the catastrophe and nihilism of the European situation already built into him.

The Jews had been destroyed. The "homeland" migration to Israel was not to be his choice because he was not a Zionist or a statist. He lived the postwar years in Paris and there, in 1970, he was suicided. The "condition" caught up with him, no doubt. It had caught up with Mayakovsky and Attila Josef of Hungary a generation earlier. And how many nameless hero-poets of lesser or even anonymous "fame" had also tasted the humiliation beyond which there is no life?

Celan was not a "people's poet" in the way that Vladimir or Attila were. He was a product of ideologic cul-de-sacs, a physical victim of the Nazis (in a forced labor camp in his youth), and today his works resonates through the working-class as well as students and intellectuals, because poems like *Deathfugue* are truly relevant lyrics. It first appeared in America in Jerome Rothenberg's momentous *City Lights* translation. It appeared amidst runs of beat poetry from San Francisco, and it immediately gave that movement (to which the "nik" suffix had been attached as a symbol of postwar Bolshevik subversion) an international texture. I doubt that any of the more political poets of that early flourishing—especially Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, David Meltzer, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Wieners were not in one way or another—then or subsequently—deeply influenced by Jerry's translation. It was the "best" translation of the Beat period, of what was obviously the finest and most authentic encounter with the experience of Nazified Europe. Since then, translations of it have appeared by Joachim Neugroschel and Michael Hamburger, to name but a couple. I have seen unpublished versions, notably the one of David Rattray. And Fred Pietarinen's version will soon appear in *Compages*, the journal of the Union of Left Writers. All attest to the poem's greatness. During the post WW II period, translation began to become the important political dimension of contemporary writing that it is today. The Rothenberg translation of *Deathfuge* was crucial to that dimension.

Celan's poems are most like what Anton Webern's music sounds like: Verges conspire; images emerge from contractions which leave old sentiments behind; texture and rhythm are all there is that remains of the absolute i.e., "god"; content is flayed to the raw wound of content, and the ever-lyrical *Sehnsucht* of German poetry is turned inside out: no longer is it a yearning for home. It is now the "thrust" upon one's self, the inner impounded sounding of a heart grappling with its own brokenness in a West that is absurd and deadly with its inheritance of "sham-death."

But it is there that the people must begin, or rebegin for Celan. He refuses to deny the weight of the nothingness which came to the German Left from the Twenties on, in the form of the Nazi reaction, even if it has ground the word into absurdity. He refuses to deny the splinters in the wood, say, of German Expressionists which spoke through the grain to Africa itself, before Hitler lopped and burned so many of those great trees. And he feels and adheres to the path of the new music of Schönberg and especially Webern because, even before the war, the intrinsic power of its clarity was projected through the abyss-to-come.

I don't mean the Webern referencing lightly, and would suggest that the readers of this read Webern's *Path of the New Music*, a series of off-the-cuff talks the composer gave in a private home in Germany in 1933. Though the talks are only obliquely political (Webern sees Nazism as the scourge of German culture on the horizon), an understanding of what he means by the concepts of *unity* and *clarity* through music will, I am convinced, provide comrades with meaning in relation to the communist and resistance movements against imperialism in the world today; for Webern is really talking about the attainment of, and the unity of human control in the attainment of, land (nature) by way of musical expression, its deep and abiding relation to inner reason.

In this sense, Paul's poetry is the expression of destroyed language reconstructing a music containing the process of the destruction as that process forces the spirit into a more and more inward and (since outwardness/extroversion, i.e., entertainment is the only "hope," and it a suspect one) isolate position. The entire evolution of his idiom involves a faith in a *you* which is the supreme ordinary affirmed after outgrappling the Thou of a religion which no longer is his, the *you* of the brutal otherness which always verges on *he* or *they*, and the *you* that is the banality of a world as collective reduced to forced entertainment.

Celan's "other" genre is not theater. He thus does not engage the masses as, say, Brecht or Kraus or, in our country, Baraka does. Rather he is involved with language leading to *thinglessness*, *possessionlessness* by a withdrawal into the self away from what is potentially capitulationist in the "larger" forms of expression. He will add nothing to consumerism; that is why his particularly ardent flame. He is an exile who is not an exile because, ultimately he is writing a notation as much in the manner of eastern as of western thought (one of the reasons why cabbalists are drawn to his work). Look closely at his lines: aren't they written as if a thing, an object in nature, or even an object manufactured or artificed had given up its insides to him, its process and thrum? This is what Paul means when he says he is "blacker in black" and "nakeder."

I had the occasion, and honor, to translate *Lichtzwang* (*Lightpressure*) in 1980. This was the last book Paul was to edit into print. It appeared three years after his death and is his penultimate work (the last volume was edited after his death). I worked on the translation of *Lightpressure*, which for reasons of estate and copyright has not yet appeared in print, with Angela Beske, a worker, photographer and a native of Germany. Angela loves Celan's works and, fortunately for me, has a nuantic grasp of both the German and American languages that greatly helped in the renderings.

By the time of *Lightpressure*, Celan is almost totally "musical." The words are "notated" as if, just before each poem, a baton (but of self-spectacle!) were tapped; then the poem enters for a brief time and untenses itself:

The cut-through dovechord,
the exploded
blossomdominion,

The actsuspicious
foundobject soul.

Dialectically, such a work, not untypical of the poems in *Lightpressure* might suggest that synaptic "putting-together" of the scattered particles of the autochthonic imagination which belongs to the decadent epoch of art for the sake of art. Celan writes:

founded on nothing,
 free from all
 prayer,

....

....

I take you in
 instead of all
 stillness.

If the "all" (Celan is a master in pressuring the smallest particles of speech into immense meaning) is here meant to reverberate to the meaning of *total* as it verges upon *totalitarian*, resonating to everything (the prayer of the religious, the stillness of that silence presumably capitulatory), then by way of his being 'founded on nothing' Celan is able to affirm an individuated "self as other" as it verges upon symbolic representation of commune or people or world—but only insofar as nothingness is admitted. That being the case, however, the stagnancy of nothing must also be admitted, and it is precisely here, where change is founded upon what abruptly and obstacles change, that the crux of Celan's world view hinges. A Marxist-Leninist comrade poet and dialectician, Csaba Polony, remarks that Celan's work is like the way he (Csaba) often feels, precisely because of the nowhere-accuracy of the poems, their ability, in effect, to drown one in a unpeopled existentiality without convincing one of *objective*, outside so to speak, their intimate music. For someone like Csaba, Celan's work represents a *stymie*: it is work that mirrors the uncommitment to the majority in revolutionary working-class struggle *in poetic fact* (if not in philosophical attitude): the marvelous independent experimentality of Celan's work is what most commends him, the seriousness of his idiom.

But there *is* a people in Celan's work. They are the cremated. It is, therefore, the dead or the projectedly cremated (for Celan's work portentously also refers to the age of nuclear terror), who are the groundwork of the complex simplicities of his work. It is ultimately from their ashes that the sparks of his poems are born. And it is the holocaustal fact—that the Jews of Europe *were* destroyed, because they represented to the fascists the potentially bolshevik minority that places Celan's work within the dialectic. The genocide of the European Jews is in fact the basis of the nothingness of his poetry,

because that genocide represented the most diabolical extension of capitalism i.e., the industry of extermination by way, literally, of factories of death.

Thus, one returns, with Celan, to the experience of Nazism, and comprehends via that experience the terms of Marxist-Leninism. For as the genocidal experience has now become, by way of the atomic age, the content of terror in *everyone* in Europe and America, and the genocidal resistance the nature of struggle in *all* continents, Celan's poems must be understood as vigilances of a very high order, of expressive cares in an age given more and more to threat in the name of the greed to which capitalism is hopelessly addicted, and, most importantly, as musics come from the depths of a human tragedy no one of good conscience and revolutionary fervor can evade the resonance of.

THE NAME REVERSED

—To Paul Anczel

DAVID MELTZER

All poets are Yids says Marina in Russian says Jack translating the emblem from *Tarussa*.

Yids. No *haimish* affectionate condensing. No Yiddles mit fiddles unt diddles unt kugelach. The roof torn off the shtetl and all of it stuffed into a furnace. Cast-off. Dumped into gouged-out ribcage graves. We Yids died together. Anonymous. Suffocating bone-crushing mulch. Archeology of parchment fingerprints. Body upon body. Blood fills open mouth unable to shut even in death.

Those who pull in the light and can't rewrite it out of self dark. Burn inward and later speak ashes, passing judgment on small matters. The most they can handle. Broken branches, roots rotten, no longer even interested in water.

Who was lost will not be found. They will not speak through children. We dream a reconstructed voice in wire recordings, acetate sandstorm 78s, white discs made in voice-o-gram booths. Lost beyond the voice is the book. The page. The word. *Mi. Mah. What. Who.* Who is lost can not be found. They will not be born. *Aleph bayt kaput.* Files flash-fired into ash. Burnt map of Eden. Missiles of telegram uncoil erupting wild sparking wires. One by one the radios play silence. One by one they go beyond the word.

Red star. Gold star. Black cross. Lightning bolt. Language reaches the edge, fall silently into the void. It is snowing paper upon them. Will not be born. Nor lost. Not found. Piles of history. Passports of silence. Erased. Fire or lime. Erasing prayers. Film gel buckles in fire.

No. Not we. Not any of us together. No more. No. They or them abide, surround, steps, walls, the doors and forms which unlock them. They the verb against the poem. They the verb puncturing skin. First a slight line of ink, then full pump from torn throat. Black rootlines on the floor catch window light. Source of all light, all dark. Not we.

Not love of life or death or love of love. Not love. Bone and skin winter. Palm ripped away from frozen hip. Fingertips carress her cheek's icy curve.

Sun in yesod runs dim light down to love. No kingdom for her continuity. No children. They can only be imagined. They will never return. Not even as ghosts. Our victory our death.

Look up to the sky
looks down
like a piece of paper.