

“Written asunder”: The language-scape of Paul Celan

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Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry

Paul Celan

Translated by Pierre Joris

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Microliths They Are, Little Stones: Posthumous Prose

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Paul Celan, the most powerful and most challenging of German-language postwar poets, never actually lived in Germany. He was born Paul Antschel in 1920, in Czernowitz, the cosmopolitan former capital of the province of Bukovina (then in Romania, today part of Ukraine). He described his native region as the “home of many of the Hassidic stories which Martin Buber has retold in German ... A landscape where both people and books lived.”

In July 1941, Nazi troops reached Czernowitz and began their annihilation of both people and books. The following summer, Celan’s father and mother were deported and killed – his father

died of typhus and his mother was shot for being “unfit to work”. He survived the last eighteen months of the war in a series of forced labour camps, shovelling rocks and hauling debris.

After the war, reeling from loss, Celan for a time failed to summon even the words to mourn his parents and other victims of the Shoah, which he simply designated “that which happened”. “To/ the worship of many gods/ I lost a word that was looking for me:/ Kaddish.” Before he could use it, German “had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech”.

But after what he called “a period of speech-filled silence”, Celan began his attempt to register in German, his mother’s language, the genocide initiated by the Germans. Where Elie Wiesel, also born in Romania, chose to write in his adopted French, Celan wrote in and against the German language he both loved and loathed, one of the few possessions he had not lost. He spoke of his horror that “the hand that will open my book has perhaps shaken the hand of the one who murdered my mother”. And yet, “there’s nothing in the world,” he wrote in 1948, “for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German.”

Besides German, Celan was at home in Romanian, Russian, English and French. He translated Franz Kafka’s parables and Anton Chekov’s stories into Romanian. Into German, he translated from Russian (Osip Mandelstam’s verse); from French (Paul Valéry and E.M. Cioran); and from English (Shakespeare’s sonnets, essays by Saul Bellow and Irving Howe). “His translations are feats of genius,” said George Steiner. “They repay a lifetime’s study.”

After several transitional years in Bucharest and Vienna, Celan settled in Paris in 1948, where he lived for the next twenty-two years. He earned a living teaching German literature at the *École*

Normale Supérieure, and in 1952 married Gisèle de Lestrang, a graphic artist.

That same year, his incantatory poem “Deathfugue” (“*Todesfuge*”) appeared in Germany: (“Deathfugue” would make its first appearances in English in 1955, in Jacob Sonntag’s *Jewish Quarterly* [translated by Michael Bullock], and in *Commentary* [translated by Clement Greenberg].) In it, he contrasts Margarete, from Goethe’s *Faust*, with Shulamit, from the Bible’s erotic poem, The Song of Songs. The much-lauded, much-anthologised poem was, Celan wrote, “threshed over in many a textbook” and has become a fixture of commemorative occasions (recited, for example, in 1988 in the Bundestag, on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht). But Celan always felt German readers exploited “Deathfugue” in their “coming to terms” with the past, using and reusing it as what he called “an alibi-mirror”.

In 1955, Theodor W. Adorno famously expressed scepticism of another kind: “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.” “One finally knows where the barbarians are to be found,” was Celan’s terse riposte. “Man will continue to bear witness with or without Adorno,” Celan told his friend Jean Daive. It is less well known that, after encountering Celan, Adorno reconsidered his oft-cited pronouncement: “It may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.” Perhaps now we can finally ask whether, after Auschwitz, we can afford to imagine a world without Celan?

Celan cast his poems in the irreducible idioms of testimony, unflinching indictment (of the Germans and of God), and rejection of reconciliation. All of which burdened him with solitude, as the last lines of his poem “Ash-glory” testify: “No one/ bears witness for the/ witness.” He once described himself in a letter as

“very alone – with myself and my poems (which I hold as one and the same)”. As two landmark new collections make clear, Celan’s poems – however often they seek the “du” – remain as solitary as their author.

The publication of *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech* marks the centenary of Celan’s birth and the fiftieth anniversary of his death. It brings together Celan’s first four books: *Poppy and Memory* (including “Deathfugue” and poems addressed to his lover, the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann); *Threshold to Threshold*, poems from 1952 to 1954; *Speechgrille* (which Nelly Sachs, in a letter to Celan, called “your Book of Radiance, your Zohar”); and *NoOnesRose*, poems from 1960 to 1962. The translations, by Pierre Joris, are bilingually presented on facing pages, and accompanied by extensive commentary, a swarm of notes that decode Celan’s ciphered semantics. This early harvest serves as a prequel to *Breathturn into Timestead* (2014), Joris’s translation of Celan’s final five collections, composed between 1963 and 1970. Together, the two volumes represent the first time that all the poems Celan collected in his lifetime, some six hundred, appear in English. Arranged in the order Celan intended, these English versions allow readers, as Joris writes, “to weave the threads of the individual poems into a text that is the cycle or book of poems”.

This magisterial two-volume achievement is complemented by *Microliths*, a collection of Celan’s unpublished prose, also in Joris’s pitch-perfect translation, including aphorisms, dialogues, drafts of fictional letters, and interviews.

It is often claimed that Celan’s language – the way it welds words together into new compounds or pries old words apart – precludes the possibility of translation, what Celan called the task of “ferry-ing” from one language into another through incommensurabilities

of meaning. Joris proves otherwise. Letting his voice reverberate against Celan's, he captures the acoustics of Celan's rhythms and repetitions, his semantic density and his timing.

Celan spoke of "the secret marriage the word contracts in the poem with the real and the true". That secret demands discretion, a kind of respect, or tact, which Joris exercises with consummate rigour. On one of his visits to Germany, Celan wrote to his wife: "I am not sure the German I write in is spoken here, or anywhere." "Radically dispossessed of any other reality," Joris writes in his introduction, "he set about to create his own language – a language as absolutely exiled as he himself. To try to translate it as if it were current, commonly spoken or available German ... would be to miss an essential aspect of the poetry."

Here, for example, is his translation of "Deathfugue":

Black milk of morning we drink you evenings
we drink you at noon and mornings we drink you at night
we drink and we drink
we dig a grave in the air there one lies at ease
A man lives in the house he plays with the snakes he writes
he writes when it darkens to Deutschland your golden hair
Margarete
he writes and steps in front of his house and the stars glisten and
he whistles his dogs to come
he whistles his jews to appear let a grave be dug in the earth
he commands us play up for the dance

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night
we drink you mornings and noontime we drink you evenings
we drink and we drink

A man lives in the house he plays with the snakes he writes
he writes when it turns dark to Deutschland your golden hair
Margarete
Your ashen hair Shulamit we dig a grave in the air there one
lies at ease

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you there and you other
men sing and play
he grabs the gun in his belt he draws it his eyes are blue
jab deeper your spades you there and you other men continue to
play for the dance

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night
we drink you at noon we drink you evenings
we drink you and drink
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamit he plays with the snakes

He calls out play death more sweetly death is a master from
Deutschland
he calls scrape those fiddles more darkly than as smoke you'll
rise in the air
then you'll have a grave in the clouds there you'll lie at ease

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Deutschland
we drink you evenings and mornings we drink and drink
death is a master from Deutschland his eye is blue
he strikes you with lead bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete

he sets his dogs on us he gifts us a grave in the air
he plays with the snakes and dreams death is a master from
Deutschland

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamit

Even in the German original, the language of “Deathfugue” induces an uncanny sense of language unhoused, what Freud called the *unheimlich*, as though Celan had been disinherited from his own language. More than any other translation of this poem, Joris’s English captures this feeling of foreignness; he renders the conditions and coordinates of our own familiar language strange and new.

A decade after “Deathfugue”, Celan began to suffer severe psychiatric breakdowns, leading to several periods of hospitalisation. He described being haunted by dreams “that cobble an ark for you, in which you survive the flood that surges up from the abysses of events, redder and redder”. The French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas diagnosed Celan with “insomnia in the bed of being”. At the same time, as *Breathturn into Timestead* makes clear, Celan’s writing was restlessly moving towards disintegration, as though its syntax was fracturing under its own weight. The modern poem, he said, had become “freighted with world”. Joris’s translations allow the English ear to hear how Celan’s diction becomes more staccato, more acutely tensed; his lines (sometimes no longer than a single word) more truncated, as though the poet himself were stammering.

At the very moment he reached the limits of language, attaining a kind of poetry *in extremis*, Celan embarked on a journey.

When Israel had come into being in 1948, Celan wrote to relatives there to tell them he would not be joining them. “Perhaps I am one of the last,” he had said, “who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe.” Indeed, his poems churn with that spirit: they feature Hebrew terms unassimilated into German—like *Ziv* (divine radiance), *bachmissini* (from Chaim Nachman Bialik’s love poem “Bring Me in Under Your Wing”), and *kumi uri* (the prophet Isaiah’s “Rise up, rouse yourself”) – and biblical allusions, like Rachel weeping for her exiled children. “*Verjudung* [becoming Jewish],” Celan wrote, “that seems to me to be a path towards understanding poetry.”

In October 1969, this son of the Diaspora, who once wrote that “the poet’s homeland is his poem”, visited the Jewish state for the first time. In Jerusalem, a city he called “a caesura in my life”, he was hosted by Yehuda Amichai. “I cannot imagine the world without Israel,” he told the Bavarian-born Israeli poet, “and I will not imagine it without Israel.”

On returning to Paris, he wrote to Israeli friends: “I really will come again, indeed not only because I still have so much to see. I need Jerusalem, as I needed it before I found it.”

He would never fulfil that need. Months later, just short of his fiftieth birthday, Celan drowned himself in the waters of the Seine for reasons only he could fathom. “Paul chose the most anonymous and lonely death there is,” Gisèle wrote. “One can only be silent, respect it.” His body was fished out of the river nearly two weeks later at a sluice-gate downstream. “Wait patiently on the shore,” he instructed in one of the aphorisms in *Microliths*. “The drowned one will save you.” ≡