

Celan for Catholics  
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I came late to Paul Celan's poetry. I was in my teens when he died in 1970 (he was 49), and I remember the obituaries in the English papers and the sense that someone important had gone. I tried to read him then, but could make nothing of his condensed intensities. I was infatuated with Eliot and Yeats and Auden at the time, and Celan was too different and too hard. I set him aside, for decades. Then, perhaps five years ago, a friend pointed me to an audio recording, available on YouTube, of Celan reading his early poem, 'Todesfuge' (Deathfuge). It's hypnotic and scarifying, whether or not you can understand German – "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland" is one of its refrains, and it, like most of the poem, needs no translation. Listening to this a dozen times or so prompted me to return to his poetry, hoping, now that I was older than Celan was when he died, that I might be able to see some way into it.

I read it, at first, in the English versions provided by Michael Hamburger, and then, more recently, in those of Pierre Joris. Both seem to me excellent (though differently so), and both are usually published in facing-page German-English editions, which provides English-speakers with an easy window into the German. My German is good enough for ordinary academic prose and the less-colloquial newspapers; but it's not good enough for Celan. Perhaps no one's is. Celan's German is about as distant from the prosaic as it's possible to get, and while reading him in English removes some surface lexical difficulties for me, the translations make the real difficulties evident, which is just what they should do. Those difficulties are both semantic and emotional. The words of Celan's late poems are shattered fragments of a whole they neither presume nor suggest; they resist attempts to squeeze meaning out of them or to assemble them into a unified object; and they provoke in the reader (in this reader, anyway) a combination of admiration, frustration, and despair, together with the occasional epiphany.

That may not read like much of a recommendation, but in fact it is – I've kept returning to Celan these past five years, and, although he's certainly no Catholic poet, I've found my Catholic faith nurtured and deepened and partly reformed by reading him.

Celan was born in 1920 in Czernowitz in Bukovina, which was then just about to become Romanian. It is now called Chernivitsi, and is, for the moment at least, in Ukraine. He grew up Jewish, multi-lingual (German, Romanian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew, French, Russian), and after experiencing, as a young man, the bloodfields of Eastern Europe and the Nazi attempt to eradicate Europe's Jews (both his parents were killed by the SS, and he was put to forced labor), he was finally exiled in 1945 and lived in Paris from 1948 until his death. He committed suicide there by drowning himself in the Seine in April 1970.

Celan wrote some early poems in Romanian, but from 1947 on he wrote poetry only in German. He began to become known as a poet in 1952, with the publication of the volume *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (*Poppy and Memory*). This contained 'Todesfuge', which was widely read, celebrated, and anthologized in the 1950s and 1960s. The early poetry, from the late 1940s through the early 1960s, is incantatory and sometimes surrealistic; its tropes are piled upon one another and its refrains repeated, and the poems from this period seem designed to overwhelm their readers.

Consider, for example, the opening of 'Assisi' (1955), in Hamburger's rendering: "Umbrian night. / Umbrian night with the silver of churchbell and olive leaf. / Umbrian night with the stone that you carried here. / Umbrian night with the stone." The poem ends with an explicit invocation of Francis, whose life has shed "brightness that will not comfort", even though the dead beg exactly for comfort from Francis. There's not much comfort in Celan, and 'Assisi' is a deathpoem even though one with a chantlike and affecting evocation of the symbiosis of the life of a place and the death – and for Celan the unavailability – of its most famous inhabitant. Death and absence frame and explain life and presence, however: Assisi's shrines and olive trees and churches are given their meaning by the absence of the man they celebrate. 'Assisi' doesn't resist its readers: it has to be read several times before it achieves its effect – which is to overwrite readers with its incantation, so that they are, like it or not, placed in the comfortless and moonshadowed Umbrian night – but it doesn't, unlike the later poetry, tantalize readers by showing them something unseeable. In 'Assisi', as in many of his early poems, Celan is a lyrical litanist. Things are different with the later poetry.

Between 1967 and 1976 (almost six years after his death), five brief volumes appeared under Celan's name, beginning with *Atemwende* (*Breathturn*) and ending with *Zeitgehöft* (*Timestead*). There is, in addition, a brief cycle of eleven poems collected by Celan in 1968 for publication in an anthology of work by several different poets called *Aus aufgegebenen Werken* (*From Abandoned Works*). Celan gave this cycle the lovely (and difficult) title *Eingedunkelt*, which Joris renders *Tenebrae'd* (*Endarkened* or *Enshaded* or *Enshadowed* would all be possible, too). All this – the complete late poetry – has been translated by Paul Joris in *Breathturn to Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, which is a beautiful bilingual edition published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2014. It's the book to read if you're new to Celan, though it should be supplemented by Michael Hamburger's *Poems of Paul Celan* (New York: Persea Books, 2002), which contains selections from the earlier poetry as well, none of which is included in Joris' collection.

In April 1968 Celan visited London briefly, staying with his aunt on Mapesbury Road. He wrote a poem there on the 14th of the month, which was, that year, both Easter Sunday and (the second day of) Passover. It opens like this, in Joris' version:

#### MAPESBURY ROAD

Waved toward you,

the quiet from behind  
the step of a black woman.

A black woman walks down Mapesbury Road, and, behind her, the stillness/silence (*Stille*) gestures. The second person (*dir*) of the opening line is, perhaps, the poet, but also the reader: you're incorporated into the scene, waved at by silence as Celan is, the silence indicated by his words. Then, after a linespace on the printed page:

By her side  
the  
magnolia-houred half-watch  
of a red,  
that also searches for meaning elsewhere—  
or maybe nowhere.

Next to her, the black woman walking accompanied by the gesturing silence, there's a magnolia measuring time (perhaps – *Halbuhr*/halfwatch, or halfclock, or maybe even half-hour); that ensemble – the woman walking, the street, the timestretched blooming magnolia, the red – looks for *Sinn*/meaning – or, again, perhaps not ("elsewhere—or maybe nowhere"). The scene is sketched, pointilliste-fashion, with its elements disjointed and half-seen, half-obscured, even, exactly by what is shown. *Sinn* could be rendered 'concept' or 'idea' as well as Joris's 'meaning'. The idea in the word is shrouded, half-visible, unmeasured, like the scene to which it belongs. Maybe meaning is being sought somewhere and maybe it isn't; maybe the right thing to do with these lines is to ask what they mean, and maybe it isn't. The reader is suspended. And then, after a linespace on the printed page:

The full  
timehalo around  
a lodged bullet  
next to it, brainish.

Timehalo (*Zeithof*)? This is an uncommon word in German, probably about as uncommon as 'timehalo' in English (Hamburger renders it 'time-yard', which seems to me less good). *Zeithof* is a word out of Husserlian phenomenology, which is probably (Joris's notes helpfully explain) where Celan got it from. There it identifies the copresence of the past and the future in a moment of memory: suppose you're remembering hearing a piece of music; in each memory-moment there's a 'halo' (a *hof*, a surrounding area, a yard, as in *Bahnhof*, railyard – this is where Hamburger gets 'time-yard') or nimbus (this might be better for *hof*, all things considered) in the musical tone present in each memory-moment provided by the tone that preceded and the tone that (anticipatorily) is to come. There is, then, a temporal halo/nimbus surrounding a bullet in someone's brain. But, "next to it"? Next to the ensemble sketched in the preceding verses; and next to the brain; and all time-nimbused to one another in an approximate simultaneity. Silence gesturing and the black woman walking down the magnolia-blooming London street (the opening verses) are timelinked to a bullet in (someone's) brain. We could note (Joris does) that Celan may

have had in mind the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., which had happened ten days before this poem was written; perhaps also the assassination attempt on Rudi Dutschke in Berlin three days before. Both these events involved bullets to the head. But the poem doesn't say so. What it does say is that violence and silence are time-nimbused, proleptically and retrospectively copresent. And then:

The sharply heavened spacy  
sips sharedair.

Or, as Hamburger has it:

The sharply-heavened courtyardy  
gulps of co-air.

The German is equally gnomic and tense. But the realization that "spacy" (Joris) and "courtyardy" (Hamburger) render *höfigen*, and that *höfigen* is derived from *hof* (halo-nimbus-yard), opens the poem up. To maintain the echo and the derivation, Joris would have had to replace "spacy" with "haloey", and perhaps he should have – readers without German altogether would then have known something important invisible on the published rendering. The reader's gaze is directed by this couplet again toward the timehalo of the previous verse. The poem again brings the London street with its particulars together with the violence of bullets to the brain – these things have/are "sharedair", *Mitluft*, contiguous – and because of that, "sharply-heavened" (*scharfgehimmelten*). Heaven embraces them and brings them spatio-temporally together. Lastly:

You—do not adjourn yourself.

The second person (the poet, the reader) of the poem's first line returns and is ordered, imperative mood, not to adjourn (*Vertag dich nicht, du*) him/herself. The verb could also be rendered 'postpone'. We, those reading, are (perhaps) being told not to extract ourselves from the spatio-temporal copresence the poem has shown us. What it would be to adjourn/postpone ourselves? To separate, abstract, remove, halt ourselves; to prevent ourselves from seeing the sharpheavened copresence, timehaloed together, of the redblooming magnolia, the waving silence, and the bloodred brainbullet – all of them looking for meaning somewhere, or maybe in no place, as also are the readers of this poem.

'Mapesbury Road' is a poem about time and simultaneity. Time-language runs through it (halfclock, timehalo), as does the language of copresence (by her side, haloey, next to it, sharedair). The words of the poem bring past and future into the present and lodge the reader (you) just there, in the middle of that temporal knot. It's not a comfortable place. That the poem was composed at Easter/Passover adds depth to this timehalo. Those are days, like this poem, in which violence, blood, and death are temporally knotted with life – the lodged bullet, brainish, with the blooming magnolia.

'Mapesbury Road' isn't without its difficulties, but it's almost transparent compared to some of Celan's short lyrics. Here's an untitled piece, composed in January 1968 and published as part of the sequence that begins the volume *Schneepart/Snowpart* (1971). It contains twenty-two words in German, and twenty-six in Joris's rendering:

Unreadability of this  
world. Everything doubles.

The strong clocks  
agree with the fissure-hour,  
hoarsely.

You, wedged into your deepest,  
climb out of yourself  
forever.

This world doesn't yield itself to the reader. It can't be construed. It's illegible. The reader's gaze trolling for meaning finds itself resisted, and that's because "everything doubles" (*Alles doppelt*), which could also be rendered "everything repeats", or even, "everything again". Those renderings might be preferable because of the shift to time-language in the second verse: the doubling appears to have principally to do with repetition. This doubling/repeating is, perhaps, an element in, or even the principal constituent of, the world's unreadability. Whatever you (you, the reader, are apostrophized in the last verse) look at won't be singular; it will already have happened, and will happen again. The world's unreadability is mirrored by the poem's: if the world is unreadable (illegible, incapable of construal), then so ought the poem be, as it is. The reader is given the strongest possible signal in the poem's opening line that this poem won't yield itself: it'll resist being read.

As it does. The shift to time-talk in the second verse, in which the "strong clocks" – those unavoidable time-measurers; the strength-figure makes them dominant, controlling of us, the readers of the poem and those who live in this unreadable world – open something up, has an air of unpleasant violence. The clocks can't be resisted; and what they do is agree with, justify, yield the right to – all possible readings of *geben ... recht* – the "fissure-hour", the time in which or at which a crevasse is opened up. Between what and what? An opening into what? We're not told. But the doubling-repetition of the opening verse lingers here, as does the world's unreadability. The timecrack (*Spaltstunde*) is ingredient to unreadability and to repetition, and the strong clocks are what give that illegibility its justification and force. That they do so isn't pleasant: the clocks' voice is hoarse.

You – the reader, the poet, the audience – appear in the last verse. You're wedged, or clamped, or tightly enclosed (*geklemmt*) into "your deepest part". That's a figure of fixity, of frozenness, and not one with a pleasant texture. But the poem ends with movement. You, the wedged one, climb out, out of your fixity and out of time – *für immer*/forever. Is there a connection between the timecrack, the fissure, of the second

verse, and the outclimb of the last one? Perhaps. Perhaps the strong clocks open time so that it can be escaped from. Even if so, what the climber climbs into is still an unreadable world.

The poem is puzzling, and it thematizes and displays its own puzzlingness, as much of Celan's late poetry does. If you read it together with the other eleven short pieces that make up the first section of *Schneepart*, and if you read all twelve pieces a number of times, Celan's preferred images and his contorted and condensed syntax begin to feel familiar. It's not that they become transparent, or that you can easily say what the poems mean. They are all, after all, illegible. But their shattered difficulty begins to reshape the way you read not only them, but also the world after having read them. Once unreadability is declared and attended to, it can become an interpretive lens, a lens through which and by means of which absence and lack declare themselves. That, for this reader, is one of the principal results of reading Celan.

I'm a Catholic reader. Not only that, but a Catholic theologian, someone whose profession and vocation it is to read, teach, and write Catholic theology. Celan was none of these things. He was a poet who was also a Jew ('Jewish poet' isn't quite right), whose vision of the world's resistance to meaning and its bloodbathed disorder was unusually intense, and who was himself damaged by the disorders about which he wrote.

What am I doing, then, when I read him? I don't baptize him, or read him as if he were a Catholic *manqué*. Those are indefensible, indeed revolting, ways of reading Celan. But as a Catholic reader, I feel the need of a Catholic poetics, a Catholic understanding of what it is to read poetry – and not just poetry, but also other kinds of literature – made by those external to Catholicism and therefore without Catholic doctrinal and liturgical formation. I don't read Celan, or at least not the late poetry, for beauty, the well-wrought urn, the verbal icon that participates in the world's ordered beauty. None of that is there. There's intensity, flashes of light and loveliness; but the deep tones sounded, humming through it all, are those of incomprehensibility and damage. The word stutters, as Celan puts it in another of his poems, and that stuttering places the fabric of speech under so much strain that almost nothing can be said, and what is said can't be understood.

What I see when I read Celan is a series of verbal icons of the devastation in which we live. The world, for Catholics, has been devastated by the fall. It's sinsoaked, riven, bloody, full of fissures opening into incomprehensible violence and apparently random death. That's not all it is, but it is at least that. Representation of this is a difficult trick because the nature of devastation is to resist representation. What can be done, and what Celan does virtuosically, is to find words to participate in lack; that's what his poetry is. Its difficulty is a proper part of its response to what can't be seen.

We Catholics, too often, move quickly in our literature and our art toward representations of beauty and refuse to look seriously at devastation. For some, it seems, for art properly to be Catholic it must be beautiful and attend to beauty. That can't be right, and it's interesting and useful to note that it's mostly non-Catholics, and especially Jews, who know that it's not right and show something else, that from which we

Catholics would, apparently, rather avert our gaze. When Catholic poets and painters do attempt something like what Celan does – Goya's black paintings, for example – we're likely to exclude such work from the Catholic canon. We shouldn't. A fully Catholic poetics would seek models for and understanding of the artist's response to the devastation. Celan is essential for this. When I read him I am deepened in my appreciation of, and given real instruction in, a doctrinal position I already hold, which is that the world is damaged, and myself along with it. When I read him I am shown something of the extent and depth of that damage, and can more easily find words to indicate what cannot be shown. Those are great gifts.