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«Sound Scraps, Vision Scraps»: Paul Celan's Poetic Practice

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Thirty-four years after his death, Paul Celan's status as the greatest German-language poet of the second half of the twentieth century seems assured. His oeuvre—roughly 900 pages of poetry distributed over eleven volumes, 250 pages of prose, more than 1,000 published correspondence, and nearly 700 pages of poetry translated from eight languages—has by now received massive critical attention. . . . And yet the work continues to be to a great extent terra incognita . . .

--Pierre Joris (2005)¹

Paul Celan's reception, at least in the English-speaking world, has always been connected to his status as great Holocaust Poet, the poet who showed that, Adorno's caveat notwithstanding, it was possible to write poetry, even great poetry, in the German language, after Auschwitz. As «Poet, Survivor, Jew» (the subtitle of John Felstiner's groundbreaking study of 1995),² Celan has become an iconic figure: continental philosophers from Hans-Georg Gadamer to Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe have read Celan's poetic oeuvre as a post-World War II Book of Wisdom. The result, ironically, has been to place Celan in a kind of solitary confinement, a private cell where his every «circumcised word» (Jacques Derrida's term)³ can be examined for its

allegorical weight and theological import, even as, so Pierre Joris suggests in the excellent Introduction to his new *Selections*, its actual poetic forms and choices are largely ignored. "Perhaps the greatest risk for the reading of Celan in our time," writes the poet Charles Bernstein, "is that we have venerated him, in the process of removing him not only from his own time and place, but also from our own poetic horizon. . . . [A] crippling exceptionalism has made his work a symbol of his fate rather than an active matrix for an ongoing poetic practice."⁴

It is that ongoing poetic practice I want to consider here. What follows is thus an experiment in reading Celan, not as exemplary Holocaust poet or as philosophical thinker, but quite simply as a mid-twentieth century poet. What, to begin with is Celan's radius of discourse? Is he a Modernist? A postmodernist? Does he believe that language can *signify* a reality outside itself? What is Celan's relationship to the various poetic currents dominant when he came of age? Is his a self-contained semiosis in the vein of John Ashbery? Or is Celan perhaps a proto-language poet? However unique a poet we take him to be, Celan does, after all, write out of a tradition, a culture, a history.

Suppose we take a poem often cited as conveying Celan's basic sense that the *ground* of language has become an *abyss*, that language is forced to speak the unspeakable. I am thinking of the title poem of *Sprachgitter* (1959), a title whose translation can only be reductive: *sprach* (past tense of *sprechen*) means "spoke," *Sprache* refers to both individual speech and language: in other words, to both *langue* and *parole*. As for *Gitter*, the noun designates "grate," "gate," "fence" and "mesh" as well as "grille." "For fishermen," Anne Carson points out in her study of Celan and Simonides,⁵ "it means a net or trap. For mineralogists, the lattice formation of a crystal." Whether fence or net, *gitter* is always associated with some sense of blockage or obstruction. Here is the poem:

Sprachgitter

Augenrund zwischen den Stäben.

*Flimmertier Lid
rudert nach oben,
gibt einen Blick frei.*

*Iris, Schwimmerin, traumlos und trüb:
der Himmel, herzgrau, muß nah sein.*

*Schräg, in der eisernen Tülle,
Der blakende Span.
Am Lichtsinn
errätst du die Seele.*

*(Wär ich wie du. Wärest du wie ich.
Standen wir nicht
unter einem Passat?
Wir sind Fremde.)*

*Die Fliesen. Darauf,
dicht beieinander, die beiden
herzgrauen Lachen:
zwei
Mundvoll Schweigen.*

Speech Grille

Eyeround between the bars.

Flitterbug lid
rows upward
sets a glance free.

Iris, swimmer, dreamless and dim;
the sky, heartgray, must be near.

Slanting, in the iron spout
the smouldering splinter.
By its lightsense
you guess the soul.

(Were I like you. Were you like me.
Did we not stand
under *one* Passat?
We are strangers.)

The flagstones. On them,
right next to each other, the two
heartgray puddles:
two
mouthfuls of silence. [my translation] ⁶

Poststructuralist theorists have consistently taken "Speech Grille" as representative of Celan's post-Holocaust estrangement from language, an estrangement that culminates in what this particular poem refers to in the inscrutable *zwei/ Mundvoll Schweigen*. In Jacques Derrida's famous essay "Shibboleth for Paul Celan," "Speech Grille" is cited in a discussion of the poet's "witness[ing] to the universal by virtue of absolute singularity," the singularity of the *Shibboleth*, that "word used as a test for detecting foreigners, or persons from another district, by their pronunciation," more loosely, "a catchword or formula adopted by a party or sect, by which their adherents or followers may be discerned, or those not their followers may be excluded."⁷ The original *Shibboleth*, as the OED notes and as Derrida reminds us, was the Hebrew word used by Jephthah in *Judges*, xii 4-6, as a test-word by which to distinguish the fleeing Ephraimites (who could not

pronounce the *sh*) from his own men, the Gileadites.⁸ *Shibboleth*, Derrida argues, thus “marks the multiplicity within language, insignificant difference as the condition of meaning” (31). And that mark of difference or trace, which becomes comprehensible only in relation to a particular site or place,” is, for Derrida, the key to Celan’s poetic language. His is a “ciphered singularity: irreducible to any concept, to any knowledge,” a “singularity which gathers a multiplicity *in eins*, and through whose grid a poem remains readable. . . . The poem speaks, even should none of its references be intelligible, none other than the Other, the one to whom it addresses itself. . . . Even if it does not reach and leave its mark on, at least it calls to, the Other. Address takes place” (35-36).

The Shibboleth must also be understood as a “circumcised word.” The poet witnesses the universal—the wounding emblemized by circumcision, the Holocaust, death in general) “by virtue of absolute singularity, by virtue of and in the name of the other, the stranger, you toward whom I must take a step which, without bringing me nearer to you, without exchanging myself with you, without being assured passages, lets the word pass and assigns us, if not to the one, at least to the same. We were already assigned to it, dwelling beneath the same contrary wind” (35). The reference is to the fourth stanza of “Sprachgitter,” with its reference to the strong Atlantic wind called Passat:

(Were I like you. Were you like me.

Did we not stand

under *one* Passat?

We are strangers.)

(Derrida 55)

Strangers because we cannot speak the Shibboleth, the lost word (Holocaust, Jew, the exterminated family, death). The stanza above is thus one more instance of the inability of language to render the unspeakable, except as trace structure. *Circumcision*, Derrida posits, “designate[s] an operation, the surgical act of cutting, but also and equally the state, the

quality, the condition of being circumcised" (63). The poetic word is opened only to be closed again; it names only to withdraw the name as soon as it is given. "The circumcised word is *first of all* written, at once both incised and excised in a body, which may be the body of a language and which in any case always binds the body to language" (67). More specifically it is also the German language that must be "circumcised," given that it had been debased by its status as the language of the Nazis (67). In Celan's own frequently cited words:

No matter how alive its traditions, with most sinister events in its Memory, most questionable developments around it, [German poetry] can no longer speak the language which many willing ears seem to expect. Its language has become more sober, more factual. It distrusts 'beauty'. It tries to be truthful. If I may search for a visual analogy while keeping in mind the polychrome of apparent actuality: it is a 'greyer' language, a language which wants to locate even its 'musicality' in such a way that it has nothing in common with the 'euphony' which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors.⁹

In its "circumcised" version of the German language, Derrida suggests, Celan's poetry becomes an offering of something that the reader can never fully understand, a cipher of a language that can never quite speak the unspeakable and is hence a speaking silence. As Dennis J. Schmidt puts it, Celan's "'Two mouthfuls of silence'" (*zwei / Mundvoll Schweigen*) . . . mark the place of the poem for Celan . . . such silence is not to be confused with mere quiet but needs to be heard as the unvocalized voice of the poem. . . . a voice estranged from language, rendering the effort to listen to language in the poem rare, demanding, and painful at once."¹⁰ And the classicist poet- philosopher Anne Carson reads *Sprachgitter* (in her translation, "Language Mesh") as "a word Celan uses to describe the operations of his own poetic language, in a poem about strangeness and strangers." And she asks:

Does Celan use *Gitter* to imply passage, blockage or salvaging of speech? Mesh may do all these. Celan may mean all of these. . . The German language offers Celan a qualified hospitality, a murderously impure meal. . . .Celan can make himself at home in his mother tongue only by a process of severe and parsimonious redaction. . . . Mesh limits what he can say but may also cleanse it. As crystal it cleanses to the essence. As net it salvages what is cleansed. (Carson 30-31)

The “action of estrangement [that] takes place in this poem,” Carson concludes, “represents, in some part, the condition of intimate alienation that obtained between Celan and his own language” (33).

The alienation of the poet from his own language, the status of a given word in that language as Shibboleth, designed to be misunderstood even by the Other addressed, the “mouthfuls of silence” the poet proffers the reader—these analyses of Celan’s poetic are based, we should note, on a very particular set of assumptions about the way Celan’s poetry—or, for that matter, any poetry-- works. For Derrida in particular, a given poem is no more than an entrance into a larger poetic universe where particular thematic motifs can be traced. Indeed, the book jacket copy for *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, the recently published book from Fordham University Press (2005) that brings together the 1984 “Shibboleth” with a number of later Derrida essays and interviews concerning Celan, contains the following description:

Central themes include the date or signature and its singularity; the notion of the trace; temporal structures of futurity and the “to come”; the multiplicity of language and questions of translation; such speech acts as witness, promise, and testimony, but also lying and perjury; the possibility of the impossible; and, above all, the question of the poem as addressed and destined beyond knowledge, seeking to speak to and for the irreducible other. . . . Derrida’s approach to a poem is a revelation on many levels, from the most concrete ways of reading—for example, his analysis of a sequence of personal pronouns—to the most sweeping imperatives of human existence.

It is true that Derrida's "Shibboleth" contains some discussion of personal pronouns, of dates and place names, and of particular events commemorated in the poems, even as no single poem is discussed as a whole. From start to finish, Derrida mines the poems, short as most of them are, for particular lines or even single words that point to his larger interpretation of Celan's oeuvre. The "circumcised word," it seems, is one that is regularly taken out of context and linked to other related words so as to produce a coherent account of Celan's poetics. Moreover, in this discussion of lyric poetry—and here Derrida is representative of philosophical critics in general—nothing is said about sound structure, rhythm, lineation, syntax, or the actual organization of the poem in question. Such reading, we might say, is more properly a reading *for*. Having found the phrase, *Nach /dem Unwiederholbaren* ("After / the unrepeatable") in *A La Pointe Acérée* (*Gedichte* 146), the strategy is to find echoes and analogues of *Das Unwiederholbare* and its relationship to the *Herzgewordenes* ("what has become heart"), never mind the surrounding details.

As such, the name Celan has become a cipher for profundity, for the true voice of the Holocaust in all its horror and pain—a voice that of necessity presents what Werner Hamacher has called "a language which appears at odds with itself" (Hamacher xi). Celan, writes Anne Carson "is a poet who uses language *as if he were always translating*" (28). Pierre Joris similarly remarks that "Celan's language, though German on the surface, is a foreign language, even for native speakers. . . . The Celanian dynamic . . . involves a complex double movement . . . of love for his mother tongue and of . . . strife against her murderers who are the originators and carriers of that same tongue."¹¹ This emphasis on double movement is even more prominent in Adorno: "Celan's poems," he notes, "want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings,

indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars."¹²

A language beyond all organic language, a language that looks like translation rather than "original," a language at odds with itself, Shibboleth, circumcised word, and so on. How do we reconcile such views with Celan's own insistence that "This language, notwithstanding its inalienable complexity of expression, is concerned with *precision*. It does not transfigure or render 'poetical'; it names, it posits, it tries to measure the area of the given and the possible" (*Collected Prose* 16)? In what follows, I want to explore that "precision"—what Ezra Pound called the "luminous detail"—by reading Celan, not as the "special case" he is usually taken to be, but as a sophisticated postwar European poet, whose native language and culture were German—more specifically the German of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into which he was born—but whose mature years were lived in France, with his wife Gisèle de Lestrange, a woman from an aristocratic, Catholic background, and his son Eric. His real last name *Antschel* had become, by a kind of anagram, the French-sounding Celan.

2. On the Fence

In a draft for "The Meridian" (the speech Celan gave on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960), the poet notes, "The pictorial" (*Bildhaftes*), that is by no means something visual; it is, like everything connected to speech, a mental phenomenon . . . a manifestation of speech as something derived from writing, therefore from something that is silent." And he adds the parenthetical note (*Sprachgitter, das ist auch das Sprechgitter, r macht das sichtbar* ["Speech-grille, that is also speak-grille, makes that evident]" *Gedichte* 643). The German word *Sprechgitter* is not a neologism. On the contrary, it refers to an object to be found at hardware or electric stores: namely, the transom above or below the doorbell, used in

apartment or office buildings to announce one's arrival and desire to be buzzed in [figure 1]. As such, a *Sprechgitter* serves as the conduit from a speaker's voice to that of an unseen (and perhaps unknown) addressee---a situation that, as we shall see, is indeed germane to Celan's poem.

But *Sprechgitter* is also an architectural term, relating to the medieval church. In the notes to the Suhrkamp *Gesamtausgabe* (*Gedichte* 652-53) Barbara Wiedemann informs us that *Sprachgitter* was written in response to a picture postcard Celan received from the author and publisher Günther Neske, with whom he planned to publish his next collection.¹³ The card, dated *Pfingsten* (Whitsuntide) 1957, bears the image of the fourteenth-century *Sprechgitter* or Confessional Screen [figure 2] of the former convent church (1300) called *Klarissenkloster* at Pfullingen in Württemberg, [figure 3]. The *Sprechgitter* pictured on the card was, according to the official guide to the Visit of German Monuments, "the only contact the convent's nuns had with the outside world."¹⁴

The *Klarissenkloster* itself was named for Santa Clara of Assisi (1194-1253). According to legend, the aristocratic eighteen-year old Clara, having fallen under the spell of St. Francis's preaching [see figure 4], secretly left her father's house in the dark of night, and "proceeded to the humble chapel of the Porziuncula, where St. Francis and his disciples met her with lights in their hands. Clara then laid aside her rich dress, and St Francis, having cut off her hair, clothed her in a rough tunic and a thick veil, and in this way the young heroine vowed herself to the service of Jesus Christ."¹⁵ From then on, no one in the outside world saw Clara again. As foundress of the Order of Poor Ladies, also known as Poor Claras, she lived in the strictest poverty. In her later years as Abbess, Clara helped the blind and ill St. Francis by erecting a little wattle hut for him in an olive grove close to the monastery; it was here that he composed his famous "Canticle of the Sun." Another time, Clara defended her convent from the troops of Frederick II, who were

trying to enter by a ladder placed against an open window of the abbey. She raised the ciborium bearing the Host so high that the soldiers fell backward as if dazzled, and the others who were ready to follow them took flight. Both these stories—the transfiguration of the blind St. Francis and the dazzling of the invading army of Frederick II-- fostered the belief that the Holy Water of the Church of Santa Clara in Assisi could cure those with eye-diseases, and it was hence referred to, in a nice pun, as *aqua clara*. The abbess was canonized in 1255. In 1958, a year before the publication of Celan's *Sprachgitter*, Pope Pius XII also declared Santa Clara to be the patroness of *television* because of her legendary ability to see into the distance.¹⁶

Celan's poem, prompted by Neske's picture postcard, contains a network of references to the eye and its inability to see. The opening line *Augenrund zwischen den Stäben* ("Eyeround between the bars"), presents the image of the poet's eye (or is it the priest's behind the confessional screen?) trying to penetrate the bars so as to see what is on the other side. The coinage *Augenrund* can also refer to the round made by the poet's eyes making a circle as they take in the scene and try to penetrate what is *behind* or inside the *Stäben*. The theme is carried on in the next two stanzas: the "shimmering" eyelid "rows" upward, stealing a glance at the ceiling. And beneath that lid, "swims" the iris, dreamless and dim or drab. A "swimming" iris means a watery or blurred eye; indeed, it can be the sign of the detachment of the retina.

In Greek mythology, Iris is the Goddess of the Rainbow, the swift-footed messenger of the Gods, who often assumed the shape of a mortal, known only to those who received her message. When a quarrel arose among the gods, Zeus sent Iris to the river Styx in the Underworld to bring back the golden jug of sacred water, which signified the oath of the gods. But in "Speech-Grille," the blurry iris beneath the flickering lid suggests that

the message of the Gods, like the healing *aqua clara* of the Abbey, cannot penetrate the speech screen. There is no response from its other side. Hence the poet posits that a “heartgray” sky, its gloom reflected in the dark, dim iris, must be near—a sky in which the rainbow of the Covenant is nowhere to be glimpsed.

The fourth stanza introduces a new image, but one which metonymically relates to the eye. *Schräg in der eisernen Tülle, / der blakende Span: Tülle*, meaning spout, also brings to mind the silken fabric called Tüll (*tulle* in French); *Span* is a shaving or splinter. What is this smoldering splinter, slanting in its silken or silvery container? If we assume that the speaker facing the grille, a speaker whose eyelid “rows” upward to take a glance at what is above, has entered a church, the iron spout, seen at an angle, is probably a censer, hanging from the ceiling (figure 5). The roundness of the censer matches the “eyeround” of line 1, even as the smoking splinter within it is analogous to a mote in the poet’s eye—the mote that evidently makes the iris swim, the dream fade, and the lid shimmer or flicker. The conclusion drawn in lines 9-10 thus seems nothing if not logical: it is the “lightsense” experienced by the churchgoer that animates the soul, the “lightsense” Clara could offer to the blind St. Francis and the invaders at the abbey’s gate. But here there is no light: the soul remains in darkness.

What the poet is suggesting is that for him, there is no grace of God, not only not in this Christian church, but perhaps nowhere. His companion, however, mentioned for the first time in line 11 (and most probably a veiled allusion to Celan’s French Catholic wife Gisèle de Lestranger) may be reacting differently. Hence the question:

Were I like you. Were you like me.

Did we not stand

Under *one* Passat?

These lines (placed in parentheses, of which more below) express the poet's painful desire to be *at one* with his wife, to *share* with her as his other. But the recognition (line 14) is that this is not the case: "We are strangers." Hence, on leaving the church, the flagstones are always and only flagstones, and these, in turn, are covered by two "heartgray" *Lachen* (note the repetition of the adjective used in line 6). *Lachen*, in this context, has the primary meaning of puddles or pools: two gray pools of water blot the flagstones. But *Lachen* also means "notches"—the stones are notched with the sign of the two unknown strangers--and in the singular, the noun "Lachen" is the common word "laughter"—in this case, a mirthless, hollow chuckle of sorts. In all three cases, the flagstones reflect the "heartgray" condition of the lovers: the desire for communion—with hidden priest? God? and especially the "you" who is his beloved—has failed. All that remains are their two mouthfuls of silence. The poem's conclusion links sight and speech: both are, at least for the moment, suspended. As Celan wrote his friend Joachim Seng, "I tell myself that in *Sprachgitter* the existential, the difficulty of all speaking (to one another) and at the same time the structure of that speaking is what counts" (*Gedichte* 643).

To say, as does Hamacher, that a poem like "Speech-Grille" embodies a "language at odds with itself," or that, in Anne Carson's words, *Sprachgitter* represents "the condition of intimate alienation that obtained between Celan and his own language," may well be true as a generality, but it doesn't get us very far. For here—and this is usually the case in Celan's work--the issues are quite specific. To be literal: the poet and his wife have evidently wandered into an unnamed abbey church; the poet eyes the confessional screen or barred side chapel, ruminating on whether he can, in Wordsworth's words, "see into the life of things," if he can see make contact with God or at least with his companion. But there is a mote in his eye, figured by the splinter in the swinging censer, as by the tick in his eyelid and

the “swimming” of his iris; this poet is neither a reliable messenger nor does a message from outside come through to him. It is not so much speech but vision that fails and the heart that shuts. Does his companion feel the same way? Evidently not, so that separation occurs: the watery eyes of the suppliants are replaced by two gray puddles, or again, the mote in the poet’s eye becomes the “heartgray” notch on the stone. Blockage prevents both vision and speech.

Sprachgitter can thus be read, first and foremost, as a poem about failed love, failed communion, both between lovers and between the poet and his God. As in the case of Santa Clara, the outside world—what Yeats called the “emperor’s drunken soldiery”—recedes. And that failure of communication, critics like Joris and Carson have noted, spells out a necessary alienation not only from the poet’s *intimates* and friends but from the German language itself. In “Memory of Words” (1990), the poet Edmund Jabès maintains that “the German language, though it is the one in which [Celan] immersed himself, is also the one which for a time those who claimed to be its protectors had forbidden him. If it is indeed the language of his pride, it is also that of his humiliation. . . . There is something paradoxical. . . to totally invest yourself in the language of a country that rejects you.”¹⁷ But, strictly speaking—and here I think we must be strict—Germany had never been Celan’s country, and his language, as deformed and unsituated as it seems to be, should perhaps also be understood as the language of Karl Kraus and Robert Musil, rather than primarily that of the poet’s “humiliation.” True, “Speech-grille” contains a number of elaborate neologisms, beginning with the title—*Sprachgitter*, *Augenrund*, *Flimmertier*—and unusual compounds such as *herzgrau* and *Lichtsinn* as well as exotic references like “Passat” (the standard, but foreign-sounding German term for trade wind). But on the whole the syntactic locutions, if not the diction, seem familiar enough, especially to an

Austrian ear like mine. And here we must remember that Celan's German was never that of Berlin or Frankfurt but the German of Vienna, which was the center and magnet of the Austro-Hungarian empire, into which Celan was belatedly born in 1920 two years after its dissolution. For his parents, the "official" German of Vienna was the necessary language of the educated class: Paul's mother Fritzi always spoke German to her son and taught him the German classics. Such colloquial locutions as *gibt einen Blick frei, der Himmel muß nah sein, errätst du die Seele*, or *Wär ich wie du. Wärest du wich ich*, testify to the naturalness, if only an intermittent one, of Celan's speech-base. He was, in other words, more at home in German—his particular variant of German—than he or his readers were given to admit. Then, too, we must remember that Celan lived in Vienna from 1947 to '48 before moving to Paris-- and that he had an intense affair—and drawn-out correspondence--with the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann.

Indeed, the difficulty of Celan's lyric has less to do with word choice or even word order than with the absence of any and all connective tissue, whether causal, temporal, or even paratactic, in his poetic discourse. What is missing, for starters, are the pronouns. *Augenrund zwischen den Stäben*: we surmise that the eye is the poet's own but we cannot be sure, and lines 2-4 provide no clues. In line 5, "Iris" is represented in the third person, as "The Swimmer (female noun), and hence evokes the goddess as well as the poet's eye. The abrupt introduction of "du" in line 11 thus comes as something of a shock: here, suddenly and parenthetically, is an address to another person. But after the announcement that "We are strangers" in line 14, the poem lapses back into its blank, subjectless third-person mode, culminating in those mouthfuls (whose?) of silence.

In the same vein, a given line rarely prepares us for the next. It is not a foregone conclusion, for example, that because the iris is a swimmer, "dreamless and dim," that the sky must be equally drab and grey. Again,

the perspective of the smoking splinter in lines 7-8 does not explain why or how the “Lightsense” allows us to guess the soul’s status. And there are no signals to indicate the shift from indoors to outdoors between lines 14 and 15. This is, in other words, an extremely oblique lyric, stripped of temporal and spatial markers that might explain what is going on. Then, too, pun and allusion produce great density: “Iris” is both the colored part of the eye and the Greek Goddess, “tulle” suggests cloth as well as spout, “lightsense” can be the yearning for light (think of St. Francis) but also the unbearable lightness of being, which may define the soul. And the Passat wind looks and sounds like *Passah*, German for Pesach or Passover;¹⁸ it thus interjects a Jewish note into the otherwise Christian imagery.

Other poets-- Mallarmé in French, Hölderlin in German, Emily Dickinson in English-- have written lyric as obscure and condensed as Celan’s. Dickinson, for that matter, introduces at least as many neologisms as does Celan, and her syntax is equally complex and disjunctive. Like Dickinson, Celan uses extensive sound patterning to relate what is otherwise disparate. Consider the internal rhyme of *Flimmertier —Schwimmerin--Himmel*, the alternate alliteration of *Dicht beieinander die beiden*, the alliteration of *traumlos und trüb*, of *Himmel, herzgrau*, and of *darauf, / dicht*. The dominant rhythm of line 1:

/ x /\ / x x / x
 Augenrund zwischen den Stäben

where a dactyl, whose third syllable has secondary stress, is followed by trochee and ambiphrrach, is repeated in truncated form in line 2:

/ x /\ /

Flimmertier Lid

And with variations throughout. The penultimate line with its \break after the monosyllabic *Zwei*, produce the final tongue twister:

/ /\ /
Mundvoll Schweigen

Here the heavy consonants sound as if the words are hard to spit out, as indeed they are. Sounds of silence would be one thing, but mouthfuls of being silent, of refusing or being unable to speak, have a sinister edge, drowning the poignancy of those eight monosyllables of the utmost simplicity--

/ x x / || / x x /
Wär ich wie du. wärest du wie ich.

--a conditional that cannot be satisfied despite the rhythmic identity between the two hemistychs.

Finally, a word about punctuation. Celan's opening line, a suspended noun phrase, would seem to need no punctuation, yet Celan concludes it with a period, thus emphasizing its separation from what follows. Similarly «Wär ich wie du» ends, not on a note of question, as the intonation may suggest, but again with two periods, the punctuation itself implying that there is no match between the first conditional and the second. Indeed, the short non-sentences closed by periods retain their separate identity. More important, the whole fifth stanza is placed in parentheses, as if to suggest that the actual conversation between «I» and «you» occurs only in memory or perhaps in supposition; it stands outside the main frame, itself a kind of *Augenrund* («eyeround») between the bars that separate the poet from his interlocutor. Confession, that is to say, cannot take place.

Such overpunctuation becomes a Celan signature, as in *Engführung* («Stretto»), where we find passages like the following:

Asche.

Asche, Asche.
Nacht.
Nacht-und-Nacht.—Zum
Aug geh, zum feuchten.

Zum

Aug geh,

Zum feuchten—

(*Gedichte* 114-15)

Ashes.
Ashes, ashes.
Night.
Night-and-night.—To
the eye, go, to the moist.

To

the eye, go,

to the moist—¹⁹

Here the poetic tension arises from the simple repetition that should be incantatory but is just the opposite because of the passage's line-breaks and punctuation, creating a feverish rhythm. I am reminded of such Wallace Stevens titles as «How to Live. What to Do--» a title whose poignancy surely has a lot to do with the period rather than expected comma after the word «Live.» The comma would supply continuity, the drive toward a way of being. But the period suggests that the poet feels there is no way to live. The sentence merely stops. Similar effects are found within Steven's later poems: for example, in «No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,» the couplets are overpunctuated, as in:

It is deep January. The sky is hard.

The stalks are firmly rooted in ice.

And in «Debris of Life and Mind» the final couplet reads:

The most gay and yet not so gay as it was.

Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while.²⁰

Late Modernist poetry—Celan's, Stevens's, or, for example, Beckett's poetic prose, is characterized by such condensation and reduction of its symbolist base, its dissolution of the speaking subject into the fragmented world it inhabits. But it remains, I would argue, a «high» mode of lyric discourse, avoiding the popular culture references, verbal-visual disjunctions, shifts from comic to serious, and found text of the poetry to come in the later twentieth century.

Then, too, this is a poetry that still respects—as later poetry will not—the emblematic status of the natural and human world. Celan's imagery—eye, mouth, grass, stone, flower, tree—is the imagery of Dickinson and Stevens as well; but for Celan, the natural world always bears the imprint of technological invention as well. Consider the late minimalist poem in *Atemwende* («Breathturn,» 1965) that gave Celan's 1967 volume its title:

FADENSONNEN

Über der grauschwarzen Ödnis,
Ein baum-
Hoher Gedanke
Greift sich den Lichtton: es sind
Noch Lieder zu singen jenseits
Der Menschen. (*Gedichte* 179)

THREADSUNS

above the greyblack wastes.
A tree-
high thought
grasps the light-tone: there are
still songs to sing beyond
mankind.²¹

Apollinaire's great 1913 poem «Zone,» concludes with the startling image of the setting sun as a cut throat: *soleil cou coupé*. But for Apollinaire, the sun still existed, a perfect sphere, an orb of light, or ball of fire that might be perceived as cut off. For Celan, by contrast, there is no more single sun--no center, no point of origin-- only a multiplicity of threadsuns—thin slivers of sun or light rays, fragile and breakable. The poet's life hangs, so to speak, by a sun-thread above the gray-black wasteland in which he dwells. But in line 3 a tree-high thought counters his despair, for it «grasps the light-tone.» The English translation, which suggests that the German noun means no more than a «light tone» or «tone of light» is deceptive, for *Lichtton* is a technical term from the annals of early sound film. The *Welte* Light-Tone or Light-Organ, invented in Germany in 1936 [figure 6] was an electronic instrument using electro-optically controlled tone generators. As the Welte web site informs us, «A glass disk was printed with 18 different waveforms giving three different timbres for all the octave registers of each single note. The glass tone wheel rotated over a series of photoelectric cells, filtering a light beam that controlled the sound timbre and pitch.»²²

If we thus think of «light-tone» as a controlled sound pitch mechanically produced on celluloid film, the poem's thrust becomes obvious. Like Stevens's «palm at the end of the mind,» «stand[ing] on the edge of space,» in «Of Mere Being,»²³ Celan's «tree-high thought» grasps for the sound pitch that allows his own particular film strip to come to life. «There are,» it seems, «still songs to sing beyond / mankind.» A *Sprachgitter*, let us recall, is not an impenetrable language wall; its openings allow the threadsuns of song to come through, even as «The wind moves slowly in the branches,» of Stevens's palm. Indeed, to read Celan against the late Stevens is to become aware that, by midcentury, Pound's Imagist credo that «The natural object is always the adequate symbol,» had given way to a

curious sleight-of-hand whereby an image like *Lichtton* («light-tone») can morph into an obscure—but highly specific—reference, in this case to the new technology of the period.

Such odd shifts are by no means unique to Celan: his contemporary Samuel Beckett, for example, was fond of introducing arcane words like *ravanastron* (an Indian stringed instrument played with a bow) into the texture of otherwise flat, sober descriptions by his protagonists, in this case, Watt. But just as Beckett's *ravanastron* hangs on an ordinary wall in a «large bare white room,»²⁴ so Celan's «threadsunned» *Lichtton* is found among the «heartgray» puddles on the paving stones. It is this tension between the Imagist-Symbolist model of the early century and the «illegible» texts to come that makes Celan's lyric poetry so challenging—a pivot in the tradition that takes us from Hölderlin, Dickinson, and Mallarmé to the elliptical fragments of Wallace Stevens, George Oppen and Susan Howe. I conclude with the following seven-line poem from *Lichtzwang* (*Lightduress*):

WAS ES AN STERNEN BEDARF
schüttet sich aus,

deiner Hände laubgrüner Schatten
sammelt es ein,

freudig zerbeiße ich
das münzenkernige
Schicksal.

WHAT'S REQUIRED OF STARS,
pours itself out.

your hands' leafgreen shadow

gathers it in.

joyfully I bite in two

coin-powered

fate.

(*Gedichte* 287, my translation)

Here syntax seems uncomplicated, the only obscure word being *münzenkernige*. This compound combines *Münzen* («coins») with the adjective *kernig* for «robust,» «strong,» «powerful,» the neologism formed on the analogy of the epithet «high-powered.» But, as in the case of such related texts as Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine* (which, incidentally, has often been said to refer to a crematorium), we know what the words «say» well enough, but not what they mean. «What's required of stars» is surely their light—a light that is «gathered» or collected into the foliage-green or «leafgreen shadow» of «your hands.» But does such gathering dissipate the shadow or vice-versa? And does biting one's coin-powered destiny in half mark resignation to one's fate or the triumph above it? «You know,» we read in Stevens's «Of Mere Being,» «that it is not the reason / That makes up happy or unhappy.» But the speech-grille remains open, poised to receive those words that pour themselves into the waiting shadows.

Notes

¹Pierre Joris, «Introduction,» Paul Celan, *Selections*, ed. Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 3.

²John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

³Jacques Derrida, «Shibboleth for Paul Celan,» trans. Joshua Wilner, in Aris Fioretos (ed.), *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1994), pp. 3-72.

⁴ Charles Bernstein, «Celan's Folds and Veils,» *Textual Practice* 18, 2 (Summer 2004): 200-01.

⁵Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Kios with Paul Celan)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 30.

⁶ Paul Celan, *Die Gedichte, Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. with commentary by Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 99-100. All further references to the German text are to this edition. Compare to the following three published translations:

(1) Joachim Neugroschel, in Joris, Paul Celan, *Selections* (California, 2005), pp. 63-64:

Speech-Grille

Eye-orb between the bars.

Ciliary lid
rows upwards,
releases a gaze.

Iris, swimmer, dreamless and dim:
the sky, heart-gray, must be near.

Skew, in the iron socket,
the smoldering splinter.
By the sense of light
you guess the soul.

(Were I like you. Were you like me.
did we not stand
under *one* tradewind
We are strangers.)

The tiles. Upon them,
close together, the two
heart-gray pools:
two
mouthfuls of silence.

(2) John Felstiner, translator, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 107:

Speech-Grille

Round eyed between the bars.

Flittering lid
paddles upward,
breaks a glance free.

Iris, the swimmer, dreamless and drab:
heaven, heartgray, must be near.

Aslant, in the iron socket
a smoldering chip.
By sense of light
you hit on the soul.

(Were I like you. Were you like me.
Did we not stand
Under *one* trade wind?
We are strangers.)

The flagstones. On them,
close by each other, both
heartgray puddles:
two mouthfuls of silence.

(3) Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, pp. 31-32:

Language Mesh

Eyeround between the bars,
glimmeranimal lid
rows upward,
sets a look free.

Iris, swimmer, dreamless and dismal:
the sky heartgrey, must be near.

Slanted, in the iron socket
the smoking splinter,
By its lightsense
you guess the soul.

(Were I like you. Were you like me.
Stand we not
under *one* tradewind?
We are strangers.)

The pavingstones. On them,
tight by each other, the two
heartgrey pools:
two
mouthfuls of silence

I have taken the liberty of retranslating the poem because all of the above have some rationalizations or slightly misleading renditions. Neugroschl's "orb of light" (line 1), for example, seems an overtranslation of "eyeround." Again, Carson's "dismal" for *trüb* is too emphatic in the context. And the verb in line 12 must be in the past tense, as in the original. And so on.

⁷ See *Oxford English Dictionary* (161), Vol. 9, #2; Derrida, 55;

⁸ See OED, 1; Derrida 24-25.

⁹ Paul Celan, »Reply to a Questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore, Paris, 1958,» in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), pp. 15-16.

¹⁰ Dennis J. Schmidt, «Black Milk and Blue: Celan and Heidegger on Pain and Language,» in Hamacher 110-29; see p. 110.

¹¹ Pierre Joris, Introduction, Paul Celan, *Breathturn*, trans. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1995), p. 42.

¹² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 322.

¹³ *Gedichte* 632. In the event, the volume was published by S. Fischer instead.

¹⁴ See <[http: tag-des-offenen-denmals.de/laender/bw/reis_reutlingent/pfullingen](http://tag-des-offenen-denmals.de/laender/bw/reis_reutlingent/pfullingen)>

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¹⁵ See entry on «St. Clare of Assisi,» *Catholic Encyclopedia*,
<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04004a.htm>>.

¹⁶ See the Catholic Encyclopedia online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>

¹⁷ Edmond Jabès, *La mémoire des mots* (Paris: Fourbis, 1990); trans. Pierre Joris, in Joris, *Celan Selections*, 217-223; see p. 217.

¹⁸ See Felstiner, *Celan* 107.

¹⁹ Robert Kelly, trans. in Joris, *Celan Selections*, p. 69.

²⁰ *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 293, 338.

²¹ *Gedichte* 179; Celan, *Breathturn*, trans. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1995), p. 84.

²² See *Lichtton website*: http://www.obsolete.com/120_years/machines/light_tone_organ/

²³ Wallace Stevens, «Of Mere Being,» *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens, (New York: Archon Books, 1984), p. 398.

²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (1953; London: John Calder 1976), p. 68.

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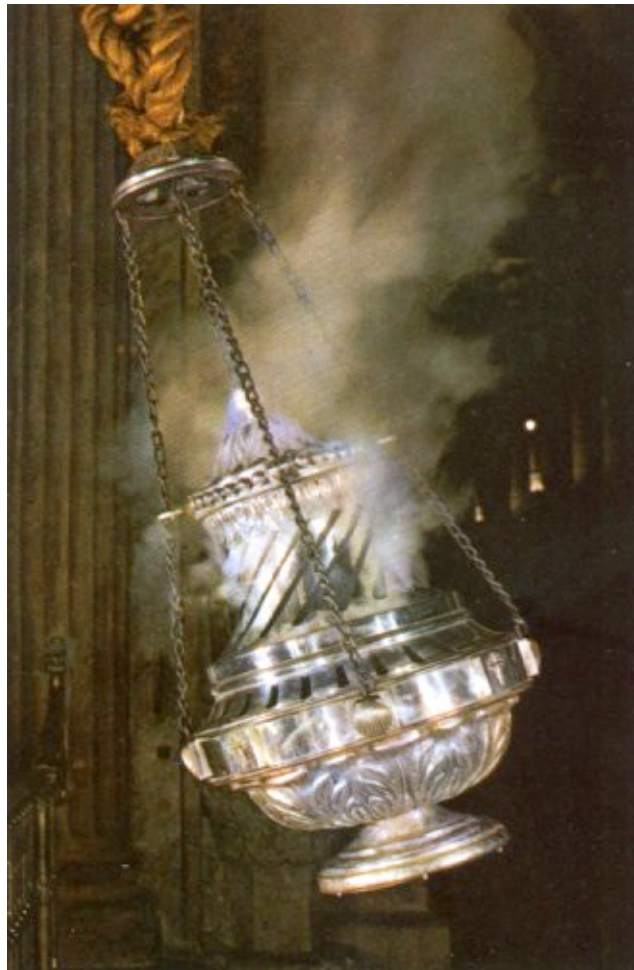


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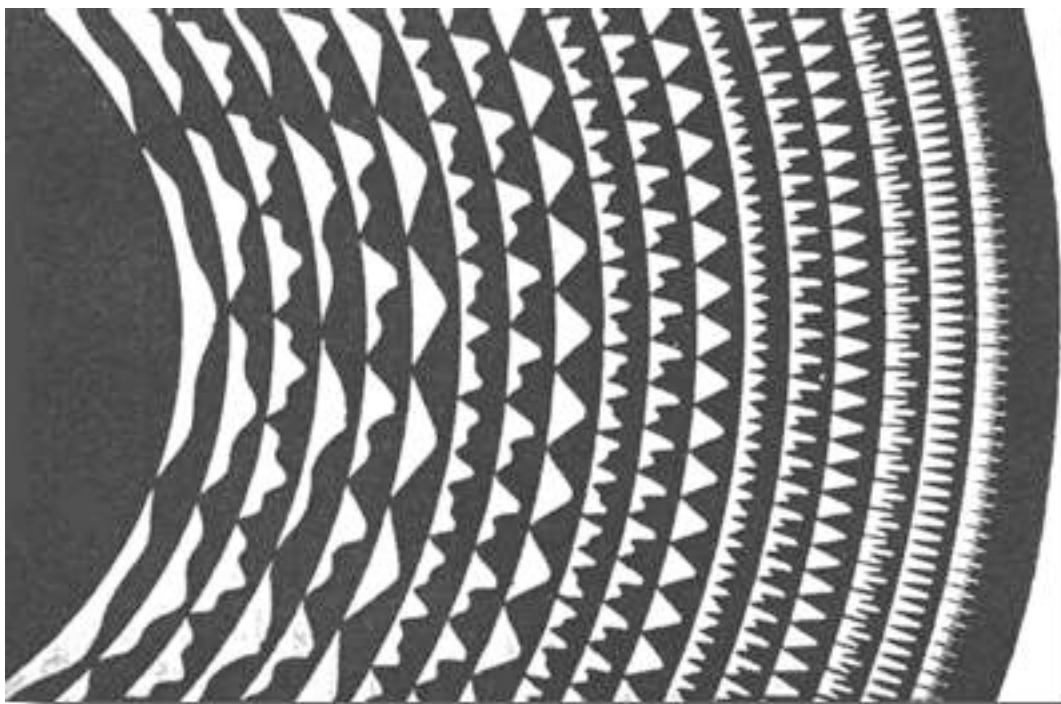


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