

"This volume has been long
and justly awaited. It is the finest
approach to the Celan-world so far
available."—George Steiner, *Times
Literary Supplement*



Paul Celan

Poet, Survivor, Jew John Felstiner

Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew

John Felstiner

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Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew



Heidi Perov

For Alek and Sarah

and

for the victims of "that which happened," 1933–1945

Acknowledgments

On first encountering Paul Celan's poetry in 1977, I knew I would have to find my way into it before doing anything else. This process proved consuming, and to reckon debts now means reviewing a whole dimension of my life.

Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, the poet's loyal widow, whom I met in 1984, was right away open and helpful. I immersed myself in her husband's Paris and Normandy libraries, and our talks illumined Celan's poetry for me. Gisèle remained a spirited, scrupulous friend until her death in 1991. I am also grateful to their son Eric for his friendly support and for permission to reproduce two of Gisèle's etchings, each titled by Paul Celan.

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Introduction

Because Paul Celan lived—or rather, survived—through the poetry he wrote, this book tries to give a sense of his life's work. Either a biographical or a textual study alone would miss Celan's reason for being. Every day he felt his era's and his own history pressing on the poems he wrote, which “had to pass” (as he said of the German language itself) “through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech.”¹

Born in what soon became the wrong place and time, Celan absorbed his misfortune but never grew immune to it. His family were German-speaking Jews from the eastern reach of the Austrian Empire. They lived in Czernowitz, capital of the Bukovina region, which passed to Romania just before Celan's birth in 1920. After Soviet, then German occupation in 1940 and 1941, after

forced labor, his parents' deportation, and the Russians' return in 1944, Celan left home for Bucharest and then Vienna, and in 1948 he settled in Paris. There he studied, taught, translated, married, and kept faith with his mother tongue, creating a poetry that "thought with and out of this time," as he said, "thought it through to its end."²

What it meant to be Paul Celan evolved in the 800 poems he wrote from 1938 to 1970. So far, a Collected Works has been published in German, and three of his eight volumes have come out in the long-awaited historical-critical edition, with dates and draft versions but no sources or notes. A thoroughgoing sense of Europe's most significant postwar poet, who plumbed his native language and others as well, and who ranged among literary traditions and theological, philosophical, scientific, historical, and personal data—a sense of this full-memored poet is hard to come by, asking much of the reader.

Celan's work demands an "encounter" like that in his writing of poems, where "I went with my very being toward language." For such an encounter, he said, "there would have to be readers again."³ After "that which happened" to both humankind and language between 1933 and 1945, poetry more than ever meant a reaching out. "A handshake," he called it, or, more hazardously, "a message in a bottle" (3:186, 177).

Celan's lyrics seek "an addressable thou": the poet himself, his mother, wife, or sons, a loved one or friend, the Jewish dead, their God, Osip Mandelshtam, Nelly Sachs, Rembrandt, Rosa Luxemburg, Spinoza, Saint Francis, Queen Esther, Prague's Rabbi Loew, King Lear, a plant or stone, a word, the Word, the Hebrew letter Bet, Babel, or often something indeterminable, present only because the speaker calls it *du*. That word is voiced some 1,300 times in over three decades of verse. "Hear deep in / with your mouth," a late lyric ends, and Celan's last poem takes the refrain "You read."

For an English-speaking audience it is here, at the point of response, that translation enters. The translator becomes answerable for what a poet's lines have to say, and I take encouragement from Celan's own lifelong commitment to translation—his versions of Mandelshtam, Shakespeare, Dickinson, and others. My book assumes no knowledge of German on the reader's part. Instead, it brings to light the overlooked process of voicing a poem anew.

To begin with, every critical resource—from history, biography, literary tradition, theory, philology, and prosody—can work toward guiding a foreign poem into our own language. Then, the intimate options need articulating, the to-and-fro of finding and losing equivalent rhythms, sounds, overtones, and ambiguities. "Poetry no longer imposes, it exposes itself," Celan said near the end of his life (3:181), and the same may be said of translation. To expose the process that one verse translator goes through, the decisions and revisions, will vivify the poetry in question, with the bonus of a new poem in English.

Celan's lyrics, being in German, pose a particular challenge. For the "Thousand-Year Reich" organized its genocide of European Jewry by means of language: slogans, slurs, pseudo-scientific dogma, propaganda, euphemism, and the jargon that brought about every devastating "action," from the earliest racial "laws" through "special treatment" in the camps to the last "resettlement" of Jewish orphans.

Celan has become an exemplary postwar poet because he insistently registered in German the catastrophe made in Germany. With his world obliterated, he held fast to the mother tongue that was both his and the murderers'—literally all he had left. Insofar as it was language that had been damaged, his verse might repair that damage.

To uproot and rewrite Celan in translation runs the risk of alienating an already alien voice. Yet this voice needs translating because of its very obscurity. Often his lines seem only half emerged from shadow, as if recovered from some lost tongue and needing further translation even for native speakers. New or odd or archaic words, ruptured syntax, ellipses, buried allusion, and contradiction fill the poet's "true-stammered mouth" (2:42).

That mouth, after the wartime "darknesses," resisted simple speech. When a European Jewish poet's turn came for the Nobel Prize in 1966, the more accessible Nelly Sachs got it, not Paul Celan. Along with a gradual recognition of his difficult genius, doubt has been voiced: Why the "insistent minimalism" of his poems and his "unwillingness to commit himself to accessibility"? Why their "discontinuous, alogical, and arbitrary" behavior?⁴

Celan's writing may baffle the reader unready to give it that "attentiveness" he considered "the natural prayer of the soul" (3:198). To grow attentive, especially in translating, is to activate these poems. Their truth, after all, may consist in obscurity or ambiguity, as also in occasional radiance.

For years Celan has been a distinctive figure, at times a contested commodity. Many claims for his identity are in the air, some more valid than others, but all pointing up a complex, migrant fate. His childhood found him embedded in the German-Jewish cultural matrix of Bukovina. Two years in Bucharest (1945–47) solidified a Romanian dimension. A 1948 sojourn in Vienna and his family's Hapsburg Empire origins have led some to call him an Austrian writer. His perfect French, his mature decades in Paris, and his marriage to the artist Gisèle de Lestrangé gave him a connection with France, though that country never embraced him. His frequent trips to Germany and regular publication there make it easy to label him a German poet. His long-deferred visit to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in 1969, where he was welcomed fervently by the German-speaking community, and some lyrics he wrote immediately thereafter tightened a link with Israel. His youthful leanings toward socialism, his solidarity with Republican Spain, his mystical tenden-

cies, and his closeness to certain literary and philosophical doctrines have each gained him adherents.

No one element alone accounts for Paul Celan. He was above all a poet—perforce and by choice a Jewish poet: that is, a poet and a Jew of his time, the two identities interpenetrating to such an extent that any other definition seems partial.

In Celan the “strain” of Jewishness means both the trace and the tension of it. Years ago, after I had spoken at a colloquium in France, an eminent academic warned against *surjudaisant* Celan, “over-Judaizing” him. I keep that in mind and welcome the risk, especially in view of a tendency (with some exceptions) to neglect that strain in him. While examining Celan’s Hebrew Bible in 1984, for instance, I found that someone from a German research team, unable to identify the volume, had placed in it a slip saying *Wichtig?* (“Important?”).

Though Celan never spelled out his Jewishness, he aligned himself more stringently with the Jews than with the non-Jews in his pantheon: with Kafka and Mandelstam, for instance, though he also prized Hölderlin and Rilke; with Heinrich Heine, and also with Georg Büchner; with Gustav Landauer, and Peter Kropotkin; with Martin Buber, and Martin Heidegger; with Gershom Scholem, and Meister Eckhart; with Nelly Sachs, and Ingeborg Bachmann. Celan’s allegiances can be traced through his lyrics, prose fiction, translations, speeches, letters, conversation, and the books he bought and marked, so often concerned with the question of coexistence between Jewishness and Germanness.

No less critical in shaping his allegiance was the hurt Celan felt, from the late 1950s on, at German and other hands. Recrudescant anti-Semitism along with neo-Nazism, plus a malicious plagiarism charge, aroused his defiance and provoked verse that took new risks. It was a distress which made for rich poetic interest.

Scripture, above all, pervades Celan’s poetry—Biblical names, places, images, liturgical figures, overt and covert allusions, Hebraic citations and wordplay—though always ironically, against the grain. Often the Psalms speak for his need, fluctuating as they do between lament and praise. At times, Hebrew terms or phrases occur abruptly in Celan’s verse. Beyond their immediate sense, they test whether Scripture holds good anymore. They bring out Celan’s design on language and on German, on his audience and on himself, on literary and on sacred tradition.

That the word *Shulamith*, from the Song of Songs, closes his first published poem and *Sabbath* his last is symptomatic of the strain of Jewishness in Celan. Yet, with so multifarious a writer and linguistic genius, no single way of hearing him will do, and every way begins and ends in the “speech-grille” of his poems. “With a changing key,” Celan advised himself, “you unlock the

house where / the snow of what's silenced drifts" (1:112). My eighteen chapters use a "changing key" to present this poetry, which moves from symbolist through surrealist lyrics to a modernist stance and beyond. While my own approach to the strain of Jewishness in Celan, plus the empathy evoked in translating him, stems from a kindred strain in myself (as a Diaspora Jew decisively less at risk), in fact Celan wrote for every possible reader, and this book aims the same way.

To engage with the life's work of Paul Celan is a difficult venture. Out of darkness and wounding he made striking poems, which challenge the way of our world. In encountering these poems and becoming conversant with them, I have felt a grim energy verging on elation. Does this belie the burden of Celan's voice, or is elation akin to something the poet knew?

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