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**The Conscience of the Damned, Translating the Mood of Paul Celan:  
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Paul Celan (1920-1970) is often cited as the last “modern” poet, as Baudelaire is cited as the first modern poet. Mallarmé sits in between. Celan had said his intention was to “think Mallarmé through to the end”. Baer (6) suggests that this end is Mallarmé’s dark zone, the “absence” left for the reader to interpret, the symbolism which in turn leads us back to Baudelaire. He further supposes that Baudelaire and Celan are both writing about traumatic, singular, historical events or experiences with no precedent or frame of reference. In Baudelaire’s case it is the squalor, immorality and fragmentation of the self in the new urban experience of the city. Paul Celan is poetising the uncharted post-Holocaust terrain, bearing witness to the catastrophic events leading to the end of the modern tradition.

In translating “mood”, I am aware it can encompass an emotional “state”, a “tone” and a “disposition” or “cast of mind”; it can be instructional, it can be “philosophical”, it can be “soulful”. In Paul Celan’s poetry, his mood reflects such a complexity. His disposition includes a vast knowledge of literary, Judaic and Biblical history, deep philosophical inquiry, intense curiosity of the natural world and indelible scars inflicted by the Nazis and the resurgent anti-Semitism of post-war Germany. His poetry shrouds the unspeakable in a rhythmic, sometimes surreal, sometimes erotic wordplay, simultaneously confronting the conscience, and incursive on the unconscious perceptions of his audience. Celan’s declaration that his poems are “a message in a bottle”, means they are often addressed to an anonymous “other”; the mood then contains a “tone” of speech, which the translator must emulate.

Celan’s oeuvre is encounter-oriented and covers the major events shaping European identity in the first half of the twentieth century – World War II, the Holocaust, and Exile. It is also coloured by his influences, ranging from surrealism and existentialism to the European tradition of symbolism and the philosophies of Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger.

Celan was heavily influenced by both Buber and Heidegger. He did, however, arrive at his own theory and practice of poetry independently, but which uncannily mirrored the intent of Buber’s dialogical approach and Heidegger’s ultimate existentialism of “Dasein” or “Being”. Celan’s poetry is dialogical; it is addressed to a “du”, a “Thou” or “other”, which represents a link to another reality, an existential place where Celan was heading in his early poems. He venerated Buber, particularly on account of his translations into German of Hassidic tales from Celan’s home. He studied Heidegger intently, but held him accountable for his membership of the Nazi party, and his inability to atone for the Holocaust.

Surrealism in Celan is not the surrealism of the 1920s. It does not contain André Breton’s automatic writing and surrender of the mind to unconscious forces. Celan’s images can, however, suggest incongruity and ridiculousness, a type of Dadaist absurdity, though they do not provoke laughter and are not witty like the original French surrealists. His imagery is more influenced by the surrealists of the 1940s and 50s from Bucharest and Vienna and are based on past and present reality.

His use of neologisms is powerful and uses incongruous images to create poetic insight. “Aschenblume” (ash flower) has the power to take us to the death-camps where prisoners walked to the gas chambers along paths lined with flowers, a truly surreal image. Other compound words are absurd, which Celan would say questions the meaning of our existence. “Steinatem” (stone breath), for example, an absurd image of a stone which has life. Or “Die Doggen der Wortnacht”, (the hounds of the wordnight), which, though without meaning, has

the connotation of danger and aggression. His collection of poems from 1963 entitled “Atemwende” – Breathturn - (*Die Gedichte*, 477), proposes that this is what poetry does, it exists in the turn of a breath. He further coined the word “Atemcrystal” (Breathcrystal) to express the poetic gift, the truth lying in wait for the poet.

For Paul Celan, language was the one “real” thing remaining amongst all the losses of the Holocaust. His poetry, however, deals with fundamental issues which both include and exceed the Holocaust. He is writing in the tongue of the Nazis, so twisted and deformed through propaganda and brainwashing. It is his mother tongue, but also the tongue of his mother’s murderers. “Muttersprache, Mördersprache”. So, Celan is intent on his absurdities and surreal objects; he is creating his own German language of incongruity, hoping that from its meaninglessness new meanings will arise. He is taking so many liberties with the language, but is asking the reader to read “the dominant gesture of the poem without access to the circumstantial data” (Hamburger, xxxiv). The translator must be both “in tune” and bold enough to perceive the underlying purpose behind his “cast of mind”. In addition, Celan was a prolific reader of dictionaries and a knowledgeable botanist, so single words can contain multiple meanings in his poems.

### **1. Todtnauberg - 1967**

A good place to start with Celan’s “cast of mind” is in 1967, when he met Martin Heidegger in person for the first time. In his estate, Celan left a wide-ranging collection of Heidegger’s works, all extensively annotated. He seems to have taken some affirmation for his own existentialism from Heidegger, whilst concurrently abhorring the philosopher’s Nazi-apologist background. Heidegger had been a divisive figure at the outset of the National Socialist government of Germany in 1933 when he took up the rectorship at Freiburg University and became a member of the Nazi party. Although he resigned from the rectorship within one year, he seemed blind to the evils of Nazism and in subsequent years never spoke out against them. He did not resign from the Nazi party until the end of the war.

In 1959, Celan had refused to contribute to a collection of writings in honour of Heidegger’s seventieth birthday, a) because the publisher assumed he would, and b) because of the association other contributors had with the Nazis. In 1967, Celan was on his way to Frankfurt to visit his publisher and stopped at Freiburg to give a reading of his poems at the university. Heidegger sat in the front row. Celan said later that he was extremely uncomfortable, but that the vigorous applause he received allayed his fears. Maybe he gave Heidegger the benefit of the doubt that he had changed since being rector of Freiburg University in 1933-34. Heidegger reserved the right to “err greatly” but had been a Nazi apologist and remained a party member throughout the war. Celan was passionately opposed to being seen in the company of ex-Nazi sympathisers and refused to have his photo taken with Heidegger.

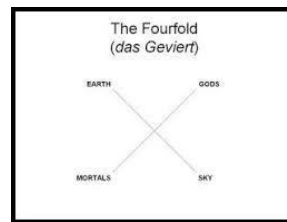
Celan had, over the years, exchanged books with Heidegger, but had never met him. After the reading, which was attended by 1200 people, Heidegger invited Celan to his mountain retreat in the Black Forest. This was a meeting of the poet and the philosopher, an artist of the German language and a thinker whose philosophy of “Dasein” or “Being” has become a mainstay of Western philosophy. Celan had expected Heidegger to address the consequences of Nazism, but nothing was forthcoming. Celan remonstrated with Heidegger in the car driving back from the mountain, witnessed by Gerhard Neumann, who told Celan that this conversation had “epochal meaning” for him. Celan had hoped that Heidegger would repudiate the resurgence of Nazism in Germany at that time. Celan sent a limited edition of this poem to Heidegger and although Heidegger proudly showed it to friends and acquaintances, he did not respond to Celan. It is significant here that Celan, three years before his death, still played to the conscience of the German people. Remember that the Frankfurt-Auschwitz Trials began

only in 1963, nearly twenty years after World War II. These trials laid bare the failures of de-Nazification, about which Celan was so pre-occupied.

The poem opens with two medicinal herbs, arnica and eyebright, which grow in the Black Forest. They represent Celan’s hope for a healing word with Heidegger. The first challenge for the translator is “Sternwürfel”, the star on a cube above Heidegger’s well. The four-pointed star represents Heidegger’s “Fourfold”, his universe of Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals. Should the translation be “star-die”, or “star on a dice”? I have chosen “the star” being Heidegger’s fourfold, as pictured below, “on a die”, being the singular of dice.

Arnika, Augentrost, der  
Trunk aus dem Brunnen mit dem  
Sternwürfel drauf,

Arnica, Eyebright, the  
draught of water from the well, topped  
with the star, on a die,



The next stanza begins with “In der Hütte”, which refers to Heidegger’s cabin, his retreat, where he wrote, where he held Nazi functions in the 30s. It is definitely not just a “cabin” – it is *his* hut, so I added the possessive pronoun “his”, which is not in the German.

Celan wrote in Heidegger’s visitor’s book at the hut that he was there with the hope of a heartfelt word with him. He alludes to whoever may have recorded their presence before him; Nazis? “Wessen Namen nahms auf?” is very sharp tongued and could be translated as “Which Nazi Swine put his name here before mine?”. The poem refers both to the guest book at “The Hut” and the book of poems we are reading, the line seeking a “word with a thinker” refers to the reader, to you and me.

in der  
Hütte,

in the  
hut, his hut

die in das Buch  
– wessen Namen nahms auf  
vor dem meinen? –,  
die in dies Buch  
geschriebene Zeile von  
einer Hoffnung, heute,  
auf eines Denkenden

this into the book  
- whose name was inscribed  
before that of mine? - ,  
this in this book  
a line, written with  
a hope, the hope, today  
for a heartfelt,

(un-  
gesäumt kommendes)  
Wort  
im Herzen,

spontaneous  
word  
from a thinker

The next lines describe the walk Celan and Heidegger took on the moor. Celan uses the word “Waldwasen”, where he could have used the word “Wiese”, meaning meadow. “Wasen” is an obscure word, meaning “turf” or “sward”, or in North Germany “a bundle of faggots”, which can be traced to the Latin “Fasces”, which is the root of the word “fascist”, and was a symbol of a Roman king’s power to punish his enemies. A “Wasenmeister” furthermore, is the one in charge of a knackery. This is pure Celan, mixing meanings, but pointing to the horror of war apophatically. The unlevelled “wasen”, I have translated as a “greensward”, which is rooted in Old English, and then “unlevelled, buried bones” to express the deeper meaning of “Wasen” hiding a knackery, like the unevenly covered mass graves of the Jews.

Then the two “orchis” take a walk, “separately”. Orchis comes from the Greek “testicle”, so we can read “the two great men, separately”. Then the drive down the mountain and the “half-trodden cudgel-bordered paths” on the moor. Heidegger had used “Holzwege”, wooden paths, in his writing to mean “paths to nowhere”, and Celan borders them now with cudgels.

The references to fascism, the buried bones of the knackery, the cudgels, the revulsion of writing his name after some Nazi in the guest book and the disappointment that Heidegger did not address his concerns regarding the war, all contribute to the mood of this poem. The ‘crude talk’ indicates, in my interpretation, an angry interchange between the poet and the philosopher. The poem ends in the disappointment of sodden, inclement weather.

Waldwasen, uneingebnet,  
Orchis und Orchis, einzeln,

Greensward, unlevelled, buried bones  
Orchid and Orchid, walking, separately

Krudes, später, im Fahren,  
deutlich,

Crude talk, later, on the journey  
crystal clear

der uns fährt, der Mensch,  
der’s mit anhört,

He who drove us down, that Mensch  
Overheard it all

die halb-  
beschrifteten Knüppel-  
pfade im Hochmoor,

the half –  
trodden cudgel-  
bordered paths on the foggy moor

Feuchtes,  
viel.

Inclement  
Sodden.

*(Die Gedichte, 286)*



A Roman Fasces, a symbol of power

The poem explores the tension between Celan's deep sympathy towards Heidegger's philosophy and revulsion at his politics. Celan is looking for healing, but finds buried bones and wooden paths – "Holzwege", which in Heidegger's parlance are paths through the forest, which can lead to nowhere. Celan is trusting his readers' ability to access this theme without knowing the actual circumstances of the incident.

## 2. Todesfuge – Death Fugue, 1948

"Todesfuge" is Celan's most famous poem. The rhythm of the poem is like a military march, a repetitive rhythm of the human voice, rising and falling in time. The poem was first published in German in 1948, so the horrors of the war were still fresh. The hypnotic, rhythmic language made a deep impression on the German-speaking world. Celan was deeply suspicious of the continued presence of National Socialism in Germany, and became the conscience of the Germans – as a Jew. He called out the continued open existence of anti-Semitism in Germany and suffered greatly as a consequence.

I have attempted to emulate that rhythm as the mood of the poem. His mood is strident and conjures fear – fear of Germany, fear of marching soldiers. For that reason I have kept "Deutschland" as in German. Calling it Germany would take from the evil connotation of the phrase "der Tod is ein Meister aus Deutschland" (Death is a master from Germany).

Celan does not intend to describe a reality that exists, he is not using metaphors to conjure a poetic reality. He is using a surrealist motif, "black milk" to conjure a mood in the reader's subconscious which transports him or her to the concentration camp. An essential part of Celan's poetry is its surrealism. The depiction of the prisoners digging a grave in the "air", which is followed by the phrase "da liegt man nicht eng", I have translated as "digging a spacious grave in the clouds". One would use "da wohnt man nicht eng" if one were to say "Go and live in the countryside, you will have freedom to move", so I have followed that lead in the surrealist idea of digging a "spacious grave in the clouds".

Todesfuge was anthologised in German school readers and in 1988 was read in the German Parliament on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht. Celan succeeded through rhythm and surreal images to enter the subconscious of the German people. This is the power of his poetry.

### **Todesfuge**

**Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie  
abends**

### **Deathfuge**

**Black milk of the morn' we drink it at  
sundown**

wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir  
 trinken sie nachts  
 wir trinken und trinken  
 wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt  
 man nicht eng  
 Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den  
 Schlangen der schreibt  
 der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach  
 Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
 er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es  
 blitzen die Sterne er pfeift seine Rüden  
 herbei  
 er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln  
 ein Grab in der Erde  
 Er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

**Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken  
 dich nachts**

wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir  
 trinken dich abends  
 wir trinken und trinken  
 Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den  
 Schlangen der schreibt  
 der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach  
 Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
 Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln  
 ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht  
 eng  
 Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr  
 andern singet und spielt  
 er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er  
 schwingts seine Augen sind blau  
 stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern  
 spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

**Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken  
 dich nachts**

wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir  
 trinken dich abends  
 wir trinken und trinken  
 ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes  
 Haar Margarete  
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit  
 den Schlangen  
 Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein  
 Meister aus Deutschland  
 er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann  
 steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft

We drink it at midday and every morning we  
 drink it at night  
 we drink and we drink,  
 we are digging a spacious grave in the  
 clouds  
 A man lives in the house where he plays  
 with the serpents he writes  
 as it darkens he writes to Deutschland your  
 golden hair Margarete  
 he writes it and stands "fore the house and  
 the stars they are blazing he whistles his  
 hounds to return  
 he whistles his Jews to present has a grave  
 dug deep in the ground  
 he orders us now, play on and strike to the  
 dance

**Black milk of the "morn we drink you at  
 night**

we drink you at daybreak and midday we  
 drink you as evening falls  
 we drink and we drink  
 A man lives in the house where he plays  
 with the serpents he writes  
 as it darkens he writes to Deutschland your  
 golden hair Margarete  
 Your ashen hair Sulamith we are digging a  
 spacious grave in the clouds  
 He cries you there dig deeper the soil, you  
 others you sing and play  
 He seizes his belted iron and draws it his  
 eyes are blue  
 You there plunge deeper your spades and  
 you others, play on to the dance

**Black milk of the morn' we drink you at  
 night**

we drink you at midday and mornings we  
 drink you as evening falls  
 we drink and we drink  
 a man lives in the house your golden hair  
 Margarete  
 your ashen hair Sulamith he plays with the  
 serpents  
 He cries play death more sweetly death is a  
 master from Deutschland  
 he cries more darkly those violins stroke  
 them then you will rise as smoke in the air

dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da  
liegt man nicht eng

then you'll have a grave in the clouds and  
comfortably there you will lie

**Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken  
dich nachts**

wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein  
Meister aus Deutschland  
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir  
trinken und trinken  
er Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein  
Auge ist blau  
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich  
genau  
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes  
Haar Margarete  
er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns  
ein Grab in der Luft  
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der  
Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

**Black milk of the morn' we drink you at  
night**

we drink you at midday death is a master  
from Deutschland  
we drink at nightfall and sunrise we drink  
and we drink  
Death is a master from Deutschland his eye  
is blue  
he hits you with bullets of lead he hits you  
between the eyes  
a man lives in the house your golden hair  
Margarete  
he sools his hounds upon us and gives us a  
grave in the air  
he plays with the serpents and dreams that  
death is a Meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Sulamith

*(Die Gedichte, 46)*

“Celan has more freedom with the German language than most of his fellow poets. Perhaps as a consequence of his origins. He is less constrained by the style and character of the language than others.” (Günter Blöcker, 1959)

“Hitler-speak” said Celan.

**3. Corona - 1948**

Corona is a love poem, an erotic poem calling for an intimate love to be shown to the world, to be shouted from the balcony. Celan had written to Ingeborg Backmann in 1949:

I will come late this year, if only for the reason that I want no one else to be present when I come with poppies, a lot of poppies and memories, just as many memories, two big shining garlands of poppies and memories, to present to you on your birthday. I have been looking forward to this moment, dying to see you for weeks.  
Paul

*(Herzzeit, 11, my translation)*

And now he declares his love – like poppies and memory. Corona is the light surrounding an eclipse. The war has almost eclipsed love, except for the corona, which Celan uses to crown his beloved.

The poem begins with a reference to autumn, hinting to Rilke's “Autumn Day”, which I have translated below – “Herr, es ist Zeit”, it is time. The autumn brings reality with it, the grapes ripen, life is lush, but whosoever is unprepared for the winter, will remain alone.



**Rainer Maria Rilke – Autumn Day**

Herr: Es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.

Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,  
und auf den Fluren laß die Winde los.

Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;  
gieb ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,  
dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage  
die letzte Süße in den schweren Wein.

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines  
mehr.  
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,  
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben  
und wird in den Alleen hin und her  
unruhig wandern,  
wenn die Blätter treiben

Hey Lord: the time has come, the boundless  
summer gone,

So deepen your shadow on the sundials now  
And soothe the winds down corridors of time

Order the last of the fruit to fullness, rich  
Grant two more Grecian days, bathed in  
sun  
Urge them on to ripeness, and hunt  
The last drop of sweetness into the viscous  
wine

He who has no house now, will build no  
house  
He who is alone now, will stay alone  
Will keep watch, will read, write long letters  
And will wander aimlessly down alleys and  
continue  
Till all the leaves lay bare, the branches of  
the tree.

(Rilke, 1902)

In Corona, as autumn is taking a leaf from the hand, I have translated it as if it were a bird – “autumn pecks.” Celan then moves to the surreal, peeling time from nuts and teaching it to walk, before it goes back into the nutshell. Sunday is mirrored, we sleep in a dream, not dream in a sleep, but the mouth speaks the truth. The rhythm of the German rolls off the tongue, so the translation can be simple, but must move forward rhythmically. Sunday is free for love and sleep, dream and truth from the mouth. It is erotic and surreal.

**Corona**

Aus der Hand frißt der Herbst mir sein  
Blatt: wir sind Freunde.  
Wir schälen die Zeit aus den Nüssen und  
lehren sie gehn:  
die Zeit kehrt zurück in die Schale.

Im Spiegel ist Sonntag,  
im Traum wird geschlafen,  
der Mund redet wahr.

From my hand does autumn peck its leaf: we  
are friends.  
We peel back time from the nuts and teach it  
to walk:  
Time turns back – into the shell.

In the mirror is Sunday  
in the dream we sleep  
the mouth rings true

Corona then makes an erotic turn as the poet’s gaze “steps down”, “alights”, to the “sex” of his lover. This could be translated as “loins”, but Celan says “Geschlecht”, which unambiguously means “sex”. “At each other we stare”, as opposed to “we stare at each other” – “wir sehen uns an” has the connotation here of “we look each other up and down”. The lovers then talk “dark, darkest things”. This line “wir sagen uns Dunkles” connotes a conspiracy, an erotic conspiracy to go to the darkness, the depths. I have then translated it as “we confide dark, darkest things”, instead of simply “dark”.

The imagery in the next stanza is surreal. “We love each other like poppies and memories”; the opiate of love, enriched by precious memories. Celan has his lovers sleep, “like wine in a shell”, like “the sea in the bloody light of the moon”. It is a restless sleep, the sea moving constantly in the “Blutstrahl” of the moon. I have not translated “Blutstrahl” as “bloodray” as it doesn’t have the same poetic lilt as “the bloody light of the moon”.

Mein Aug steigt hinab zum Geschlecht der  
Geliebten:  
wir sehen uns an,  
wir sagen uns Dunkles,

My gaze alights to the sex of my lover:  
at each other we stare,  
we confide dark, the darkest things.

wir lieben einander wie Mohn und  
Gedächtnis,  
wir schlafen wie Wein in den Muscheln,  
wie das Meer im Blutstrahl des Mondes.

We love our love like poppies and memory  
we sleep like wine in a shell,  
like the sea in the bloody light of the moon.

The lovers are then seen from the street below, “umschlungen”, entwined at the window, visible to the world. The poet now calls for disclosure, it is time for others to know of love. The surreal rock may now bloom, the restlessness of the post-war times can now be transformed, and beat in a heart. The moment is set in stone, time stands still, love survives and sleeps “in the bloody light of the moon”.

Wir stehen umschlungen im Fenster, sie  
sehen uns zu von der Straße:  
es ist Zeit, daß man weiß!  
Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen  
bequemt,  
daß der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.  
Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird.  
Es ist Zeit.

Entwined, we stand in the window, people  
staring up from the street:  
It’s time, time to tell all!  
It is time that the rock has comfort to  
bloom,  
that restlessness beats in a heart  
It is time that time became time.  
It is time.

(Die Gedichte 45)

#### 4. The Word About Going-to-the-Depths

In 1959, Celan wrote another poem, “The Word about “Going-to-the-Depths”, which contains similar poetry to “Corona”, but going “deep” not “dark”. It was written as a birthday gift to his wife, Giselle Le Strange, and refers to what they had read together by George Heym – “*Your eyelids so long/your eyes’ dark waters/Let me dive therein/Let me go into the depth.*”

Whereas in “Corona” the lovers “confide dark, the darkest things”, in this poem the lovers go to “our depths”. It is characteristic of Celan in the erotic or love poetry that the dialogue is deep and dark, the darkest, deepest feelings. It is tragic that as his mental health deteriorated in the mid to late sixties, that the deep, love relationship he had with his wife became dysfunctional.

#### DAS WORT VOM ZUR-TIEFE-GEHEN

#### THE WORD ABOUT GOING-TO-THE-DEPTHS

das wir gelesen haben.  
Die Jahre, Wie Worte seither.  
Wir sind es noch immer.

which we read, back then.  
The years, the words, gone by.  
We remain, unchanged, like that.

Weißt du, der Raum ist unendlich,  
weißt du, du brauchst nicht zu fliegen,  
weißt du, was sich in dein Aug schrieb,  
vertieft uns die Tiefe.

You know, Space is eternal,  
you know, you have no need to fly,  
you know, that which stayed, written in  
your eye  
it deepens for us those depths, our  
depths

*(Die Gedichte 129)*

## 5. Water and Fire – 1951

Of course, all interpretation of Celan is speculative as he rarely provided analysis of his own work. “Water and Fire” from 1951 includes two motifs found frequently in Celan’s poetry. The fire motif in this instance may reference Medea and her madness, her murder of Jason’s bride Glauce. “A flame that measured you up for a dress”, the poisonous wedding dress provided by Medea, the mistress of poison. The yew tree is poison. The fire can be an allegory for loss, for violence, for the war.

But then the night becomes light, perhaps truth, and Celan returns to his surrealism, this time quite playful. Moons in the plural, hauled up on “gischende” tables, which literally has to do with “spray”, and I have translated as “bubbling tables”. The German moves quite quickly and I have tried to capture the rhythm in the surreal images – the wind fills the goblets, the sea serves the food. The sea is so powerful – the roving eye, the thundering ear.

Then references to the war – the flags of the nations, the coffins rowed to shore. Following is a reference to Midsummer’s (“Johanni”), which can be analysed with reference to Strindberg’s “Miss Julie”, which is set on Midsummer’s Eve and was being filmed in same year in Stockholm. Is it Celan alluding to class differences?

So warf ich dich denn in den Turm und  
sprach ein Wort zu den Eiben,  
draus sprang eine Flamme, die maß dir  
ein Kleid an, dein Brautkleid:

So I threw you in the tower and had a  
word to the yews on the side  
From thence came a flame that measured  
you up for a dress, your wedding dress

Hell ist die Nacht,  
hell ist die Nacht, die uns Herzen erfand  
hell ist die Nacht!

Light is the night,  
light is the night, for us, the inventor of  
hearts  
light is the night!

Sie leuchtet weit übers Meer,  
sie weckt die Monde im Sund und hebt  
sie auf gischende Tische,  
sie wäscht sie mir rein von der Zeit:  
Totes Silber, leb auf, sei Schüssel und  
Napf wie die Muschel!

She shines her vast light o’er the sea,  
she wakes the moons in the straits and  
hauls them up on bubbling tables,  
and for me she washes them, cleaned,  
absent of time  
Dead silver, rise up, be cup and plate, look  
like a shell!

Der Tisch wogt stundauf und stundab,  
der Wind füllt die Becher,  
das Meer wälzt die Speise heran:  
das schweifende Aug, das gewitternde  
Ohr,

The table rocks back and forth, hour upon  
hour  
the wind fills the goblets,  
the sea serves the dishes delicious  
the roving eye, the thundering ear,  
the fish and the serpent –

den Fisch und die Schlange –

Der Tisch wogt nachtaus und nachtein,  
und über mir fluten die Fahnen der  
Völker,  
und neben mir rudern die Menschen die  
Särge an Land,  
und unter mir himmelts und sternts wie  
daheim um Johanni!

The table rocks back and forth, night in  
and night out  
and above me the flood of the flags of the  
nations do flutter  
and next to me people are rowing the  
coffins to shore  
and beneath me it heavens and stars like  
at home on Midsummer's!

The poet then speaks romantically to his lover - "Feuerungssonnte", a Celan neologism. I don't think "fire-shrouded" does justice to the neologism, so have translated it as "a vision of fire and sun", which stays in rhythm. Then, the night climbs a mountain, the poet is a master of dungeons and towers, a whisper passing the (poisonous) yews, a reveller at sea, and finally, simply - a word, towards which his lover "slowly smoulders and burns" in my translation of "herabbrennst", which literally means to "burn down to", but would lose its passion in translation without "smoulder and burn".

Und ich blick hinüber zu dir,  
Feuerungssonnte:  
Denk an die Zeit, da die Nacht mit uns auf  
den Berg stieg,  
denk an die Zeit,  
denk, daß ich war, was ich bin:  
ein Meister der Kerker und Türme,  
ein Hauch in den Eiben, ein Zecher im  
Meer,  
ein Wort, zu dem du herabbrennst.

And then my eyes rest upon you,  
Vision of fire and sun:  
Think of that time when the night climbed the  
mountain, with us  
think of that time,  
think, that I was, what I am:  
a master of dungeons and towers,  
a whisper passing the yews, a reveller at sea,  
a word, towards which you slowly smoulder  
and burn.

(Die Gedichte 58)

## 6. Memory of France – 1947

Celan did foundation studies for medicine in Paris in 1938/39 and came into contact with literary surrealism. This poem refers in part to a line from Apollinaire's "Les Femmes" – "le songe Herr Traum", which is French – le songe, the dream, and German – Herr Traum, Mr Dream. Celan accesses the dream, the unconscious, the "unsaid" – his lovers are dead, but can breathe. The great autumn crocus is Medea's, the sorceress, buying hearts. This poem was dedicated to Ingeborg Bachman, with whom he had a love affair at the time and with whom he maintained a deep relationship all his life.

It is interesting to compare some words and phrases of my translation and that of Pierre Joris. In the first line, I say "the Parisian sky", he says "the sky of Paris". In both French and German the nominative comes first, the genitive second; in English the word order can be either, but to me "Parisian sky" works better poetically.

In line 4, I say "our hideaway", Joris says "our room". Celan uses "unsere Stube", which could be a chamber, or a parlour, but not merely a room. I have chosen hideaway, for the lovers. In line 6, Monsieur Le Songe (Mr. Dream) is painted by Celan as "hager", which has the connotation of "haggard" more than "thin", so I have used "a gaunt, a little, man" to give it some wordplay, as opposed to Joris' "a thin little man", which is think is quite plain.

In line 7, Celan loses his "Augensterne", which literally means "pupils of the eye", but figuratively means "apple of my eye", or "sweetheart". I have translated it as "darlings"; Celan

lost his family; now his lover lends him her hair, he loses it, he is struck down, the dream exits. I don't think he loses the pupils of his eyes; it is not in keeping with the poem.

Concentrate, you, think with me: <b>the Parisian sky</b> , the great autumn crocus...	Du denk mit mir: der Himmel von Paris, die große Herbstzeitlose...	You, think with me: <b>the sky of Paris</b> , the great autumn crocus...
We fetched hearts at the flower girls:	Wir kauften Herzen bei den Blumenmädchen:	We bought hearts from the flower girls:
they were blue and blossomed in water.	sie waren blau and blühten auf im Wasser.	They were blue and blossomed in the water.
It began to rain in our <b>hideaway</b> ,	Es fing zu regnen an in unserer Stube,	It started to rain in our <b>room</b> ,
and our neighbour came in, Monsieur Le Songe, <b>a gaunt, a little, man.</b>	und unser Nachbar kam, Monsieur Le Songe, ein hager Männlein.	and our neighbour came, Monsieur le Songe, <b>a thin little man.</b>
We played cards, I lost <b>my darlings</b> ;	Wir spielten Karten, ich verlor die Augensterne;	We played cards, I lost <b>the pupils of my eyes</b> ;
you lent me your hair, I lost it, he beat us to the ground.	du liehst dein Haar mir, ich verlors, er schlug uns nieder.	You lent me your hair, I lost it, he struck us down.
He left by the door, <b>the rain in his wake.</b>	Er trat zur Tür hinaus, der Regen folgt' ihm.	He left by the door, <b>the rain followed him.</b>
We were dead and could breathe.	Wir waren tot und konnten atmen.	We were dead and could breathe.
SFN	( <i>Die Gedichte</i> 40)	Pierre Joris

## 7. Count Out the Almonds – 1952

If we interpret “almonds” in line 1 to be events, or memories from the past, we see here the young poet exhorting his readers to interpret the bitter resonances from which his art derives. In the second stanza, however, he spins a secret thread, the secret word of poetry, on which the thoughts of the person (woman?) to which the poem is addressed can slide down to repositories, to “jugs”, but remain inexplicit – finding no heart.

But in that space, where the poet's art lives, the addressee finally feels at home inside her own skin, puts her best foot forward – line 9. Then in line 11, the Nietzschean hammers of philosophy are free in the bell tower of her silence and she is privy to the whispered, the overheard secrets of life. Then death takes her arm and together the three – the poet, the whispered and death – stride off into the night. That is the poet's bitter lot, to be counted amongst the almonds.

Zähle die Mandeln, zähle, was bitter war und dich wachhielt, zähl mich dazu:	Count out the almonds, count, that which was bitter and robbed you of sleep,
--	--

and count me in:

Ich suchte dein Aug, als du's aufschlugst und  
niemand dich ansah,  
ich spann jenen heimlichen Faden,  
an dem der Tau, den du dachtest,  
hinunterglitt zu den Krügen,  
die ein Spruch, der zu niemandes Herz fand,  
behütet.

I sought your eye, as you opened it, alone,  
unwatched,  
I spun that secret thread,  
on which the dew of your thoughts  
slid down to the jars,  
and shielded by a word, found no one, no  
one's heart.

Dort erst tratest du ganz in den Namen, der  
dein ist,  
schrittst du sicheren Fußes zu dir,  
schwangen die Hämmer frei im Glockenstuhl  
deines Schweigens,  
stieß das Erlauschte zu dir,  
legte das Tote den Arm auch um dich,  
und ihr ginget selbdritt durch den Abend.

There you stepped out, fully that name,  
yours,  
put your best foot forward, sure on your  
feet,  
the hammer swung free in the bell tower  
your silence,  
the whispered' rose to your ear,  
the dead took the crook of your arm,  
and you band of three, sauntered off  
through the night.

Mache mich bitter.  
Zähle mich zu den Mandeln

Make me bitter  
Count me among the almonds.

(*Die Gedichte* 59)

### 8. Corroded – 1963, from “Atemwende” (Breathturn)

This poem is taken from the collection entitled “Breathturn”, published in 1963. It is useful to quote here from *Der Meridian*, Celan's 1960 acceptance speech for the Georg Büchner Prize, giving a rare insight into one of his neologisms:

Poetry is perhaps this: an Atemwende (breathturn), a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn? And since the strange, the abyss and Medusa's head, the abyss and the automaton, all seem to lie in the same direction—is it perhaps this turn, this Atemwende, which can sort out the strange from the strange? It is perhaps here, in this one brief moment, that Medusa's head shrivels and the automaton runs down? Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed here, in this manner, some other thing is also set free?

(Paul Celan, transl. Rosmarie Waldrop)

The poem revolves around the word “Breathcrystal” in the final lines of the third stanza. The “Breathcrystal” is waiting, embedded in glacial time, to witness the artist's creation. If we take this neologism to represent the true poem, the crystallisation of the poetic gift, we can work back to the first stanza which opens with the word “beizen”, which can be translated as either etched or corroded by some caustic solution. My interpretation is that “Breathcrystal”, line 19, has been corroded, but is then freed through penitence, line 12. “Beizen” also means hunting with a bird of prey, a falcon. I have used both corroded and hunted, as the reader of English will have no way of appreciating Celan's play with the alternative meanings of “beizen”.

The first stanza proposes that the “hundred-tongued perjure-poem” the “nulloem”, the not-a-poem, arises from the corrosion of speech, like at Babel. “**Meingedicht**”, line 5, could be translated as either “My-poem” or take the “Mein” to mean perjury, as in “Meineid”. Given that the result is the “nulloem” I have chosen to base the translation on perjury. Celan’s “Genicht”, line 6, plays with “Gedicht”, which means poem. By replacing one syllable, the “d” with the negative “n”, he has created the “nothing poem”, the “Genicht”.

But the Breathcrystal, the real poem is waiting. The poet has been freed, whirled out like a mystic dancer, line 8, 9, Through the snow, the human snow, the penitent’s snow of human experience. Celan coins the word “Büßerschnee”, which I have translated as “penitent’s hoodsnow”, the “hood” emphasising the image of the ritual of doing penance. He is welcomed into the glacial caves, line 13. There, in honeycombed ice, in a gash of time, Breathcrystal waits to witness the absolute poem.

WEGGEBEIZT vom  
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache  
das bunte Gerede des An-  
erlebten – das hundert-  
züngige **Mein-  
gedicht, das Genicht.**

CORRODED, hunted by  
The windray of your speech  
The colourful gossip of received  
wisdom – the hundred-  
tongued perjure-  
poem, **the nulloem.**

Aus-  
gewirbelt,  
frei  
der Weg durch den menschen-  
gestaltigen Schnee,  
den Büßerschnee, zu  
den gastlichen  
Gletscherstuben und -tischen.

Swirled-  
out,  
**free**  
the track through snow-  
humanlike, snow,  
penitent’s hoodsnow, leading  
to the hospitality  
of the glacial caves and tables.

Tief  
in der Zeitenschrunde,  
beim  
Wabeneis  
wartet, ein **Atemkristall,**  
dein unumstößliches  
Zeugnis.

Deep  
in the timegash  
within  
honeycomb ice  
waits, a **Breathcrystal,**  
your irrefutable  
witness.

*(Die Gedichte 185)*

Paul Celan is known for his courageous dedication to poetry as the highest form of language. From an early age he had a preternatural gift with language and languages. For Celan, language was the key to the mystery of life. When all else was exhausted, when all hope was gone, there was the word. He drew images of devastation, he wrote poems about love and sex, he wrote dedications to saints and emasculated the butchers of World War II, he honoured his mother and his Jewish blood. Above all, he mastered the poetics of the German language, confronted post-war Germany head on with their negligence, their inability to see what they had done to their culture and their language.

Eventually, the depth of Paul Celan’s shame for his fellow human beings became too much. He was too sensitive to carry the sins of the world on his shoulders. Paul Celan committed suicide most likely in the night of 19 to 20 April 1970. It is assumed that he went into the Seine from Pont Mirabeau. He did not leave a note, but Wilhelm Michel’s 1940

biography (464) was open on his desk with the following sentence from a letter by Clemens Brentano about Hölderlin underlined:

Manchmal wird dieser Genius dunkel und versinkt in den bitteren Brunnen seines Herzens.

(“Sometimes this genius gets dark and sinks in the bitter wells of his heart”)

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