Paul Celan, Poet of the Holocaust

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The Jewish poet, Paul Celan, was born in Czernovitz, Rumania, in 1920 and committed suicide in Paris in 1970. His native tongue was German. He wrote eight volumes of poetry, all in German, although he spent almost half his life in France and was fluent in several languages.* In a public address delivered in Bremen in 1958, on the occasion of being awarded a literary prize, he spoke of the German language as the one possession that had remained "reachable, close, and unlost in the midst of losses...although it had to pass through a thousand darknesses of death-dealing speech." German is the language of Hölderlin, Büchner, and Rilke, all of whom Celan admired, but also the language in which the words Endlösung (final solution), Sonderbehandlung (special treatment), and judenrein (cleansed of Jews) were coined. It was perhaps the embodiment of these extremes in the German language that led Celan to choose it "to orient himself, to discover where he was and where he was going, in order to chart reality."

His poetry is dedicated to memorializing the dead of the Holocaust: those victims who were made anonymous when they were destroyed as persons before they were murdered physically. The "efficiency" with which they were killed was intended to perfect that anonymity. No trace of their lives was supposed to remain, they were given no graves or tombstones, and death came to them as a final confirmation of that nothingness that had been inflicted upon them while still alive. Poetry about the victims of the Holocaust cannot praise their heroic acts (which remain largely unknown), nor eulogize their lives (an act that, in its conventionality, would amount to a sacrilege), nor admonish us to tend to their graves (which do not exist); rather it must create for them what their murderers denied them: an existence, a reality.

Celan's poetry does what even the most accomplished prose cannot do: It creates a landscape of death into which the reader must enter with him. For this essay I have selected poems from three volumes: Speech-Grid (Sprachgitter), No One's Rose (Niemands-Rose), and A Turning of Breath (Atemwende). (Unless otherwise indicated, the translations have been made by me.) I will let the poems speak for themselves and merely try to highlight certain words and lines to ease the rather steep descent into the world of the dead that Celan requires of his readers. The first two poems are from Speech-Grid.

Snowbed
Eyes, world-blind, in the cleaved rocks of dying.
I'm coming. Hardgrowth in my heart.
I'm coming.
Sheer cliff: moon mirror. Downward.
(Breath-stained lamp. Blood here and there,
clouding soul, almost in human form again.
Ten-finger shadow—grappled.)

Eyes world-blind,
eyes in the cleaved rocks of dying
eyes, eyes:
The snowbed beneath us both, the snowbed
crystal by crystal
latticed time-deep, we fall,
we fall and lie and fall.
And fall:
We were. We are.
We were one flesh with the night.
In the lodes, the lodes.

This poem describes the descent into the nethermost lodes of the heart, where the dead are buried and yet

*For information about Celan's life and the literary tradition in which reviewers have placed him the reader is referred to an article by Paul Auster, "Paul Celan, Poet of Exile," in Commentary (February, 1976).
alive. The path is difficult and dark: We need to be hardy (hardgrowth in the heart), and we need a miner’s lamp; our panting stains its glass. First we discover only traces of death: “blood here and there.” These traces evoke more concrete forms: “clouding souls, nearly of human form again.” “Again” implies we are about to meet the dead; only the dead once had human form and therefore can take on human form “again.” What we see next is clearer, almost too painfully clear: a ten-finger shadow—grappled. Grappled, perhaps, in prayer, perhaps in the agony of death.

The cold of death is like the cold of snow; yet the image Celan uses is not snow but “snowbed.” What transforms snow into a snowbed? Snow is desolate, but a bed is a human place of rest, and a snowbed is a place where he who has descended into the lowest layers of the remembering heart finally rests with the dead. The snowbed is the place where the dead—and we—are redeemed if our memory joins them. The infinity of time is transformed into a concrete spatial image. As such, it is part of the landscape of death: “crystal by crystal/latticed time-deep”; such is the snowbed beneath us into which “we fall and lie and fall”; that is, its depth, measured in snow crystals, is infinite. The union with the dead is repeated several times: “We were. We are.” The dead “were,” the living “are.” Hence we, the dead and the living, were and are. Again: “We are one flesh with the night.” The flesh of the living in the night of the lodes of dying.

The path does not end here. In another poem, “Voices,” we find the following lines:

Voices from the nettle trail:
Come to us on your hands.
He who’s alone with the lamp has only his palm to read from.
Voices streaked with night, ropes on which you hang the bell.
Vault high, oh world:
when the deathshell washes ashore there may be a knelling.
Why the “nettle trail”? We must keep close to the ground to find the dead of the Holocaust; no tombstones mark their graves, more likely weeds grow where they were buried, as they do in old deserted cemeteries. If we search patiently, with nothing but our inner light to guide us (“He who’s alone with the lamp”), the voices “streaked with night” will challenge us to envision a new world, a world vaulted to receive the deathshell and transform the voices—almost inaudible at first—into a knelling. The shore of the deathshell exists within us when the waters of forgetting recede. Seas and rivers, in folklore and life, have been used for opposite purposes. Murderers throw corpses into the water in the hope they would never be found. Others who want to entrust special messages to chance throw them into the water in
the hope someone will find and decode them. (Celan compared poems with such messages and expressed the hope that someday they would wash ashore on the human heart.) The washing ashore of the deathshell combines both meanings: like murderers, we may want to forget the dead; but the deathshell may wash ashore and start a knelling we must hear.

Later stanzas of the same poem speak of other voices. One, a biblical voice, is eminently clear.

Jacob's voice:
The tears
The tears in the brother's eye.
One adhered and grew.
We dwell within.
Breathe—that it may fall.

Like Jacob and Esau, who were not only brothers but twins, mankind is unable to live in peace, and its wars have usually the same cause as the quarrel between Jacob and Esau: the wish to be one up on the other. That we hear of the voices of the dead of the Holocaust and biblical voices in the same poem underlines the unity of mankind.

Eight years elapsed between the publication of Speech-Grid in 1959 and A Turning of Breath in 1967. The poems of A Turning of Breath are caesuras between silences; they were written by a poet who had tried out the traditional language of poetry and found that even its richest and most original images and metaphors had been turned into lies and meaninglessness by the "deathdealing speech" of the murderers. Before reading the poems found in A Turning of Breath we must explore what happened during those eight intervening years. No One's Rose, published in 1963, contains poems illuminating the process of turning away from traditional forms. In "Tübingen, Jänner" (an allusion to Hölderlin, who lived in Tübingen) we learn that poetry in modern times can only be a stammering. One stanza reads (the translation is by J. Neugroschel in Paul Celan: ech-Grille and Selected Poems, Dutton, 1971):

If there came,
came a man,
came to the world, today, with
the bright beard of the
patriarchs: he could,
if he spoke of these
times, he
could
only st-utter, stutter,
all, all ways, al-
ways.

Hölderlin spent the last years of his life in madness, and the poems he wrote during those years were a stammering. His poetry, like the words of the biblical patriarchs, was addressed to God. It is left to us to wonder whether Hölderlin went mad because he addressed God in his poems.

"Psalm," the title of another poem from No One's Rose, shows the direction of Celan's poetry during the last decade of his life (Neugroschel translation):

No one kneads us again of earth and clay,
No one incants our dust.
No one.
Blessed art thou, No-one.
For thy sake we will bloom.
Towards thee.
We were, we are, we shall remain a Nothing,
blooming: the Nothing-, the No-one's-Rose.

With the style soul-bright
the filament heaven-void,
the corolla red
from the purple word that we sang
over, oh over the thorn.

Even more painfully poignant in its direct references to the dead of the Holocaust is the following poem (translation by Neugroschel in Paul Celan):

There was earth in them, and they dug.

They dig and dug, and thus their day wore on, and their night.
And they did not praise God, who, they heard, willed all this, who, they heard, knew all this.

They dig and heard no more: they did not grow wise, nor contrive any song, or any kind of language. They dig.

There came a stillness, and there came a storm, and all the oceans came.
I dig, you dig, and the worm digs too, and the singing there says: they dig.
Oh someone, oh none, oh no one, oh you:
Where did it go, if nowhere it went;
Oh you dig and I dig, and to you I dig in,
and the ring awakes on our fingers.

In an address Celan delivered in 1960 (Büchner-Rede) there is a sentence that could be a laconic translation of these poems: "He who walks on his head sees the sky beneath him like an abyss." It is all a matter of perspective, we are told, and the perspective of those who had "earth in them" because they dug their own graves revealed a sky whose infinity was terror. After

(Continued on page 35)
(Continued from p. 26)

that comes only stillness and a storm. Stillness can also bloom, it will bring forth the no one’s rose for the altar of him who “willed” and “knew” the holocausts of history.

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ting this, we understand better why Celan’s way led into muteness. Speaking of the poet Büchner, Celan said: “It [his poetry] is a terrible muteness, it takes his breath away—and his word.” And in the same address: “Poetry: it may mean a turning of the breath. Who knows, possibly poetry goes its way—which is also the way of art—in order to reach a turning of breath.” If breath stands for life and Logos, and in the Bible it does, then a turning of breath stands for silence and death. Harold Weinrich called Celan’s poetry “the individuation of silence,” and Christoph Perels put it this way: “through his poetry, the poet betrays—again and again—his covenant with those who were silenced by death.” Yet, the potential for transcendence is also expressed in these poems. “The purple word that I sang over, oh over the thorn” alludes to the crucifixion of Christ and the possibility of redemption and deliverance. (In many of his poems, especially the later ones, Celan combined Jewish and Christian religious imagery.) “The ring awakes on our fingers” evokes thoughts of human love with the power to transcend suffering.

The volume A Turning of Breath was written on the path into silence; and complete silence—it cannot be denied—equals death. In the Büchner-Rede, then, Celan announced that the time would come when he would take his own life. I have selected three poems from A Turning of Breath that indicate Celan’s way into muteness.

Paths in the shadowy quarry of your hand.

In the four-finger furrow I burrow for the petrified blessing.

This poem is a prayer to a God who has turned into stone. Hence we must dig for the “petrified blessing.” God no longer gives his blessing freely to man, who he created in his image. He no longer looks upon his creation and sees “that it was good.” Today the creator is half-dead in a half-dead world. Yet some life is left in him. Some part of his hand has not yet turned into stone, but has the softness of earth in a quarry; we may dig a furrow in it in which to sow our prayers and hopes. A furrow can then become a beginning of life.

The message of this poem is not new. It is a return to the biblical: “I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me.” As the biblical prayer, it is not a spoken prayer, but an action prayer. In the Bible it is Jacob’s wrestling with God that precedes God’s blessing; in Celan’s poem it is our mute digging that may wrest a blessing from God. Why must prayers be acts rather than words? Words are cheap, acts make man accountable. Is Celan suggesting that God closed his hand into a fist in response to the irresponsibility of spoken prayers?

The next poem is even more taciturn:

Pale filament of suns over the grey-black wasteland. A thought tree-high is stretching to grasp the tone of their light: there are songs yet to be sung beyond man.

Again the poem refers to an inner landscape. The Holocaust laid waste the human heart because it called into question the power of love in us all. About the terror of the Holocaust itself the poet is silent. Only the ruins remaining in the heart are alluded to: “pale filament of suns over the grey-black wasteland.” Why does the sun form a pale filament? Because its rays are refracted a thousand times by the smoke from the ovens, smoke that will not go away? Even in this landscape transcendence may still be possible: “there are songs yet to be sung beyond man.” “A thought tree-high” defines the direction of transcendence, “the tone of their light” its goal: the clarity of light undimmed by smoke, which means the light of love.

The theme of the next poem is the genesis.

Once, I heard him, and he cleansed the world—unseen, in the long night—and it was.

One and infinite, demolished, are aughting.*

And there was light. Deliverance.

Again Celan speaks of the creation of an inner (unseen) world, not the physical world. That is why demolition may inaugurate creation; in the inner world such transformations are possible. Destruction per se is the opposite of creation; it may become creative only through a cleansing, which may lead to a turning and therefore a deliverance. In religious thought cleansing means penitence and restitution. Understood in this context, the poem expresses a moral imperative: We must create an inner world in which the darkness of forgetting is changed by the light of memory. Until that happens, “He” remains “unseen, in the long night.”

Just as the poems of No One’s Rose speak of the possibility of transcendence, so too do the three from A Turning of Breath. In many of his poems Celan writes of two realms of transcendence: religious transcendence and the transcendence made possible in human love. In some poems these two realms of transcendence are so closely fused that it is nearly impossible to say which lines refer to which. Consider the following, also from A Turning of Breath:

*The German word I have tried to translate here is ichten, a neologism I believe to be derived from nichten. Heidegger’s word for annihilating or “making something worthless.” The old English word “aught” is related to “naught” as ichten is to nichten.
On the white phylacteries—the Lord of this hour was a creature of winter, whatever happened, it happened for his sake—my climbing mouth bit fast, once more, when searching for you, you trace of smoke, high above, in the shape of a woman on your way to my fiery thoughts in the black gravel beyond the words of the chasm, through which I saw you walk on high legs with your severe head with its heavy lips on that body made alive by my deadly accurate hands. Tell your fingers which accompany you down into the crevices how I knew you, how far I pushed you into the depths where my bitterest dream slept with you, directed toward your heart, in the bed of my irredeemable name.

The beginning of the poem once again seems to refer to praying. But what kind of praying is it that is expressed, not by a speaking mouth, but by a “climbing mouth”? And on what does it climb? The phylacteries? Literally understood, yes: “on the white phylacteries...my climbing mouth bit fast,” in a kind of struggle with God, one may assume; except that the poem continues, “When searching for you,” and the “you” is a woman. The lines that follow evoke images of sexual love, except that the woman is addressed as “you trace of smoke,” which means she is a woman who, like Celan’s mother, was a victim of the Holocaust, and except that “black grave,” “chasm,” “crevices” are part of the vocabulary with which Celan so often outlines the landscape of death. But it is death transcended by love. The woman he addresses is about to join him “beyond the words of the chasm.” Death is in the chasm, love knows words that lead beyond it.

To whom is the last stanza addressed, the one that begins so mysteriously, “Tell your fingers”? To God? Is it God who is pushed into the depths because the works of his hands (fingers) led to bitterness and destruction? Or is it death to be understood in its positive meaning, as opposed to shallowness? The last lines offer an ambiguous answer. “My irredeemable name” refers, I believe, to the name of suffering mankind. The German word for “irredeemable” is unablöbar, derived from ablösen, which, in some contexts, means to pay one’s debts. The name of suffering mankind is inscribed in God’s ledger book forever, that is, he has broken his covenant with us and cannot redeem his debts. Yet the lines immediately preceding—“my bitterest dream slept with you, directed toward your heart”—allude to another possibility: a union in love whose very depth implies eternal search.

Celan committed suicide in 1970 in Paris. Even today the numerous commentators and critics who have tried to interpret his work have remained strangely silent about his suicide. As if his work could be understood apart from his life—and death! That may be possible with respect to the work of other poets. But to read and write about Celan’s poetry without taking cognizance of his experience means to commit, once again, the crime of stony indifference. Some—in particular, his German interpreters—prefer to use euphemisms and circumlocutions such as “he left life” (“er ist aus dem Leben gegangen”). Many of his German interpreters also avoid confronting the fact that Celan’s poetry is dedicated to memorializing the dead of the Holocaust. To justify this they refer to a statement by Celan himself to the effect that the meaning of his poetry was not limited to the Holocaust. But surely it is one thing to warn against an overly narrow understanding and quite another to deny or ignore any relationship to the Holocaust.

I think the reason for both the evasiveness regarding his suicide and the evasiveness regarding the theme of his poetry is the same. Distance and avoidance are more comfortable than facing facts. And so, the cowardice, the avoidance of the pain of recognition and repentance, continue. Toward the end of his life Celan complained that he found no real response in Germany. Dietlind Meinecke finds that a strange complaint in view of the fact that there was no dearth of commentaries and interpretations of Celan’s poetry in Germany. As if the number of essays had any significance! As if the characteristic German literary volubility and love of the mot précieux could have been helpful to a poet who walked in silence.

Why did he commit suicide? Celan answered that question himself. Poetry after the Holocaust has but one mission: to give reality to the unimaginable and existence to the dead in the memory and actions of the living. That done, he walked the path into muteness, and at the end of that path he joined the dead he had written about. One poem in A Turning of Breath begins,

With the persecuted in late but unconcealed and radiant alliance.