IN MEMORIAM

PAUL CELAN: THIRTY YEARS LATER

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I.

The severe mourning period after *Shiva* – the week following the death of a loved one – is *Sh'loshim* – thirty days. What shall we do thirty *years* after the death of one of the greatest Jewish poets of our century? He entered death freely, walking into the Seine and letting the dark waters carry him into the time beyond time; yet he remains one of the great gifts of the past century for us who are aware of the inheritance which is passed on to us by the poets and prophets of our people.

When Celan accepted the Literature Prize of the City of Bremen (in 1958), he began with the words: *Denken und Danken sind in unserer Sprache ein und desselben Ursprungs*, 'thinking' and 'thanking' are derived from the same root in our language. *Gedenken*, commemorating, shares that origin. We cannot think without giving thanks; and we cannot give thanks without commemorating. George Steiner reminds us that we are *remembrancers*; that is our duty. In his examination of Celan's work, he pointed to clues in the poems by which the poet brought himself to our attention: *Amselpaar* in 'Largo' refers to his name Ancel (=Celan). It was not necessary. His poems are now treated as a 'Canon', commentated as much as his life – more has been written about him than he ever wrote. And his translators vie with one another in an effort to reach him through other languages. This is particularly true within English literature.

In many ways, it is difficult to come to terms with this: '*translators are traitors*' is an established truism. At the same time, they show our struggle in bringing Celan's work to English readers who *must* discover him in some way. It is my own conviction that the best translator of his work was and remains Michael Hamburger, whose own strength as a poet and great translator make his work definitive. I can appreciate the work of John

Felstiner, Katherin Washburn and Guillemin, Joachim Neugroschl, and the many translators of the *Death Fugue*, ranging from Clement Greenberg to Christopher Middleton to my own attempt. And all translations fall short of the mark. The original Romanian text has disappeared behind the German (where Celan himself changed the title from *Tango of Death* for valid reasons); and even the composers struggle as they try to find their own commentary through vastly varying compositions (note Birtwhistle, for example). But it is language itself which defeats us, and dozens of German commentaries, in particular, present us with the mystery of a poet/prophet who keeps re-appearing in our time. *Death is a master from Germany* reverberates within that community, and will not respond to the most subtle commentary. Recently, Wolf Biermann wrote me in response to my note reporting my conversation with Paul Celan regarding the *Death Fugue*.

Wolf Biermann can be seen as a key figure in German writing today. As the poet honoured with the Büchner Prize, the Heine Prize, the Hölderlin Prize, the National Prize (for civil courage), and other distinctions, he is far more than the singer who changed the whole atmosphere of the DDR and helped to bring down the Wall. In his breast, he '*carries the ashes of his father Dagobert Biermann murdered in Auschwitz*'; and so there is an important link which exists between these poets which is missing in most translators and critics. The *Shoah* as the *Tremendum*, an Arthur Cohen vision of its incomprehensibility, must be part of any appraisals in the twenty-first century. Biermann can draw closer to the darkness and is, in fact maimed by it:

I cannot get out of this black Shoa-Hole which the people call the Holocaust. Sometimes I succeed with my head, sometimes even with my heart . . . but never with my enchained feet. Then, the lemurs of the past and the monstrosity of my sleeping reason pull me down again . . .

I believe you, Albert, that the 'Death Fugue' already stuck in Celan's craw when it was always this black-milk-poem which is so highly celebrated. His response may well rest upon another basis, since another poet out of this nest of poets, this Bukowina . . . supplied a few but important elements to this poem [Biermann here refers to Immanuel Weisglas, now a forgotten poet but a class-mate and friend of Celan] . . .

Who knows, I don't, whether the enthusiasm of the Germans for Paul Celan is not particularly great, because one can wash oneself white with the 'black milk'.

I cannot see this as an accusation, even when other writers, notably Claire Goll, fighting for her husband Iwan Goll, also see something in Celan

which 'belongs' to others. The fact remains that there were many from the Bukowina (Paul Celan met Weisglas in the home of Rose Ausländer, also deserving of mention) who should be recalled at this time. What cannot be ignored is that Celan was a giant among his contemporaries, and that poetry itself depends upon the conversations among the writers, upon recognising other visions but writing with the special genius burned into the poet's soul. I often think of James Berryman (one of my teachers for a short time), whose greatest sonnet based itself upon the *Death Fugue* and whose tragic death echoed the departure of Paul Celan. If we say that every society destroys its prophets, we might say the same about the writers, particularly those who have tasted the black milk.

And then we come to the next generation, to the others, who try to carry Celan into contemporary language, the translators and critics. I do not think they approach Hamburger as a poet, or Felstiner as a biographer. Still, each attempt is important, is an act of *remembrancing*. If, in this issue of *European Judaism*, we remember Paul Celan thirty years after his death, we can be aware of the many dimensions which crashed together in his life, the darkness and the quest for light. We must honour his life as well as his work (and if there are Germans who dishonour his work by misusing it, so much the worse for them). Both Paul Celan and his writings live in our midst. In a review of Celan's work George Steiner (*Songs of a torn tongue: Paul Celan: Gesammelte Werke* in TLS Sept. 28, 1984, p. 1093) wrote:

... it follows that the writings of a great poet alter the surrounding fabric of general feeling and of discourse. It is not only the literary canon and the syllabus of cultural reference which are modified by the presence of a new master; it is the more diffuse but pervasive landscape of emotional and sensory recognitions, of self-representation and of the social and public code. The poems produced by a truly great poet will change certain features of the language in which they are composed. They will purify and simultaneously enrich the vocabulary ... great poetry will have provoked mutations in the evolution of the language.

On each of these counts, the poetry of Paul Celan is to be included with the very greatest of Western literature.

George Steiner speaks for all of us, as we remember Celan after thirty years, and try to offer our memories as a tribute.

II.

Occasionally, we receive translations of Paul Celan; the fact that 'definitive'

translations exist does not deter the writers. In its way, it is encouraging, proving the point that Celan speaks to the new generation as much as to his contemporaries. And so we are pleased to publish some new texts, translations by Harold Teichman, from the posthumous collection *Fadensonnen*. We appreciate the sensitive lyricism of the translation which creates its own English poem, but use the editor's license to add one note.

i.

All your seals broken? Never.

Go, line it also
With cedar, the foolscap-
skinned, eleven-
hoofed ruse:

so that the wave,
honey-far, milk-
near, if
courage move it to lament,
if lament be courage again,

so that it not
reflect the electronic
idiot, who
predigests dates
for portent-mongering
apes.

Note: 'portent-mongering apes' may give an understandable message for today, but Paul Celan's knowledge of the biblical *mene tekel u'pharsin* (which is also part of German speech), needs to be retained. Also, a matter of personal preference by this editor, Celan talks about the Electronic Idiot of today.

ii.

Pau, later
In the corners of
your eyes, stranger,
the Albigenian shadow—

after
the Waterloo Plein
to the castaway bast-shoe, to the
hawkers' indulgence-amen,

in the eternal
house-lacuna I sing you
away:

so that Baruch, who
never weeps, can
hone
the rough-edged
uncomprehended, seeing
tear
aright.

III.

IN MEMORIAM PAUL CELAN

He has gone to live in a continent
of his own making: the past.

All those years he held up his eye,
that obsidian lens by which
the dark was focused.

In the sky-split tunnels he walked,
in the Ile de la Cité,
in the blackened rose.
On the dark walls Israeli slogans
flashed their survival.

He picked up broken glass
in No-Man's-Land, where the voices
still came seeping.

And the words formed:
a sandstone
with the ripplemarks of his brain.

Now you may tease the earth with roses –
she will not speak of him.

Esther Cameron
1971