Preface

In 1992 when we began this project, our intention was to supply versions of Celan poems not yet available in English.1 Such a restriction focused our attention on Celan’s collections Fadensonnen and Atemwende. As our work progressed we added untranslated poems from Celan’s later books and retranslated a few poems already available in English, for the sake of contextual coherence (Celan’s later poems often quote, allude to, or rewrite earlier poems of his). We believe that only a wide range of translatorial approaches can do justice to a poetry as complex as Celan’s, and through our selection and method we have emphasized some of his understudied poetic virtues. Our selection bypasses many major poems of Celan’s middle period (most of those can be found in Neugroschel and Hamburger); it contains poems from a later, less known, and more opaque, elusive, or downright disturbing body of work. We hope that our selection will surprise readers—as we ourselves were surprised by the range of Celan’s imagination, by the variety of poems he was capable of writing in his last decade, and by the exquisite formal discipline of those poems (written at a time of profound personal crisis).

Out of respect for Celan’s aesthetic control and integrity, we restricted ourselves to poems for which we could find, in English, sufficiently rich or opportune poetic resources to justify publication. No one can reproduce in a language other than German Celan’s tragic relation to the language which was his instrument and life, a language that had remained silent through the horror. Like Büchner’s, his words come to us framed by those invisible quotation marks that always listen “not without fear, for something beyond themselves, beyond words.”2 The beauty, the daring, and the tragedy of Celan’s poetry cannot be comprehended merely in terms of reference. (What is “reference” in Celan?) We sought, cautiously, to create poems that follow Celan’s intentional mode (Benjamin’s Art des Meinens), and the intensity of his listening to language itself. Given the fundamentals of Celan’s poetics (phonographic, grammatical, and rhetorical), any attempt to isolate a “literal” meaning apart from those fundamentals would seriously impoverish and distort the effect of the poems, both individually and as a whole. Everything in a poem is literal, that is, made of letters, blanks, and their interrelationships on the page, and the literal is everything. Precisely this omnipresence of the letter, and the depth of Celan’s probings into the matrix of his “original” language, prohibit naive replications of line or meaning. Celan’s word order in German is quite natural, but the same linear order in English can sometimes misleadingly suggest experiments in syntax where there are none, and so drown out other features of his formal daring. In short, we often sought higher levels of fidelity than those of the word, the line, or the individual poem: Working on a fairly large body of poems allowed us to re-create, where possible in English, effects that seemed characteristic of his art as a whole, for example, Celan’s frequent use of paronymy not as an embellishing but as a structuring device, or his way of wrenching a word apart so that its parts would speak as loudly as the whole.

In the course of our sift, we threw out about a third of the approximately one hundred and fifty poems translated in all—precisely in the cases where we felt we had not advanced significantly beyond a working version of mere meaning. The admirability of a poem in its original German was a necessary but not a sufficient raison d’être for its final inclusion in this book; its conduciveness to the resources of English poetry had to meet a very high standard, too. In other words, we required of ourselves extraordinary results in the target language: Nothing short of that selectiveness seemed sufficient homage to Celan himself.

Because first and foremost we value the experience of the poetry, we decided not to print the German texts en face. Both of use were reluctant to encourage, in the process of fostering an international readership’s acquaintance with Paul Celan, too early a recourse to the kind of line-by-line comparison that fatally distracts attention from what matters first: the experience of a poem’s coursing, cumulative power. The serious scholar will

1. We had in mind such creditable collections as those published by Michael Hamburger, Joachim Neugroschel, Katharine Washburn and Margret Guillemin, and Brian Lynch and Peter Jankowsky, as well as John Felstiner’s translations and reflections on translating Celan.
have no trouble looking up the poetic originals; the serious reader will have no objection to focusing on a poem’s presence and integrity. Neither the one or the other will ever forget that, no matter how plausible a poem may sound in its target language, it remains a poem in translation, an encounter marked by surprise, ambiguity, affection, and violence.

As a mysterious paradigm of the encounter between self and other, the process of translation itself suggested the title for our enterprise. The glottis is not a thing but an interstice: the space between vocal chords. A glottal stop is, in Webster’s words, “the speech sound produced by momentary complete closure of the glottis, followed by an explosive release.” Celan uses the term to end the poem “Frankfurt, September”: “the glottal stop is breaking into song.” In this poem, each of a series of obstructions gives way to a version of expression: blindness to brilliance, flat rasters to a 3-D sweat, lamentations to open-mindedness, glottal stop to song. (One could say that the arc described in the latter instance is that from linguistic precision to poetic uncontainability.) Celan’s poetry abounds in motifs of the mother’s death in a concentration camp: she died of a wound to the throat. If utterances issue from a gaping hole, so too does blood: the place of vulnerability is also the place of poetry.

What need of Day—
To those whose Dark—hath so—surpassing Sun—
It deem it be—continually—
At the Meridian?
Emily Dickenson (#611)

Paul Celan’s own translation of Emily Dickenson are astonishingly post-emptive: Dickenson is the star he starts from, not the one he’s shooting for. Like Dickenson’s, his own is a work of opportunite attentuations—famously obscure, and famously oversimplifiable. Its polysemies arise from architectonic terseness. To replicate such arts in English, we had to bring to the occasion two quite separate sensibilities. The partnership of a European-born literary scholar-exegete and an American poet and translator brought, we believe, unusual range and resource to the enterprise. Having worked together on Celan translations now for half of our married life, we are not insensible of its status in (and perhaps as) the matrimonial tragicomedy. For where Celan combines traits of scholar and poet in a single figure, we divvy it up, or duke it out. It is in the nature of translation that it should provide a most congenial medium for contrary cooperation. In the course of our Celanian struggles we found out how often the logomania of the one was at war with the logician’s nature in the other. Effects one found diabolical the other found divine; foundings the one divined, the other bedeviled. Where one’s headlights were trained for clarification, the other loved the half-lights. If one read first and foremost through the lens of intellectual history and literary precedent, the other was big on immediacy’s intricacies, the patterns of rhetoric, rhetorics of image: parallels, counterpoises, serial effects. Our dispositions did some chiastic entwining: The poet’s analytical acuity balanced and corrected the scholar’s verbal high jinks (haunted by his memory of having once been a translator of James Joyce). We were of several minds; we were consoled to know that so too was Celan. Ultimately the domestic battles between reason and what la raison ne connaîts pas were representative of his own psychomachies: Celan wrestles with angles of both realms.

But his premises are never merely dualistic. They comprehend desert and open ocean, glacier and swamp—in hospitable landscapes that exert peculiar pressures on the human visitor. Celan can make earth itself seem an alien place. And just wait till you see Celanian space: The poems are uncommonly satel-lit, mother-shipped, moon-probed, tele-commed. His eye is alert to its own instruments (like Spinoza, he sees the world through the structure of a tear) and his views assume a global curve. Passing whether across philosophy or physics, theology or military logistics, his eye takes due note of the sensual details, zooming from electron microscopy’s expanses all the way to the intimacies of interplanetary camerawork; from the closest big dark cells of politics or sex, all the way to the soul’s own smallest far-flung star.

Among the jargons at his casual disposal are those of jurisprudence and...

3. As John Felstiner puts it, “in translating, as in parody, critical and creative activity converge. The fullest reading of a poem gets realized moment by moment in the writing of a poem. So translation presents not merely a paradigm but the utmost case of engaged literary interpretation.”
geology, anatomy and neurophysiology, nautical and aeronautical navigations, heavy industry and manufacturing, biotech and electronics, cabalistic esoterica, philological finesses. You can find, in these poetic reliquaries, such odd bedfellows as karst and carpel, korbel and syncope, saxifrages and sporangia, raised bogs and swan ponds. There are brain mantles, nerve cells, auditory canals, X-rays. There are conveyor belts and pressurized helmets, mine shafts and shower rooms. Lines of communication are bundled with tricks of synapse; mainstays can’t be untied; brain-waves are made in rain-pools. Celan has a lot of gray matter in his hold, and he’s bailing like mad. (Surely he understood Beckett’s definition of tears as “liquefied brain.”)

For all the otherworldliness of these poems, there’s a distinctively Celanian atmosphere. Ominous with flashing and floating signs, ashen words and sinking letters, numerals blown about in wind, it sometimes seems a domain of gamblers, Kabbalists, palm-readers, jugglers and tightrope walkers: domains of oddities and omens. There are whiffs of the famously biographical topoi of the camps (the gas and shower facilities, the dishes of the dead); evocations of his murdered mother, severance at every throat and windpipe. It would be easy for biographizing sensibility to read his literary aporias into only that connection. But all is not so easily stylizable: consider, for example, the fierce array of female figures in the poems, especially of the darker muses: venomous vamps, festering fecundities. (Among the features of a Celanian carnality are its undermined grounds—or underground mind: The roots of the sexual seem to be set in moist mephitic places for which the poet feels, as often as not, an undisguised disgust. Look at the corrupted love song he calls “Haut Mal”—in which he apostrophizes his black-tongued, foul-mouthed, all-but-coprophagic mate. It’s a poem that begins in soot and sex, and ends in sacrilege. It’s so illicit it’s delicious.) Words may be “dirty” precisely because of the mud in man’s mouth: Man is a creature of soil, whether proceeding from dust to dust—or from the lightning bolt to the puddle.

Having relegated the hermeneutic particulars of allusion and side-reading to our notes (at the back of the book), we’ll mention here only a few of the force-fields in Celan-land that from the very first attracted our explorer-instincts, the ones that made Celanian realms seem crucial to a reader today. (Already in mid-century Celan was seeding the poems with millennial references. Like Dickinson, perhaps he sensed the proleptic nature of the work a brilliant poetry performs, creating a readership the poet will not live to see.) Celan himself refers to his work as a kind of “spectral analysis”—a scientific term that does not for a moment diminish the mysteries of its application to (and as) poetry. It is a peculiar sort of sensory materialization one finds in lines like these: “white, white, white / like paint on pickets / the laws line up / and march right in.” (In German the word “white” is only a whisper away from the first-person present form of the verb “know,” thus from the shades of gray matter.) In another poem, gray-greenishness is “dug out” from a well—a characteristic materialization of the search for something beyond the evidentiary surfaces. If Celan’s a spiritual seeker, he’s doing it with dredges, shovels, mining equipment, scoops, claws, and light-probes, examining body and mind for physical evidence of God, to materialize whose name would be idolatry. Elsewhere emotions are gouged from a landscape as nominalized color (“gray-white of sheer / excavated feeling”). It’s the mind that does the feeling. The hand is all eyes.

At times, the landscapes of man and mind and language seem synonymous. The remarkers may be moved, the markers may float (even continents and anchors shift; there are forms of tug and barge for moving meaning), but at the bottom of it all, past the shells and slimes of ultimate (or originary things), there’s something unspeakable.

Sometimes the Celanian pool is a stone-gray surface (across which felt and faithful swans may steer their way). On one poem’s stone surface appears lettering, beneath which Celan imagines a “deep brother-letter,” to put us in several minds at once: of lapidary inscription’s role in human memory, and also of the prospective (and projective) force of language itself, making its attempts on the timeless. From the surface folds or levees of the stream of consciousness, we should not then be surprised to find ourselves fallen into the fossae (or ditches) of the brain, where anatomical nomenclature places the “calamus scriptorius”—near the center that controls breath: These are characteristic Celanian premises: the stone in the head, the stab-wound in the throat, words that hurt. Stich⁴ is stab in German, but it means a line of verse in Russian (Celan jocously referred to himself as a Russian poet in the realm of German infidels). In German, the word for letter (the letter of a

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⁴. From the Greek *stikhos*; hence “distich” and other prosodic terms of Greek origin.
word) is Buchstab (book-staff). The Runic sticks and stones that hurtle across these networks of etymology and morphology are dear, in every sense, to a Celanian temperament: As a poet-philosopher, he suffers the materiality of language; as a son and husband and father, he suffers the dematerializations of love. Through the polyglot exile’s several homes (German, Rumanian, Russian, French, and English) wander many ghost-guests and gists. They amount to a memory, and morphology, of meaning.

Even in the strictest technical vocabularies he frequents, Celan favors those concerned with seeing things through, or seeing through them: he is attracted to the lensgrinder’s craft (perhaps because of Spinoza), and to the realms of X-ray technicians (a ghostly science if ever there was one). What happens to the metaphysician after Dachau is a famous question. What happens to the physician after Mengele is not so often asked. But it is that question that drives the closer to the heart of Celan’s excruciations. He’s a serious sensualist, in whose hands spirit’s question must be retooled for ever more exquisite senses of sense, ever more painful instrumentalities. However fundamentally mental may be Celan’s vertiginous moves across space and time, he’s never any the less fascinated by the material markers of the moved mind: its Doppler effects and red shifts. Suffering has a cerebral cortex; the grim reaper sports a brain mantle. Grau means gray, in German; but Grauen means horror.

“Acephalic by choice” he calls the Thou-less tribe. His outcry is of inwit, a nightmare’s EEG. God’s rod and staff, far from being a comfort, are rather (like retinal structures and letter-formations) made to make us see: see with the mind’s eye, if no other—the same eye, says Meister Eckhart, through which God sees us. The infinite sands come to be ground through the hourglass; where time is contained, it also runs out. The watch-crystal gives its name to a form of quaking bog; the message in the bottle is stoppered; the wind-rose (a compass at sea) is disoriented. Under glass, the eye looks back: It sees that it cannot see. “Right away, / the teardrop took shape—.” “your destination the one / precise crystal.”

Paul Celan died by drowning. He did it not just reflexively, but transitively: He died by drowning himself. As figures of flotation and immersion recur throughout the poems, particularly those that refer to writing, it is natural that—like so much else in the Celanian legend—those figures come to seem fateful proleptic. (As subjects and objects of our own regards, readers and writers of our own lives, we hold out as long as we can—like “dreamproof tugs—each / with a vulture-claw / towing a part / of the still- / unsunken sign.”) Paul Celan’s attraction for readers today may be deeply ideogrammatical: He made himself a glancing stroke, a winking wave, withdrawal’s sign. As waters rise toward iris-level, as the eye-globe is covered, a greatening force of mind informs the sensual field. In the face of grief, in the light of death, in the vale of tears, what does intellect do? Of sinking things, thinking sings.

H M, N P
Seattle, 1999

Translating Paul Celan
The materials on the following pages are reproduced from these sources:

Translations & notes

Other translations


With wine and being lost, with
less and less of both:

I rode through the snow, do you read me,
I rode God far—I rode God
near, he sang,

it was
our last ride over
the hurried humans.

They cowered when
they heard us
overhead, they
wrote, they
lied our neighing
into one of their image-ridden languages.

Many of Celan’s later poetological studies are informed by the tension between voice
(the traditional medium of the lyric) and inscription. Voice, by definition, is single
and always already articulated in a specific tongue; a grapheme, on the other hand,
can be shared by several writing conventions. Celan’s own linguistic predicament
gives this commonplace a twist: All the languages he used were, in some sense, foreign (Lacoue-Labarthe); none could provide the security of an indubitably voiced
lyric subjectivity. Hence, many poems contain what one might call *translingual
effects*. For example, in the poem at hand, *Neige* means “remainder,” “end,” “dregs”
in German; the “same” grapheme in French spells the word “snow.” The phrase is
hardly over when snow literally befalls the poem in line 3. To the English eye, *neige*
also moves in the nearness of “neigh” (God’s “song”!) and its homonym “nay.” The
latter, retranslated into a German verb (*neigen*), brings us back, with a difference,
almost to the place where the translingual steeple-chase started.

A corresponding tension obtains between presentation and representation.
The representers, that is, those who busily and fearfully make sense out of the
sheer music of sound (animal? divine?), are exposed as liars. One of the poem’s
drafts suggests the proximity, for Celan, of things understandable (*verständlich*) and
things imaged or illustrated (*bebildert*). Against the attempt to contain the music in
understandable transcription or visual images, the poem broadcasts its iconoclastic
resistance to reason and pours Nietzschean scorn on the attempt to trap art—or
divinity—in images. Translators, among others, thus encounter a troubling
image of their enterprise; hence our commitment, here and elsewhere, as
much to a translatorial reconstruction of meaning as to the phono-graphic
fundamentals of Celan’s poems.

German *Wein*, wine, is paronymically very near to *weinen*, cry, weep; with
regard to the poem’s poetology it’s worthwhile to remember Joel 1.5: “Awake, ye
drunkards and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine;
for it is cut off from your mouth.” It’s also noteworthy that Celan’s poem quotes
from (alludes to) the translation that institutes modern German, Luther’s Bible;
namely, from Jeremiah 25. And here translation runs into an aporia: to translate a
translation is not to translate precisely the fact that it is a translation.

Bei Wein und Verlorenheit, bei
beider Neige:

ich ritt durch den Schnee, hörst du,
ich ritt Gott in die Ferne—die Nähe, er sang,
es war
unser letzter Ritt über
die Menschen-Hürden.

Sie duckten sich, wenn
sie uns über sich hörten, sie
schreiben, sie
liogen unser Gewieher
um in eine
ihrer bebilderten Sprachen.
WITH WINE AND LOSTNESS, with
the dregs of both:

I rode through the snow, do you hear,
I rode God into the distance—the nearness, he sang,
it was
our last ride over
human hurdles.

They ducked when
they heard us overhead, they
wrote, they
lied our whinnying
into one of
their painted lingos.

(John Felstiner)

OVER WINE AND LOSTNESS, over
the running-out of both:

I rode through the snow, do you hear,
I rode God into farness—nearness, he sang,
it was
our last ride over
the human hurdles.

They ducked when
they heard us above their heads, they
wrote, they
lied our whinnying
into one
of their be-imaged languages.

(Michael Hamburger)
**THREESOME, FOURSOME**

In the dooryard, puckered mint,  
you pucker back, you leave a hint.

Mind this hour, it is your time,  
mine the mouth and yours the rhyme.

Mine’s the mouth, though it is still,  
full of words that will not fill.

Some spell narrowness, some breadth,  
all recall the brush with death.

I make one, and we make three,  
one half bound, one half free.

In the dooryard, puckered mint,  
you pucker back, you leave a hint.

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**SELBDRITT, SELBVIERT**

Krauseminze, Minze, krause,  
vor dem Haus hier, vor dem Hause.

Diese Stunde, deine Stunde,  
 ihr Gespräch mit meinem Munde.

Mit dem Mund, mit seinem Schweigen,  
mit den Worten, die sich weigern.

Mit den Weiten, mit den Engen,  
mit den nahen Untergängen.

Mit mir einem, mit uns dreien,  
halb gebunden, halb im Freien.

Krauseminze, Minze, krause,  
vor dem Haus hier, vor dem Hause.

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**BY THREES, BY FOURS**

Curly mousetail, mousetail, curly,  
here’s the housecat, hunting early.

Now’s the time, and it’s your time now,  
time for chatting with my rhyme now.

Here’s a mouth and here’s its quelling,  
here are words, hear them rebelling.

Open spaces, narrow scrapings,  
near catastrophes we’re facing.

You and me too, then we threesome,  
half in fetters, half in freedom.

Curly mousetail, mousetail, curly,  
here’s the housecat, hunting early.

(John Felstiner)

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The poem is a variation on a Romanian folksong pattern. Our translation foregrounds the self-reflexive language of the original. The poem is also part of Celan’s poetic dialogue with Nelly Sachs, in Die Niemandsrose.
Pain, the Syllable

It gave itself into your hand: a You, deathless, where all self encountered itself. There was a vortex of voices without words, empty forms, and all went into them, mixed, unmixed and mixed again.

And numbers were interwoven with the Innumerable. A one, a thousand and what before and after was larger than itself, and smaller, and full-blown, and turning back and forth into the germinating Never.

Forgotten things grasped at things to be forgotten, earthparts, heartparts swam, they sank and swam. Columbus, mindful of the immortelle, the mother-flower, murdered mast and sail. And all put out to sea, exploratory, free, and the wind-rose faded, shed its leaves, and an ocean flowered into shape and sight, in the blacklight of a compass gone berserk. In coffins, urns, canopies the children woke up—Jasper, Agate and Amethyst—nations, tribes and kinfolk, a blind

This poem not only engages in dialogue Rilke’s majestic Tenth Elegy but re-cants and re-spells he entire tradition of visionary poetry in the West, its premises and means, its meanings, and the meaningless. (The initial letters of the nouns in the original title spell an ominous SS.)

The poem declares its ontological search with its very first words. German Es Gab (“it gave”) is also the idiom for the gift of being, a dative dynamic missing from the English “there was.”

The flower of Columbus’s quest is the Colchicum autumnale (erroneously known, in English, as the autumn crocus), a flower with an emblematic presence in Celan, on account of its poetic genealogy and suggestive Latin and German names. Colchicum comes from Colchis, the mythical land of the Golden Fleece, and was associated with the black arts of its princess, Medea (it contains a poisonous alkaloid); later, the troubadours associated it with the menace of the Lady’s eyes; in modern times, Apollinaire, whose poetry Celan cherished and translated, revived the legend in “Les Colchiques.” The German name of the colchium means, literally, “timeless” (hence its importance in a poem that explores history’s beginnings and ends); it is also known as the “Naked Whore” and “Naked Virgin” (both latent in connection with Columbus). As an ambiguous emblem of the entire European poetic tradition, the colchium reflects Celan’s own ambivalence vis-à-vis what he inherits and is outcast from. Just a few lines later Celan explores—indeed, deflowers, reflores— the anagogic Rosa Mundi. To capture some of the resonances in Celan’s poem, we used another (unfortunately, innocent) flower, the immortelle, hoping that the markers of time, death, and privation/loss (todlos—Zeitlose; deathless—immortelle) will thicken the translation’s texture in a manner suggestive of the original’s richness.

At midpoint Celan constructs a complex spatio-temporal figure, conflating rose season (fall) and time of day (nightfall). Furthermore, taking advantage of the term “wind-rose” (the face of the compass), Celan projects an image of complete loss of orientation: The wind-rose has lost its points/petals, become black/blank, so the instrument of orientation is unruly and useless. And yet the burst of nightbloom is a luminous dawn. Black light is, after all, a light, a contralight (backlight)—the light of letters? As the poem’s further progress indicates, this nautico-stellar wordscape recalls Mallarmé’s Master, the Septentrion above his shipwrecked head, but Celan doesn’t seem content with the ironic consolations of constellar art.

The precious stones that follow the imagery of new day refract a variety of Judeo-Christian visionary texts and ancient rituals (Egyptian burial practices); for example, in Revelations 21, the New Jerusalem has twelve foundations of precious stone, each kind of stone corresponding to one of the twelve tribes. But for Celan the Apocalypse (Auschwitz, the end of time) has already occurred; the annihilation that makes his poetry possible also makes meaning well impossible—casts a shadow on any attempt to articulate a new world vision.

The last lines of the original perform a characteristic Celanian stutter, spelling—and stumbling at—the incommensurability between pain and articulate language. Pain (a word conspicuously absent from the body of the poem) gnaws away at the ends and means of poetic inscription—even as it constitutes (spells) the poem’s condition of (im)possibility. In German this stutter (buch-, buch-, buch-/stabiete, stabiete) follows the bimorphic structure of the verb buchstabieren (from Buchstabe, “letter”), which means “to spell.” The ending also recalls Mallarmé’s puns “l’alphabet des astres” (in “Quant au livre”), the “alphabet of stars,” which sounds like “alphabet disastre,” and “sur les cendres des astres” (in “Igitur”). The density of self-reference and language invocation in the poem’s finale suggested a number of paragogic possibilities (e.g., a litter of little alphabeasts in the alphabys), but the question was to find a rendition in tune with Celan’s pain-ful economy.
DIE SILBE SCHMERZ

Es gab sich Dir in die Hand:
ein Du, todlos,
an dem alles Ich zu sich kam. Es fuhren
wortfreie Stimmen rings, Leerformen, alles
ging in sie ein, gemischt
und entmischt
und wieder
gemischt.

Und Zahlen waren
mitverwoben in das
Unzählbare. Eins und Tausend und was
davor und dahinter
grösser war als es selbst, kleiner, aus-
gereift und
rück- und fort-
verwandelt in
keimendes Niemals.

Vergessenes griff
nach Zu-Vergessendem, Erdteile, Herzteile
schwammen,
sanken und schwammen. Kolumbus,
die Zeit-
lose im Aug, die Mutter-
Blume,
mordete Masten und Segel. Alles fuhr aus,
frei,
entdeckerisch,
blühte die Windrose ab, blätterte
ab, ein Weltmeer
blühte zuhauf und zutag, im Schwarzlicht
der Wildsteuerstriche. In Särgen,

Urnen, Kanopen
erwachten die Kindlein
Jaspis, Achat, Amethyst—Völker,
Stämme und Sippen, ein blinder

THE SYLLABLE PAIN

It gave itself into your hand:
a Thou, deathless,
on which every I came to itself. Wordfree
voices spun about, void forms, everything
passed into them, mixed
and unmixed
and again
mixed.

And numbers were
woven into the
unnumberable. One and a thousand, and what
was larger than itself
in front and behind, smaller, full
ripened and
back and forth
transformed into a
budding Never.

Forgotten reached
for To-be-Forgotten, land masses, heart masses
swarm,
sank and swam. Columbus,
his eye on the meadow
saffron, the mother
flower,
murdered masts and sails. Everything fared forth,
free,
exploringly,
the compass rose faded, its petals
fell, an ocean
bloomed by heaps and bounds in the blacklight
of wild rudder strokes. In coffins,

urns, canopic jars
little babes awoke:
jasper, agate, amethyst—peoples,
races and tribes, a blind

(John Felstiner)
“Frankfurt, September” is a study in modern art’s origins, means, and ends: On the one side, we encounter the institutions and avatars of culture, interpretation, and commerce (the title points to the international book fair in Frankfurt); on the other, one artist’s unsayable pain and privacy.

Freud, who is explicitly named, opens the show as a graven image on a screen and as an apparatus of enlightenment, metonymically displaced by his Cockchafer Dream (a.k.a. the May-beetle dream, analyzed in the chapter on condensation in The Interpretation of Dreams). The image of the insect gives us the first hint of Kafka (whose transformed Gregor Samsa is once referred to, erroneously, as a species of beetle). But before we get to Kafka’s name, we hear Kafka’s voice: “Psychology for the last time” quotes a note of Kafka’s, first published with his “Wedding Preparations in the Country” (where, incidentally, a character envies the cockchafer’s condition of life). The quote, which serves as a transition from Freud to Kafka, encapsulates Celan’s own attitude regarding psychology: He’s on record saying psychology neither explains nor excuses anything.

Celan dubs his breakfast eater a Simili-Dohle. German Dohle (jackdaw) translates Czech kavka, from which the name Kafka is derived. Connoisseurs of literary ornithology may recall this diary entry of Kafka’s: “In Hebrew my name is Amschel, like my mother’s maternal grandfather.” Celan’s name (before he anagrammatized it into Celan) was Antschel. (He was matrilineally connected with the Jewish community in Bohemia.) The bird in the poem is not the kavka itself but a kavka translated into German (the language Kafka wrote in) and a bestsellerized celebrity, to boot: in short, a displaced literary double or semblable—the situation Celan found himself in, too. Insofar as translation is yet another act of doubling and pseudonymyzation, we bared the device by doubling the double. But the fake Kafka is not the end of Kafka. Celan ends his poem by reinscribing the unignorable k’s of Kafka’s name and literary being into the poem’s penultimate word, the Kehlkopfverschlusslaut, the glottal stop said to be singing—an unheard melody, if ever there was one. In phonetics, glottal stops (or occlusives) are cough-like sounds reconstructed from Proto-Indo-European (the original sounds have been lost). Kehlkopfverschlusslaut, the German term for “glottal stop” (lit. occlusion of the head of the throat) is such a throatful that it can choke even a native. Kafka’s last days were an agony of emaciation and unsayable pain, his larynx closed down by infection. Yet the same closed larynx sang, with mortal humor, in his last masterpiece “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk.”

**FRANKFURT, SEPTEMBER**

Blind wall-space, bearded by brilliances. A dream of a cockchafer sheds light on it.

Behind that, raster of lamentations, Freud’s forehead opens up:

the tear compacted of silence breaks out in a proposition: “Psychology for the last time.”

The pseudo-jackdaw (cough-caw’s double) is breakfasting.

The glottal stop is breaking into song.
Blinde, lichtbärtige Stellwand.
Ein Maikäfertraum leuchtet sie aus.

Dahinter, klagegerastert,
tut sich Freud's Stirn auf,
die draussen hartgeschwiegene Träne
schiesst an mit dem Satz:
"Zum letztenmal Psycho-
logie."

Die Simili-
Dohle frühstückt.

Der Kehlkopfverschlusslaut
singt.

Blind, aureole-
bearded hoarding.
A maybeetle dream illumines it.

Behind, rastered by lament,
Freud's gaping brow,
the lamina-
mute tear
bulletins:
'For the last
time psycho-
logy.'

The mimic
daw
breaks fast.

The glottal stop
sings.

(Ian Fairley)
Staged happenstance, the signs all unconsigned to wind, the number multiplied, wrongs wreathed, the Lord a closet-fugitive, raincaller, eyeballer, as lies turn blazing sevens, knives turn flatterers, crutches perjurors, U-under this world, the ninth one is already tunneling, O Lion, sing the human song of tooth and soul, the two hard things.

The curtailed U- at the poem’s very center recalls Celan’s statement in “The Meridian,” that the poem should conduct its topological quest in the light of U-topia (hyphenation emphasizes the end’s nowhereness). Celan’s emphasis on u-topia as an un-place should be read against utopia in place (Nazi, Soviet, or any other). As for this poem, its first four lines sketch a dys-topia in the light of which a utopian place is no longer conceivable even in negative terms, so that what remains is the sheer negativity of the U- (for the reader of philosophical prefixes) or a sheer howl. Many late Celanian poems, from *Fadensonnen* on, are devoted to satirical explorations of the modern dys-topia (these poems were written at the height of the German economic miracle). The apostrophized “Lion” may be Isaac Luria (1534–72), a legendary figure in Jewish mysticism, called Ha-Ari (Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac), The Lion, author of The Tree of Life (recorded by his disciples).

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*GEZINKT DER ZUFALL, unzerweht die Zeichen, die Zahl, vervielfacht, ungerecht umblüht, der Herr ein Flüchtignaher, Regnender, der zuäugt, wie Lügen sieben-lodern, Messer schmeicheln, Krücken Meineid schören, U-unter dieser Welt wählt schon die neunte, Löwe, sing du das Menschenlied von Zahn und Seele, beiden Härten.*

*CHANCE IS CHEAT, the signs unscattered, the number, multiplied, unrightly inflorescent, the Lord is passing near, He rains, He eyes, as lies flame seven-fold, knives connive, staffs swear manath, U-under this world mines the Ninth, lion, you must sing man’s song of tooth and soul, each adamantine.*

(Ian Fairley)
Who rules?

Our life—color-beleaguered, number-beset.

The clock wastes time with the comet,
the knights are anglers,
names cover frauds with gold-leaf,
the hooded jewelweed numbers the dots in stone.

Pain as a snail’s shadow.
I hear it’s not getting later at all.
Here Bogus and Boring, back in the saddle, set the pace.

Instead of you, there are halogen lamps.
Instead of our homes, light-traps, terminus-temples.

Diaphanous, black,
the juggler’s pennant
is at its lowest point.

The hard-won Umlaut in the unword:
your light reflected: tunnel-shield for a local shade of thought.

The poem’s polemic with color and number, the perceivable and the measurable, calls attention to its quarrel with the traditional means of poetic expression, Celan’s own early poetic output included.

The black pennant in the penultimate stanza entropes the poet’s sign as a celestial body: A circumpolar star “transiting” the meridian above the pole is in “upper culmination”; the opposite or lowest point is its “lower culmination”; when Venus and Mercury transit across the Sun’s disk they appear as dark/black spots against the sun’s face. The grotesque figure of the poet as juggler or minstrel appears in several of Celan’s poems, and so does the (anarchist) emblem of the black flag. German Gösch (small bow-flag) has an etymological history a Celan wouldn’t miss: It comes from Geuse, which at one time meant a rebel against Spanish rule (in the Netherlands), but in the course of the sixteenth century came to mean “beggar.” See also Celan’s poem “Shibboleth.”

The tunnel shield evoked at the end is a cast-iron cylinder used in large-scale tunneling. Mining, drilling, tunneling—the slow, subterranean groping in the dark toward the You or Thou (as opposed to the unquestioned clarity of garish/false identity)—constitute quintessential acts of negative capability (i.e., poetry) in Celan. (The metapoetic significance of such metaphors goes back to the German romantics, but Celan’s frequent use of unpoetic technical vocabularies defamiliarizes the traditional topos.) Tunnel shield in German is Grabskild; because the first meaning of Grab is “grave,” an innocent eye would be tempted to read the word as if it meant a grave plaque—which of course it does, in terms of its larger, poetic sense.
Wer herrscht?

Farbenbelagert das Leben, zahlenbedrängt.

Die Uhr
stiehlt sich die Zeit beim Kometen,
die Degen
angeln,
der Name
vergoldet die Finten,
das Springkraut, behelmt,
beziffert die Punkte im Stein.

Schmerz, als Wegschneckenschatten.
Ich höre, es wird gar nich später.
Fad und Falsch, in den Sätteln,
messen auch dieses hier aus.

Kugellampen statt deiner.
Lichtfallen, grenzgöttisch, statt
unsrer Häuser.

Die schwarzdiaphane
Gauklergösch
in unterer
Kulmination.

Der erkämpfte Umlaut im Unwort:
dein Abglanz: der Grabschild
eines der Denkschatten
hier.

Who rules?

Besieged by colours, life, bestead by ciphers.

The dial
steals time from the comet,
the blades
tilt,
the name
gilds their feints,
the helmeted touch-me-not
numbers periods in stone.

Pain, as a limax shadow.
I hear it does not get later.
Saddle-fast, the fade and false
here measure even this.

Bulletlamps instead your own.
Light-traps, terminal, instead
our dwellings.

The black diaphanous
juggler's jack
in abject
zenith.

The trophied umlaut in the unword:
your reflex: graveplate
of an apostrophic shadow
here.

(Ian Fairley)
Spasms, I love you, psalms.

O semensmeared one, feelwalls
depth in the gulch of you exult,

You, eternal, uneternized,
eternitized, uneternal you,
selah,

into you, into you
I sing the scarscore of the bone-staff,

O red of reds, strummed far behind
the pubic hair, in caves,

out there, round and round
the infinite non of the canon,

you throw at me the nine-times-
twined
and dripping wreath
of trophy teeth.

Spasms (Spasmen), psalms (Psalmen), and semen (Samen) constitute an even closer triad in German than in English; the intimacy of creation and procreation in the letter is the genetic mark of the “Jewish strain” (Felstiner’s term). In the poem at hand, we have an extreme example of blasphemous but nonetheless sacred revisionism in that the religious bond between psalmist and god is framed as sexual intercourse. For Celan, this act of oral intercourse is nothing other than a fundamental ars poetica—just as it was for David (the exultant psalmist’s sexual member bears the mark of God). Celan conjoins the second-person pronoun with the image of a narrow chasm (Du-Schlucht: note the cavernous assonance) in a figure that can be said to represent the ultimate Engführung or straining of language—from speaker to collocutor, from human throat to divine abyss. The pressure exerted upon language in this narrow and perilous passage produces a poetics of paronymy, exemplified here in what may be the quintessential paronymic pair, psalm-spasm. Every item of the original poem has been subjected to this pressure, which drives language beyond language.

It goes without saying that there are more ways than one (and none) to render the vertiginous double chiasmus in the third stanza. In the original Celan plaays with the grammatical form “eternal” and “uneternal” both as adjectives (positive and negative) and past participles (from the verb “eternalize” or “eternitize”); in addition, Celan’s play generates a host of satellite senses: Strarting with 6 (eternal), we get verewigt, which means “eternitized” but also “dead,” unewig (“uneternal”), and verunewigt. The last neologism suggests “uneternitized” or, perhaps, de-eternitized. However, insofar as verewigt can mean “dead” and Verewigung “death,” the negative verunewigt also conjures up the opposite of “dead,”—a perfectly inextricable tangle of life and death, time and timelessness.

“Red of reds” is a conjectural rendition of Celan’s “German” Rotrot, based on the form of the Hebrew superlative.

In a “psalm,” Celan’s geharft appears to be related to the psalmist’s musical instrument (harp or lyre); hence “strummed” (from the Greek psalein, to pluck/twang a stringed instrument). The homonym of geharft, meaning screened (or sifted, strained), also makes sense in this context in that it participates in a key Celanian chain of metaphors derived from alchemy: gold-seed/semen-grain, etc.
Spasms, I love you, psalms,
palpate walls deep in the You-cleft
jubilate, O painted with seed,
Ever, you are nevered,
forevered, Notever, you,
hei,
in you, into you
I sing the honestave rasp,
reddest red, harped far behind
the maidenhair, in every hollow,
without, about
the infinite canon of no kind,
you cast me the nine times
twisted, spittled
deer tooth crown.

(Ian Fairley)
Eyeshot’s island, broken
into heartschrift
in the quick of night, faintly lit
by an ignition key.

Even this seemingly
starstudded altitude
is overcrowded
with destination-driven forces.

The wide-open stretch we longed for
hits us head-on.

Here and elsewhere Celan’s idiosyncratic compounds (herzschriftgekrümt, Zündschlüsselschimmer, etc.) pose an intractable problem. In English compounds are a poeticism redolent of the 1890s. Even in German where compounding is a common language pattern, and where there is a tradition of Baroque compounding, Celan’s compounds are exorbitant; one might even suspect his excesses of vindictive intentions. His compounds often destroy reference as such and focus on what makes it possible for language to exceed its instrumental and/or utilitarian uses. It is, of course, possible to follow Celan to the letter and do excessive compounding in English (we have G. M. Hopkins), but that leads nowhere because translation changes the ground from and against which Celanian compounding derives its power and inventiveness. Compounds thus leave a choice between bad and worse solutions. Most translators (into English and, especially into French) choose to render Celan’s compounds as genitives, such as (the) A of B. We, too, have had to resort to that solution more often than we’d like.

The problem is threefold: To begin with, in English the compound frequently levels out or parataxes the relative grammatical values of the two words conjoined, so it’s harder than in German intuitively to hypotaxize components. Second, despite the flexibility afforded by the genitive in English (conflating the subjective and the objective genitive), the parts of a Celanian compound often do not relate the way tenor and vehicle are supposed to in a genitival metaphor. To turn a compound into a genitive entails a whole metaphysics (of unambiguous causation, part/whole disposition, etc.); yet many Celanian compounds seem designed precisely to obstruct facile reference and to unsettle any realistic metaphysics. Finally, in the morphology of Celan’s poetic manner there is a clear movement away from analytical genitival metaphors (of the type the-A-of-B), which are quite frequent in his early work, and toward (synthetic) compounds (preponderant in the later work). A regular recourse to analytical genitives would thus distort something very important—fundamental—in his development as a poet.
DIE HERZSCHRIFTGEKRÜMELTE Sichtinsel
mitnachts, bei kleinem
Zündschlüsselschimmer.

Es sind zuviel
zielwütige Kräfte
auch in dieser
scheinbar durchsternten
Hochluft

Die ersehnte Freimeile
prallt auf uns auf.

THE SIGHTED ISLE’S heartscript moraine
at midnight, by the little light
of the ignition key.

There are too many
powers enthralled of an end
in even this
to all appearance starpierced
ether.

The suspired free mile
hurtles upon us.

(Ian Fairley)
HAUT MAL

O irredeemable
beloved, sleep-attacked,
tainted by the gods:
your tongue is sooty,
your urine black,
your stool a bilious liquefaction,
like myself,
you use
foul language;
you put one foot before the other,
lay one hand atop the other,
burrow into goatskin,
consecrate
my cock.

"Haut mal" is the old French designation of epilepsy. (English vocabulary distinguishes between “grand mal” and “petit mal” attacks.) Celan exploits the correlation between this “high” or “divine” malady and the ancient notion of poetic inspiration, and B. Badiou has traced the poem’s origin to Celan’s reading of Hippocrates:

I do not believe that the “Sacred Disease” is any more divine or sacred than any other disease [...] nevertheless, it has been regarded as a divine visitation by those who, being only human, view it with ignorance and astonishment [...] It is my opinion that those who first called this disease “sacred” were the sort of people we now call witch-doctors, faith-healers, quacks and charlatans. These are exactly the people who pretend to be very pious and to be particularly wise. By invoking a divine element they were able to screen their own failure to give suitable treatment and so called this a “sacred” malady to conceal their ignorance of its nature. [They picked] their phrases carefully, prescribing purifications and incantations along with abstinence from baths [...] their patients were forbidden to wear black because it is a sign of death, to use goat skin blankets or to wear goat skins, nor were they allowed to put one foot on the other or one hand on the other [...] none of the inhabitants of the interior of Lybia can possibly be healthy seeing that they sleep on goat skins and eat goat meat [...] I believe that human bodies cannot be polluted by a god; the basest object by the most pure [...]. Like other diseases it’s hereditary. (Hippocratic Writings, W. N. Mann tr., pp. 237–240)

From its very title, the poem behaves as a polylogue: Haut and Mal are common German words (meaning “skin” and “mark,” respectively) and, even though their juxtaposition results in a somewhat strained German, the poem that follows this title is in German; the combination of Haut and Mal would recall other formations, such as Denkmal (monument) and Muttermal (birthmark). So there is almost as much incentive to construe the title in German as in French. The head graphemes seem poised in nearly perfect undecidability. (Consider further the ironic allusion to Ps. 119, “Blessed are the undefiled.”)

The figure addressed in the poem—indeed, the figure of the poem (subjective and objective genitive)—is gendered feminine in the original. (Gender is ineliminable in the German nominal system.) The reader is invited to decode this Sleeping Beauty’s identity at his or her own discretion; we tend to see the figure not as something out there the poem’s language refers to, but rather as poetry as a whole. For example, the literal “your tongue is sooty” is, paronymically, extremely close to russisch (Russian), and it was Celan himself who jocoseriously claimed he was a Russian poet exiled among German infidels. “Bilious” in German is designated with the word gallig, which suggests Celan’s language of domicile, French.

If the poem’s head is divided between two languages, its last word is inhabited by two graphemes: German Glied (member) contains the grapheme Lied (song). In a poem that deserves to be named Celan’s Song of Songs (formally, “Haut Mal” resembles the wasf, the sequential imagistic description-praise of the beloved’s body, as in Song of Solomon 4.1f and 6.14f), this paronymy could hardly be overemphasized. Celan once mentioned that his language was designed and assigned to perform a “spectral analysis of things,” to show how they are penetrated by, or fused with, other things. The poet’s things, we needn’t emphasize, are her words; his words, her things.
Haut Mal

Unentsühnte,
Schlafsüchtige,
von den Göttern Befleckte:

deine Zunge ist russig,
dein Harn schwarz,
wassergallig dein Stuhl

du führst,
wie ich,
unzüchtige Reden,

du setzt einen Fuss vor den andern,
legst eine Hand auf die andre,
schmiegst dich in Ziegenfell,

du beheiligest
mein Glied.

Haut Maul

Inexpiate she,
narcoleptic,
by the gods maculate:

your tongue is soot,
your water black
your stool is bile,

you mouth,
like me,
obscenities,

you plant one foot in front of the other,
place one hand over the other,
huddle under goathide,

you sanctify
my member.

(Ian Fairley)
The golfball growth in the neck:  
God's arithmetical brain-teaser  
for the full-head hairpiece,  
a place  
to test the one-of-a-kind chest pain, revealing 
the future, blithe as a fiber of steel.

Pöggeler relates the poem to Leibniz (who suffered from a calcification or growth in the neck and, as a Baroque-age man, wore a full-head hairpiece): Leibniz brought to an end classical metaphysics and inaugurated the calculative technical-scientific thinking of the modern world. The latter, the poem would seem to remind us, cannot reckon (with) death any more than phenomenology can see the back of its head.