

## Den Siste Poeten

*En essä om Paul Celans aska*

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The art of interpreting and commenting on a poem seems to have much in common with a Rorschach test. It is fully subjective and feeds in an uninhibited way on itself, the one association effortlessly giving rise to another, seemingly without rhyme or reason. In short an analysis can never be falsified, and worse what cannot be falsified puts little demand on the imagination, as there is no need to dodge a critic. And why, asks the innocent reader do we need an interpretation of a poem, why could not the poet write in a straightforward way rather than to play hide-and-seek with the reader? Why make a cross-word puzzle out of it all, except to indulge in innocent play. But if so why take poetry so seriously, if it merely belongs to the puzzles to be found at the recreational pages relegated to the end of a magazine or newspaper?

The comments, although uninformed and revealing a certain autistic tone-deafness, are nevertheless not to be pushed aside and ignored, a critic should always keep them in mind as a remainder that the line that separates the sublime from the ridiculous may indeed be very thin at times. With this caveat we may proceed in earnest. First we may dispense with the seeming paradox that an interpretation and explication of a poem does not render it superfluous. A poem is not just something that is sent from the source to the target in an encoded form and needs to be decoded, even if an analysis of a poem seems to indicate that this is the case. As an example we may consider the rather trivial statement supplied by the computer scientist Hofstadter in his book of self-reference *par excellence* Gödel-Escher-Bach: 'Try to run around your house not thinking of a wolf'. The meaning of the statement is immediately clear to the effect that even a trivial task may be impossible to perform by the very act of being demanded. One notes that all the specific details such as 'run around the house' and 'wolf' can easily be replaced, and that the meaning transcends the particular situation. However, if you would like to formulate it in more abstract terms, you run into definite problems. On one hand that task as well appears almost impossible and even if successfully achieved the result would lack the vividness and immediate comprehensibility of the concrete and particular manifestation. The same phenomenon is at play in mathematics in which a simple strategic example is far more successful in conveying understanding than a general, formally impeccable definition of a concept, although the latter is designed to cover all the aspects. This seems to point at a basic aspect of human cognition, namely the need to build up understanding from bottom-up with meanings implied rather than imposed. Thus a simple statement as above about not thinking of the wolf, may lead to reflection, attempts at more general formulations, as well as producing alternative renderings. If those are put down, they may be seen as the analogue of an interpretation of a poem, producing a wide cloud of associations and remarks, which in no way is intended as a replacement, thus not a

decoding in the technical sense in connection with secret conveyance of information, but constitute a documentation of an engaged reading. The trivial example naturally points to a similar kind of examples which in the context of poetry may seem a bit frivolous, namely the joke. The joke too conveys in condensed and particular form an enraging thought. A joke too can be explained, on the other hand a joke that has to be explained is thought to have failed, The whole point of a joke, and what produces that particular release, some may want to liken to a mental orgasm, is that the reader works it out for himself, the flash of sudden understanding can never be imposed, at most provoked. Thus jokes are presented but seldom explained let alone being subjected to lengthy commentaries, that would have something ridiculous about it and seen as a joke on its own (and thus barred from repetition). Thus in the case of jokes an interpretation and explication is definitely not a substitute. Now having brought in mathematics above, it is natural to touch upon another analogy to poetry, namely the mathematical formula. The mathematical formula is indeed a very condensed expression, which hides in itself unsuspected riches. One may only think of Maxwell's equations or those of Einstein, which when unfolded reveal rich worlds. However, such analogies are ultimately misleading, because jokes and Hofstadter statement above are not really analogies to poems, but actual embryos; while the mathematical formula is a well-developed entity which has significantly diverged from the poem. The analogies may serve some purposes nevertheless, assuring the mathematician that he is a poet at heart, while suggesting to the poet that he is a scientist in mind. In other words, if an explication would be called for, that the mathematician has a heart and the poet a mind.

Thus what is the poem? It is something very specific and concrete a thing in the world, and as such it has both form and content. The form is more or less obvious and is basically physical, while the content is far less palpable and entirely mental. The form may be thought of the hardware and cannot be tampered with, just as paintings are unique entities consisting of pigments of color applied to canvas, and any copy is by definition a fake and thus, at least from a financial point of view worthless; the wording of a poem may not be changed, although copies may exist but not paraphrases, the original handwritten version (as far as it ever existed) is more of a curiosity and adds in principle nothing to the poem. Thus in particular poems tend to be memorized, unlike prose, whose exact form we seldom recall, only the meaning, which invariably is somehow paraphrased in our minds. If a piece of prose is actually committed to memory in its exact formulation, one may even argue that it is in fact poetry in spirit. Something to copy and put on the wall, like a painting.

This book is not so much a standard biography, although some basic and informative details of the life of the poet are initially supplied, but a documentation of an extensive reading of Celan, which according to the author has been almost a life-time occupation. The result is that the reader is subjected to a tsunami of words and associations, somewhat ironic in view of the fact that Celan is such a sparse writer, who does not waste many words. A tsunami that overflows and floods the initial biographical chapter which subsequently tends in retrospect to drown and be submerged into the reader's oblivion. But if a life-time of work and reflection has gone into the book, the apparent verbosity may in fact be the result of selection and parsing down, providing the proverbial tip of an iceberg. Anyway

what has taken a life-time to write, may take, if not a life-time at least some substantial time to read through. It is hard to sustain a steady reading pace, as the material is not exactly a page-turner, making demands on the reader's concentration and participation, and, it has to be admitted, at times also on his or her patience. And then, to return to the initial skepticism voiced, is it all non-falsifiable nonsense? However, the question of whether the interpretations are correct or not, is an unnecessarily narrow one, what matters is the enthusiasm of the writer. An over-powering enthusiasm which serves as an inspiration and teaches how much can be extracted through a close reading of poems and provokes the sympathetic reader to join in the game. Any game creates its own world, and it is this world into which the reader is invited. And the criterion is not correctness per se but fertility. But the notion of game is a bit misleading. On one hand a game presupposes definite rules, and there are none to be had. Thus it is not the kind of game that accords a precise definition. What it has is more of the spirit of a game, just as the proverbial smile of the vanishing Cheshire cat. Yet, the spirit of a game is one of frivolity, and that may be offensive in the context. Because the game is not one of irresponsible play but a matter of dead seriousness.

There is a dark substratum to the poems of Celan, namely the Holocaust. Adorno famously claimed that after the Holocaust poetry is no longer possible. As by all cryptic remarks it is not entirely clear what he meant by that, or whether he meant anything at all. Thus the statement becomes a little bit like poetry itself, in the sense of provoking interpretations, but of course lacking the essential aspect of poetry, namely its form in which its appeal resides<sup>1</sup>. One may interpret it as that the preoccupation by poetry is indeed a frivolous activity in view of what has happened. A luxury only appropriate at innocent and idyllic times. Yet Celan nevertheless tries to write poetry, although the author is adamant in avoiding to reduce Celan to a Holocaust poet, because another natural conclusion is that after Auschwitz only poetry based on it can be written. Instead he stresses the fact that Auschwitz constituted an end of the world as it had been known until then, and anybody living through such a calamity is bound to feel that he or she is living at the end of times, that there is no future ahead. In particular that the classical poetical tradition is at its end and thus Celan is the last poet, building on his predecessors but having no successor to stand on his shoulders. Thus from a more competitive point of view, Celan is in the position of being able to improve on everybody who went before him, and not to be surpassed. Thus not being just the last poet, but the poet in whose hands poetry reached its culmination. After Celan no more poetry will be possible.

Who are the poets on which Celan draws? His mother tongue was German and thus he is steeped in the German tradition. But he is also a Rumanian, and Rumanians have a deep Latin connection, which makes them in practice Francophiles. And the German language was to remain deeply ambivalent to him for obvious reasons. In addition to being the language that nurtured him as a child, it was also the language of those who was out

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<sup>1</sup> The actual full quote is : Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben. Whatever its merits, striking poetic expression is not one of them.

to kill him as a young adult<sup>2</sup>. A language soiled and hence spoiled. Maybe it was merely impossible to write poetry in German? As Celan spent the larger part of his adult life in France, and had a perfect command of French, it would have been natural to him to have adopted French. Some writers consciously adopt a language, such as Beckett who chose French over his Native English or Canetti who chose German as he did not really have a Native language of his own. Celan did not belong to those for which language was one of choice, it was one thing into which you were born and fated to die in. As he puts it. You can only speak the Truth in your Native language, in a foreign tongue the poet is bound to lie. Thus your language was part of your identity, much more so than your mere name, which he found no problem changing. He was not born Celan, but 'Ansel'. The adopted *nom de plum* admittedly just being a simple juxtaposition of two syllables, was nevertheless of great importance to him, and also to the author, who does not tire to point out hidden implications. Or as Celan put it himself: It was a language he could not forget, but a language which had forgotten him. Yet of course French nevertheless was important to him as well, he did engage in translations between French and German poetry, a challenging exercise, providing a more technical way of engaging in a piece of poetry as the activity is more structured and thus more prone to falsification. One who translates poetry is engaged in a handicraft which in a sense requires more palpable skills than the mere writing of poetry itself. And if this is revealed as not true, it points to unsuspected depths of the latter.

So once again who were the German sources of Celan's poetry? Rilke is a name that appears repeatedly, and some parallels with Rilke are indeed brought up in the book. But Rilke is a poet in the tradition of Goethe, and whose poetry is in fact often smooth and pleasant with obvious rhymes and rhythms that fondle the ear. The poetry of Celan lacks those pleasing, not to say saccharine, features which you may expect in smooth decorative pieces of Meissen porcelain. It is instead jagged and stark, making few if any concessions to the casual reader. A more relevant source is Hölderlin who shared with Celan a tortured psyche, thus living at the edge of an abyss. But while Hölderlin descended into a veritable psychosis, thus actually falling into the abyss; the case of Celan seemed more to have been in the nature of weak nerves that kept him from losing control, yet not protecting him from destruction as he did end up as a suicide. As the German word 'Freitod' suggests, suicide may be thought of the ultimate control. As to the effect of the treatment he was subjected to Celan remarked as you can only do in German. 'Man hat mich zerheilt'. What was meant to put together again had at the same time sundered.

In short the poems of Celan are written in the style of *verse libre*. This by itself does not say anything beyond that the poetry does not comply to any standard rules. But there has to be some rules to any kind of poetry, although some of them may be neither very visible nor explicitly expressible. In the case of Celan one uses the vague word of 'structures' which may mean anything. In fact what is meant is often conveyed negatively, i.e. by showing what it is not. One thing that strikes the reader about Celan is his discontinuity. On a more positive side, structure could be expressed numerologically, a word I prefer to use rather than mathematically. There are striking similarities between mathematics and poetry, but those are not really expressed through numbers.

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<sup>2</sup> In a Swedish pun it was the language of 'mördrarna' (mothers) and 'mördarna' (murderers).

Celan's attitude towards poetry is hence not one aimed at beauty and pleasure. There is nothing pleasant about poetry (after Auschwitz?). One may be tempted to think of his poetic attitude as a kind of scientific, in the sense of being factual. Emotional of course, but not in a vague emotional way, but precise and unsentimental. Celan uses the metaphor of a watchmaker, thus emphasizing the meticulous putting together of interrelated pieces. As Celan remarks. 'Truth is to be found in the details', or as mathematicians put it 'The Devil is in the details'. This gives yet another more or less obvious connection between mathematics and poetry. The maker of a watch is not concerned with noting the time, he is too concerned with making it possible to note the time. Making a watch and using it are two very different things, just as composing a piece of music and listening to it are two very different things. Composing music has nothing to do with experiencing the emotions from listening to it. One concludes that writing a piece of poetry is as different from reading it, as checking a watch for time is from constructing it. Thus a poet is not concerned with reading his poem while writing it. In particular there is nothing beautiful of pleasant writing a poem, but why then should the reading of it be?

Now the general strategy of the author in analyzing the body of poems left by Celan, is to very carefully delineate the meaning of words as well as exhaustively explore their various connections and wider associations, as well as their relations to each other in the form of the poem, to which should be added a host of numerological consideration to which we have already alluded to and to which we will return. As an example; in the poem 'Ortwechsel', the author pays attention to the relation between 'Wort' and 'Ort'. As to the latter there is a reference to astronomical coordinates. This ought to have been clarified. In geometrical problems with coordinates one often speaks about the 'Ort' (locus) of certain points and the algebraic relations those enjoy. Thus typically the 'Ort' of certain points satisfying some geometrical condition trace out a curve (in a planar problem).

Words have an almost physical quality, Celan would even say that they are material. As an example take the words 'finster' and 'dunkel' in German. Both mean 'dark' and although one may no doubt come up with subtle differences in meaning, it is in their physical appearance they mainly differ. They behave differently on the tongue. 'Finster' is a rather jagged and awkward word that may feel like a thorn in your mouth and make your tongue and gum bleed, while 'dunkel' is much softer and more readily swallowed, after having rolled nicely on the tongue. Thus if you want to translate the line 'es läutete eine eine Nacht, die finsterte länger als wir'<sup>3</sup>. The Swedish rendering by the author strikes you as unnecessarily smooth, as there is no real physical equivalence to 'finster' with the same meaning in Swedish, or in many other languages. Of course this is only one of a host of obvious problems that presents itself to the translator. Incidentally illustrating how the exercise of translation makes you aware of the structure of a poem as a casual reading never would.

The physicality of words is further emphasized in the short poem 'Sprich auch Du' where we have the lines 'Gib deinem Spruch auch den Sinn:/gib ihm den Schatten'. The author embarks on a long discussion of light and darkness and 'yes' and no'. I think this is a wild goose chase. What it means, and which ties in with the discussion above, is that words do not only have meaning, they have also a physical existence, no less palpable than

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<sup>3</sup> '...., which darkened longer than we'.

stones. Things in the real material world cast shadows, that being one of many incidental phenomena that is connected with being part of the real exterior world and which can be used as one of many criteria for material inert existence. Ghosts do not cast shadows, nor do things in the mind, except metaphorically. What Celan wants to express is not that casting a shadow is a metaphorical thing, it is a real thing. Words are in addition to conveyors of meaning also real inert things. A language that uses words that do not cast shadows is too abstract, the shadow testifies to concreteness. 'Finster' is a word that conveys various meanings, but it is also a particular sequence of sounds, and printed on the page, a certain sequence of marks on the paper. A poem is not just a sequence of words with meanings attached by conventions, it also has a definite appearance on the page, a form, a visual shape; just as when spoken and read it has a definite aural impact. In fact if looked at close enough, the thin layer of graphite on the page will indeed throw shadows that may be discerned by minute observations. This is of course in the form of a drastic interpretation in the literal spirit, and in its ambition to go the extreme one loved by mathematicians and poets alike. In fact Celan wrote his poems by hand not hitting the keys of a typewriter. This classical way of writing allows for a sensual engagement. Not only do the words sound in the ear, they also enter the hand and its subsequent movements. Less literally interpreted, words in a poem, will by their very shapes, visual and aural, have unintended consequences, by virtue of being specific, individual and material. The material world kicks back at you, and thus every poem ultimately escapes the control of its author.

Language takes on a different aspect when used in poetry. This is of course a truism, yet one which is often overlooked. One particular peculiar aspect we have already remarked on above, namely that words in addition to their use as conveyors of meaning also have a physical existence, something that plays no role in ordinary use, but once it does, we seem to enter the land of poetry, if only peripherally. Another sense, emphasized by Celan and his many French inspirators, such as Valery, is that language when used poetically is in a state of being reborn anew. The author prefers to interpret this in the mystical vein, namely to emphasize that being born means emerging from the dark into the light (only to be subsumed in the dark eventually). In this way he can connect this preoccupation with the theme of Auschwitz, turning it almost into an obsession, and thus making indeed Celan into a Holocaust poet. I think that the issue is more general than this. The renewal of language through poetic articulation is one of the universally acknowledged aspects of poetry, to some its very *raison d'être*. Then there is some intriguing argument that the language of poetry is different from that of philosophy. It is not clear what it is meant, except that the brief allusion to analytic philosophy indicates the obvious fact that poetry is not necessarily logical, at least not in any formal sense.

We have discussed above the act of physically writing a poem. This connects to the word 'setzen'. The word is obviously connected with 'Satz' which somewhat pedantically known as an 'Aussage' of which a poem is composed. Composing a poem is hence a matter of 'setzen'. And then the author associates to 'übersetzen, freisetzen'. The poem sets the writer free, while the reader should be 'besetzt'. Furthermore the German for 'exposer' is 'aussetzen', which may refer to lepers, or more generally those who are shunned and set aside. And of course the word 'Aussatz' makes us think of 'Auschwitz'. And so on and on. Does this really make sense. The author quotes Paul Auster to the effect that a poem by

Celan is not a straight path from A to B, but rather a fractal drift through a dense cloud of associations, puns, obscure personal asides, bizarre neologisms, intentional misquotes. Thus it is inevitable that a closer engagement with the poems of Celan will result in partial reconstructions of those intricate webs of connections, as the close reading of a poem by Celan convinces the reader that everything he encounters has meaning. But of course, the reader of this book asks himself, is there not a big danger of getting lost, there being no real constraints. This issue we have already considered above and now as back then we can only say that correct or not this is what we will have to do, whether or not it leads to the goal or not, because after all, what kind of goal can there be waiting for us at the end? Just as in life. If death is the ultimate goal in life, life itself should not be lived as to achieve that goal. At least not solely so.

Word-play. We have encountered it repeatedly, starting with Wort/Ort and the author goes on an extra-vaganza providing many more pairs. One of the peculiarities of German is not only its freedom to create compound words and hence compound concepts which it has in common with its Scandinavian variations, but more specifically its abundance of prefixes such as 'ent-, zer-, her-, ver' which when combined with verbs make up for new and often stunning and unexpected meanings. Just take a word as 'verdichten' and its derived noun 'Verdichtung'. What does it mean? The combination itself is a mini-poem.

What is the opposite of light? As in *Fiat lux*. Light that is obstructed gives a shadow. A light source gives rise to a light cone, while what obstructs light gives rise to another cone, namely that of shadow. We cannot see the cones directly, neither the one of light nor the one of darkness. We only come aware of the light when it shines on a surface (which stops it by reflecting it) as we only become aware of the darkness when it falls on a surface as a shadow. The latter is of course a very Platonic metaphor. But in Celan another kind of darkness enters, not a passive one associated with an absence of light, but an active one. A source that spews out darkness as an octopus squirts out ink. This incidentally reminds me of a dream I had a few days before my father died many decades ago. I dreamt about a lamp which was 'alight' with darkness. Of course this kind of image will invariably be associated with the Holocaust indicating not mere indifference but active evil.

We have touched on the meaning of 'Ort' as one of location and hence geometry. The art, or knowledge, of spatial measure - Meetkunde - in Dutch. This theme is particular relevant in the poem 'Der Meridian'. The meridian being a line imposed by man on the Earth with no physical existence but present in the mind to make sense of measurement. The spatial aspect of a poem becomes very palpable when you consider its graphical aspect on the page. And here we enter upon numerology, which can be seen as the *cul de sac* of mathematics, stemming from the Pythagoreans who stood on the continental divide that divided the land into two areas. One in which the rivers found their way to the sea and one in which they merely dried out and vanished into the barren ground. Some of the things the Pythagoreans bequeathed to posterity turned out to be very fruitful, while much was merely silly. In this context we have the series of numbers 3, 5, 9, 17, 33... (which is continued by 65, 129, 257, 513... etc but that is of less relevance). How is this series constructed? Every number in the series is odd, thus it has a number in 'the middle'. Thus 'the middle' of 3 is 2 which is an even number and has no 'middle', thus we stop at 3 and cannot go further back. But let us consider the number for which three is middle, that is five, and

the number for which five is middle is nine, and so on. So if  $n$  is a number in the series the next number is  $2n - 1$ . Start with  $n = 2$  and we will get the aforementioned series. In fact we can write the numbers as  $2^n + 1$  so for  $n = 1, 2, 3 \dots$  we get  $3, 5, 9 \dots$ . This is easy to prove by induction for anyone with a modicum of mathematical competence. So what is the significance of this series? Celan's *Sprachgitter* contains 33 poems, so does Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The idea being that each cycle contains a middle, and that middle in its turn should have a middle, and so on, (until we reach an even number). From a mathematical point of view it would have been more logical, to remove the middle, and each of the remaining parts would have had a middle and so on. If the lines of a poem, or a cycle of poems would be organized in such a way we would have a fractal structure in which each parts mirrors the whole, (what Gide refers to as *mise-en-abîme*) reminiscent of the celebrated Cantor set in mathematics. Then the induction would have been  $n$  goes to  $2n + 1$  giving rise to  $1, 3, 7, 15, 31, 63 \dots$  instead, corresponding to  $2^n - 1$ . So much for numerology,

Then there is geometry again. The Star of David is formed by two equilateral triangles mirror images of each other and appropriately superimposed. This means that for one of the triangles the apex points up, for the other it points down, pregnant with symbolic possibilities. This is discussed in connection with the poem *Engführung* in the collection *Sprachgitter*. The triangle pointing downwards is made to represent the descent into the abyss. Whose bottom line is 'Asche' meaning of course 'ash' and related to Celan's birth name 'Ansel'. Of course 'ash' refers to those who were reduced to ashes by the flames of the Holocaust. Furthermore the downwards pointing triangle has the form of a 'V' and hence make us think of 'Verbrechung' (an act against natural law). But the 'V' is also the Roman sign for 5 (one of the numbers in the magic sequence). And so we can go on.

And more geometry, especially in *Sprachgitter*. The word 'Gitter' refers to lattice, in the mathematical sense of points evenly distributed in the plane or in space, or for any kind of dimensions. Technically an additive subgroup. It occurs naturally in tessellations of the plane, or in crystals. A rich mathematical structure which a poem cannot do justice to only allusions. But the associations in poetry generally are, but do not need to be, different. The hexagonal lattice structure of a bee hive gives wider associations to bees, and their faceted eyes, and thus to crystals closing the circle of associations, by linking the hexagonal cells to their eyes. There is also not only a reference to the supine figure 8 in connection with the organizations of the poems in *Sprachgitter* but it is also named by its proper name - the Lemniscate - . We all know that the locus (der Ort) of all points whose sum of distances to two fixed points is an ellipse (with those points as foci). What happens if we instead take the product of the distances? We get, depending on the value of the product in terms of the distance between the two given points a family of ovals, known as Cassini's ovals. Sometimes two disjoint, sometimes kidney formed ones. In the middle we get a lemniscate. It goes way back to the Old Greeks, and while they can be given precise equations, there are also curves similar in shape to them, occurring in other ways. A more precise formulation will be given in an appendix. Now it suffices to point out that the theory of the lemniscate is mathematically rich with surprising connections and an interesting history, but none of that is of course relevant to Celan, who I suspect was innocent as to any knowledge of that, otherwise further traces of it would have been



discernible, at least to the mathematically literate. To put it concisely, to Celan and his poetry friends it matters, at least to some extent, that the Leminscate is supine, it is not just a figure eight, it is a figure eight in a peculiar position, to the mathematician that is irrelevant. But true, its equations can be given in many forms, and some are more pleasing than others, at least to the human observer. This ties in with a discussion of Platonism which would lead us too far astray at this point, although the author refers to the Platonic dialogue *Timaios* in which Platon discusses the figure eight (but of course by another name, the classical Greeks being ignorant of the Indian conventions), but that is a different direction from what I have in mind.

The discussion so far may give the impression that to the author analyzing a poem is very much akin to solving a crossword puzzle. Although I have never understood the appeal of the latter, or more precisely I have never been captivated by such puzzles, its fascination can be succinctly explained by the contrast of two things. The free activity of association (more specifically of words and concepts) on one hand, and the necessity of its letters to interlock appropriately - falsification - on the other. Admittedly this explanation (or explanation scheme) is abstract enough and hence wide enough to cover most human intellectual activities, including mathematics, yet in each specific domain it works slightly, but often significantly differently. But the author takes exception to that. A sequence of poems in *Sprachgitter* cannot be reduced to calculations, crosswords and constructions the author alliterates admonishingly and almost aggressively (one sees how an imposed form may run away with you). Obviously there is something beyond that. The author tries valiantly to formulate what is in fact the spirit of a poem as opposed to its mere form. He is not very successful for obvious reasons. Wittgenstein famously pronounced that on what one cannot speak one should keep quiet, but that is not the policy of the author (nor of Wittgenstein, in spite of some commendable attempts). The problem is that what can be expressed with precision and formality necessarily reduces to a calculus. Hence the almost irresistible temptation of conducting an analysis along the lines of crossword puzzles.

But surely poems are more than cross-word puzzles? Classically they are thought of as divine, enabling humans to get in touch with a higher reality. This is poetry as religion, and the author refers explicitly to the Orpheic tradition in which the poet is divinely inspired. Although religious sentiments tend to be disparaged nowadays, the notion of divine inspiration still is something that strikes a chord although those various chords have ostensibly been severed. The myth of Orpheus is of course a fertile ground for poetry and hence a subject of digressions when commenting on poetry. The author digresses on Celan's translation of Nerval's poem 'El Desdichado' (and as already noted attempts at translations are unparalleled in trying to get to grips with a poem), and where he characteristically omits to translate 'ma seul étoile est mort' or rather translates into the void, he follows the advice of Rilke (and Wittgenstein?) to point at the unsayable, which nevertheless by its very absence in the given context gives rise to an echo. It is often said that real understanding is never conveyed by what is written, but gleaned from what is written so to speak between the lines. It is through this reading true meaning can be had. A text is formally a sequence of symbols. Such symbols can be decoded by a computer mechanically and according to strict rules be translated into various actions. This is the formal side of a text seen as a message. But there is something that goes

beyond the formal, namely the meaning and the intentions which can never be explicitly encoded. Man is more than a machine, In fact one can view this as the divine element of a text, too elusive to be captured mechanically.

In any discussion of Celan one cannot avoid touching on anti-semitism, and as already noted, its ultimate expression. This obviously formed much of Celan's life, although as the author admonishes, one should not let it define it. The author points out that traditionally in its most virulent form it has been promulgated by the Christian church, not the Muslims; and that probably the Protestants are as culpable as the Catholics and the Orthodox (the rantings by Luther in this regard has caused much recent embarrassment). The big question is whether the Holocaust should be seen as the logical conclusion of traditional anti-semitism, or as an aberration of the same whose sources are to be found elsewhere and that its connection to anti-semitism is but incidental, however absurd such a statement may appear. This is a question that cannot be explored here, and one which obviously will not have a simple and categorical answer. Anyway the subject of anti-semitism runs like a red thread through the book (or as the author prefers - the extended essay) giving the excuse for many a digression, such as the notion of the cross. The name of Benn is brought up. A rival poet or at least rival *Schriftsteller*. One of the sadder facts about the rise of Nazism was the readiness of the intellectuals, especially the humanists, to join forces, the most notorious example being Heidegger. Mathematicians and theoretical physicists were less liable to be seduced, although there were still many who let themselves be gripped, The notion of Aryan mathematics and physics were far more risable than in general culture. Would a serious physicist reject relativity theory on racial grounds? The question is absurd, and those who joined did in fact not. What were the motivation? A kind of mass-hysteria which also was at play during the outbreak of the First World War. Benn was one of those fellow travelers, whether out of conviction, opportunism or plain absent-mindedness is hard to tell. He was also a medical man and a scientist, but that of course did not make him immune. But how could such a figure be taken seriously and given prizes (such as the Büchner prize which later also graced Celan)? Does it testify to the woolliness of humanities. That an ability to form sophisticated phrases does not signify any moral nor even intellectual worth? On the other hand one cannot outright reject people like Benn. Life is not black and white, there are shades of gray (occasionally livened by patches of color). Benn too was identifying himself with Orpheus, not only as a poet, as his wife during the final days of Berlin got separated from her husband and believing him to be dead committed suicide. Benn survived of course. With Benn Celan would engage in a polemical interchange. It is not clear to what extent this was simply motivated by the need to distance himself from Benn and his past. The discussion on Benn and related material results in a discussion of *Augenrund*, meaning the roundness of the eye. There are references to Dante, where it also plays a role. The author also points out that as in Dante to pass through a narrow hole is an *Engführung*. A rite of passage. But seen even as the hole you must pass through into the gas oven. In such a way the Holocaust is never far from consciousness. I would also want to pursue another train of association in the spirit of the book. The eye is also a sensuous object. Sight in fact being the most sensual of our senses, more so than touch. The eye does in fact carry an uncanny resemblance to the breast, the pupil being its nipple. And the female breast is the most

sensuous part of a human body, presenting to the world two protruding eyes. Not seeing, but being the object of a hungry set of eyes. Should this be taken seriously or just as a parody?

Much of Celan's poetry is not accessible, at least not immediately so. But there are also noteworthy exceptions, such as the following four lines worthy of being reproduced in their entirety,

Rabenüberschwärmte Weizenwoege.  
Welchen Himmels Blau? Des untern? Obern?  
Später Pfeil, der von der Seele schnellte.  
Stärkres Schwirren. Näh'res Glühen Beiden Welten.

The image of the ravens, the waves of wheat, and the blue sky, invariably makes you think of the last painting of van Gogh executed just before he killed himself. Another troubled soul with which one presumes that Celan must have felt some affinity for, because what else could have inspired him? In fact when this poem was written, and the author informs you that it took many years of conception, Celan was roughly the age at which van Gogh had come to his end. One should note that it is not only through the visual images that the painting is evoked, but also by the words themselves, their vowels, their successions of syllables, attempting to mimic the characteristic brush-work of the artist, as well as the dazzling summer heat which must have pervaded when van Gogh was putting pigments to canvas. Now, as with any other poem put under the magnifying glass, the author engages in a lengthy soloquay, which is too long to describe.

Sand. Sand as in 'Keine Sandkunst mehr' plays an important role in the poetry of Celan. Sand like pebbles and ash, are like snow flakes too many to count, and constitute among the most prosaic of material objects. Every grain of sand, like every flake of snow, is subtly different from all other sands or snows, yet of course being so similar. This makes for their insignificance as individuals, because those differences make them individual and there are so many of them. Had they all been alike, they would all have partaken of the mass of which they are a part. Just like every atom of H or Cr or whatever chemical element (and isotope) you choose, are not individual but representatives of something larger, just as with electrons all of whom are just the electron. But there is no such thing as the sand. Could it be the same with man? We are all so alike, yet not quite, and our feeble individualities make us so insignificant. The Holocaust reduces man to grains of sand or pebbles, insignificant individualities overwhelmed by the mass of them, all reduced to mass to fill a ditch or be dumped into the sea.

But yet, as Blake reminds us, in a single grain of sand you can see the whole universe. That vast universe in which Archimedes imagined filled with sand and proceeded to count in his work - The Sand reckoner. The purpose was not poetic, at least not primarily, but to devise a system departing from the rather primitive system of denoting numbers used by the Greek, to encompass very large numbers. And what larger numbers could be thought of, as that of grains of sand, not only covering vast deserts or interminable stretches of beach, but filling up every nook or cranny of whatever space that could be imagined?

In a thick book of interpretations it would be impossible that an engaged reader always agrees with the author. That would be a sign of laziness, maybe even combined with timidity. The author needs to stick his neck out from time to time, so does the reader.

As an example in 'Geh deine Stunde/hat keine Schwestern,..' the author wonders what can be meant by an 'hour' has no sisters, admitting that it is quite obscure. His suggestion that it can be a hand on a clock that has no hands for minutes or seconds strikes me as a bit too prosaic. Should 'Stunde' really refer to its conventional meaning 'hour'? The word exists in Scandinavian languages, not meaning the time-span of an hour, but both a definite time period of rather limited extension, and at a definite point in time. ('Din stund på jorden' - your time on Earth). German is of course not indifferent to this wider notion. Just as in English a lecture at school is referred to as a '(Schul)stunde' and we have of course the expression 'Stunde Null'. We are talking about a definite moment, not pointwise and instantaneous, at which '...du bist-/bist zu Hause...' And having no siblings, could mean that this particular time is unique, there are no alternatives, no rivals. Everything converges to you. That is what it means in a deeper sense to be home. To be at just one place, at one time, and nowhere else. To dwell in a particular place at the moment, and nowhere else. Of being fully present.

Then of course when it comes to the Swedish translations of Celan's poems one may have diverging opinions. In particular in 'Bin es noch immer..' the author translates the last line 'deckte es zu?' with 'höljde över?'. The Swedish word 'täcka' (cover) is very close to the German 'decken' not only in meaning. The word 'hölja' is more poetic and has another German equivalent 'hüllen' and does not just mean 'cover' but more specifically 'enclose'. It also in Swedish gives you associations to 'dölja' (conceal) and makes the whole rendering more poetic than Celan may originally have intended.

Finally mathematics and poetry have often been posited as opposites. Mathematics being precise and dry and, let us face it - inhuman. To the uninitiated mere calculations complying to strict and incomprehensible rules. Ultimately diminishing. While poetry is warm and pulsating and very much human. Fallible yes, but in its very fallibility human and triumphant leading to a higher reality of sorts. On the other hand mathematics is strict an eternal while poetry is woolen and ephemeral. Compare an Einstein with a Freud or better still a Jung. Mathematics departments occasionally offer watered down mathematics courses condescendingly referred to as 'mathematics for poets'. The point is that they cannot be compared, they belong to different categories such as horses and health insurances. Mathematics is a total activity just as life itself, encompassing anything from mechanical calculations to higher order reflections and decisions. Thus poetry can enter mathematics in the same way it enters life. And it is here the similarities appear. The mathematician while doing mathematics may approach it poetically, just as the poet approached life itself poetically. The difference being that in life, poetry is extricated as something special something outside life, while in mathematics it is integrated with the activity itself. There are no mathematical poems. They are not isolated like theorems, lemmas and definitions, but imbue the activity as such, without being explicitly formulated.

I fear that this review has become almost as long as the book itself, bringing into my mind the folly of making a map of the world in the scale 1:1 as explicated in one of Borges funnier stories.

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