Celan in English

Celan's poetics can be understood as a poetics of translation, so that to translate him is to participate in his mode, to enter into what the poems themselves imply and intend. There is also the compelling example of Celan's extensive work as a translator, a practical instance of the intimate connection his work knits between poetry and translation.[1] Many aspects of his poetics can be associated with, and clarified by, the idea and practice of translation, and one of the best ways of following the relationship is by reading 'Der Meridian' alongside the radio-essay 'Die Dichtung Ossip Mandelstamms'.[2] But, as no more than an allusion to a context which can merely be hinted at here, consider the idea of the meridian itself: a line which joins what may lie far apart, which puts things into relation and permits orientation, which like one language over another traces a path whose connection to the terrain it covers is a matter of faith and consensus. It is, in the closing words of *Der Meridian*, 'etwas – wie die Sprache – Immaterielles, aber Irdisches, Terrestrisches' [something – like language – immaterial, but earthly,

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[1] On these matters, Leonard Olschner's *Der feste Buchstab: Erläuterungen zu Paul Celans Gedicht-Übertragungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985) is essential.

[2] For the latter, see Paul Celan, *»Mikrolithen sinds, Steinchen«: Die Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. by Barbara Wiedemann and Bertrand Badiou (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 196–206.

terrestrial].[3] The language of translation maintains a comparable relation to the original it retraces, while making its own habitation in the idiomatic structures at its disposal.

Celan first came into English, at least in book form, in America, in a remarkable anthology of *New Young German Poets* published in 1959 in the famous Pocket Poets series issued from Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookshop in San Francisco. The editor and translator, Jerome Rothenberg, gave Celan a good deal more space than anyone else, and apart from Karl Krolow, he is already the senior of the ten 'young poets' in the book. There are eight of his poems, including 'Todesfuge', 'Corona' and 'Schibboleth', and also 'Schneebett', a *Sprachgitter* poem Rothenberg presumably translated from its original printing in the journal *Akzente* in 1958, since *Sprachgitter* appeared in March 1959. Rothenberg presents his poets as 'a new avant garde (opposing the inherited dead world with a modern, visionary language)', and his Celan translations bring the more unconventional aspects of his language across literally, as well as being rhythmically close. He tends to translate syllable for syllable, so that in 'Schneebett' ('Snowbed') the line 'Zehnfingerschatten – verklammert' is given as 'Tenfingershadows – clamped shutfast', where the double translation of 'verklammert' must stem from the desire to copy its

[3] 'Der Meridian', in Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Beda Allemann, Stefan Reichert and Rolf Bücher, 5 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) III, 187–202 (p. 202).

metrical pattern, and ‘shutfast’ is an incidence of a Celan-like idiom unprovoked by the lexical make-up of the word being translated (‘clamped’ would have sufficed for that).[4] This extends – further instances from ‘Schneebett’ – to ‘heartsplace’ for ‘Herzen’ [heart], and we also find ‘Breathspecklespattered’ for ‘Atemgeflecktes’. Even where no doubling is required to make the metre – ‘Moonmirror steepwall’ for ‘Mondspiegel Steilwand’ – we might doubt whether this attempt to mimic Celan’s practice in English always comes off. It is a fundamental problem to which we shall return, but these examples already suggest the difficulties of trying to make English behave like German, as well as the necessity of making the attempt. ‘Mondspiegel’ may not exist in German (though one should always be wary of assuming that Celan’s words are invented) but there are enough compounds close to it in formation and implication – *Mondscheibe*, *Mondsichel*, *Mondsilber* – to make it an organic development, a word waiting to be found; and ‘Steilwand’, unlike ‘steepwall’, is a perfectly good word. So what seems to be happening is that the imitation of Celan’s idiom results in a much stranger-feeling text, giving the impression that his way with German is more wilful than it is.

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[4] *New Young German Poets*, ed. and trans. by Jerome Rothenberg (San Francisco: City Lights, 1959), p. 24; Paul Celan, *Die Gedichte*, Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe, ed. by Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 100.

Rothenberg's readiness to break the bounds of English stands out in what one might call the first phase of translating Celan into English. The earliest translations to appear in Britain are more cautious in idiom and also in the poems they venture on: the 1962 anthology *Modern German Poetry 1910-1960*, edited by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton, contains versions of 'Todesfuge' and 'Die Krüge' by Middleton and of 'Schibboleth' and 'In Memoriam Paul Eluard' by Hamburger, that is, two poems from each of the first two 'official' collections.[5] The third, *Sprachgitter* (1959), in which Celan's style shifts quite markedly, had appeared by then, but is not represented, an indication of the time needed to digest Celan before his poems could be accommodated.[6]

Celan's most direct appearance in English can be said to be John Felstiner's translation of 'Todesfuge' in 1984, which brilliantly allows the German poem to seep into the English in the form of its actual words, so that by the end – 'dein goldenes Haar Margarete|

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[5] (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962), pp. 318–327.

[6] The *Celan-Handbuch* has sections on Celan's reception in France, in Italy and (very briefly) in Romania, but nothing on the Anglo-American. This despite the fact that substantial translation of Celan got underway quickly in English, and his influence on English-language poetry has been extensive. The very first book-length publication devoted wholly to Celan in translation appears to have been in Slovak, by Ivan Kupec in 1966. See Jerry Glenn, *Paul Celan: Eine Bibliographie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989).

dein aschenes Haar Sulamith' – original and translation have attained a parity translators can usually only dream of.[7] This is brilliant because the English participates in the fugal structure of the German, not just mimicking it as, as a translation, it is anyway condemned to do, but inventing a counterpoint between languages of its own, so that the repetition in the German becomes a way of introducing elements from the original in less and less mediated form. As words which have already been translated recur, the need for them to be in English falls away, and the effect is of a gradual and inevitable arrival of the poem and its terrible truth into the host language, which has, by the end, actually been pushed aside or rendered superfluous.

The achievement of this, Felstiner's extension of what we think of translation as doing, sets a standard but is unfortunately also unrepeatable, since it depends so completely on the composition of the original. (Possibly it also presupposes a certain presence of the poem in English – numerous translations had by

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[7] *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. by John Felstiner (New York and London: Norton, 2001), pp. 30–34. The translation of 'Todesfuge' first appeared in *The New Republic*, 2 April 1984, in a slightly different version. Felstiner was however anticipated (by some twenty-five years) by Rothenberg, who keeps 'nach Deutschland' and 'aus Deutschland' in his version in *New Young German Poets* (pp. 16–17), but doesn't attempt the incremental arrival of the original into the translation.

then been published, including at least those by Middleton, by Rothenberg, by Hamburger, and by Joachim Neugroschel.[8]) Nevertheless, it points to the way Celan's German seems to demand and encourage a rethinking of what translation is and is capable of, to the delicacy and significance of the operation that his translators consider themselves involved in. The critical nature of the transaction can only really be compared to the translation of a religious text, where the consequences of failure – omission, alteration, generally falling short – are so momentous that the undertaking is almost impossibly fraught. From the beginning, Celan's status as a poet unlike any other became part of the drama of translating him – making it crucial and impossible to do so. *Not* to translate (to use the German) is a way round this, but not of course one that in practice can be taken very often.

Something of the process of acclimatization that was necessary for Celan to come into English can be seen in the early issues of the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation*, founded by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort in 1965. Poems by Celan first appeared in the third issue (Spring 1967). This contains a very large selection of Ingeborg Bachmann (about forty poems), and two poems from *Mohn und Gedächtnis* translated by Michael Bullock: 'Corona' and 'Chanson einer Dame im Schatten'. The headnote calls

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[8] In Paul Celan, *Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980); and in Paul Celan, *'Speech-Grille' and Selected Poems*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Dutton, 1971).

Celan ‘the foremost German surrealist poet of his generation and by many considered the greatest post-war German poet’. The editorial to the same issue repeats the reference to Celan’s ‘surrealism’, which ‘seems altogether more convincing than that of so many of his contemporaries’, and announces the desire to publish a fuller selection of this ‘major figure in modern German poetry’ in a future issue.[9] In the event, this did not happen until after his death. *MPT* 7 (June 1970) contains five poems translated by Hamburger, the headnote being ‘extracted’ from his ‘broadcast tribute’ which would have been aired on BBC Radio 3. Hamburger’s words, which precede versions of ‘Tenebrae’, ‘Es war Erde in ihnen’, ‘Zürich, Zum Storchen’, ‘Psalm’ and ‘Du warst’, list some of the difficulties involved in bringing Celan across:

> Much of the later poetry is virtually untranslatable because the increasingly personal vocabulary tests and dislocates linguistic conventions. The syntax is abrupt, halting and tentative, the diction full of ambiguities, new word formations, semantic leaps and twists. The five poems printed below, which did prove translatable, tell us something we want to know, but often cannot be sure of understanding, about the extremism of Celan’s work, its

[9] *Modern Poetry in Translation* 3 (Spring 1967), 1 and 20–21.

> groping towards religious and social communion, in the teeth of acute isolation, scepticism and pain.[10]

The ‘extremism’ of Celan’s work, like his ‘surrealism’, suggests how hard it was to adjust to, the strangeness of his utterance as it appeared at about the point of his death. It is of course his death itself which contributed to the sense of his poetry as something absolute, which translation could hardly hope to approach, but the fascination his work exerts means that there has been no shortage of translators, sometimes aided by the knowledge that criticism has brought to light, willing to tackle the problems Hamburger identified. Like Hamburger, they have often devoted a lifetime’s work to the task, gradually extending the domain of the translatable: just as Celan’s own poems have years of reading and word-research behind them and often seem to depend on linguistic finds from all manner of sources, so his translators have also needed years of patience, of similarly varied reading and chance encounters, for things to slot into place. The particular difficulties presented by Celan’s later poetry (after *Die Niemandsrose*), especially early on when the idiom was unfamiliar and had not yet begun to alter poetic practice in the way it later did, can be seen from Hamburger’s first book of Celan translations, *Nineteen Poems* (Carcanet, 1972). This volume, which an advertisement in *MPT* announces as a collaboration between Carcanet and *MPT*, contains

[10] *Modern Poetry in Translation* 7 (June 1970), 27.

no poems later than those printed in *MPT* 7, and by not including ‘Du warst’ (one of the poems in that issue) confines itself to poems from *Die Niemandsrose* and before (over half are from *Mohn und Gedächtnis*). It seems likely that the book was intended to appear earlier, since in the same year Celan was published in the Penguin Modern European Poets series in translations by Hamburger (and a small handful by Middleton) including selections from all the collections up to and including *Schneepart*. In his introduction to this Penguin volume, Hamburger emphasizes the ‘difficulty and paradox’ of Celan’s poetry, ‘the anomaly and extremity of his position as a poet’: ‘Such poetry demands a special kind of attention and perhaps a special kind of faith in the authenticity of what it enacts’, an attention and faith akin to that required to write the poems in the first place.[11] It is this ability to convince of its authenticity that paradoxically makes the poems translatable: Hamburger notes that what renders translation possible is ‘whether I could respond to the gesture of a poem as a whole. If the gesture of the poem made sense, the oddities of diction and usage, including the ambiguities, could usually be reproduced in English’ (pp. 14–15), even in full consciousness that not all allusions were being caught. Hamburger’s pioneering and slow-burning work, which continued until 2007,

[11] Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 10, 11, 19.

incorporated continuous revisions as obscure details clarified over time.[12]

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Part of the process of Celan's coming into English was the recognition of his work in writing by contemporary poets in English, and also the development of English poetic idiom into a mode which is perhaps more accommodating of Celan. One notable instance of Celan's work being taken up in English is Geoffrey Hill's *Tenebrae* (1978), a collection whose title has Celanian resonances though they are not the dominant ones. *Tenebrae* contains 'Two Chorale-Preludes on melodies by Paul Celan', the melodies being, as Hill's note informs us, two poems from *Die Niemandsrose*, 'Eis, Eden' and 'Kermorvan' (neither, be it noted, was included in the 1972 *Selected*, so Hill's poems are their first English manifestations at least in the British domain). The 'Chorale-Preludes' have Latin titles and German epigraphs, the Latin being the opening words (or titles) of, in the first case, a Marian antiphon for the close of compline ('Ave Regina Coelorum') and, in the second, of an even older hymn

[12] See *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil, 2007). For an assessment of Hamburger as translator of Celan, see Charlotte Ryland, 'Keeping Faith: Michael Hamburger's Translations of Paul Celan's Poetry', *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 43 (2011), 63–76.

for compline (‘Te Lucis Ante Terminum’); and the German being the first line of ‘Eis, Eden’ (‘Es ist ein Land Verloren . . .’) and the fourth line of ‘Kermorvan’ (‘Wir gehen dir, Heimat, ins Garn . . .’).[13] Each of Hill’s poems has approximately the same form as the German templates. The Latin hymns are also in quatrains, but otherwise their relation is formally more distant, and ‘Ave regina coelorum’ has only two verses to Hill’s and Celan’s three. In the first poem, Hill begins with straightforward and indeed close translation: ‘There is a land called Lost’, but thereafter the relationship to ‘Eis, Eden’ is more glancing. We find the moon and the frost (‘ein Mond im Ried’, ‘erfroren’), but otherwise the first verse distances itself from the German not just in its decision not to translate but in its troubling of the ‘melody’ of the Celan poem. Where ‘Eis, Eden’ is perfectly regular, with full rhymes, Hill’s rhyming repetition of ‘heads’ and the inverted foot of ‘vivifies’ seem to want to disrupt the balance of the base as soon as it is established:

> There is a land called Lost
> at peace inside our heads.
> The moon, full on the frost,
> vivifies these stone heads.[14]

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[13] For the German poems, see *Die Gedichte*, pp. 132 and 151.

[14] Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 165.

The rest of the poem takes hints from the German, but cannot be considered a translation or even a version in anything like the usual sense. Celan's poem provides at most a 'point of departure'.[15] The play with forms of *sehen* ('Es sieht, es sieht, wir sehen, / ich sehe dich, du siehst') is taken up in 'Moods of the verb 'to stare', / split selfhoods, conjugate / ice-facets from the air', which also borrows from 'Das Eis wird auferstehen' (line 11 of Celan's poem), but the poem is now closer to the Latin antiphon whose title it bears. The last verse addresses Mary ('Look at us, Queen of Heaven'), and line 8 ('the light glazing the light') seems to owe something to 'lux est orta' [light is risen]. On the other hand, the last verse is metrically the closest to Celan and combines full feminine and masculine rhyme in the same way, so it might be thought to return to Celan's 'melody', though what Hill means by melody is far from clear.

Hill's own description of what he is doing is this: 'I have combined a few phrases of free translation with phrases of my own invention'.[16] He makes no mention of the Latin poems despite displaying them in his titles. The second poem takes almost nothing identifiable from its Latin antecedent other than the title, but a bit more from 'Kermorvan'. This poem begins:

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[15] See Hill's note on *Tenebrae*: 'Spanish and German poems have provided points of departure for several poems in this book': *Collected Poems*, p. 204.

[16] *Collected Poems*, p. 204.

Du Tausendgüldenkraut-Sternchen,
du Erle, du Buche, du Farn:
mit euch Nahen geh ich ins Ferne, –
Wir gehen dir, Heimat, ins Garn.

Hill begins with botanical accuracy, in what can be construed as a kind of love-song to the original:

Centaury with your staunch bloom
you there alder beech you fern,
midsummer closeness my far home,
fresh traces of lost origin.[17]

The word ‘staunch’ seems to be suggested by the sounds/appearance of ‘Sternchen’, line two retains the trees but is unusually (un)punctuated for Hill and, as perhaps with ‘ice-facets’ earlier, possibly borrows Celan’s idiom against the specific context of the line it is translating. Lines 3 and 4 can be read as variations on the equivalent German lines, but they become at the same time a reflection on the act of translation they are engaged in, a further dwelling on the dynamics of nearness and distance and of finding and losing from which the negative connotations of ‘Garn’ are notably absent. Hill’s poem then seems to diverge quite explicitly in

[17] *Collected Poems*, p. 166.

the following line, which keeps the structure of the German, but reads *like* mistranslation:

Silvery the black cherries hang

Schwarz hängt die Kirschlorbeertraube

Silvery rather than black, black cherries rather than cherry laurel – Hill is deliberately marking his difference now (perhaps playing with the idea of falling into a trap) and largely leaves the German behind at a point where, as Michael Hamburger notes, we might have expected him to be drawn to the Christian themes of faith, hope and charity.[18] 'BE FAITHFUL' in line 11 is a displaced remnant of '*Ich liebe, ich hoffe, ich glaube*', but the phrase '*Servir Dieu est régner*' in line 10 of 'Kermorvan' – the heraldic motto of the knights of Kermorvan in Brittany, where the Celans had a house – is replaced by words from another Christian source, Walter J. Ong's essay 'Voice as Summons for Belief': 'a "kind / of otherness"'.[19] They are in the same position (lines 9-10), and 'self-understood', the words that complete line 10, are a condensation of Celan's line 9: 'Ein Spruch spricht – zu wem? Zu sich selber'. So altogether the relations running between 'Kermorvan' and 'Te Lucis Ante Terminum' are

[18] Michael Hamburger, 'On Translating Celan', in *Poems of Paul Celan*, pp. 405–422 (p. 419).

[19] See *Die Gedichte*, p. 699; and *Collected Poems*, p. 204.

many and intimate, even though they are quite different poems. Celan comes into English here by becoming something else, an accented version of what is always also the case in more straightforward translation. We can also understand Hill's method in these poems as a more involved form of Celan's interweaving of texts. And not just texts: chorale preludes are organ pieces which take a hymn-tune ('melody') as the basis for contrapuntal elaboration. There is thus a possible memory of or even allusion to 'Todesfuge' lurking in Hill's two poems.[20]

It is also possible that 'Te Lucis Ante Terminum' remembers one of the first English-language responses to Celan, the poem 'Es Lebe der König' by J. H. Prynne, which was first published in 1970 and carries the dedication '*(for Paul Celan, 1920-1970)*'.[21] This poem has several words and phrases whose presence in Hill it is difficult to be sure is coincidence, even though some of them may go back to the common root of 'Kermorvan'. In the following pairs, the first term is from Prynne's poem, the second from Hill's: 'oozes'/'oozes',

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[20] See further: Leonard Olschner, 'Von der Kontrafaktur: Paradigmatisch-poetologische Resonanzräume zu Paul Celan: John Banville (2006/2008), Lawrence Norfolk (2000), Geoffrey Hill (1974/1978)', in *Celan-Referenzen: Prozesse einer Traditionsbildung in der Moderne*, ed. by Natalia Blum-Barth and Christine Waldschmidt (Munich: V&R unipress, 2016), pp. 159–182.

[21] J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1999), pp. 169–170.

‘cracks’/‘cleft’, ‘the plum exudes its | fanatic resin’/‘the plum-tree oozes through each cleft’, ‘alder’/‘alder’. ‘Kermorvan’ supplies alder (‘Erle’), crack/cleft (‘klafft’), and perhaps plum in that the cherry laurel’s Latin name is *Prunus laurocerasus*. Even if these *are* mere coincidences, ‘Es Lebe der König’ – which takes for its title Lucile’s cry at the end of Büchner’s *Dantons Tod*, characterized by Celan in *The Meridian* as the ‘Gegenwort’ [counter-word] of poetry[22] – is an early instance of the dangerously high regard in which Celan is held, a fact which adds to the delicacy of translating him. It is also an early example of Celan’s making his way into English via other poets, a passage closely connected to the history of his translation and to the shifting of what is possible in it. Both tendencies might be summed up in Douglas Oliver’s lines on Celan as ‘the only poet I have to struggle against | because none wrote more beautifully post-war | of the perfection and terror of crystal’.[23]

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[22] *Gesammelte Werke*, III, 189, 194.

[23] ‘A Little Night’, from *Penguin Modern Poets 10: Douglas Oliver, Denise Riley, Iain Sinclair* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 41. Many other of Oliver’s poems in this selection contain references to Celan. See especially ‘Crystal Eagle 1 (*In memoriam* Paul Celan)’ (pp. 48–49). They originally belong to a sequence called *Shattered Crystal*.

On 27 December 1966 Celan said in a letter to his wife, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, that he had just written a poem ‘dur, difficile à traduire’ [hard, difficult to translate]. The poem, ‘Wenn ich nicht weiß, nicht weiß’, later appeared in *Fadensonnen*.[24] Celan doesn’t explain which aspects of the poem are particularly resistant to translation, but versions of the difficulties it presents occur in most of the poems, especially the later ones: involved and precarious syntax (the twenty-five lines of the poem form a single sentence), neologisms, polysemous words whose meanings are all in play, a memory of a Hölderlin poem (or possibly more than one), words from Hebrew and French, and then the elusiveness of the poem as a whole, which invites and repulses understanding at the same time, seems very specific while not quite revealing what it is being specific about. That these things render the poem difficult to translate is not as obviously true as it might seem, and there is even a sense in which Celan can seem quite amenable to translation. Most of his poems offer no particular metrical difficulties, and because the words give the translator so little leeway, above all when set out in the predominantly short lines of the later poems, they can, and must, be simply transposed: what makes them exacting also narrows a translator’s choices in ways which may actually facilitate the arrival at a convincing version. Four translations of this poem appeared within about a year: by Pierre Joris and by Nikolai Popov and Heather McHugh in 2000, and by John

[24] *Die Gedichte*, 237–8.

Felstiner and by Ian Fairley in 2001.[25] The divergences between them are not great, and where the English has been more venturous it has often ended up somewhere questionable or even in error. Here are some of the kinds of differences to be found:

in line 2: for ‘ohne Du’, Joris and Popov/McHugh give ‘without a You’, Fairley ‘without You’, Felstiner ‘with no Thou’;
in lines 4-5: for ‘die | Freigeköpften’, Joris gives, ‘the | freebeheaded’, Felstiner ‘those | free beheaded’, Popov/McHugh ‘acephalic by choice’, Fairley ‘the elective beheaded’;
in line 16: for ‘gespritzt’, Joris gives ‘injected’, Felstiner ‘squirted’, Popov/McHugh ‘ejaculated’, Fairley ‘shot’;
in line 20: for ‘karpatisches Nichtnicht beharft’ (l. 20), Joris gives ‘harps Carpathian nono’, Felstiner ‘harps Carpathian Notnot’, Popov/McHugh ‘strums a Carpathian not-not’, Fairley ‘plucks the Carpathian Nichtnicht’.

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[25] *Fathomsuns* and *Benighted*, trans. by Ian Fairley (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), p. 111; *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. by John Felstiner, p. 295; *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. by Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 2014), p. 157/9 (Joris originally published his version of *Fadensonnen* as *Threadsuns* in 2000); *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems*, trans. by Nikolai Popov and Heather McHugh (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 56.

One might observe the following. With ‘die | Freigeköpften’ the sense is clearly to do with people whose heads have been removed. If they are ‘free’, they are at least as much free of their heads as they are free in any more positive sense, and the meaning of freedom has in any case been put in question. To use ‘acephalic’ seems wrong as it points to creatures who never had heads rather than to those that have lost them. And ‘by choice’, translating ‘frei-‘ by analogy with *Freitod* [suicide], compounds the inappropriateness of suggesting that these people (who seem to be the Jews) have not suffered a terrible fate. Fairley’s ‘elective’ has similar problems, so that although they sound less inventive and more beholden to the German, the versions by Joris and Felstiner are probably to be preferred. In the case of ‘karpatisches Nichtnicht beharft’, ‘nono’ seems best avoided as it has an existing sense in English that isn’t quite right (the double ‘Nichtnicht’, Barbara Wiedemann suggests in her commentary, refers to the way Bukovina has been annulled by the resettlement of its Germans and by the extermination of its Jews[26]); to keep ‘Nichtnicht’, apart from the obvious problem, might lead one to think that it has a specific untranslatable meaning; so that the straightforward ‘not-not’ or ‘Notnot’ (but why the capital?) seem unimaginatively best. It is interesting that none of the translators tries ‘harps on’ for ‘beharft’.

To allow in a little more context, we can look at the closing lines of the poem:

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[26] *Die Gedichte*, p. 765.

dann spitzenklöppelt die
Allemande

das sich übergebende un-
sterbliche
Lied.[27]

Popov/McHugh:

then the
Allemande
starts tatting
her im-
mortal self-sick
song.

Felstiner:

then the Allemande
knits lace out of
thrown-up im-

[27] The stanza-break is correct but easily overlooked on the page-turn in *Gesammelte Werke* (II, 154–5), hence its elision by most of the translators.

mortal

song.

Joris:

then the Allemande

bobbins her lace for

the vomiting im-

mortal

song.

Fairley:

the Allemande drills

to

the evacuate im-

mortal

song.

All the translators end in consonance with the original, taking the opportunity to split ‘im-|mortal’ as in the German, though Popov/McHugh interpolate ‘self-sick’ for reasons that are not clear. All also keep ‘Allemande’ (which may make us think of Celan’s mother, or of his wife, but also names a dance or a movement in a

suite).[28] The two ‘difficulties’, or parts that offer or require more knowledge and ingenuity, are ‘spitzenklöppelt’, a reference to lace-making, and ‘sich übergebende’, an adjectival form of a verb usually meaning ‘to be sick’ but literally ‘to give oneself over’. Fairley seems not to pick up, or in any case not to transmit, the lace-making: it is hard to see how ‘drills | to’ is arrived at. And then the Miltonic ‘evacuate’ (not in the *OED* as an adjective) seems over-abstruse and not obviously to solve any of the trickiness of the original. Popov/McHugh’s ‘tatting’ is a real find in that it refers to the right thing, gets some of the hard-edgedness of ‘spitzenklöppelt’, and avoids the awkwardness of ‘knitting’ lace (Felstiner) or the inexactness of ‘bobbins’ (Joris). Crucially, it can also be used transitively: Felstiner and Joris have to introduce prepositions (‘out of’, ‘for’) which both impede and over-explicate the sense.

The problem of ‘sich übergebende’ is also dealt with differently by each translator: Joris goes for the dictionary-sense ‘vomiting’, which seems to lack the openness of the German, and neglects the make-up of the German word. He is of course correct that in an ordinary context this would be the word’s main tilt, but here the ordinary meaning, as the line and stanza breaks slow the poem down, is tempered by what the words more literally convey and indeed by what is happening, as the poem hands itself over to us and the possible consonance between the ‘Lied’ we are reading

[28] Wiedemann tells us that the poem was written on Celan’s fourteenth wedding anniversary (*Die Gedichte*, p. 764).

about and the poem we are reading, into which the prevarication as to whether it is ‘im-mortal’ or not plays (the word ‘unsterblich’ has in a sense been beheaded), is held in its final word. There may be no way of conveying this, but Felstiner’s ‘thrown-up’ perhaps has the advantage of allowing a wide range of sense (a problem, a heap, hands, a game and many other things can be thrown up besides the contents of a stomach). Popov/McHugh’s ‘self-sick’ is harder to assess: clearly it tunes into the reflexive element in ‘sich übergebende’ and so permits us to catch at a complexity, alluding perhaps to the notion that the poem and the ‘song’ may be one and the same. It also possibly brings in an allusion to Blake (‘O Rose, thou art sick’) which would not be out of place. It tones down the normal sense, in a way the German arguably also does. On the other hand, it forfeits some of the movement. But in the end it seems to work as part of an attention to making the translation unfold as a poem. Of all the versions, there is no doubt that Popov/McHugh achieve the best cadence, and the out-of-position ‘self-sick’ comes off in part because the sounds of ‘-liche | Lied’ find an equivalent in ‘self-sick | song’. They are the only ones to diverge from the disposition of the original’s lines, taking six lines to translate the final five (having used one less for the second stanza). This seems to be a way of indicating and asserting a little more freedom from the German. It’s worth noting that Popov/McHugh are the only translators of those being discussed not to supply a parallel German text.

These comments are intended to point to some of what is at issue in translating Celan. What in the end makes the task difficult is his precision in the use of language and in the placing of words in the line, in his notation of realities physical and mental, and in his exploration of the language web. It is this precision that is so hard for any translator to match: the poems are the result of, part of, a life lived with a precision that made it unbearable. Popov and McHugh, in their interesting preface, note that 'only a wide *range* of translatorial approaches can do justice to a poetry as complex as Celan's'.[29] They see their own work as seeking 'to create poems that follow Celan's intentional mode (Benjamin's *Art des Meinens*), and the intensity of his listening to language itself'. What they are trying to translate is a practice, and they even claim to be after 'higher levels of fidelity than those of the word, the line, or the individual poem'.[30] To translate then, is not (only) to attend to the meaning of a particular poem, but to enter into Celan's language-work *by* performing a comparable tapping and fitting of English. The translations are of course in close dialogue with the shape and import of the individual poems, just as translations by others which think of themselves as more concerned with following the original's trace word by word also necessarily engage in the probing of language, and work an equivalent of it in English. Similarly, when Popov and McHugh say they have restricted themselves to 'poems

[29] *Glottal Stop*, p. xi.

[30] *Glottal Stop*, p. xii.

for which we could find, in English, sufficiently rich or opportune poetic resources to justify publication', that will not be any different from Hamburger or Felstiner's practice, though it is different from Joris and Fairley, who have committed themselves to whole collections. Even for translators picking their poems, the question of how much and what kind of understanding is necessary for a poem to be translated will always remain. Celan's poetics involved an idea of 'darkness' ('Dunkelheit'), quite possibly arrived at in conscious opposition to Heidegger's concept of the *Lichtung*. If his poetry carries or conceals an intrinsic darkness, something that inhabits it that cannot be elucidated or dispersed and without which it would not be what it is, then the translator necessarily has to convey that darkness, possibly even as its most essential element. Hamburger, a translator of great integrity, has spoken of how an elusive detail in a poem prevented him from translating it.[31] Felstiner admits that though translation can bring understanding, 'with inscrutable poems or lines, I gladly pass them along to the reader within the full stream of Celan's writing'.[32] This does match the experience of reading much of Celan, where the overall movement of a poem allows us to receive and respond to it without being able to account for every element of its composition, and where it is the wider context of Celan's work which permits the intuitive grasping of the details. A

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[31] See his remarks on the word 'Kolben' in 'Coagula': 'On Translating Celan', pp. 414–416.

[32] *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, p. xxxi.

significant component of the original poems, of the darkness they bear with them, cannot in any case form part of a translation (except partially in the case of Felstiner's 'Todesfuge'): the very fact of their being written in German. As Popov/McHugh point out, 'No one can reproduce in a language other than German Celan's tragic relation to a language which was his instrument and life'.[33] But perhaps the sense that the enterprise of translating Celan is flawed from the start introduces a fraughtness which actually becomes part of the tension of the translation and enables it to operate as a distinct but related poem. The necessity and difficulty of being in German that inheres in the original shifts into the necessity and difficulty of being in another language (here, English). What could be called the drama of translation is already present in the originals, and is brought out in the translations.

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To close, we can look in more detail at a particular poem and its various versions in English. It is notable that later translators, who have benefited from the groundwork done by people like Hamburger and Felstiner, gravitate towards the later poems, which is to say that the slow process of coming to terms with Celan has made the approach possible. Popov and McHugh explicitly concentrate on poems not yet available in English at the time they were working on

[33] *Glottal Stop*, p. xi.

their book, and as a consequence there are not that many poems that have been attempted by a wide chronological span of translators. ‘Erzflitter’, from the volume *Schneepart*, exists in versions by Popov/McHugh (2000), Fairley (2007) and Joris (2014):

ERZFLITTER, tief im
Aufruhr, Erzväter.

Du behilfst dir
damit,
als sprächen, mit ihnen,
Angiospermen
ein offenes
Wort.

Kalkspur Posaune.

Verlorenes findet
in den Karstwannen
Kargheit, Klarheit.[34]

Popov/McHugh (no parallel text, brief notes):

Particles, patriarchs, buried

[34] *Die Gedichte*, p. 336.

in the upheaval, spangles
of ore.

You make the most of things
with them,
as if angiosperms
were having a
forthright
word
with you.

Shofar traced in limestone.

In karst caverns
what is lost gains
rarity, clarity.[35]

Fairley (with German *en face*, no notes):

OREFLASHES, orefathers,
deep in the uproar.

You make of it
what you can,

[35] *Glottal Stop*, p. 99.

as if angiosperms were
to speak with them
an open
word.

Chalkmark clarion.

In karst basins
what's lost finds
poverty, clarity.[36]

Joris (with German *en face*, and notes):

OREGLITTER, deep in
turmoil, urfathers.

You help yourself
thus,
as if
angiosperms spoke
a clear word,
with them.

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[36] Paul Celan, *Snow Part / Schneepart*, trans. by Ian Fairley (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 109.

Chalktrace trombone.

In the karst depression
the lost finds
sparseness, clarity.[37]

First we can observe that only Popov/McHugh, as we have already seen, do not feel bound by Celan's arrangement of lines. Unlike Fairley and Joris, they add a line to each of the first two stanzas, and again this goes with a more relaxed approach to the poem. There is a spoken, even demotic feel to their lines not found in the other versions. But they return faithfully to the poem at the end, and all three versions end on the same word and with a similar gait. They are also the only translators to sidestep the compound with which the poem begins. One of the chief problems facing translators of Celan is how to deal with composite words, especially if they are also, or have the appearance of, neologisms. German is naturally rich in such words—many common words are made up of two elements that have clear and separate existences on their own. So *Flugzeug* means aeroplane, but literally 'flight-thing'; *Herzkammer* means ventricle, but literally 'heart-chamber'. German's etymological roots are much closer to the surface than most languages': many medical and scientific terms are made out of common elements where in English we tend to use a term from

[37] *Breathturn into Timestead*, p. 375.

Latin or Greek. So when Celan invents a word such as ‘Erzflitter’ (if indeed it is an invention), he is doing something very much within the domain of how German operates. To imitate him by making ‘oreflashes’ or ‘oreglitter’ seems unobjectionable, even unavoidable, but the effect, especially cumulatively, is to make Celan appear much odder than he is. Celan is often thought of as working against the grain of the German language, dismantling it, but it is at least as accurate to say that he worked with and in it. All translators recognize this to an extent, but one can still see that Popov/McHugh and Fairley carry the recognition over into their practice more deliberately and (especially in Fairley’s case) overtly, with the difference that Popov/McHugh are more wary of transposing German methods directly, and more inclined to keep to the idiom of a contemporary poem in (American) English. Joris tends to lie somewhere between the two, but in this poem is closer to Fairley in his desire to mirror the German. Fairley focusses on the modulation of ‘Erzflitter’ into ‘Erzväter’ without feeling bound by the word order, so foregrounding the word-play. His ‘Oreflashes, orefathers’ in one line neatly brings out the dual sense in ‘Erz-’ of ore and arch, with ‘orefathers’ summoning and withholding ‘forefathers’. ‘[D]eep in the uproar’ then doubles down, outdoing the German in its repetition of the key sound and running a risk, perhaps, of approaching babble in a way that is justifiable given the context of primal stirring. Joris follows the German much more closely (word for word), and finds his own way of dealing with the repetition of ‘Erz-’, though

‘urfathers’ is less likely to summon ‘forefathers’ and reads like an attempt to avoid a previous solution. Against this background, Popov/McHugh seem to be operating very differently, but they are also working to reproduce some of the original’s effects. It’s notable that they translate ‘Erzväter’ by its true dictionary equivalent, ‘patriarchs’, and introduce ‘particles’ apparently for the sound, in response to ‘Erz-’. They thus gesture towards beginnings, to the elemental (suggested also in ‘tief’ which they give as ‘buried’), but lose some of Celan’s concision. Notably also, they avoid trying to imitate the compound, and come up with something more idiomatic: ‘spangles | of ore’. Their version of the next stanza is also easily the most idiomatic, but seems to have misplaced ‘mit ihnen’, so that the angiosperms are made to speak ‘with you’ instead of with the ‘Erzflitter […] Erzväter’. It also seems odd not to let the stanza close on ‘word’, but Joris avoids this too, and only Fairley lets the sentence settle in this way, without quite convincing with ‘an open | word’, where the problems of tracking the German too closely are evident: ‘ein offenes Wort [reden]’ is normal German, whereas ‘to speak an open word’ sounds out of tune. This is a good example of Celan’s way with language – an everyday phrase, and yet one which the context pulls into a new sense, since ‘offen’ here works in opposition to the meaning of angiosperms, which are a class of

plants with enclosed seeds (as Joris and Popov/McHugh tell us in their notes).[38]

The solitary next line, ‘Kalkspur Posaune’, also provides the occasion for some interesting divergences. Joris and Fairley both cleave close, probably too close. ‘Kalk’ is limestone (or lime) rather than chalk, and neither ‘chalkmark’ nor ‘chalktrace’ really make much sense of the juxtaposition with ‘Posaune’, since the kind of trace intended, and confirmed by ‘Karstwannen’, is not a line drawn on something, but a hollowing, an opening. ‘Trombone’, for ‘Posaune’, also strays towards the literal, since as Michael Hamburger pointed out long ago with reference to the later poem ‘Die Posaunenstelle’, the use of ‘Posaune’ in Luther’s Bible corresponds to ‘trumpet’ in the Authorized Version and later English Bibles.[39] Fairley’s ‘clarion’ doesn’t rule that out, but Popov/McHugh’s ‘shofar’ more surely fills in the right context, and their ‘traced *in* limestone’ much more readily leads into the karst landscape evoked at the end, which focusses on the empty forms left by the passage of water (so a negative of what is lost, a possible definition of or allusion to the poem). ‘Karstwannen’ are better as ‘basins’ or perhaps ‘depression’ than ‘caverns’, since the traces need to be visible. And ‘rarity’ is odd for ‘Kargheit’, which in context denotes a denuded landscape.

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[38] *Breathturn into Timestead*, p. 600: ‘a plant that produces seeds within an enclosure’.

[39] Hamburger, ‘Introduction’, in *Poems of Paul Celan*, pp. 36–37.

Again, these remarks are intended to draw attention to some of the difficulties, and to give an idea of the range of possibilities and solutions that have been found. Hamburger's method of translation, which forms a kind of substratum over which later translators have moved, has been called by Christopher Middleton 'documental' (in reference to his Hölderlin translations). The translations build on one another over time, and so the originals work their way into English almost organically, unfolding in a series of life-forms. But it is worth pointing out that though a vast amount of inventiveness has been devoted to translating Celan, none of his translators can be said to be aiming at 'versions' of Celan in the recent sense which distinguishes 'versioning' from translating.[40] Allegiance always seems to be squarely towards the original, and towards the absolute status Celan continues to enjoy. There are poems for and about him, or strong allusions of the kind we saw in Hill's 'Chorale-Preludes', but the translations seem always to be attempts to tap the depths of the German, not exercises in variation. This is true even of Popov/McHugh, who perhaps do the most to make something with its '*own* pattern of error and lyric felicity'.[41] This is connected to a function which translations of Celan, particularly of the later work, fulfil more than is usually the case:

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[40] On which see Don Paterson, 'Fourteen Notes on the Version', in *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's* Die Sonette an Orpheus (London: Faber, 2006), pp. 73–84, but take it with a pinch of salt.

[41] Paterson, 'Fourteen Notes', p. 73.

they are themselves readings, interpretations, elucidations, serving the originals and our understanding of them.