

Joanna Klink

YOU. AN INTRODUCTION TO PAUL CELAN

To Cling
to unstable things:

two fingers are snapping
in the abyss, a
world is stirring
in the scratch-sheets, it all depends
on you.

(Trans. Washburn & Guillemin)

*An Die Haltlosigkeiten
sich schmeigen:*

*es schnippen
zwei Finger im Abgrund, in den
Sudelheften
rauscht Welt auf, es kommt
auf dich an.*

—Paul Celan

The great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, “I want you to be.”

—Hannah Arendt

The poet Paul Celan lived from 1920 to 1970. In this respect he is post-modern: someone who inherits the problems and values of those people who lived between the 1890’s and the 1930’s. He is also a post-war poet: he wrote most of his poems after the war, with a steady, incredulous eye upon Europe’s abrupt return to “normalcy,” and today Celan is regarded as the great German-language poet of the second half of this century, extending a speculative tradition in German poetry that runs from Hölderlin in the eighteenth century through Trakl and Rilke in the twentieth.

In the critical reception of Celan there has been some attempt to appropriate his poetry entirely to the Holocaust, as though the poems were not in themselves exemplary poems but exemplary of the kind of poem which could only be written in response to Auschwitz. But Celan’s practice locates him in the company of other poets—so-called difficult poets, like Mallarmé and Hart Crane—who situate their poems close to a symbolic source of meaning, poets who carry their very existence into language, “. . . wounded by the real and in search of it” (wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchend “Bremen” 35;

186). The extreme doubt that propels their poems is doubt about the stability of the external world, about language, and especially about sources of meaning which might authorize poetic practice. Celan's doubt cannot be separated from his experience of the Holocaust, but the poems which arise out of this doubt should be understood as contending with ontological issues which include and exceed those raised by the Holocaust.

During Celan's lifetime, critics and readers accused him of writing "difficult" and "hermetic" poems because his language was dense, strange, and did not lend itself to paraphrase. "Hermetic" here means "self-referential," "veiled," or "deliberately concealed"—verse which seems turned away from the world, which has the markings of a private language. Even today, the predominant schools in Celan scholarship regard Celan's hermeticism as fundamental to his poetics. The charge of hermeticism has a basis in two distinct lines of influence in Celan's life: his dialogue with Gershom Scholem, whose scholarly engagement with the Kabbalah and traditions of hermetica were of great interest to Celan, and the *poésie pure* announced by Mallarmé and taken up in France by poets such as Éluard and Char, which sought to free symbols from their explicitly referential or mimetic obligations. Celan's interest in alchemy, evident in poems such as "Solve" and "Coagula," contributes to the association with hermeticism as well. But Celan insisted that his poetry was not hermetic, and the label upset him a great deal. He inscribed Michael Hamburger's copy of *Die Niemandsrose* with the phrase *ganz und gar nicht hermetisch*—"not in the least hermetic." Evidently Celan felt the need to defend himself against the charge, to direct his readers away from the anti-communicative implications of that term—because to call a poem hermetic means that it is not ultimately concerned with including you in its meaning.

Celan's poems are in search of something he calls *Wirklichkeit*: the real. What makes Celan a difficult—but not a hermetic—poet is his intense orientation toward the real. Like a great many other poets, Celan does the work of representation between two domains: the actual and the real. (I have chosen to translate *Wirklichkeit* as "the real" instead of "reality" in order to free it somewhat from conventional associations and to better distinguish it from the domain of appearances.) The domain of the actual is the domain of appearances. In the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt reconsiders the primacy of appearances in the phenomenological tradition that runs from Husserl through Heidegger. In everyday life as well as in scientific study, she

writes, “the criterion for what a living thing essentially is . . . is determined by the relatively short time span of its full appearance” on this earth, its “epiphany” (22). We are, each of us, appearing and disappearing creatures born into a world which contains “many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal, all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled, to be perceived . . .” (19):

In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide. Dead matter, natural and artificial, changing and unchanging, depends in its being, that is, in its appearingness, on the presence of living creatures. Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*. (19)

Insofar as “to be” always means to be perceived by a spectator—that is, to be unto others—being and appearing coincide. Each of us appears and is a “recipient of appearance.” Although each appearance is irreducibly singular, we share the fact that we appear, that the world appears, and that we are of the world—that we belong to a world which existed before our arrival and which will survive our departure. Appearance is the medium in which we receive and encounter one another. We have appearances in common.

Poems attest to appearances. They evidence the world at its most literal and particular—how a certain slant of light appears; its outline, its character, its precise feel; and then, what comes to pass around the certain slant of light, also what might come to pass. Indeed in Celan’s vocabulary, this domain includes both what is “given” and what is “possible”: the world as it seems, and as it might be (“Reply to a Questionnaire from Librarie Flinker” 1958). The actual is always inside time, or subject to time (things come into appearance and vanish). Likewise, it is subject to perception (we receive it through our senses).

The contradiction of the actual is the real. In this context, real does not mean material, or empirical, or (as in Plato) the opposite of ideal. The real is, above all, source: the source of meaning; that which sponsors our existence in this world. By definition, it is outside of time, outside of experience; it does not set bounds; it provides a common ground abstract enough to include your experience and mine at once. Most essentially, the real provides the category

of existence. It is transcendent insofar as transcendence consists in moving beyond the boundaries of one self; being among others; being included. Appearances imply our involvement in a common world, but the real is our involvement in that world. In poems the real often figures as the principle of discourse, as those powers which originate us but are not ourselves. And because it is a term of highest value, it always carries a burdened evaluative weight: it lends meaning to the actual, authorizes the significance of the actual, and thereby determines what is most worthy of value.

In life, as in art, we hunger for the real. Certain events get slotted into this category, events which force us to acknowledge the sanctity—the highest value—of a person. Extraordinary events, for example. Traditionally, light has been associated with the real, as that which illumines a person or makes one person visible to another. The value of a person is most apparent when brought close to the real. As with light, which has the capacity to most augment and most threaten the identity of a person, the real is both constitutive of and destabilizing to self. Personhood tends to be most illuminated by those forces that threaten its limits, and the real threatens those limits. Silence and pain are included in this domain as well, although sites of affliction and great pain tend to soak up the real and sometimes make us forget that it also occurs in ordinary life. But because the domain is symbolic, we do not and cannot sustain a life in the real. Collapse the actual and the real and there would be no life, no appearance, nothing creaturely, nothing in itself. With its generalizing force, the real has the potential to annihilate particularity, to extinguish the “polychrome” design and detail of the actual (“the polychrome of apparent actuality,” *das Polychrome des scheinbar Aktuellen*, “Reply” 15;167). Emily Dickinson, a poet especially attentive to the violent-beautiful-ephemeral quality of the real, expresses this in 258 when she calls attention to the way life seizes up in its presence: “When it comes, the Landscape listens—/ Shadows—hold their breath—/When it goes, ’tis like the Distance/On the look of Death.” The threat of the real is that, in breaking into the realm of appearances, it takes—for an instant—our breath away (the pause in breath Celan calls “breath-turn”). The power of the real is its capacity to make our lives—in that same instant—incandescent.

Celan’s poems situate themselves at the juncture between this power and this threat, and seek out the real. Celan was particularly adamant that poems not take the real for granted, not assume that it exists or is ready-at-hand. In the poem, he says, the real “is not simply there. It must be sought and won”

("Reply" 16). Just prior to his acceptance of the City of Bremen Literature Prize in 1958, Celan received a letter from a high school teacher in Bremen who felt that Celan's poems were incomprehensible and whose students wondered if perhaps the poems weren't meant to be interpreted at all. Celan replied by saying

Reality for poems is in no way something that stands established, already given, but something standing in question, that's to be put in question. In a poem, what's real *happens* . . . The poem itself, insofar as it is a real poem, is aware of the questionableness of its own beginning. (Felstiner 118)

Wirklichkeit ist für das Gedicht also Keineswegs etwas Feststehendes, Vorgegebenes, sondern etwas im Frage Stehendes, in Frage zu Stellendes. In einem Gedicht, ereignet sich Wirkliches . . . Das Gedicht selbst ist sich, sofern es ein wirkliches Gedicht ist, der Fragwürdigkeit seines Beginns wohl bewußt. (160)

When Celan says "what's real *happens*," he is calling upon the history of the word *Wirklichkeit*, which is related to the verb *wirken*. *Wirken* (*würken*) first appeared in the 13th century. The word was used by mystics to mean "to take effect," "to bring forth" (*herstellen*), "to work" (from the root substantive *Werk*) (Kluge 795). In contemporary usage, all the variations on the verb—such as *Wirkung haben*, *verwirklichen*, *einwirken*—mean to have an effect, to act on something, to realize. As Jonathan Culler suggests in his essay "Apostrophe," poems can be said to "take effect" insofar as they establish a relationship to the real. For example, when a poet cries out, in apostrophe, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance" or "O Presences/That passion, piety or affection knows," he is appealing—vertically—to a source of meaning to break into the world of appearances and take hold, take effect, make something happen.

This effort to secure a relationship to the real is part of the ritual activity of poems, and each poet has a different strategy for how to manage the transaction. "Transaction" because, on the one hand, poems seek to overcome the difference between actual and real, between the world as it appears and the world as it is sponsored. On the other hand, poems must try to keep the two

domains sufficiently distinct, because the world is most intelligible when there is a difference between appearances and source. Poems need to maintain a difference between actual and real in order to maintain the intelligibility of the relationship. The difference between appearances and source makes possible judgments concerning which appearances are valuable and which are not, since, evidently, not all things that appear are worthy of value. In other words, the efficacy of the relationship depends on a sustained, engaged difference between actual and real. Any transaction between these two domains ensures the ongoing beauty and complexity of appearances: ensures both that the world continues in the poem (it is authorized by a source of meaning) and that it continues to be discussable (appearances can be distinguished from each other and from their source).

For Celan, poems proceed with profound intention of manifesting the real. Indeed the anticipatory character of his poetry is due in large part to the way in which the poems imagine what it would look like for the unmanifest symbolic world to break into view. But to say that there is a necessary difference between appearances and source is to say that, within the dynamic constraints of representation, the process of manifestation is always necessarily incomplete. As he explains in the Bremen speech, poetic language [entails]

movement, you see, something happening, being *en route*, an attempt to find a direction. Whenever I ask about the sense of it, I remind myself that this implies the question as to which sense is clockwise.

For the poem does not stand outside time. True, it claims the infinite and tries to reach across time—but across, not above. (34)

The poem is *en route*; it never arrives at the real; it “tries to reach.” Because the poem cannot reach straight “above” for the real, it reaches across: it is inside time and must sustain its engagement with the domain of appearances. In its processual character, the poem is arrested between actual and real and cannot fully actualize its claim on the infinite.

Difficult poetries—those brilliant, sometimes inscrutable languages—tend to be situated very close to the real. They seem to be oriented so fully toward the symbolic realm that they threaten to lose touch with appearances altogether, to lose touch with sense. In fact the closer certain poetic languages are to the real, the more they verge on nonsense. Those moments in a poem

when the music threatens to obscure the meaning often occur when the actual and the real are brought closest together. For example, in the concluding phrase of Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection," there is a conflagration of actual and real which causes the nouns to condense into clusters. It creates what initially seems like a nonsensical word-string in the middle of the phrase:

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,

Is immortal diamond. (106)

Similarly, in the poem "Pain, the syllable," Celan describes a serpent biting its own tail:

a blind

let-there-be
tied itself in
free and serpent-headed coils—: a
knot
(and counter-knot and anti-knot and tauto-knot and double-knot and thousand knot)

ein blindes

*Es sei
knüpfte sich in
die schlangenköpfigen Frei-
Tae—: ein
Knoten
(und Wider- und Gegen- und Aber- und Zwillings- und Tausendknoten)* (Popov and McHugh 15;28)

Many difficult poems evidence clustering moments such as these, which force us to redouble our efforts at making sense of what we're reading. In transacting between the actual and the real, difficult poetries need to be especially vigilant about sustaining a productive tension between what appears and what authorizes that appearance, otherwise they risk not making sense, or short-

circuiting the structure of communication which was their original intent. Most poets want to communicate something about the world, and difficult poetries are always at risk of losing their audience. This is why charges of hermeticism arise.

Celan came of age during the Holocaust. Overnight, his parents were taken from their home; he heard second-hand of his father's death from typhus, and likewise the news that his mother had been shot in the neck because she was thought unfit for work. Essentially, Celan lived out his life in exile, coming from "a homeland that hardly existed anymore, writing for a German audience that he did not live among or trust, residing in France yet unvalued there" (Felstiner 94), and witnessing waves of neo-Nazi outbursts in the late 50's and 60's. It is fair to say that Celan was not able to take the real for granted. Of course, radical doubt about sponsorship can arise from any number of circumstances. The narrative of Jewish history in the Torah and beyond is itself an account of the persistent failure of the real to safeguard the losses of the community. Profound doubt about sponsorship occurs when there is not enough compensation for the losses endured—that is, when the horror of loss is greater than any symbolic compensation can provide. This, it seems, is the experience of history. For Celan, there is no "intrinsic" situation of being. Identity—social, cultural, spiritual—is threatened at every level. Perhaps one of the reasons Celan's poems appear private or inward is that they do not claim to speak on behalf of a culture, as Eliot (in "Tradition and the Individual Talent") says a poem should. Celan does not assume that there is any culture on whose behalf he might speak. Nor does he assume the possibility of a universal reception of his poems. Celan is continually asking the question, "May we, like many of our contemporaries, take art for granted, for absolutely given?" ("Meridian" 43).

Everywhere in Celan's poetry there is the strain towards what is most minimally given in the world. Because the question of whether or not anything can be said to be authorized is a genuine question, there is in his poetry an extra burden (and this is a post-modern burden) to secure a source of meaning—in effect, to "produce" the real. The High Moderns either rely on an established source of meaning (Hopkins' God) or invent their own world-legitimizing source (Eliot's Tradition, Yeats' System). Yeats' System, for instance, allows him to be assured that the chestnut tree he addresses at the end of "Among School Children" is there, apart from his address; he has enough

cultural assurance to know that the reference is valid. The High Modern poet engages the source of meaning in the poem, and out of this encounter arise the troubled, beautiful, ritual activities of description and address—shuttling back and forth between the realm of appearances and what sponsors those appearances. By contrast, in every Celan poem the effort to transact between appearances and source is *also* an ongoing struggle to produce that source. Celan, drawing on Buber, calls this source “you.”

The IYou relation is the irreducible structure in Celan’s poetry, the condition of possibility of anything happening at all within the poem. Beyond the IYou relation, the world is in doubt. “The world is gone,” he writes at the end of “Great glowing vault,” “I must carry you” (*Breathturn* 323). Consequently, for Celan, all *Rede* (speech) is *Anrede*—“speaking towards,” speech directed at someone or something else. The I alone does not suffice. In “*Der Meridian*,” the speech he gave when he was awarded Germany’s prestigious Büchner Prize and which engages the central tenets of his poetics, Celan writes that the destination of the poem is a you, a second person, the “for sake of whom” anything is said to have meaning. “The poem,” says Celan,

intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it. For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading. (“*Meridian*” 49)

The second person is at once the addressee of the poem, the recipient of the message, the reader, the listener or silent auditor, the co-perceiver, a figure of the “opposite” or the “outside” to the voice that speaks the poem. It might be a stranger, a beloved, a meadow, Meister Eckart, Mandelstam, some altered version of the I, an imaginary companion, the rain. In order to see what Celan is doing on the page, it is useful to distinguish between at least two kinds of second person. One kind of you is actually there, the body which appears. It is immanent, mortal, intimate, social, reciprocal; the you attached to a particular life; the one who is irreducibly singular. The other kind is the you attached to the general life, the “Thou.” This you is abstract; it partakes of the category of the real; it is the you with respect to which anyone can be said “to be”; “everything and everybody is a figure of this [you] toward which [the poem] is heading.” It is sometimes called the ontic you, or “the Other”—*l’Autre* of Levinasian and Sartrean philosophy. Heidegger, with Husserl, calls it “*das Andere*,” at times Celan calls it “*das ganz Andere*.”

The instability of Celan's poetic enterprise—the blurring between invoking a source of meaning and producing that source—is a function of his position as someone who has been denied cultural assurance, denied the institutional framework which makes it possible to distinguish a principle of meaning from an instance of meaning. It is the contingency of a well-functioning institution which enables the High Moderns to recognize a difference between the vertical appeal to a source of meaning (as in Crane's "Adagios of islands, O my Prodigal") and the horizontal address to a particular, concrete you ("but there is a line/You must not cross"). In a well-formed polity, the abstract sense of the person—the you attached to the general life—is given, and the problem is how to engage it. In a polity that doesn't work, the abstraction "you" itself becomes troubling, because there is no institution in place to recognize it or lend it legitimacy. In the absence of institutional sanction, Celan throws all his energies into acts of address which would speak to the person as a multiple presence, an assembly of different kinds of you. He struggles to make each "you" both actual and real at once.

In Augustine's celebrated definition, to love someone means to confer ontic status upon that person. In love, we will the existence of the other. I desire that you *be*, I will that you be what you are: *volo ut sis*. (Heidegger, who directed Arendt's doctoral thesis *Love and St. Augustine*, makes frequent reference to Augustine's definition in his letters to Arendt and in the Nietzsche seminars of the early 1940's. Celan began reading Heidegger in 1952 and may have been familiar with Heidegger's understanding of Augustine from Heidegger's *Nietzsche*.) For Augustine, to love is to treat as inseparable the body of the beloved (how he or she appears) and the existence of the beloved (that the beloved is). We will the mortal, creaturely, intimate second person into the domain of the real. As in the Augustinian model of love, Celan wills that there be no distinction between actual and real you: when he says "you," he tries to make them inseparable. As he explains in the "Meridian" speech,

perhaps an encounter is conceivable between this 'altogether other'—
I am using a familiar auxiliary—and a not so very distant, a quite
close 'other'—conceivable, perhaps, again and again. (48)

In effect, Celan's effort is to condense these two forms of second person, and thereby produce or ground his legitimating source within the poem. He calls upon a you so that the world can be said to be: you be, so that the world can

be. Celan is always working to secure the existence of the thing he is addressing as he addresses it. As he says in one poem, addressing a shadow,

you slide across my mouth
midway through the words
I address to you, shadow,
to give you weight.

(“With the Voice of the Fieldmouse”)

Often, and especially in Celan’s late work, the *you* takes shape over the course of the poem, so that people and things initially spoken *of* become beings spoken *to*—and through what Celan calls “desperate conversation,” they coalesce around the act of address. In this respect, the address calls up into life—fills out, makes concrete—whatever is lost, estranged, or helplessly removed from the self.

But why does Celan resort to this particular strategy of address? Celan’s most acute loss was the loss of his mother. This most important, structuring moment in Celan’s biography—the moment in which love didn’t work out—is accompanied by a profound sense of guilt. Indeed there is some suggestion that Celan felt himself to be an agent in his mother’s disappearance, or, at the very least, that he acknowledged a connection between his choices and her death. In the end, it was impossible for Celan to narrate the concrete details of her disappearance. As his biographer Felstiner points out, Celan—like many people who lived through the Holocaust—gave almost no factual testimony about his experiences. But there isn’t even a single, reliable *second-hand* account of what happened the night his parents disappeared. In Czernowitz, in June of 1942, the Gestapo began a new deportation action: they would arrive on Saturday nights and rout people into trucks, then into cattle cars at the railway station. After two such overnight “actions” had just occurred, Felstiner notes, “Jews were forewarned. Over the weekend they could stay elsewhere or send their children away” (14). In one account, Celan’s parents wanted him safely out of the house. He went to a friend’s house and stayed overnight because of the curfew, and when he returned home the next day, his parents were gone. In another account, Celan quarreled with his mother; he wanted his parents to hide with him in a cosmetics factory, but she was resigned to being taken. (As Felstiner points out, “she had no way of knowing that by this

time, two-thirds of the Jews deported to Transnistria had died" 14). Celan left the house, convinced they would follow him to the hiding-place, and when he returned later that night, they were gone.

What we do know is that Celan began writing with a new intensity in 1943, with the news of his mother's death. In the poems from this period, referred to by critics as his "early" work, Celan frequently addresses his mother as a source of meaning ("Your hand full of hours" and "Tallow Lamp" are good examples of this). For instance, in the expressly autobiographical poem "Wolf's Bean," which Celan took out of his fourth book, there is no difference in the speaker's mind between the physical, actual you and the ontic you. The story that he tells of his mother's murder is a story of the loss of source of meaning. It culminates, simply, in

Mother, I
am lost,
Mother, we
are lost,
Mother, my
child who resembles you.

Parentheses enclose most of this poem. Outside the parentheses, a child is sleeping. The only thing the child knows is that there are seven roses in the house, and a menorah—there are stable signs of timelessness, tradition—something is being kept alive, but the child does not know against what. Indeed outside the parentheses, the speaker tries to shut out the story of his mother's murder. The opening imperative of the poem is "lock the door," keep this particular horror outside that the child might sleep. But the body of the poem undermines that imperative, the story of his mother's death filling up the entire, extended parentheses, implying that the effort to suppress this loss is futile. In fact, the speaker states quite openly that he can't get the story out of the poem—"Yesterday/one of them came and/killed you/once more in my poem."

In a certain sense, every poem of Celan's has this parentheses in it; every poem brackets this narrative of a loss of a source of meaning. It is the principle doubt Celan tries to come to terms with through the poem, the problem he is always implicitly addressing. Over his corpus, Celan's poems become less autobiographical and more complex, more ontological, since he focuses

his energies on restoring that source, on saying “you *be*,” on finding what it would take to ensure that the child keep sleeping and that the signs of a culture of holiness remain intact. In “Wolf’s Bean,” the speaker is not engaged in the process of producing a new source of meaning. The condensed you is given—the mother is present both as perished body and source of meaning—and the grief of the poem is that this is not enough. “Wolf’s Bean,” in this respect, is more a statement of the problem than an attempt to find a solution. In most of Celan’s other poems—and this might explain why he didn’t want “Wolf’s Bean” published—the effort to make the dead live again is made visible. Celan’s poems are patterned on the effort to bring his mother into the domain of the real, to lift her from the fate of her particular body and will that she “be,” that she authorize his speech.

In the letter to Nelly Sachs from August 9, 1960, it is possible to locate Celan’s attempt to produce a source of meaning. This letter demonstrates how the effort starts to torque his language, to overstrain the communicative system even in ostensibly “stable” prose sentences; the complexities you see here are the central complexities of Celan’s poetic. Nelly Sachs was Celan’s dear friend, a German-Jewish poet who fled Berlin in 1940 and went into exile in Sweden, and who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1966. They exchanged letters for sixteen years, and in a sense they kept each other alive—Sachs suffered from psychic and physical illnesses, and throughout the 60’s Celan suffered from severe depression and underwent painful drug and shock therapies. Celan wrote this letter to Sachs just prior to her hospitalization for a nervous breakdown, in response to a letter of hers which made it clear that she wanted to die (“I so long for my beloved dead,” Felstiner 160). In this letter, the net is a metaphor for death, for whatever threatens to separate Sachs from life, to entangle her with those already dead; it drags her down, isolates her, and obscures her sight. Over the course of the letter, to banish death comes to mean to establish reciprocity. Above all, Celan wants to remind her that she is part of an exchange which sustains the world, and it is possible to follow Celan’s effort to secure her existence by addressing her into the real. The mortal you blurs into the ontic you when Celan starts using complex, verb-based nouns such as “being-at-one-with-yourself-in-the-open”:

And take whatever is a hand and wants to be helpful through you,
through your being, through your being-there, and being-at-one-

with-yourself and being-at-one-with-yourself-in-the-open, take it, please, let it be there, by virtue of this being-able-to-come-to-you-today-and-tomorrow-and-for-a-long-time! (36)

Nimm hinzu, was sonst noch Hand ist und hilfreich—und Hand und hilfreich bleiben möchte durch Dich, durch Dein Dasein, Dein Da- und Bei-Dir und Bei-Dir-im-Freien-Sein, nimm es, bitte, laß es da sein, durch dieses Heute-und-Morgen-und-lange-zu-Dir-Können! (57-8)

What causes the verbs to coalesce into nouns is the pressure to be actual and real at once—that is, not merely to *[be]* there but to *[be]* at one with yourself in the open, or (further in the passage) to be here and to be among people in the same instant. The real is that by virtue of which anything can be said to be. Celan means “the real” when he says *by virtue of this being-able-to-come-to-you-today-and-tomorrow-and-for-a-long-time!* and *something will remain helpful through you and through your nearness, such things become visible*. Essentially, Celan says “take effect,” “be real,” “be,” that the rest of us (Celan, Sach’s friend Gudrun) might also live.

This letter illustrates the principle features of Celan’s poems. Of course, the poems don’t always follow this sequence, but the elements of the sequence are usually present. First, often through imperative or petition, he tries to secure his relationship to source—he says “you,” sometimes repeatedly; then there is a kind of reciprocal exchange whereby this source sanctions or validates other people or other things (here Nelly Sachs is asked to send her gaze “back into the open” and entrust it to them—she becomes, in effect, the source of reality of all the others); and suddenly there is a turn in the poem where something “happens”—the real flashes out:

Look, Nelly: the net is being drawn away! Look Nelly: there is Gudrun’s hand, she has helped, she is helping! Look, there are other hands helping! Look, yours is helping too! Look: it is getting light, you are breathing, you are breathing freely. You will not be lost to us, I know it, you will not be lost to us, we know it, with all that is near from so far away, you are there and here and at home and with us! (36)

*Schau, Nelly: Das Netz wird fortgezogen! Schau, Nelly: da ist die Hand
Gudruns, sie hat geholfen, sie hilft! Schau, es helfen noch andere Hände!
Schau: die Deine hilft mit! Schau: Es wird hell, Du atmest, Du atmest frei.
Du bleibst uns, ich weiß, Du bleibst uns, wir wissens, Du bist, mit allem
Dir Nahen, auch mit allem Dir von so weit her Nahen, da und hier und bei
Dir und bei uns! (58)*

A short-hand way to describe what occurs in a Celan poem is this: the poem travels from I to you, where the you is the source of the real; the you is located, in some respect, through the act of address; a transaction or exchange takes place between I and you (frequently Celan will mark this with a phrase like “I’m wintering over to you” or “my grief, I can see, is deserting to you”); and out of that encounter, a world begins to emerge, to be witnessed. Often, when the real “happens” in a Celan poem, something is broken-through-to; light appears; the poem shifts into a more present tense; and things can be said “to be.” In the context of this letter, to be in the real means to be “the ones standing-with-you-in-the-light.” In Celan’s poems, the real “happens” or appears when its existence is confirmed by two: “through your nearness, such things become visible.” For this reason, the IYou relation is the condition of possibility which Celan’s poems strive to secure.

Celan’s poem “The Bright Stones,” from his fourth book *Die Niemandsrose*, bears the same structure as the letter to Nelly Sachs. In this poem, the stones float through the air, carrying light; they float upwards towards a you, vertically, in the way that blossoms open upwards; a you is located (“my quiet one, you, my true one”); and suddenly the world becomes visible (“I see you”). The real “appears.” Through this encounter, the I becomes part of collective life. We see this when the speaker says that the I’s hands are now “new . . . Everyman’s hands.” Likewise, the stones are returned to the real (“Brightness-Again” or “Bright-once-more”), where all losses are restored. Set against Celan’s other work, this is a fairly idealistic poem. By the end of many Celan poems, depending on the kinds of resistance the poet encounters, the world is no longer in doubt. (“The Bright Stones” and the letter to Sachs are both cases in point.) But everything has to be reestablished again in the next poem; there is always the sense that the world must be called up *ex nihilo*. This explains why so many of Celan’s poems—notably “Pain, the syllable,” “The Straightening,” “Behind the sleep deck”—read like creation accounts.

Even in the numerous poems which chart the speaker's failure to secure a relationship to source, Celan reminds the reader that the real is there, hanging in the balance; failure coexists with astonishment. In those poems where he most despairs of the real, when he concentrates his energies upon the act of address, words start to embed within other words, to coalesce around the you. If you survey Celan's entire corpus, from early poems to late, many stylistic developments are apparent: he shortens his long lines, dramatically reduces the length of poems, and eliminates titles altogether. But this word (or world)-clustering energy is one structural feature that persists throughout his career, as is his use of some form of the word "Du" within the poem (Lyon 114). For Celan, the IYou situation is invariant. The question is never what constitutes the difference between the I and the you, because this basic difference is given. In other words, relation is something the poet must assume, as well as something he tries to accomplish. "Poems are *en route*," Celan writes, "they are headed toward":

Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality.

Such realities are, I think, at stake in a poem. ("Bremen" 35)

Worauf? Auf etwas Offenstehendes, Besetzbares, auf ein ansprechbares Du vielleicht, auf eine ansprechbare Wirklichkeit.

Um solche Wirklichkeiten geht es, so denke ich, dem Gedicht. (186)

The task he sets for himself is to reconstruct a relationship to the real, to address every thing and every one into that domain. In this respect, Celan is a love poet, since love is the practice of valuing persons as real.

In the end, what Celan finds intolerable is an extreme version of what it means to be a human being in history, indeed an extreme version of what we experience in ordinary life: our separateness from the real. Poetry tries to overcome the difference between the actual and the real, but it also acknowledges that that separateness is necessary. The difference between appearances and source is what holds the world of appearances together; it makes value visible, allowing us to determine what is most worthy of our attention and care, and what is not. In this light, the IYou relation is, for Celan, the irreducible minimum—what must be given—and the unobtainable maximum—what can never be accomplished. As he says in one of his most beautiful late poems, the loss is always there: "The Poles are inside us, insurmountable."

Celan's poems, like so many brilliant poems, create confidence in the continuity of the human world, in the fact that things appear and will continue to appear, that this appearance is sponsored. Poetry, Celan reminds us, has ontology in it; poetic languages hold out the possibility of reintroducing the ground of being. By imagining a relation between an I and a you, by assuming that the two are connected and indicating how the two might be connected, a poem holds out a common world. In this way, poetry reconstructs the relation between an actual, particular life and the general life, between the world of appearances and what lends meaning to those appearances, between experience and holiness, between what comes to pass and what is most valuable. In poetry, in Celan's poetry, separate and provisional selves are summoned out of their personal lives into the ground of that life.

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