

## Celan and Shakespeare

Recently I came upon a review of Paul Celan's poetry, where the reviewer had an eye to a new translation of Celan's later work. I was proceeding through it with my usual mild interest in literary accounts of art, in this instance enhanced by my memories of an afternoon conversation with Martin Heidegger, in May of 1968, which touched upon Celan's poetry. Liliane, who had accompanied me on this visit (in June of 1965 I had gone alone to consult with him on other matters), noted that the poetry reminded her of his own work, and he agreed on the resonance. At the time, I must admit, I had not yet befriended any German poet, and so remained a passive witness to the exchange; since then, only Hölderlin and Rilke have ever deeply interested me.

It was when the reviewer remarked on Celan's frequent employment of the second-person singular that I began to perk up: that, he said, sometimes the "you" seems to be the reader, sometimes a beloved (lover, mother, wife), and often "something like God." He then wondered how the "you" could be read in this one poem:

We lay	Wir lagen
already deep in the thicket, as you	schon tief in der Macchia, als du
finally crept on up.	endlich herankrochst.
Yet we could not	Doch konnten wir nicht
darken on over to you:	hinüberdunkeln zu dir:
dominant was	es herrschte
light-compulsion.	Lichtzwang.

[Notes: (1) from *Lichtzwang*, 1970 (the title taken from this poem, itself untitled); (2) "crept on up" and "darken on over" are neologisms, the latter especially bold.]

I perked up because I myself had been recently re-reading Shakespeare's sonnets and was puzzling over *his* very frequent use of "thou" and "you." Some sonnets I can read either as addressing me, the reader, or some long dead third party — an ambivalence empowering the poem to engage us in an essential movement. But in others, as in the one by Celan, I found that neither of these two readings quite works, leaving me wondering about a third. Consider sonnet 38:

How can my Muse want subject to invent  
 While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse  
 Thine own sweet argument, too excellent  
 For every vulgar paper to rehearse?  
  
 O, give thyself the thanks if aught in me  
 Worthy perusal stand against thy sight,  
 For who's so dumb that cannot write to thee  
 When thou thyself dost give invention light?

Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth  
 Than those old nine which rhymers invoke;  
 And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth  
 Eternal numbers to outlive long date.

If my slight Muse do please these curious days,  
 The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.

The easiest and most likely reading will assume the author is addressing some superlatively loved and lovable man or woman, real or imagined — without, however, mentioning a single attribute deserving such adulation. A more strained reading may in fact understand the poem as addressing the reader: the author is then saying that *you*, in your innermost but generally concealed being, are the “sweet argument” — not at all his own achievement, painfully wrought as it is, but your own (anybody’s) true self, finally invoked. While the first reading leaves the reader a passive witness to what can only be the author’s feelings (since the “sweet argument” itself in no way presents itself for our enjoyment); the second, less likely, reading at least has the advantage of engaging the reader’s testimony. Still, one wonders...

Consider sonnet 39:

O, how thy worth with manners may I sing,  
 When thou art all the better part of me?  
 What can mine own praise to mine own self bring,  
 And what is't but mine own when I praise thee?

Even for this, let us divided live  
 And our dear love lose name of single one,  
 That by this separation I may give  
 That due to thee which thou deserv'st alone.

O absence, what a torment wouldst thou prove,  
 Were it not thy sour leisure gave sweet leave  
 To entertain the time with thoughts of love,  
 Which time and thoughts so sweetly dost deceive,

And that thou teachest how to make one twain,  
 By praising him here who doth hence remain!

These verses, I say, defy any easy reading. Indeed, the first quatrain poses the difficulty twice over: celebrating the worth of another, I necessarily set that worth as a standard — for the other, for myself, for anyone — and therefore celebrate my own “better part” as well. To proceed modestly (“with manners”) I must then ask that we “divided live” — so that I can discern (and sing: celebrate) what truly deserves praise all by itself: thine, as unconfounded with mine.

Addressing the first two quatrains to my wife, I’d find her unimpressed: I think she’s so great that I can no longer live with her, but would rather live at a distance where I can better appreciate her worth. (Abelard seems to have tried this tactic with Eloise.)

The third quatrain addresses absence, not the beloved: a torment *if it were not* that precisely such absence, effected by separation, provides the “sour leisure” to give thought to love — to the love that the passage of time, as well as the unending efforts to think about it, so “sweetly” obscures. For instance, to write sonnets recovering love’s lost meaning. Again, my wife would not be impressed (as Eloise seems not to have been).

The “thou” of the final couplet is again the absence of the beloved, now referred to as masculine: absence here teaches “how to make one twain” — how to discern in a single phenomenon, love on site, a twosome, a difference. How? By praising the beloved here, in this song, so that *this* presence, the one in song, will henceforth remain. The beloved himself — any one human being — is left behind: already here, the one *referred to* in thoughts and words, not to speak of the one the poet meets or has met or might meet for dinner.

Two presences — one abiding and one ephemeral. The distinction harkens to a tradition reigning, in barely questioned force, from ancient times — first clearly in the works of Plato, then all the way through Christianity and the Renaissance into Shakespeare’s own sonnets.

We ourselves, now four hundred years later, heirs of other thoughts, those of what we summarily call the Enlightenment, must exert considerable effort to understand this talk of two presences.

The original thought, the thought originating the West, at first proposed and later assumed that any one thing we can or do meet for dinner — whether a fellow human being, a city, an animal, vegetable or mineral — has its being, its impact on us, its very intelligibility only with a view (its view, our view) to what it needs to be. Each immediately available being must measure up to its measure: its past is its set potentiality, its future is the fulfilment of this set potentiality. We ourselves live essentially and troublesomely in the drama of this incompleteness aiming for completeness, and pay for our failures already before dying.

From just about the time of Shakespeare thinkers began introducing another thought, perhaps a variation on the original but in any case billed as proposing a New Knowledge, one standing in stark opposition to the original. Whatever else this New Knowledge involved, it consistently required that we no longer seek to reveal the inner purposes of things or of ourselves: things are just what they are, determinable apart from any inner destiny or ultimate fulfillment, and what we make of them is entirely up to our own desire and ingenuity. The past serves only as a platform for futures of our own choosing, our own making: for ungrounded possibilities.

For confirmation of the ambitions of the New Knowledge (now no longer proposed but simply assumed), you need only look to the workings of academic fields such as biology, physics and chemistry, or history, sociology and psychology. And also to the academic certification of hermetic poetry addressing the arduous drama of living within the purview of a future of ungrounded possibility and a past reflecting ungrounded choosings and makings — as against more comfortable literature that tells of daily and easily recognizable human dramas, even if embedded in unfamiliar fantasies.

Both sonnets speak of what we might call inspiration: in 39, of absence teaching how to make two presences out of one, namely by praising; in 38, of the very presence serving as a tenth Muse surpassing the other nine. Indeed, the “thou” shifts from some absent third party to the reader or listener precisely and only because the poems address the source not only of themselves, the sonnets, but also of any fulfillment — the fulfillment being the same for each instance of a kind.

But what serves as inspiration when no fulfillment, no completeness looms as intimating its possibility? The question appears rhetorical: if there’s no legitimate fulfillment in the offing, anything we call inspiration can only serve as a cover-up, and will come down to something like an urge explicable materially in chemical-biological or mentally in sociological-psychological terms — or even cynically as a ruse for manipulating others. Any talk of “absence teaching how to praise” or of a “Muse pouring the subject into verse” evidences only a fling of metaphor.

Some of that hermetic poetry beloved by some academics takes another tact. Most obviously, I would say, Stéphane Mallarmé’s, e.g. *Un coup de dés*, but now I’m thinking of Paul Celan’s seven-line poem beginning *Wir lagen*. These works — the genuine ones, as distinct from their retinue of copycats — address the very condition that has evolved from the expiration of the Old into the parturition of the New Knowledge, which (we should not forget) itself has allowed us to enjoy, as Descartes promised (following Bacon), *des fruits de la terre et de toutes les commodités qui s’y trouvent*, including longer life and better health.

“We were already lying deep in the thicket,” the poem begins: in the *Macchia* — a common Italian word, now conscripted into German — translatable perhaps as “brush,” but thick enough to serve as a place to hide outside the city. A metaphor, evidently. But for what? For our very condition: for us ourselves, first-person plural.

But then “you” did finally creep on up: we had been waiting. Not having yet emerged from hiding, we could hardly be sure exactly who or what “you” are. Only that “you” were not standing foursquare, and perhaps not even intending to enter.

In any case, we, for our part, could not “darken on over toward you” — could not, did not, rise to the occasion in the way expressed in the neologism. We could not move out while retaining the darkness — perhaps of the thicket, perhaps of ourselves. We, all of us, failed — at least on this one occasion.

“Dominant was light-compulsion”: grammatically awkward in English, while German more gracefully allows the impersonal (as in “it’s getting dark outside”; so perhaps: “it was imperative that there be light”). And the formation of the hyphenated word follows a pattern typical in German: just as at a restaurant you may be told you must wear a tie (there’s *Krawattenzwang*), and in some places dogs must be muzzled (there’s *Maulkorbzwang*), and in some court proceedings you are forced to testify (there’s *Zeugniszwang*), and some countries you can only enter if you have been vaccinated (there’s *Impfzwang*), and adolescents feel a lot of peer pressure (there’s *Gruppenzwang*), so now too, in the condition of the thicket, there’s an imperative for light: *Lichtzwang*. Or perhaps not so much an imperative as an obsession: the same formation can express such pathological urges as to urinate or to buy stuff (*Harnzwang*, *Kaufzwang*).

The demand for light accounts for the failure to rise to the occasion: so the verses seem to say. But how can that be? Isn't light exactly what we need, what allows us to see our way out of thickets? Goethe's last words, we hear, were: *Mehr Licht!*. Which seem to pick up on our entire tradition: light allows us to see, to know, to make our way — to rise effectively to occasions. How might we, as readers, countenance this contrary thought — that the demand for light (or light itself?) gets in the way?

Or: What might it mean to be *able* to “darken on over toward” what/who “creeps in upon” our thicket-abode? To retain, on our way on over, the dark? To know, in Dylan Thomas' verse, “that dark is right”?

In the meantime, we might consider what our commitment to light has meant. Until Shakespeare's time, the commitment formed an essential part of the contemplative life, the contemplation of life as a whole, from beginning to end, the looming fulfilment of a set human destiny. Then, during what we call the Enlightenment, the focus of contemplation turned toward the middle, all that may be learned about the material settings of life, the workings of the universe considered as governed by laws rather than by purposes. The New Knowledge commits us to shedding light on mechanisms allowing us to redesign our circumstances with mechanisms of our own and a view to our own purposes. With the result that our world now comprises massive infrastructures of transportation, communication, and production supporting ever-expanding efforts to assure household convenience, public health, and generalized entertainment, and defended by massive military hardware. Until the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the Enlightenment compulsion for light had a dream: to develop forms of government, education, and research open to human designs uncommitted to essential purposes. Only when the dream came true did it become clear that we had run out of essential designs as well — that our only hope lay in makeshift ones, with which (often under the name of “rights”) the 21<sup>st</sup>-century is replete. Who today can say what government, education, and research is about, apart from thickening the thicket?

And, finally, how are we to read the “you” (the *du*, the “thou”)? In those two sonnets by Shakespeare we can read this second-person singular flexibly, starting with the address to an admirable third-party, becoming perhaps an address to the reader, and then possibly revealing itself as addressing the source of inspiration embodied in the presence or absence of the third-party (a source in which we all have a share). None of these options fits the *du* in Celan's poem. It has no qualities, apart from that of creeping up to the thicket. If the reader has a place, it's among those lying in the thicket. And it can hardly serve as a source of inspiration — which in Shakespeare and his entire Pagan and Christian tradition is understood precisely as the source of light.

Yet the poem addresses us nonetheless: it invites us to accept our position as having lain in the thicket along with others, as having been approached by an intimacy, and as having been unable to “darken on over” toward this intimacy. Or: as still lying, still being approached, and still failing to meet the intimacy — perhaps outside the thicket, or at its edge. Is the poem sending us on a guilt-trip?

None of these questions — how light-compulsion gets in the way, what it means to “darken on over,” what exactly our condition in a thicket means, how to read the *du*, what

the poem expects of us — can receive an answer from the text itself, much less from any determinations about its empirical source. The only way we might allow these questions to take on substantial answers is to consider carefully exactly where we are, and to consider as well what it means to write verses in full recognition of our condition. For only with and against our own efforts do the efforts of others, even the greatest specimens of literature, take on sense appropriate to them. Self-knowledge always precedes, by an inch or two, the knowledge at issue in the works of others.

Ordinary talk comprises a number of features we can in contemplation lay out for inspection: the talk is about something (a subject), there's a speaker and there's at least one other, the addressee, who may or may not be listening; in any given instance, we can point to each of these three. Then there's something said about what the talk is about — something logicians might call a claim, a proposed bit of information pertaining to the subject, although the intent or force of the "information" often lies more in instruction to the addressee or in expression of the speaker (as in questioning, promising, or emoting). And, finally, what one says invites some sort of response on the part of the addressee: obedience, sympathy, assurance, additional determinations about the subject, or critical comparison of what the speaker said to what the addressee independently detects. Ordinarily, these features coalesce to form a context recognized by those sharing in it, and ordinary talk struggles to keep this context whole and recognizable.

Now, Celan's and Shakespeare's poems radically transform the structure of ordinary talk.

To be sure, each poem talks about something — but the something is not presumed, as it is in ordinary talk. As readers now, we might select a few words of its text to say, lamely, what the poem is about, but the subject hovers just beyond those words as that to which the words are responding. Only in the course of perusing the poem might the subject come in close so that we too, our own words, may respond to it. In short, only when we find ourselves in the working of these works do they reveal what they are about.

To be sure, there's a speaker in each case: we can usually name its author. But authors of great poems are far off, out of reach, often long dead. They are not here with us in the way speakers in ordinary talk are, or even in the way a soldier is present to his mother in a letter from the front lines to her. It makes no difference who the author of a poem is in ordinary life; if you think it does matter, then you are not listening to the poem but expressing something about yourself (perhaps grinding an axe).

To be sure, there's at least one addressee at any moment of reading or listening. And the poem was meant for this addressee. But it's essentially promiscuous — inherently disposed to run off to another. And not, as often enough in ordinary talk, because the speaker intends only to occupy the stage or to blow off steam in utter indifference to the audience, but because the author, or rather the poem, takes a keen interest in what Plato and Aristotle called the soul of the listener — and therefore of any listener.

To be sure, the poem says something about its subject, slippery as this already is. And as readers we can once again select a few words from the text to represent, lamely, some sort of claim, exhortation or emotion. Claims (inciting counter-claims), exhortations

(inciting defiance), and emotions (inciting sympathy or antipathy) are the favorites of ordinary talk, and may indeed be advanced by lesser art works — such as the advertisements on radio and television, newspaper editorials, and run-of-the-mill novels. In contrast, a true poem simply brings the subject home to us. And if we rise to it we discover it, the subject itself. A poem may say many things about this subject, but each saying serves the discovery, and counts as true only in the discovery — may even appear false apart from this one event. It leaves claims, exhortations, and emotions trailing behind, which is exactly where we as readers generally find ourselves.

Great poems initially escape us and remain unconcerned about our peace of mind; indeed, as we begin to catch up with one, it may very well upset us. All this in marked contrast to ordinary talk, which we rightly expect to clarify and advance the particular voyage on which we have already embarked, and above all to avoid rocking the boat.

But a poem — any art work — speaks to us differently according to whether or not we are responding to it or to what originates it. Responding to its formulations apart from their origin, we hear them in the mode appropriate to ordinary talk: as making claims, raising questions, giving instructions, or expressing emotions. Responding to what the formulations themselves are responding to, we hear them as differentiating the ordinary, with all its obfuscation, from the truth: for the while, at least, we are released from everyday entanglements into full engagement — whereupon we are first able to detect details accurately, raise significant questions, give worthwhile directions, and, fully affected, caring for others and taking care of things with genuine life-promoting affection.

But what if the established institutions encasing our everyday condition recognize only ordinary exigencies, eschewing pre-set destinies and pre-defined fulfillments? For one thing, officialdom (institutions of government, education, and research) will understand truth as a cover-word for accurate statements, and see only obfuscation in the ancient use of the word from Parmenides' didactic poem all the way into Shakespeare's sonnets. For another, though, "More light!" can only mean more clarity in the advancement of ordinary interests (in transportation, communication, and production, most obviously in the palliations of tourism, entertainment and pharmaceuticals).

And for yet another, or as a summation of the first two, poems — art works generally — have no official status, as they so clearly did in Ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. At the completion of our Enlightenment ambitions, paintings and sculptures are expected to decorate banks, public squares and private homes, while concerts are expected either to recall spirit in fact dead or entertain spirit unborn, and poems are expected to express personal frustration in essentially private spaces. I say "are expected to": you and I can still do something better, both as readers and as writers, but we cannot rightly expect the slightest toehold in the world for which we do our reading and writing.

The first thing you and I can do — I mean those of us who commit ourselves to truth at all costs, and therefore work to differentiate the ordinary, with all its inevitable obfuscation, from the truth — is to highlight the ordinary for what it is. But not in the mode of public criticism or private frustration — which is just exercise, like running in place. Rather, with a view to letting it open up on its own — a view that includes a bit of tender

loving care, as in gardening. And without basing the opening on any pre-designed discovery — for such pre-designs can only reflect ordinary, officially recognized norms, and these have all been disqualified by our own aspirations.

Another thing we can do — must do, if we are to remain committed to truth — is to study the works working in officialdoms warranting the differentiation. Unavoidable for artists will be the Homeric, the Christian, the Renaissance and, yes, the Enlightenment traditions — although I do recommend at least one foray into a tradition alien to our own (in order better to discern the unity as well as the diversity of our own).

Perhaps, too, we will have to admit that in our own age the most suitable art forms for highlighting the ordinary, while preparing it for differentiation, are those of the novel and the movie — forms allowing for extensive inclusive development and unobtrusive opening. Other art forms either drift toward decoration or speak exclusively to us as artists. Paul Celan's poems count among the latter.

A roaring: it's	Ein Dröhnen: es ist
truth itself	die Wahrheit selbst
into the midst of men	unter die Menschen
stepped,	getreten,
right into	mitten ins
the flurry of metaphors	Metapherngestöber

[Notes: (1) from *Atemwende* (turn of breath), 1967; (2) "roaring" not as a lion's, but as a waterfall's or machinery-shop's (a droning); (3) the accusatives of "into the midst" and "right into" effect the sense of transition rather than stability.]

For contrast, note the ease of Shakespeare's sonnet 54, its self-confident talk of truth:

O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem  
 By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!  
 The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem  
 For that sweet odor which doth in it live.

The canker-blooms have full as deep a dye  
 As the perfumèd tincture of the roses,  
 Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly  
 When summer's breath their maskèd buds discloses;

But, for their virtue only is their show,  
 They live unwooed and unrespected fade,  
 Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so:  
 Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made:

And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,  
 When that shall vade, my verse distills your truth.

[Notes: (1) "ornament" still means "enhancement" (not decoration); (2) "virtue" still means "manifest power" (not internal integrity); (3) "lovely" still means "love-inducing" (not pretty); (4) "vade" means "go" (Latin *vādō*, still in today's Italian).]

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