Paul Celan: Two Poems

Once,
I heard him,
he was washing the world,
unseen, nightlong,
real.

One and infinite,
annihilated,
they I’ed.
Light was. Salvation.

Einmal
da hörte ich ihn,
da wusch er die Welt,
ungesehn, nachtlang,
wirklich.

Eins und Unendlich,
vernichtet,
ichten.

Licht war. Rettung.

Paul Celan was the son of Jewish parents. Born in Czernowitz, Bukovina (then Romania, now the Ukraine), he wrote in German.

When Hitler and the Nazis moved eastward, his parents were imprisoned in a forced labor camp. His father died in the camp, likely of typhoid fever. His mother, exhausted by hard labor, was shot and killed. Celan, away when his parents were deported, was himself sent to a labor camp, where he learned the fate of his parents. Unlike most of his Jewish compatriots, Celan survived the war and the Nazi regime and moved to Bucharest, then Vienna, then Paris.

So Celan was a survivor of the Holocaust, or as it is called in Hebrew, the Shoah. That experience, including both the loss of his parents and, as my former

colleague Raul Hilberg termed it, "the destruction of the European Jews," was the defining point of his life and the focus, in my view, of his poetry.

He was a very great poet. He began by writing a poem known widely – for most people, it is the only Celan poem they know – called "Death Fugue," which as is title implies is a 'musical' verbal interweaving of images of the destruction wrought in the concentration camps.

But that poem was, perhaps, too straightforward, too comprehensible. For how does one express or attempt to explain the inexplicable? Every poet confronts this question, since poetry puts into words what we might call 'felt experience.' It gives a verbal shape to what the poet has experienced, which although she or he can attempt to communicate it with words, is actually somehow before and beneath words. There is always a residue, when we speak or write, of all that we have left out because we do not have adequate words, or because a choice to write *this* means that we do not write *that*.

It is one of the strengths of writing, of poetry. It gives shape to the inchoate within us. We can recognize our interiority, share it with others, see it in a way we had not seen it before. "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" E. M. Forster wrote. Writing is an act of self-definition, a way of making visible something that is within us.

But writing also falsifies. By giving a specific shape, that of a series of words, it chooses not to choose other possible shapes; by using words which approximate reality but are not themselves the actuality of our 'self,' they falsify what is within us. Make no mistake: words are what we have, and we shape much of ourselves in and through language. But our bodies – seeing, hearing, touching, moving, responding to physical stimuli – our bodies are something other than words.

This is a lot, I know, to throw your way at the beginning of a discussion of a very short poem. But to understand Celan is to understand something very fundamental about poetry: The problem for every poet is how to give a specific form to that which exists before, or if we are not being temporal, apart from such form.

Most poets write about love, or death, or a feeling for nature, or family. Celan has as his 'subject' the Shoah, which itself is beyond words. (I think in some fashion death and love and feeling are also 'beyond words,' just not as obviously and problematically so.) How does one write about the destruction of an

entire people? How does one address 'God' when He would appear to have totally abandoned His 'chosen people' to destruction?

Celan's decision was to radically – literally 'from the root' – unmoor language from its seeming normality, so that it could address that which is way beyond normal, so that it could begin to address the unsayable. In a line I love, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein concluded his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen." "Whereof man cannot speak, thereof man must be silent." Wittgenstein retreated into philosophic silence for three decades.

But Celan could not retreat into silence. His parents were dead, his community destroyed. He himself had survived when millions did not. Besieged by survivors' guilt, hammered by grief, tortured by the question of how to keep going, he had only poems.

He knew he could not write 'conventional' poems about things so far beyond convention. His poems became more elliptical, approaching truth by indirection. (He translated, among others, Emily Dickinson, who began one poem "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —/Success in Circuit lies".) He moved from 'conventional' imagery towards surrealism, which strives toward the imagery which shapes our subconscious being. As he wrote more and more poems, his poems became shorter, more gnomic: a hard kernel of insight, a brevity of statement, seemed preferable to more words, because to use many words would be to lose contact with 'truth' and drown in the pleasurable flow of verbiage.

Thus, we come to the poem with which this essay started. Short, gnomic language stretched to and beyond 'meaning.'

I love the poem, even though I am not entirely sure what it means. But let's begin.

The title, which is also part of the sentence which comprises the first stanza, has resonances. "Einmal" – 'once' -- in German is how many Grimm folk tales begin: "Es war einmal." In English, we would translate that into the phrase so common to folk tales in our language, 'Once upon a time.' So we are entering the realm of the tale that has been long known and often repeated.

What a tale it is! I think the first stanza is the reason for my strong attraction to the poem. 'Once upon a time God was washing the world.' One can

image it: God, bent over the globe, washing, washing. Is he washing away people? Here is, again, Emily Dickinson, this time on God:

It's easy to invent a Life —
God does it — every Day —
Creation — but the Gambol
Of His Authority —

It's easy to efface it —
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity —

The Perished Patterns murmur —
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed — inserting Here — a Sun —
There — leaving out a Man —

God washes away human life, leaving out men (and women, and children) because, well, that is how His creation moves. Does He care? In Dickinson's poem, the question is irrelevant. God has a plan, and human concerns have no place in it.

Or is God washing away the stains of the world, its sins, as he once washed away almost all of living creation when he sent a flood upon the world to destroy all but Noah and his family and two of each kind of beast?

Or is God attempting – the verb is in the past tense, 'God was washing,' yet it seems to stretch into the present – to wash away His own lapse in letting so many millions die, as if creation included a destructiveness He now knows He should not have allowed?

Three possibilities, and there may be more. God wiping out life, God washing away sins, God washing away His own sin. "O which one? is it each one?" Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. Perhaps it is all of these, although I lean towards the last. He is washing all night, without anyone watching (this is God, after all!) and yet the washing is actual, not metaphorical. Just as the Shoah was actual and not metaphorical.

It is hard for me to get beyond the image that opens this poem and comprises half of it. A tale of what happened once and which is part of who we are and what

we have been (‘Once upon a time’) in pre-history but also somehow, insistently, of our time. God washes the world. Scrubbing away people, sin, His own wrongdoing.

The God who does this laundering is “one and infinite,” the God whom we recognize and perhaps worship. The ‘one’ echoes the most important Jewish prayer, the Shema: “Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One.’

At this juncture, I want to point out significant rhymes that appear in the German, which the translator has done well to translate. You don’t have to read German to hear them:

Einmal

da hörte ***ich*** ihn,
da wusch er die Welt,
ungesehn, nachtlang,
wirklich.

Eins und Unendl***ich***,
vern***ich***tet,
ichten.

L***ich***t war. Rettung.

The play is on “ich,” ‘I’. It recurs in “Unendlich,” ‘unending’; in “vernichtet,” ‘destroyed’ (which Felstiner quite brilliantly translates as ‘ann**i**hilated’ to capture the rhyme, since the literal translation of ‘vernichten’ is ‘to destroy;’ on the archaic verb “ichen” in its past tense, “ichten,” ‘to have declared an I, to have asserted a self,’ and, finally, “Licht,” ‘Light,’ which is what God first created in the third verse of Genesis. “Let there be light.”

Ok. Lots to unpack here. The self, which experiences – “hears” in the first line of the poem – encounters the one and only unending God. Something is annihilated. Surely, the six million Jews, including Celan’s parents, in the concentration camps. Yet there is also a sense that God, the everlasting God, is also annihilated in the shadow of the camps: the self, the I, is destroyed as the new selves (of the post-war world?) emerge and seek to continue. It is in this sense, of continuation, that the speaker of the poem asserts that he has a self.

So there is light. But it is more than the light of God's original creation. It is the light the self perceives – sees here, heard in line one – that to live in a world after Auschwitz is to live in a world that is beyond God.

Does this make sense? Let me be blunt: maybe it shouldn't. You should beware falling into a trap, that because I have written something about the poem my commentary has authority. What I have just written about the poem may be just malarkey, a tap dance of literary criticism before an audience – which is you, the reader. Because what I have just written is an interpretation of what is un-interpretable. Celan's poems exist just beyond our comprehension. In point of fact, I am not sure I believe the interpretation I have just offered. It may baloney. Hot air.

Ten years ago I understood the later Celan poems. Not all of them, but many. Then a year or two ago I re-read him, and none of the poems made sense. None. This is contrary to almost all my experience with poems. I read a poem and move from incomprehension to, slowly, comprehension. Celan worked entirely oppositely with me. The more I read, the less I had any sense of understanding.

(Let me acknowledge what I, in these emails an 'explainer' of poems, know to be true but hide from you. What I am saying about Celan is, in some measure, the case with all good poems. We don't know what their words mean. We think we know, and that is pretty good stuff: but when we return to the poem, every once and a while we recognize that there is more, that there are things we did not see before. Poems at the very tilth of their being remain strange to us, unknowable. Nietzsche apparently once wrote, "Interpretation is the will to power over a text." In other words, we take words and make them ours, asserting our dominance over what another has said or written. Gertrude Stein had it simpler. in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* she wrote of a rival literary mentor, Ezra Pound, "A village explainer. Excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not." We all pretend, not only to others but to ourselves, that we have mastered a text. So, once again, the extreme example of Celan turns us toward a general rule of reading….)

I've offered a reading of the second and third stanzas of Celan's poem. I made it up, and I don't think I believe it. I am pretty sure an opposite reading also works, and likely better: The One God, infinite in His wisdom, annihilated people, all of whom were individuals who individuated themselves. That is the light that dawns on the poet, who sees the Shoah as part of what Dickinson calls "His Perurbless Plan." Such recognition is our salvation, for it allows us to continue.

To become the individuals who were destroyed by the millions but also individuals whom we must continue to be, going onward.

Make sense? Well, maybe.

The poem resists such interpretation. I remind you of a line of Wallace Stevens I have cited before: “The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully.”

What attracts me to this poem is that its first stanza is so clear – God is washing the world – even though the action portrayed is totally ambiguous. And then its second and third stanzas are so murky, so beyond understanding, as their language pushes its boundaries.

In stanza one, we encounter the irreducibility of narrative. In the succeeding stanzas, it is language itself which I irreducible.

I just wrote about how we ‘encounter’ dimensions of narrative and language. Somehow, I slipped into Celan’s own terminology. Apart from his letters, he wrote remarkably little about what a poem is, what a poem does, how a poem works. The great exceptions came when he was awarded major literary prizes, the first being the Bremen Prize. Returning to Germany, speaking in German, he reflected on what writing is and means when one writes after the Shoah, or perhaps when one writes at all.

> Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure among all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, ‘enriched’ by it all.
>
> In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality.
>
> It meant movement, you see, something happening, being *en route*, an attempt to find direction….
>
> A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always

> strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *en route*; they are headed toward.
>
> Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality.

What Celan is emphasizing, this poet who writes on the very border of unintelligibility, is that poems use words – poor, pitiful words – to go toward something (*en route*). Poems are attempts to send a message – that letter in a bottle – which can somehow, some day, some way be read by someone else. With those difficult words, maybe we too can find a way to live in the word ('inhabitable, approachable.')

Celan later gave another speech when he accepted the Georg Buchner Prize. He published the speech, on which he worked at great length, as an essay called "The Meridian."

The essay is dense, sometimes even approaching his poems for density and a striving for things that are beyond the reach of language.

> But I think – and this will hardly surprise you – that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange* – no, I can no longer use this word here – *on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps, of an *altogether other*.

We already knew this from the Bremen speech. Poetry is not a narcissistic enterprise. It speaks to other people. The inner need to comprehend extends outward to other people, through the words of the poem. He continues, emphasizing how much silence hangs over and about the poem, even as it is apparently *en route* to a reader:

> It is true, the poem, the poem today, shows – and this has only indirectly to do with the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awkward sense of ellipsis, none of which we should underrate – the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence.

Yet what immediately follows shows us the poem insisting on being itself, a note in a bottle if you will. It will communicate to readers something about the reality they inhabit in the actual moment of reading it.

> For the poem holds its ground, if you will permit me yet another extreme formulation, the poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-here.'
>
> This 'still-here' can only mean speaking….Language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limit drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens…..
>
> The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route*. Its author stays with it.

And now it comes, the word I used earlier, a word that I recognized as being very much a word from Celan's own view of what poems are: an 'encounter'. It was as if, in discussing Celan, echoes of his prose sounded faintly in my head.

> Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, *in the encounter, in the mystery of encounter*?
>
> The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite, it goes toward it, bespeaks it.

The language is tough, kind of mystical/philosophical. But what Celan is striving to say is not so hard, even though doing what he counsels is very hard. Celan says that poems speak to us needful things, things we have to hear if we are to survive, even if the writer of poems is often lonely, often burdened by the insufficiency of words to say what must be said. No matter how hermetic [like a hermit, off by itself, isolated from all else] a poem may be, it is still a note in a bottle sent out to a reader who, listening, strives to hear what it has to say.

> For the poem, every thing and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading…..
>
> The poem becomes – under what conditions – the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation – often desperate conversation.

We must remember this when we return to Celan's poem, "Once." However much it may hover on the edge of the indecipherable, it is an attempt to engage in dialogue with us, it is part of a conversation, however desperate that conversation may be.

> Is it on such paths that poems take us when we think of them? And are these paths only detours, detours from you to you? But they are, among many others, the paths on which language becomes voice. They are encounters, paths from a voice to a listening. You, natural paths, outlines for existence perhaps, for projecting ourselves into the search for ourselves. . . a kind of homecoming.

Again, the poem is an 'encounter'. It involves language being spoken and by a human being, as language becomes voice. And the self which utters the poem speaks not only to the 'you' which is others, but to the 'self' which exists apart from the speaker and is in much need of being in dialogue with another as the reader. The poem I some way speaks back to the one who makes it: the message in the bottle is read not only by the reader, but by the poet himself.

This is a lot to take in once more. The poet offers – to himself, as well as to others – 'outlines of existence.' No wonder poems are in some important sense 'a kind of homecoming.'

At this point, let me cite another very short poem by Celan.

The Trumpet-Part

The Trumpet-Part
deep in the glowing
Text-Void
at Torch-Height,
in the Time-Hole
listen in with
your Mouth

This is also a tough poem, however short. We recognize that this is a strange place, wholly dislocated from the everyday, for there is no language ("Text -Void"). I have no idea what "Torch-Height" is or refers to. "Time-Hole?" Where time comes from, in the stream of time, before time existed? Who knows?

But the last two lines seem to me very clear. We listen by speaking. We know what to make of things by uttering words. In poetry we find ourselves.

Let us at last return for a final time to the poem "Once." God has washed the world. He destroyed human beings, and maybe He destroyed any possibility of our belief in His justice. Maybe all we have left is ourselves, and for each of us:

our self. Maybe this is the light we live in ‘after Auschwitz.’ Maybe this is our ambiguous salvation.

Maybe. What we get with Celan is a profound meditation on what it means to live in a world which exists after the horrors of the Shoah, a world which is impossible to live in and in which we nonetheless have to live. A world in which we have, as a major though flawed resource, language.

He has initiated a dialogue with us, and with himself. That the dialogue is murky and without clear boundaries is part of what burdens us in post-modernity. It is a needful dialogue, nevertheless, and no one, no one, embarks upon it as tenaciously as Paul Celan.