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SPECIAL ISSUE ON PAUL CELAN

GUEST EDITOR

James K. Lyon

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Ambiguities of Interpretation: Translating the Late Celan.

Nicholas J. Meyerhofer 9

Abstract. Celan's later poems are seen as increasingly problematic because of their inherent tension between speaking and not speaking, because of their formalization (semantic and syntactic) of this tension, and also because of Celan's poetic intentionality. The latter, described as a poetics of ambiguity, is the focus of this article. Particular attention is given to the implications such a poetics has for the task of the (English) translator. To illustrate in the concrete this poetics, and to show how its intentional integration of thematic and etymological ambiguity must be taken into account by the translator, two late lyrics ("Einkanter: Rembrandt" and "Wenn ich nicht weiss") are translated and examined in detail. (NJM)

Verbal Mimesis: The Case of "Die Winzer."

Howard Stern 23

Abstract. Paul Celan's "Die Winzer" (E. "The Vintagers") is a poem that narrates the story of its own composition and eventual reception through the metaphor of a ritual communion. At the same time, particularly in its rhythmic structure, the poem imitates that very communion by means of a traditional poetic device called "kinaesthesia" (in the recent semiotic terminology of W. K. Wimsatt). The essay is a reading of "Die Winzer" that develops its semiotic complexities and seeks to assign it a proper place in the general field of "verbal mimesis." The present author is not a philosopher, nor does he require a reader who is. (HS)

Poetry and the Extremities of Language: From Concretism to Paul Celan.

James K. Lyon 40

Abstract. Despite his disdain for most contemporary German language poets, Paul Celan in his own verse shares and reflects in several ways the attitudes toward language and the possibilities of poetic speech found in the practitioners of so-called “concrete poetry.” Skeptical of language that had fallen victim to the “verbicide” of modern usage, each set out to re-create or revitalize language by using it in an anti-metaphorical sense where words, rather than functioning as bearers of meaning, are often employed as unconventional, in some cases anti-referential sign systems that have meaning only in relationship to themselves, but which simultaneously attempt to create (or discover) a pristine language. Beyond the affinity of theoretical statements made by Celan and the concrete poets, their practices of punning, word play, word deformation, reduction of words to component letters and sounds, the emphasis on the optical appearance of words and poems, and attempts to probe the essence of words by devices such as punctuation, citation, and negation all suggest that, differences notwithstanding, they shared and sought to overcome a commonly-perceived crisis of the possibilities of poetic language by a number of common means. (JKL)

Celan and the “Stumbling Block” of Mysticism.

Joachim Schulze 69

Abstract. In certain poems, Celan uses concepts that derive in part indirectly, in part directly from mystical sources (Gershom Scholem, Meister Eckhart). In other poems, the reader also finds themes related to mysticism. This discovery raises the question of whether one may read these poems as mystical expressions, or whether they should not in fact be viewed instead as “poetic transpositions” of concepts drawn from the “raw material” of mysticism.

Using a specific example, this essay will demonstrate the possibility of reading a poem in a mystical context, i.e. as a mystical expression, and then address the question from two perspectives. First, on the basis of one study that deals with the matter it will demonstrate the difficulties with which any claim for “poetic transposition” must struggle in light of certain aesthetic assumptions and currently accepted definitions of “the poetic.” Second, it will focus on the question of whether “aesthetic distance” in Celan’s poetry can be established at all. To clarify this concept, it will use Mallarmé’s aesthetic reaction to his experience of “nothingness.” The essay concludes with a brief reference to the tradition of the “mystical aphorism” as a genre or type to which one might assign the corresponding poems by Celan. (JS)

Paul Celan in Translation: "Du sei wie du"

John Felstiner 91

Abstract. Translating the lyric poetry of Paul Celan, especially his later poems, carries not only the endemic challenge and difficulty of any verse translation, but the added incentive of doing justice to a writer whose whole recourse after the Holocaust—whose sanctuary, if he was to have any at all—he sought in language itself, specifically in the *Muttersprache*, the mother tongue that was as well the tongue of those who murdered his mother and father. This essay exposes a process of translating "Du sei wie du" (1970), which perhaps more than any other poem by Celan, at once solicits and defies translation, moving as it does from modern to medieval German, and closing with Hebrew words from Isaiah—a messianic imperative that shows Celan verging as ever on his Jewish identity. (JF)

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