

PAUL CELAN IN TRANSLATION "DU SEI WIE DU"

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With Paul Celan's writing I have found the translator's task at its most challenging and revealing—especially with his later poems, which fracture and obscure the lineaments of lyric form. Why do they? "Every word you speak," he said, "you owe to destruction." Born in Czernovitz, Rumania, in 1920, within a German-speaking Jewish community, Celan saw Soviet forces overrun his homeland in 1940, then a year later, Rumanian troops plundered and brutalized the Jews, followed by an SS *Einsatzgruppe* obliterating the millennium-old culture, burning, torturing, shooting, deporting. Paul's parents (he was the only child) were wrenched from the ghetto overnight; he worked 18 months at forced labor, hearing first of his father murdered, then of his mother.

After the war an exile in Paris, teaching German poetry, he also made brilliant translations from Rimbaud, Valéry, Mandelstamm, Dickinson, Shakespeare, and many others. It heartens me that Celan upheld the possibility of verse translation. Above all he dwelt in—wrote poems in—the *Muttersprache*, the German mother tongue that had passed through "a thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech," he said—the language that was literally all he had left. He became the leading postwar poet in German, though increasingly inaccessible, unattended to. In 1970 he drowned himself in the Seine River.

Paul Celan's poetry, however idiosyncratically lodged within his native tongue, still beckons to the translator, because every poem he wrote remains a work in progress—or as he himself, estranged and precarious, once put it: “a poem can be a message in a bottle . . . that may somewhere and sometime wash up on land.” A poem, he said in his great speech “The Meridian,” a poem wants to reach an other, a “thou,” a poem is making toward encounter, homecoming, messianic release from exile. Is it presumptuous to see in translation a way of continuing that work in progress, of keeping the poem in motion toward attentive listeners, and toward some new beginning, following Celan's meridian around to where his poem and its translation alike have their source?

Nothing he wrote has drawn me more than one poem composed in 1969, between the Six-Day War and Celan's late journey to Israel.¹ The poem appeared shortly before his *Freitod*, as the German has it, his “free-death”:

DU SEI WIE DU, immer.

*Stant vp Jherosalem inde
erheyff dich*

Auch wer das Band zerschnitt zu dir hin,

*inde wirt
erluchtet*

knüpfte es neu, in der Gehugnis,

Schlammbröcken schluckt ich, im Turm,

Sprache, Finster-Lisene,

*kumi
ori.*

[*Gedichte II*, ed. Beda Allemann
(Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 327]

YOU BE LIKE YOU, ever.

*Ryse vp Ierosalem and
rowse thyselfe*

The very one who slashed the bond unto you,

*and becum
yllumyned*

knotted it new, in myndignesse,

spills of mire I swallowed, inside the tower,

speech, dark-selvedge,

*kumi
ori.*

To carry over into English and yet still respect the integrity of Paul Celan's poem, which already bespeaks enough displacement and loss, I won't leave you with my (always provisional) version but will retrace my way there and back via the to-and-fro, symbiotic exchange between interpretation and translation—the process of reading and writing.

Du sei wie du: how to preserve the tensile arc of that phrase, and the modulation of its vowels? We cannot tell yet whether the poet is speaking to God, himself, or his listener; or what has dis severed *du* from *du* so that we need this stark imperative. But we can hear how Celan's grammar moves—how it binds—one pronoun to the next through a terse articulation. I know two French versions of the poem. One begins *Toi sois comme toi*, euphonious and seemingly inevitable; yet the other says *Toi sois égale à toi-même*, "You be equal to yourself," which tips the balance of the phrase. Celan's barest utterances can make so strong a call on us that in translating, one is tempted to interpret them. Whatever we may hear in *Du sei wie du*, the simplest rendition probably holds the most potential: "You be like you." For the verbal symmetry, if nothing else, holds some promise.

What English cannot manage, though, as French can quite

naturally, is a true equivalent for *du*. We have “thou” only in archaic or poetic usage, whereas the intimate pronoun marks four hundred of Celan’s poems, coloring their speech and shaping their stance. Celan began to read Martin Buber intensively during the war—the lectures on Judaism, the Hasidic translations, and possibly *Ich und Du*, “I and Thou.” Unfortunately a modern English version cannot reflect the charged expectancy of Celan’s *du*, although it can closely mime both his rhythm and vowel-sounds: *DU SEI WIE DU, immer*, “You be like you, ever.”

*Stant vp Jherosalem inde
erheyff dich*

Here two more imperatives enter, again in the second-person singular: literally, “Stand up Jerusalem and / raise yourself.” Now, we hear that line one may also have been addressed to Jerusalem, Zion. These next two lines, bearing the emphasis of italics and strange orthography, seem to have warned off their French translators, who simply transfer the Middle High German as is. But how do the words sound to German readers of Celan’s poem, and how then should they sound within an English version? These questions of translation carry straight to the heart of Celan’s own poetic undertaking.

The thirteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart first uttered the words.² He would open his sermons with a Biblical text in Latin, then translate it into the vernacular as here, then go on to speculation. One such sermon caught Celan’s eye, giving rise to “Du sei wie du.” *Surge, illuminare, Jerusalem*, reads Jerome’s Vulgate, *quia venit lumen tuum, et gloria Domini super te orta est*. We know this in the King James version of Isaiah 60, which makes a soaring alto aria and chorus in Handel’s *Messiah*: “Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.” The preacher’s Middle High German version, *Stant vp jherosalem inde erheyff dich inde wirt erluchtet*, made its way literally into Celan’s poem—having made its way, that is, from the prophet Isaiah’s pre-Christian Hebrew to Saint Jerome’s fourth-century Latin to Meister Eckhart’s medieval German and then into Paul Celan’s lyric voice, the messianic word underway and translated through time.

Eckhart considerably rendered the Latin for his flock, but Celan does not in turn adjust Eckhart’s words for his own audience. Nearly every German reader would understand them, but at the same time would feel a sudden strangeness, feel displaced backward in time.

Celan wanted this dialogue between one epoch and another. In carrying us back from the present, Eckhart's German preempts by seven centuries the spawning of words such as *Einsatzgruppe* and *Sonderbehandlung* and *Endlösung*. Long before *Juden raus!*, as it were, was heard *Stant vp Jherosalem inde erheyff dich*—words which, incidentally, more than one reader of Celan's poem has taken for Yiddish—a plausible yet painfully ironic mistake, given that language's European fate.

If a German listener, then, would catch the sense of Eckhart's words, they need translating into an equivalence, familiar yet slightly inaccessible. I went to the visionary Dame Julian of Norwich and to the mystic Richard Rolle of Hampole. My keenest pleasure came from seeking out the early English Bibles, and then going back to the Hebrew itself: Isaiah 60:1 and also 51:17, since Eckhart (or the scribe or congregant who wrote down his sermon) made a new blend of those two passages. Isaiah 60:1 opens, קומי אורי, which in John Wycliff's 1382 version from the Vulgate becomes "Rys thou . . . be thou lightned." And for the Hebrew of 51:17—הַתְּעוּרִי הַתְּעוּרִי קוּמִי יְרוּשָׁלַם—Wycliffe offers a striking verb: "be rered, be rered, ris thou, ierosalem." Finally "rere" felt merely physical and I pulled out a prosodic stop to carry the metaphoric energy of Eckhart's *Stand vp Jherosalem inde / erheyff dich*: "Ryse vp Ierosalem and / rowse thyselfe."

Auch wer das Band zerschnitt zu dir hin

Each word here bristles with possibilities and problems, which begin to resolve as one decides how to translate the pivotal noun *das Band*. It can mean "ribbon, band, strap," so that literally the line reads, "Also the one who cut apart the band to you there." But the figurative sense of *Band*, a "link" or "bond," may come closer to what animates this poem. The German word *Band* is cognate with *Bund*, meaning "covenant," or in Hebrew ברית, which originally meant a binding. Once Isaiah's call to God's people has rebounded off Eckhart and resounded through Celan's voice—*Stant vp Jheroslam*—the idea of breaking and renewing a covenant comes into force.

It may well be the speaker who feels he has severed himself from Jerusalem, from his people. This line might then read: "Whoever cut off the bond to you there." Always in Jewish history it was a sinful people, not their God, who broke the mutual covenant. Yet now if the poet, like Isaiah, speaks to the Jewish dead and to a people returning

from exile, then the very one who slashed the bond—I need that stressful verb—may also be God. This crucial ambivalence must remain in translation.

*inde wirt
erluchtet*

The dialogue returns in italics to another prophetic imperative, “*and becum yllumyned*,” letting us hear that Isaiah’s words, the old dispensation, have been at work all the time. I hope “yllumned” does not look merely quaint. To intensify the word I have gone from translating Eckhart’s *wirt* as “be” to a more full and exact idea: “becum.”

knüpfte es neu, in der Gehugnis

Whoever slashed the bond, Celan now tells us, also *knüpfte es neu*, “knotted it new.” (I must have had Pound’s “Make it new” in mind here.) God’s knotting it new seems too much to hope for, unless it is the very persistence of the divine word that binds the covenant again. Celan found that persistence not just expressed but embodied in language. After the Holocaust, he said, “there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language.” In exile he dwelt, he took refuge, within the mother tongue itself, and every poem he wrote he wrote in mind of the dead. So to summon up a medieval German that has the prophet’s Hebrew behind it constitutes the only kind of memorial that counts for him, and lets the poet himself renew a covenant.

The same one who slashed the bond knotted it anew, and Celan can say where: *in der Gehugnis*—in a very strange word. Virtually no German reader will recognize this term from Middle High German (and rare in that lexicon, too), where its root *hügen* meant “think on, be in mind of, long for.” Given the dictionary’s three modern equivalents for *Gehugnis*—*Erinnerung*, *Andenken*, *Gedächtnis*—we find that the word means “memory” or “remembrance.” *Gehugnis*, then, vexes translation in a revealing way. For a while I tried “memoraunce,” dating from 1320 and filling out the verse rhythmically, but it came to seem too Latinate and, what’s worse, too understandable. The point is, Celan leads his audience to a word they cannot know, then prints it in roman rather than italics as if they ought to know it. Possibly he wished his readers to go through something like what the translator does here. In digging for the arcane and archaic word *Gehugnis*, “remembrance,” we perform an act of memory itself

and of possible renewal. Not quite having the courage of Celan's conviction, I searched for remote but just barely perceptible terms and finally settled on early Middle English "myndignesne," akin to "mindedness" and meaning the faculty of memory. I still wonder if it is obscure enough or too obscure.

Schlammbrocken schluckt ich, im Turm

I've put more time into revising and refining precisely what the speaker recalls here, than into any other line of the poem. Translated simply—"I swallowed bits of mud in the tower"—it drains from Celan's verse the revulsion and anger and pain of exile. More must emerge. Impelling the line, strong drawn-out stresses pull the word *Schlamm* ("mud," "mire," "slime") into *schluckt* ("swallowed," "gulped"), then a vowel ties *schluckt* into *Turm* ("tower").

Schlammbrocken schluckt ich, im Turm, "mudclods I swallowed, in the tower": that will do, yet it still lacks something. Despite—or rather thanks to—my difficulty in finding a vital equivalent, I begin to feel myself edging closer to the experience behind Celan's line as I sound out phrase after not-quite-adequate phrase. "Hunks of muck I gulped" or "scum in lumps" or "chunks of sludge" go too far in miming the poet's disgust, while "scraps of slime" and "bits of swill I swallowed" risk sounding like tongue-twisters.

I need a deeper sense of the voice Celan is projecting. Both Luther's and Buber's German Bibles use *Schlamm* in figures of abandonment and despair: Jeremiah prophesies Jerusalem falling to the armies of Babylon and is put into a dungeon where (in the King James) "there was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire." Psalm 69 makes the painfulest utterance if we remember Paul Celan's own death: "I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God. . . . Deliver me out of the mire." So maybe Celan is saying, "mire in lumps I gulped, inside the tower." That felt all right, until one day I recognized a constraint more essential than any other, in *Schlammbrocken schluckt ich, im Turm, / Sprache*. . . . The alliteration linking *Schlamm* with *schluckt* carries even further to a word in apposition. *Sprache*, "language" or "speech," supplants the mire the poet swallowed. After *Schlamm* and *schluckt* make their bitter alliteration, in *Sprache* they give way to what the poet cherishes, what "remained in the midst of the losses." Celan's language so engages

with his agony that I feel obliged to alliterate these two lines, even if it means changing word order. Here then is one rendering, awaiting a better: “spills of mire I swallowed, inside the tower, / Speech. . .”

Sprache, Finster-Lisene

Why “speech” for *Sprache*, instead of “language”? I would respect the source of *Sprache* in *sprechen*, “speak,” and also bring out the influence of Buber, who made speech that act by which we identify all our realities. Since the next image describes *Sprache* as something bordering or buttressing the dark, I think Celan meant it as language in use, in action—that is, speech.

As to *Finster-Lisene*, he invented the term and had never used *Lisene* before. In Romanesque architecture, *Lisene* denotes a pilaster strip, a semi-projecting column that buttresses, and later mainly decorates, the corner of a building. *Lisene* derives from French *lisière*, “list, selvedge,” a woven edge that keeps fabric from unraveling and thus by extension a margin or frontier. That figurative sense of speech as an ultimate stay against dissolution fits Celan’s image, yet he loved the precise and highly unusual names of things, probably because they were not spoiled, not abused by any usage other than their own.

So if I translate *Lisene* at all familiarly, I am prying Celan away from the difficult purity he elected. He craved yet in his way resisted being understood. Still I myself dearly want him understood, and reluctantly, wrongly, I abandon the architectural sense of *Lisene* in favor of “selvedge,” derived from “self” and “edge,” with overtones of “savage” and of “salvage”:

spills of mire I swallowed, inside the tower,
speech, dark-selvedge.

And here Celan’s German ends.

kumi
ori

Whatever displaces—and releases!—this final Hebrew couplet from the German poem should do the same from the English poem. Like Celan, I leave untranslated these imperatives, second-person singular, feminine, of קם (“rise”) and אור (“shine”). In Isaiah

60, *kumi ori* proclaims a new Jerusalem, renewing the covenant and returning the exiles. Since German and English transliterate the Hebrew words קומי אורי identically, Celan's gesture in closing as he does allows me the choice—I would almost say the grace—to do the same and leave *kumi ori* as is.

In several earlier poems, Celan moves at the end from German into Yiddish or Hebrew, utterly transfiguring the tone of the lyric. Possibly these moments offer him a kind of refuge. (Though what happens, I wonder, when "Du sei wie du," exposing Celan's Diaspora fate, gets translated into Hebrew?) As it is, I delight in not needing to translate the poem's final words, *kumi ori*. I see him breaking free in them, renewing his bond with them in messianic speech. After a lifetime's writing dictated by loss, here at least nothing need be lost in translation—unless the very catch of breath between German and Hebrew has its own quality, distinct from that between English and Hebrew.

Celan's audience in Germany, as he well knew, had scarcely anyone left to recognize *kumi ori*. For him, Hebrew was anything but strange. He studied it as a child, after his parents' death used to recall the beauty of the language, kept a Hebrew Bible on his bookshelf in Paris, and in Jerusalem in 1969, recited Bialik to Yehuda Amichai.

In Jerusalem, Celan renewed contact with a woman he'd known when they were young in Czernovitz, and who had emigrated after the war. He wrote out "Du sei wie du" for this friend, and recently when I visited her, she gave me a photocopy. Only later, on the plane, as I was staring at this paper, did I notice that Celan had written the two closing words not in transliterated form, as the published version has them, but in a perfectly natural Hebrew script. Perhaps he could write the words that way only there, for someone in Jerusalem.

Not, anyway, for his postwar German public, who must find the Hebrew in this poem legible, barely legible and audible. Although he could expect precious few to understand *kumi ori*, I think that not only printers' limitations kept Celan from setting the words in Hebrew characters. His listener must have something at least to wonder at, and should (in a utopian world) feel spurred to seek the source.

From modern to medieval German, then back out of all this toward a yet deeper source, reversing the process of translation as if of history itself, Celan comes finally upon words that were there to begin with. "Du sei wie du," as it closes, renews, a circle, a meridian from Isaiah's קומי אורי through Jerome's *Surge illuminare* to Eckhart's

Stant vp Jherosalem and then around to the poet's (I hope also the translator's) *kumi ori*—a circle broken by the slashed bond knotted anew, the mired mouth surviving.

NOTES

1. "Du sei wie du" appeared first in book form in *Lichtzwang* (1970). I have discussed the translating of this poem at greater length in "Translating Paul Celan's 'Du sei wie du,'" *Prooftexts*, 3 (Jan. 1983), 91-108, where full annotation may also be found. The present essay embodies several vital reconsiderations.
2. Werner Weber, in "'Auf, werde Licht,'" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29 March 1970, p. 49 (rpt. in *Über Paul Celan*, Dietlind Meinecke ed. [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970], pp. 277-80), informed by Celan, identifies Eckhart as the source.