

The most famous poem of the Holocaust

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Regarded as one of the most complex and introspective poets of the 20th century, Paul Celan has been acclaimed by critics such as George Steiner as “almost certainly the major European poet of the period after 1945.”¹ An artist whose oeuvre has been deemed by many to be unapproachable, Celan’s beloved German language was taken away by the oppressors who murdered his parents and destroyed his community. And thirty-five years after his death, Paul Celan, despite a canvas of 700 poems, is still an enigmatic poet whose gaunt, elliptical creations baffle readers and critics alike.

Paul Celan was born Paul Antschel (also transliterated as Ancel) in 1920 in Czernowitz (now in the Ukraine), the capital of Bukovina, on the eastern edge of the Austro-Hungarian empire, to a semi-traditional German-speaking Jewish family. The region, labelled ‘Little Vienna’, was heavily Jewish. His father, Leo, an ardent Zionist, wanted his son to imbibe the Jewish tradition. And so, at the age of six, he pulled the young boy from elementary school where subjects were taught in German, and placed him in a Hebrew school called Safa Ivria run by the Jewish Socialist Bund.

¹ George Steiner. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998: 191.

Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 34, Number 1, 2020

ISSN- 0111-8854

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Feeling that he was compelled to learn Hebrew, Celan, in his youth, resisted his father's beliefs and embraced leftist, anti-fascist politics. It was his mother, Friederike Schragar, with whom he mostly identified (and to whom he addresses many of his tragic poems) that taught him to love the German language. As a matter of fact, his first romantic sonnet, "Mother's Day 1938", crafted when he was seventeen, is devoted to his mother. Other works radiate with her symbolic presence. At night, she would read him German lullabies and fairytales, instilling in her son a fondness for Goethe and for Schiller's poetry. In 1938 he travelled to Paris to study medicine, but returned the following summer just before the outbreak of World War II. On 27 June 1942 he arrived home after hiding with his friends (when the ghetto had been swept) to discover the house boarded up and his parents missing. He later learned that they had been deported along with hundreds of other Jews to the labour camp of Transnistria in German-occupied Ukraine, never to see them again. Among the conflicting historical accounts (Celan did not provide a clear version), one theory is that his father died from typhus in fall of 1942 in the town of Michailowka in the Ukraine, and that his mother was shot by the SS, since it was ruled that she could no longer work as a slave labourer. Other accounts claim that his father was shot too. From that day on, the legacy of the Nazi genocide was to haunt Celan until his death.

Celan himself was sent to a Romanian-administered forced labour camp in Tabaresti, Wallachia, 650 kilometres south of his hometown. After spending two years 'shovelling' (from July 1942 until early 1944) he resided in Bucharest, Romania in 1945, writing prodigiously

Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 34, Number 1, 2020

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and working at once as an aide in a psychiatric clinic, a translator of Romanian newspaper articles into Ukrainian, and as a reader of manuscripts. When reports of the terrors of the concentration camps began to filter through and were printed, Celan, after meeting his former classmates who had survived with their families the horrors that reclaimed his own parents, reportedly underwent a violent psychic shock from which he never recovered. In 1947 he moved to Vienna, after Romania fell to communism, and in July 1948 relocated to Paris where he lived for the rest of his life, becoming a naturalised citizen in 1955, until his suicide in 1970.

At that point, in essence, Celan's familial and geographical points of origins had been obliterated. It was in Paris that he adopted the pen-name Celan, an anagram of his surname. His first volume of poetry was published in Vienna in August 1948. Disappointed by poor sales (twenty copies had been purchased), he had the book pulped. Meanwhile, he earned a living translating various authors (Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Henri Michaux Mandelshtam, Rimbaud), and after obtaining his Licence Lettres, he taught German literature at the École Normale Supérieure. At Christmas 1952, despite her family's displeasure at the poor poet's meagre salary, he married the French Catholic graphic artist Gisèle Lestrangé. Their first child, born in 1952, died that year, and their second, Eric, was born in June 1955.

In 1952, "*Todesfuge*" ("Death fugue") was published and instantaneously garnered the writer popular recognition, emerging as arguably the most recognised Holocaust poem of our time. Celan became a celebrity in Germany, and was invited to deliver lectures and give

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ISSN- 0111-8854

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readings to packed halls. He won the prestigious Buechner Prize awarded by the German Academy of Language and Literature in 1960.

In 1967, he left his wife to live alone. Tormented by guilt that in some way he could have saved his parents (he saw himself as a traitor for surviving), a burden which beleaguered his contemporaries, he suffered constant spells of acute depression that led to his hospitalisation and to shock therapy. A spurious accusation of plagiarism in the 1960s by Claire Goll, the wife of Jewish poet Yvan Goll whom Celan had translated, exacerbated his recurrent melancholy and existential loneliness. Likewise, the realisation that anti-Semitism was still widespread in Europe deeply shook the manic-depressive poet.

In September 1969 he travelled to Israel, where he delivered several readings and seemed to be happy. But in April 1970, aged forty-nine, he jumped into the Seine River from the Pont Mirabeau and was found by a fisherman on 1 May 1970, 11 kilometres downstream and ten days after he had gone missing. He left a biography of Hölderlin on his desk, open at a page with a highlighted passage that read, “Sometimes this genius goes dark and sinks down into the bitter well of his heart.”²

Celan, who began writing poetry while in the labour camps, saw poems as gifts and as ‘messages in a bottle’ which might or might not be picked up. Never exploitative or

² Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Michael Irmscher. (editors). *Translating Literatures, Translating Cultures: New Vistas and Approaches in Literary Studies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988: 175.

Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 34, Number 1, 2020

ISSN- 0111-8854

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manipulative, he managed to make sorrowful art out of loss through torturous poems that in later years, as scholar John Felstiner puts it, “are so cryptic as to seem like signals from another planet.”³ Searching for meaning in a meaningless life, Celan found solace in surrealism. As his work became more and more insular, the artist, who through relentless experimentation customarily invented new compounds, absolutely insisted that his work was not hermetic. In transforming the German language, or perhaps rescuing or purifying it from the depths of blackness, Celan, as an alchemist of the word, blended ancient German with neologisms, re-working syntax and borrowing from other languages in his efforts to rework his mother’s tongue.

At root, Celan wanted to unshackle German from its accepted context and overlay it with a new patina which would transform something which had been demolished as a monument into a tombstone for the unburied dead. Beyond that, he sought to sever and disunite the German language from its Nazi past so it would be possible to speak it again in a humane manner. Though he wrote that no one witnesses for the witness, Celan carried, deep within, the onerous weight of bearing witness to the unspeakable, and attempted to revive, through the German language, a treasured human presence lost in the whirlpool of death.

It is of note that although he was proficient in a myriad of tongues – Romanian, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Portuguese, Italian and English – he elected to compose in German. For

³ John Felstiner. *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996): 230.

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although the Germans killed his mother, and by extension what she loved and taught him, Celan found it impossible to renounce German because it would have meant forsaking and rejecting his mother. After all, the German language too was a victim and a tool of the Third Reich. To wit, he once told a friend in 1948, shortly after settling in Paris, that “There is nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German.”⁴

This paradox rested on his shoulders as a heavy weight of affliction. Clearly, German remained for Celan the most intimate configuration of living speech. By and large, his verse was an undertaking to shatter and re-fit the syntax and morphology of the language that “had to walk through its own loss of answers, through its terrible silence, through the thousand darkneses of death-bringing speech.”⁵ In a sense, Celan’s purpose was to re-establish the erstwhile integrity of the German language after its degradation by the Third Reich. True, Nazism appropriated and corrupted the language, but like his childhood and like Judaism, it was an inextricable facet of his heritage. Such excruciating tension plagued Celan until the day when that breach tore his soul apart. Beyond that, Celan wanted to renew poetry, savaged by Nazi genocide which employed German euphemisms (‘action’ ‘special treatment’, ‘resettlement’) to dehumanise and ultimately decimate European Jewry.

⁴ Michael André Bernstein. *Five portraits : modernity and the imagination in twentieth-century German writing*. Evanston, Ill. : Northwestern University Press, 2000:101.

⁵ Felstiner. *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, 88.

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Principally, Celan's corpus resonates with Jewish themes, a brick by brick, dense web of copious linguistic elements and biblical allusions that lament the Almighty's absence – one poem talks about dead angels and a blind God, while another talks of people who do not praise the creator for he has allowed their abasement, while still another presents a mortally wounded God watching a bloody tent brutalised by the Nazis, impotent to save the collapsing tent. Building on the romantic tradition of Hölderlin and Rilke, Celan's broad canvas included non-sectarian and non-Holocaust themes, though such subjects took a back seat to his colossal preoccupation.

There is little question that "Death Fugue" is Celan's most celebrated and anthologised poem, a work which Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi maintains has become "as much an icon of the Holocaust as the photograph of the little boy with his hands raised in the Warsaw Ghetto."⁶ Composed during World War II and appearing in May 1947 in a Bucharest magazine (in Romanian translation) with the title, "Tango of Death", it was his first published poem and the first to feature his newly crafted name, Celan. Today, every German pupil knows the text since it is required reading in German high schools. On the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, the poem was recited by Austrian-German actress Ida Ehre in the Bundestag, the German

⁶ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi. "The Grave in the Air: Unbound Metaphors in Post Holocaust Poetry", 262. In Saul Friedlander. (editor). *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "final Solution"*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992.

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parliament. Often quoted in art and film, it has been canonised to the extent that it is “part of the official ritual of remembrance in Germany.”⁷

There is an account that philosopher Theodor Adorno, upon reading “Death Fugue”, with its fusion of surreal imagery and shocking beauty, wrote his famous 1951 stricture that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁸ Adorno intended translating one of Celan’s volumes and, according to his editor, retracted his celebrated dictum in 1966 in his book *Negative Dialectics*, after becoming acquainted with Celan’s canon. Commentators have noted that initially the poem was denounced for its aesthetic treatment of the indescribable, for being overly romantic and sublime, and for dimming the terror of the Holocaust. In the 1960s, as the poem gained monumental recognition, especially in Germany, Celan felt that “Death Fugue” was being appropriated to allay national guilt and was being read by critics as reconciliatory. Consequently, he refused to recite the poem publicly, and disallowed its inclusion in anthologies. While the poem is redolent with metaphors, the images and occurrences it delineates are certainly based on facts as conveyed by survivors. Significantly, the introduction to the poem, when it was first published, made it clear that poem was rooted in fact.

Described as “the Guernica of post-war European literature”,⁹ “Death Fugue” is a meditation on the collective fate of the Jews, beginning with the recurring, haunting voice of

⁷ DeKoven Ezrahi. “The Grave in the Air: Unbound Metaphors in Post Holocaust Poetry”, 262.

1. ⁸ T.W. Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton. London: Continuum, 1981: 326

2. ⁹ John Felstiner. *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996):
3. 26.

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the prisoners, that opens the opus: “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink / we shovel a grave in the air ...”¹⁰ This incantatory refrain appears at the start of each of the stanzas, and is then followed by a chilling description of the inmates and the commander. The sameness of the words, divested of punctuation, reformulated in different combinations and cycles, underlines the annihilation of the individual, to be replaced by the walking dead. At one point, the “We drink it” is substituted with “We drink you”, amplifying the relentless atmosphere of despair.

The paradoxical and irreducible metaphor, image and oxymoron of “black milk” indicate an impossible situation. Milk, which usually provides nourishment, and is a symbol of life, purity, mother, fertility and innocence, is transformed into a black, bitter, bile liquid that devours all colour and highlights the seemingly immense unspeakability of the camps. The speakers are imbibing death in a warped universe that has denuded itself of the potential for growth. Also, black milk denotes the bitterness of confinement which the concentration camp prisoners had to bear all day, every day. It is probable that the inmates named the drink they were given as black milk. The unidentified camp outside Germany transmits to the reader the typical monotonous drudgery of forced labour as chronicled by survivors, slaving away on the edge of collapse. The usage of the first person ‘we’ transports the reader behind the barbed wire.

4. ¹⁰ John Felstiner. *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996): 31

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ISSN- 0111-8854

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It is noteworthy that Celan employs the ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ to refer to the victims. One could surmise that such use strives to envelope all people, not just the designated Jews of the death camps, in the horror, positing that the Nazi terror could strike at all people. Further, the unspecified, collective ‘we’ invokes the stripping away of any trace of individuality experiences by the internees. Moreover, the use of the first-person plural announces that Celan, and the reader, are inseparably bound with the event and the murdered.

The German master referenced in the poem, who writes to his golden-haired Margarete, while whistling the Jews to dance as they dig their mass graves, and who summarily executes his captives, encases within its midst multiple interpretations. First, the German language, as Primo Levi recalled, was spoken in the camps to inmates who frequently did not understand what they were being told. Likewise, the word ‘Master’ (*Meister*) works on various levels. Master could refer to the mastery of the craft of industrialised extermination, as the German devolved to, or the master of the concentration camps, or the infamous ‘master race’. During the poem, the ‘master’ is described while addressing the Jews in the camp, ordering the victims to play music while their brethren are marched into the gas chambers.

The tango motif alludes not only to the brisk, enchanting dance that enthralled European society during Celan’s adolescence; it also refers to the sickening tangos the SS officers at the concentration camp near Czernowitz, in the Janowska camp in Lemberg, and in Auschwitz, would customarily order the Jewish fiddlers to play while watching the victims walk into the gas chambers or during tortures and shootings. Prior to demolishing the camp, the entire

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orchestra was executed. In other locations, prisoners would hum nostalgic tunes while another group would dig graves. The tango theme also references the European, Judeo-Christian culture of German society, that once included the Jewish prisoners. On still another level, the tango device is embedded within the timbre of the poem which shimmers with a symphony of musical sounds and builds to a crescendo towards the end.

The fugue of the title may pertain to the fugal composition in music known for its acutely structured and disciplined form, featuring an exact and monotonous conformation. At the same time, fugue could denote the polyphonic, reciprocal exchange between the Nazis and their prey, present in the poem, without an artful undertone of pathos that may embellish the devastating horror of the Holocaust. The poem's metrical and lilting rhythm, especially as read by Celan, reminds us of the commandant's grotesque decree that those who dig their own graves must simultaneously dance and play. In fact, the rhythmical nature of the verse permeates the fabric.

The poem's brew of Genesis, Wagner and the "Song of Songs", melded with the inferno of the camps, shatters the lyrical fabric evoked by the beautiful passages. The German woman, Margarete, perhaps a lover, perhaps a spouse, to whom the SS executioner writes to and dreams of, embodies stereotypical Germanic traits – blonde, golden hair – is in sharp contrast to Shulamith, the winsome princess from the "Song of Songs" (6:13), the archetype of doomed beauty, with her ashen-coloured hair. Later in the poem, Shulamith has been incinerated, reduced to ashes, evoking the dual meaning of the ash-coloured hair. Shulamith is the all-

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purpose metaphor for the Jewish women burned in the crematoriums of the concentration camps. The blonde-haired Margarete, safe in Germany, recalls the virginal beloved, the romantic archetype in Goethe's *Faust*, and is the personification of German idealised womanhood. Margarete also calls attention to the fact that the commander of Auschwitz read *Faust* during his idle hours. In that regard, Celan underlines the warped reality that existed, whereby young German men, cultured enough to read fine literature and write to their girlfriends, could contemporaneously shoot their compatriots (as the poem puts it, "grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it").

The act of digging appears elsewhere in the Celan canon, most obtrusively in the poem "There was earth in them", depicting Jews digging and digging all day and all night. In that poem, the Jews never praise God, do not hear anything, do not grow wise, and devise no kind of language. In "Death Fugue", the air in the graves points to the horrific reality that the Jews were never buried, but were cremated, their ashes rising as clouds of smoke into the sky, disappearing into air. Only in the world of the concentration camp is death a form of release, allowing the victims to escape the terrifying oppression: "you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped".

The vipers signify evil and disease, and are linked to hair. Hair, customarily the emblem of fertility, plenteousness and sexuality, is totally obliterated here. Celan marshals prototypical elements associated with the Third Reich and its extermination machine – the hounds/dogs, the graves, the spades, the blue eyes of the commander, the autocratic ordering. The conjoining of

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Margarete and Shulamith at the close of the poem was perceived by certain readers as a nod by Celan to an appeasing, forgiving, placatory union between the German and the Jew, rather than a direct reflection of the abnormal state that led to Shulamith's demise. In fact, the concluding lines evince the unbridgeable gap between the Jewish tradition of the Bible and the Nazi tradition of evil epitomised by Faust's Margarete. The two women, twinned at the poem's coda, remain unreconciled, far apart as Germans and Jews were after the Third Reich sent millions of Jews to the ovens. Additionally, choosing to place Shulamith in the last sentence may betray a desire by Celan to endow the comely female dancer in the "Song of Songs", the epitome of the Jewish beloved, with the final words, so as to deny the Germans the erasure of identity they strove to achieve.

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