

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Celan and Me

Robert Wood · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

I came to poetry after training as a historian. I had an undergraduate degree in history and went to the University of Pennsylvania to undertake a PhD. As a pre-requisite for my PhD, I had to complete a Masters. As part of my Masters I had to complete at least 16 graduate classes. I took every opportunity to take classes outside of history. I took sociology, I took philosophy, and, I took literature. In this time I realised that I did not want to become a historian at a university, but a poet in the world.

My training as a historian, though, has enabled a particular perspective on poetic research and composition. I was a historian who tended towards Walter Benjamin rather than Leopold Ranke. The history I liked was something mystical involving sampling rather than scientific studies involving synthesis. The turning point for me was a class taught by Charles Bernstein titled 'The Sound of Poetry and the Poetry of Sound'. It was as much about Charles as it was about other classmates – Steve McLaughlin, Dotty Lassky, Sueyun Julietee Lee, Sarah Dowling, Julia Bloch. I wanted to join the conversation that was happening here rather than research the habits of nineteenth century Westerners. Even if it was marginal, poetry was at least contemporary.

With my new book – *loam-words* – I hope I have composed poetry that will be read with a similar attentiveness demanded by the German historians I mentioned as well as my Language and po-lang colleagues. I hope too that it is contemporary. Indeed, in its compositional method I have turned to conceptual poetry and post-conceptualism. *Loam-words* are centos from Paul Celan via way of Pierre Joris. Centos are constrained exercises in sampling; the creative part is in the reading and Frankensteinian stitching so it sits somewhere between traditional and uncreative ways of being written. Centos too are homages in the way hip-hop referred back to soul.

So why Celan?

I came to Paul Celan in three different but overlapping ways.

The first was through the John Felstiner translation, which was given to me by Ben Etherington for my birthday in March 2008. The second was through Jerome Rothenberg, who I heard speak about Celan at the Kelly Writers House in April 2008. The third was through my German uncle, Christian Grote, who had known Celan in post-war Europe and who gave me an idiosyncratic education in high modernism when I stayed with him in Berlin in May 2008.

Since that time I have combed through Celan again and again. This has not been in a scholarly or systematic way, but as a set of possibilities. He has responded to a set of overlapping concerns that

have held my attention as I moved from the United States to Australia via Europe and India. While one may want to seek and find affinities, it might be enough to say there are possibilities in Celan. That he is the beginning of a post-Shoah poetic project is only the beginning. Clean, with his relationship to abstraction, with his neologisms, with his hermetic, unmistakable quality, strikes me not simply as an ancestor one should draw from but also as someone whose specific and unique timeliness enables us to read and adapt him to our own present political and aesthetic pre-occupations. Celan then does not simply speak in his own moment but to our moment now.

In a world that continues to be paradoxically barbaric and civilised, Celan offers us critique and therapy. His words enable us to live and to think. In remixing them, I hope I have introduced people to a different beat that was already in them. It is as much about my reading of Celan as it is about my writing through him. If this work creates a desire in you to read Celan then I have succeeded. I will have also succeeded if it also enables you to think through what language is and can be; how whiteness functions discursively; what a climate changed world increasingly looks like; what sex in the morning feels like; whether or not mining is a good thing; the conditions that lead to refugees; why we love; and what we should do in the face of death. For me and mine, in the face of death I can only say I can find, at this stage, no better companion than Celan.

With *loam-words* I also wanted to find a project that was appropriate to the object of the book. That meant respecting Alan Loney and Electio Editions in their capacity as a publisher and printer; as a maker of limited edition artists books. There is a cultural tendency to venerate the poet without thinking of all the other people involved in the process. We forget about editors, about publicists, about booksellers. We cannot forget about Alan. There is no praise I can say to adequately convey my thanks. As we used to say in my old trade union 'it is an honour and a privilege'. Alan is from the avant garde and a master craftsman. I chose Celan because of these resonances. And for example, the absence of centre in the formatting of my poems, the presence of space around the thread that literally holds it together, is a material expression of the decentering enabled by post-totalising and post-totalitarian poetics.

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