

Reading Paul Celan with Anne Carson

“What Kind of Witness Would That Be?”

For my wife Mechthild Bauschen, 1961-2002:
zur Begegnung Führende

1

In a 1996 interview Anne Carson said, “I’ve been reading a lot of Celan. He’s clarifying” (D’Agata 19). To fellow Montreal poet-professor Mary di Michele she later listed Celan with Dickinson, Pessoa and Stein among primary influences: “Economy and devotion interest me in these writers” (di Michele 9). An unpublished recent lecture, “If Body Is Always Deep but Deepest at its Surface: Translation as Humanism,” is devoted in part to Celan’s poem *Weggebeizt* (“Etched Away”), which she reads as a translation of his wife Gisèle Lestrange’s etchings. In 1999 she published *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, using the Bronze Age Greek poet as a means to explore the epitaphic quality of Celan’s verse. Her poetic engagement with Celan’s legacy is equally involved. For her adversaries this marks Carson as a mere epigone. David Solway, another Montreal poet and teacher, writes that what Carson does “has been done before, done better and done authentically—for example, by Akhmatova as by Celan” (Solway 25).

Carson’s close attention to Celan’s work could not, however, be confused with mere emulation. While Carson is indebted to Formalist doctrines important to Celan,¹ their affinities are limited. The discrepancies between the poets are not of the kind she would pretend to discount. She is of secular Protestant extraction, raised in post-war prosperity in English Canada, and Professor of Classics at McGill University. Her scholarship is influenced by feminist theory while her poetry reflects closest engagement not only with the Bronze Age Greek lyric poets but with Gertrude Stein. Celan in contrast was reared in modest circumstances in an observant Jewish family in what until recently had been the Habsburg city of Czernowitz, in the

Bukovina region of Romania. His parents perished in a German concentration camp while he was conscripted into a Romanian labour camp. Freed, he translated Russian texts into Romanian and studied Romance languages before fleeing to the West in 1947. He settled in Paris, where he lectured on German literature at the École Normale Supérieure until, after years of impaired mental health, he committed suicide in 1970. Philosophically oriented toward phenomenology, Celan experimented in a poetry that adapts Biblical cadences and themes to modernist strategies, exploiting the plasticity of German to craft a neologistic, elliptical and intensely suggestive idiom, whereby he recast a mother tongue undone by the Shoah.

Carson is frequently comic, self-consciously allusive and quotidian where Celan is elegiac, oblique and portentous. The ancient language she studied most closely was Greek, he Hebrew. His most conspicuous stylistic debt is to French surrealism and German expressionism, hers to Stein and American collage art. He is a poet of Orphic concentration and sombre musicality while she is expansive, whimsical and prosaic. And in contrast to the introspective lyric typical of Celan, Carson's characteristic mode is narrative.

Both poets have nevertheless been vilified for writing gnomic poetry, indeed for not writing poetry at all. Most gravely, both have been accused of writing someone else's work: the widow of Yvan Goll charged Celan in 1953 with pilfering her husband's verse; in a recent diatribe David Solway charges Carson with pilfering both from Celan and Celan scholar John Felstiner (whose *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* describes the devastating consequences of the scandal on Celan). Carl Hohoff took up Clare Goll's accusations and in 1955 published an article similar to Solway's, setting what he alleged were incriminating passages side by side before condemning Celan as a charlatan and second-rate imitator of a master poet's style. The Alsatian Goll, like Celan a German-speaking Jew who lived in Paris, had forged ties to surrealism, as would Celan later, and wrote (again like Celan) of Jewish dislocation and isolation. Both were polyglots who earned their livings in part by translating. (Goll, much of whose work is in French, translated *Ulysses* into German.) Celan's first major verse translation was of Goll's work.

Affinities between Celan's work and Carson's are easy to discern, as easy indeed as those between Goll's and Celan's. Goll's precedent obviously strengthened Celan's confidence in techniques he had developed in his first book, *Sand aus den Urnen*, published before he was introduced to Goll in 1949. Translating three collections of Goll's poetry in the early 1950s, while writing the poems collected in 1955 in *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (the book

which revived cries of plagiarism), permitted Celan to venture an encounter with the elder poet—one in a sense strengthened by Goll's death in 1950. Celan's precedent has analogously strengthened Carson's confidence in techniques she appears to have developed prior to making an encounter with the poet. (Her remark to Di Michele quoted above suggests that Carson began reading Celan in the mid-1990s, by which time she had published her first two books of poetry.) She probably honed her appreciation of Celan, just as Celan honed his of Goll, by translating the poet, as is reflected in the poems of *Men in the Off Hours*, composed while she was preparing *Economy of the Unlost*, lectures that include a number of her versions of his poetry.

Rather than the proprietorial terms Solway uses with the peremptory self-assurance of a bailiff, Carson's involvement in Celan's work might more faithfully be understood in the complementary terms Celan and Carson themselves apply to their creative engagements. In *Begegnung* (encounter) Celan found a term primitive to neat discriminations between exposure, reading, translation, and influence—indeed, in its aura of spiritualized tangibility, primitive to the distinction between presence and absence, even between life and death. The site of encounter offered him a margin of licence, where converged the yearning for self-effacement in, and the desire for self-enlargement by means of, the other's vitality. Neither masochistic self-denial nor vampiric exploitation was involved in cooperation with these guides to his own powers.

Behind this protocol of engagement stands another, perhaps decisive encounter: that with Martin Buber, before whom Celan is said to have knelt, the master's books in hand, when this philosopher of the spirituality immanent in all verbal exchange visited Paris in 1960. Buber, preserver of communal tales and translator of scripture, proposes that the truth-telling function of language inheres not in articulation per se but in dialogue—in *Begegnung*. (Indeed Buber had come to Paris from Munich, where he had been honoured for his efforts to re-establish dialogue between Germans and Jews, concerning which Celan questioned him [see Felstiner 161].)

The fullest expression of this notion Celan reserves for "Der Meridian," which like almost all of his few essays was written for a direct encounter, here an address in Darmstadt upon receiving the 1960 Georg Büchner Prize. He calls poetry a "leading to encounter": "*das Gedicht zur Begegnung Führende*" (61). He asked his Darmstadt audience, "*Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung—im Geheimnis der Begegnung?*" [Yet does not the poem precisely thereby stand, even here, in

encounter—in the mystery of encounter?] (55). He stresses how his readings open spaces where the encountered grant access to a utopian ground of origin; the encounters of poetry prove “*eine Art Heimkehr*” [a kind of homecoming] (60). They finally make the poet tangible to himself: “*Ich bin [. . .] mir selbst begegnet*” [I am myself encountered] (59). The degree of fostering reciprocity and eagerly undertaken encroachment involved in *Begegnung* renders it immune to anxieties of plagiarism as of anxieties of influence. Celan assumes no mere Poundian “pact” with the precursor but consent (recall him kneeling before Buber), indeed mutuality (as when Goll responded to the gift of *Sand aus den Urnen* by returning to writing poems in German, indeed a German suggestive of Celan’s innovations). Such contact is of course unverifiable—a genuine “*Geheimnis*” (mystery). *Begegnung* thus operates rather as a “supreme fiction” in Wallace Stevens’s terms, an enabling myth redeemed by the faith with which it is made to serve the exigencies and ideals of craft. It permits Celan as well to recover the classical and medieval ideal of the poet as member of a guild or sodality, and to extend it into the domain of reception, by inclusion of the reader and translator.

Begegnung furnishes a metaphysical recuperation of conditions most other poets (including Carson) can safely assume—those of home, community, audience—but which were unavailable to Celan, an orphaned stateless émigré in France writing in German, language of the murderers. What Celan shows—and Carson grasps—is this wider “mystery of encounter.” In *Economy of the Unlost*, where she invokes this phrase, Carson approvingly stresses Celan’s view of poetry as encounter between I and You: “The properly invisible nature of otherness guarantees the mystery of our encounters with it, pulls out of us the act of attention that may bring ‘some difference’ to light here” (71-72).² It is in these terms that she would attempt to meet him, and it is in these terms that one might usefully attempt to meet both.

In a section of “The Truth about God” called “God’s Christ Theory,” Carson acknowledges the theological enigma of “withness” (*Glass* 51): how is God “with” Christ, how is Christ “with” us? She returns to this conundrum in the preface to *Economy of the Unlost*:

Think of the Greek preposition πρὸς. When used with the accusative case, this preposition means “toward, upon, against, with, ready for, face to face, engaging, concerning, touching, in reply to, in respect of, compared with, according to, as accompaniment for.” It is the preposition chosen by John the Evangelist to describe the relationship between God and The Word in the first verse of the first chapter of his Revelation:

πρὸς θεόν

“And The Word was with God” is how the usual translation goes. What kind of witness is it? (viii)

She proposes no answers but, placed toward the end of her preface to a book subtitled “Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan,” the question invites us to rethink notions of literary propinquity. Despite the mischievous pedantry with which she coins the word, “witness” stands as Carson’s earnest attempt to adapt *Begegnung* to her uses: a term both cheeky and solemn, comical and sacramental. Almost every denotation of the accusative πρὸς suggests a shade of Celan’s *Begegnung* and furnishes a model of contact corresponding to Carson’s encounter with the poet: Celan is with Carson, who responds by approaching, engaging, touching, replying to, respecting, and accompanying Celan’s work within and by means of her own.

2

Carson has attended to Celan’s techniques in small ways as well as large. There are, for instance, the sonorous repetitions when writing of death, as in “Catullus: *Carmina*”:

One carries.
One carries.
One carries it. (*Men* 38)

This compares with Celan’s “Matière de Bretagne”:

Du
du lehrst
du lehrst deine Hände
du lehrst deine Hände du lehrst
du lehrst deine Hände
schlafen. (*Gedichte* [1: 172])

[You / you teach / you teach your hands / you teach your hands you teach / you teach your hands / to sleep.]

There is the mundane chain of noun phrases mounting into mystery, as in the description of Orvieto in “The Fall of Rome”:

On top
arises
a pedestal of volcanic rock.
On top of the rock is a word. (*Glass* 96)

Celan too makes abrupt transitions from elementary particulars to meta-physical statement, a device which permits both poets to hypostatize abstractions, treating mental constructs as objects. This, after all, is precisely what the builders and artists of Orvieto did, “shaping the word / into a cathedral” (*Glass* 96). In “*Ich hörte sagen*” (“I heard say”) “word” and “stone” are bonded in much the same way:

*Ich hörte sagen, es sei
im Wasser ein Stein und ein Kreis
und über dem Wasser ein Wort
das den Kreis um den Stein legt. (1: 85)*

[I heard say, there was / in the water a stone and a circle / and over the water a word / which lays the circle about the stone.]

Celan’s own poem about a medieval Italian cathedral, “Assisi,” works similarly to describe St. Francis as the church’s first builder:

*Umbrische Nacht
Umbrische Nacht mit dem Silber von Glocke und Ölblatt.
Umbrische Nacht mit dem Stein, den du hertrugst.
Umbrische Nacht mit dem Stein. (1: 108)*

[Umbrian night / Umbrian night with the silver of churchbell and olive leaf. / Umbrian night with the stone that you bore there. / Umbrian night with the stone.]

One may hear both poems in “Lazarus (First Draft)”: “Inside the rock on which we live, another rock” (*Men* 21). In places the echo approximates allusion: “Hard, darling, to be sent behind their borders. / Carrying a stone in each eye” (“Mimnermos,” *Plainwater* 6). “*Die Offenen tragen / den Stein hinterm Aug*” [The open ones bear / the stone behind the eye] (“*Rebleute graben*,” “Vintners Dig,” Celan, *Gesammelte* 123). Carson adapts Celan’s literalized tropes, fusing an often unparticularized object with its figurative connotations. Thus Francis is both a Christ bearing not a cross but a stone, and a Christian Sisyphus (mythic builder of Corinth), as well as church-builder. Carson’s “rock” meanwhile is both the earth and the earth’s resistance to us; “another rock” is both Lazarus’s tomb and the deliverance implied in his resurrection.

Carson follows Celan’s practice of rendering nouns adjectively, as in “Hopper: *Confessions*”: “You on the other hand creature whitely Septembered” (*Men* 58). Compare this with the untitled late lyric beginning “*Eingejännert / in der bedornten / Bahme*” [Januaried / into the bethorned /

rock recess] (2: 351). Arbitrary temporal divisions become agents, acting as psychological states with the sanction and force of seasons.

Sanctioned in part by the recovery of the Anglo-Saxon kenning in Doughty, Hopkins, Pound and Joyce, Carson exploits Celan's most distinctive lexical device, the neologistic compound. A section of "Catullus: *Carmina*" ends: "So then I grew old and died and wrote this. / Be careful it's worldsharp" (*Men* 40). A convincing compound is both an arranged marriage and an elopement. It is calculating and coerced yet should appear an unsanctioned flight into new possibility. The dictionary refuses to recognize the union, but this verbal infringement, though a defiance of linguistic propriety, is also an enlargement of the properties of language. Indeed this wilful aberration becomes the lexical embodiment of encounter: a model not of assimilation or integration but of equipoise, exchange and cooperation. Neologisms are unnaturalized compounds, the two elements retaining their integrity even while generating unforeseen combinations. Carson writes that neologisms "raise troubling questions about our own verbal mastery. We say 'coinages' because they disrupt the economic equilibrium of words and things that we had prided ourselves on maintaining. A new compound word in Celan, for example, evokes something that now suddenly seems real, although it didn't exist before and is attainable through this word alone. [. . .] It has to invent its own necessity" (*Economy* 134). If Carson's Orvieto cathedral is an affirming word (it proclaims "the word 'Live!'" [*Glass* 96]) upon "volcanic rock," speech in Celan strives to do the same with vastly more compromised materials: "*Wortaufschüttung, vulkanisch, / meerüberrauscht*" [Wordheapings, volcanic, / sea-overswept] (2: 29). Such compounds suggest a tumultuous semantic exuberance difficult to separate from violence. The compound itself, be it Carson's "day-wolf" (*Men* 19) or Celan's "*Schneetrost*" [snow-comfort] (*Gesammelte* 105) is a heaping-up of words, where incompatibility conceals profound secret affinities.

Celan routinely appeals to an unidentified auditor, a "you" both intimate and unknown—a mobile token of company ghostly, domestic, and readerly. Carson sometimes invokes this auditor as well. A section of "Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela" begins: "Your voice I know. It had me terrified. When I hear it in dreams, from time to time all my life, it sounds like a taunt—but dreams distort sound, for they send it over many waters" (*Plainwater* 175). This disembodied voice, generalized yet specific, intimate yet unsettling, belongs to the awry logic of the dream. It is one of what

Celan calls “sleepshapes,” the oneiric “you” appearing in Celan’s late poem “*Alle die Schlafgestalten*”:

*Alle die Schlafgestalten, krystallin,
die du annahmst
im Sprachshatten

ihnen
führ ich mein Blut zu (Gesammelte 76)*

[All the sleepshapes, crystalline, / which you assumed / in the speechshadow // to them / I lead my blood]

Carson comments on this poem: “Whoever ‘you’ are, you are placed at the beginning and end of the poem, to enclose the poet in the middle and make his existence possible for him in two essential ways: for you take on shapes that he can understand and you give him a place for his grief” (*Economy* 70). Carson’s rhetoric here arrestingly conspires with Celan’s to affirm the vital reality of “you.” “You” sheds its quotation marks, becoming the subject of her direct address as of Celan’s. You thus give her as much as him understanding and a place for grief.

In the Büchner Prize address Celan calls the poem a “*Flaschenpost*” or message in a bottle:

Gedichte sind auch in dieser Weise unterwegs; sie halten auf etwas zu. Worauf? Auf etwas Offenstehendes, Besetzbares, auf ein ansprechbares Du vielleicht, auf eine ansprechbare Wirklichkeit. (Meridian 39)

[Poems are also in this way en route: they are making for something. For what? For something standing open, engageable, for an addressable You perhaps, for an addressable reality.]

In “*Die Silbe Schmerz*” (“The Syllable Pain”) he writes:

*Es gab sich Dir in die Hand:
ein Du, todlos,
an dem alles Ich zu sich kam. (1: 280)*

[There appeared in your hand: / a You, deathless, / in which all things I came to itself.]³

The You is both potentially a solipsistic projection and an idealization by which the shards of identity may textually reassemble.⁴ For Carson it can be an enigmatic but enabling alterity, as in “Kinds of Water.” This text culminates in the intercession of an unidentified, perhaps imaginary you, who rescues the pilgrim from an intangible menace: “Your action is simple. You

take hold of my paws and cross them on my breasts as a sign that I am one who has been to the holy city and tasted its waters, its kinds" (*Plainwater* 187). Carson's Compostela echoes Celan's Assisi; she makes a pilgrimage along the Camino bearing psychic equivalents to St. Francis's stone. Within the logic of "withness" the "you" who meets her at the "holy city" acts on the speaker of the poem as Celan acts on the poet, extending protection and conferring a sanction.

This "you" even becomes, however obliquely, Celan himself. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, the narrator's unfaithful husband has travelled with her to Athens to promote a reconciliation. Noticing her sadness, he asks, "why in your eyes—" but she deflects his attention by requesting tea. While he fetches drinks she is reminded of a line of poetry: "why sadness? This flowing the world to its end. Why in your eyes—" (*Beauty* 98). The lines derive from an epistolary poem sent to Celan in a letter dated March 10, 1958 by the expatriate German Jewish poet Nelly Sachs:

*Warum diese Traurigkeit?
Dieses Welt-zu-Ende-fließen?
Warum in deinen Augen
das perlende Licht daraus Sterben sich zusammensetzt?
(Briefwechsel 16)*

[Why this sadness? / This world-to-end-flowing? / Why in your eyes the pearly light of which dying consists?]

"Your eyes" are, in the context of this uncollected poem, Celan's. (He reciprocated four years later with an epistolary poem inspired by their first meeting, "*Zürich, Zum Storchen*," in which the "you" is its dedicatee, whose words close the poem.) Celan thus surreptitiously enters Carson's own poem, with uncanny repercussions:

It is a line of verse. Where has it stepped from. She searches herself. Waiting.
Waiting is searching.
And the odd thing is, waiting, searching, the wife suddenly knows
something about her husband.
The fact for which she has not searched
jerks itself into the light
like a child from a closet. (*Beauty* 98)

By a kind of portentous happenstance, recollection of a passage from the sibling-tender correspondence between Celan and Sachs precedes—induces?—an insight into the protagonist's failed marriage. The figurative "light" in an Athens hotel room is also *das perlende Licht* of death in Celan's

eyes. (He indeed would drown himself in the Seine in 1970, less than a month before Sachs's own death in Stockholm from cancer.)

Carson can however praise in Celan powers which, in her own poetry, come under scrutiny. "*Sprich— / Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja*" ("Speak— / But split the No not from Yes," as she translates it), Celan writes in "*Sprich Auch Du*" ("Speak You Too") (1: 135). Of the line Carson notes, "yet the German word order does split *das Nein* from *Ja* by the negative adverb *nicht*. In between No and Yes Celan places the poet's power to cancel their difference, his licence to double the negative of death" (*Economy* 109). The catechistic ending of *Economy of the Unlost* suggests compliance with Celan's imperative: "Is stammering a waste of words? Yes and No" (134). Yet, when the unfaithful husband returns with tea to the Athens hotel room in *The Beauty of the Husband*, and his wife confronts him with the truth mysteriously linked to Nelly Sachs's poem to Celan, this capacity proves a bedevilment. The wife's accusations can be parried easily because "he was holding Yes and No together with one hand" (*Beauty* 100). The ability to align affirmation and negation grants a terrible immunity to the mercurial husband. Celan's imperative can thus be exploited meanly, to deflect calls to account.

The cycle of epitaphic verses in *Men in the Off Hours* are particularly Celanesque. Terse, brittle and oracular, they measure frail human possibilities against the annihilating prodigies of superhuman and subhuman force. "Epitaph: Annunciation" reads:

Motion swept the world aside, aghast to white nerve nets.
Pray what
Shall I do with my six hundred wings? As a blush feels
Slow, from inside. (*Men* 14).

The world reduced and vulnerable, the objects in it precisely denoted yet enigmatic, occasionally being specifically yet perplexingly numbered: all this is characteristic of Celan.⁵ And the body utterly exposed, whittled away:

*Hohles Lebensgehöft. Im Windfang
die Leer-
geblasene Lunge
blüht. Eine Handvoll
Schlafkorn
weht aus dem wahr-
gestammelten Mund
hinaus zu den Schnee-
gesprächen. (2:42)*

[Hollow life's-farmstead. In the draught-screen / the empty- / blown lung / blossoms. A handful of / sleep-grain / wafts from the true- / stammered mouth / to the snow- / conversations.]

A wind that germinates as it denudes, a body that signals truths through—and by means of—its decay: these are redemptive paradoxes dear to Carson. The “six hundred wings” constitutes a curiously baffled whole celestial hierarchy of powers, or an outrageous proliferation of Rilke’s angelic orders in the *Duino Elegies*. Rather than complementing the claim made in the first phrase, each of the subsequent three phrases confounds its sense, the confusion operating as well at the level of grammar. Within a more conventional syntax Celan’s compounds accumulate a similar pressure on sense. Something, however briefly, is nevertheless being retrieved from oblivion and rehabilitated, its validity suggested by the very instability and disorder of its expression.

At the end of “The Glass Essay” the poet, abruptly and inexplicably reconciled to the loss of love, approaches in a vision what appears to be a Yeatsian figure of decline, a tattered coat upon a stick:

It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
but as I came closer
I saw it was a human body

trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was
blowing off the bones.
And there was no pain.
The wind

was cleansing the bones.
They stood forth silver and necessary. (*Glass* 38)

Here is a hollow life’s farmstead where, as in Celan, germination defies the void, and inarticulate sounds make valid speech. The sterilizing blast inadvertently disperses the seed in Celan, and it purifies in Carson.

As in Celan, the wind is a devastation in Carson’s “Epitaph: Zion,” which recounts an even more costly deliverance:

Murderous little world once our objects had gazes. Our lives
were fragile, the wind
could dash them away. Here lies the refugee breather
who drank a bowl of elsewhere. (*Men* 9)

That refugee from annihilating violence could be Celan himself, a survivor

who in exile remained fragile, and who tasted “elsewhere” both as an ideal (Zion) and a dislocation (Austria and France).

In *Economy of the Unlost* Carson asserts that, from Simonides to Celan, epitaphs provide, even while restricted to mere inscription, a mode of redemption:

Salvation occurs, through the act of attention that forms stone into memory, leaving a residue of greater life. I am speaking subjectively. There is no evidence of salvation except in a cold trace in the mind. But this trace convinces me that the beautiful economic motions of Simonides’ epitaphic verse capture something essential to human language, to the give and take of being, to what saves us. (95)

Carson proposes that, though the poet composed only one explicit epitaph (“*Grabschrift für François*” [“Epitaph for François”], for his infant), the spirit of Celan’s verse is epitaphic. An epitaph is a speaking stone, is the dead speaking or addressed, thus a mode of encounter. She invokes “*Grabschrift*” as evidence that the poet “does seem at times to have entertained the notion that the dead can save the living” (95).

Carson is responsive to Celan’s curiously devout lack of faith. She is a secular poet preoccupied with belief—indeed, as the quotation above suggests, with soteriology. Though her opera libretto *Decreation* may echo the works Gertrude Stein wrote for Virgil Thompson, the subject is the Christian mystic Simone Weil. (The unpublished recent lecture “Decreation” focusses on Weil and other female apophatic mystics, including Marguerite Porete.) To Mary di Michele Carson claimed that “a fundamental motive of thinking and making stuff [. . .] is worship. That is, apprehension of some larger-than-oneself thing. And that is what is missing from a great deal of modern thought” (di Michele 9). She cites Celan as an exception.

Exasperated worship characterizes Celan’s relations with God, and some of Carson’s finest poems, such as “The Book of Isaiah,” describe just such a state. Her emphasis however frequently falls on the verbal formulas and the gendered constructions of faith, while the tone is often comic and acerbic. Celan’s encounters with the émigré German Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, who remained devout, suggest how a poetics of *Begegnung* could allow him to enter into states alien to him. After a six-year correspondence they first met on Ascension Day 1960, near the Zürich Minster, the talk turning naturally enough to theology. Celan’s notes record the conversation: “4h Nelly Sachs, allein. ‘Ich bin ja gläubig.’ Als ich darauf sage, ich hoffe, bis zuletzt lästern zu können: Man weiß ja nicht, was gilt” [“4 o’clock, Nelly Sachs, alone. ‘I am indeed a believer.’ When I replied that I hoped to be able to blaspheme to

the very end: One just doesn't know what counts"] (*Briefwechsel* 41). Three days later Celan wrote "*Zürich, Zum Storchen*," based on their exchange. The poem begins by invoking the multiplicity of identities convoked in the second-person singular pronoun: "*Vom Zuviel war die Rede, vom / Zuwenig. Von Du / und Aber-Du*," where the hyphenated pronoun can mean "Again-You," "Yet-You," or literally "But-You: "The talk was of Too Much, of / Too Little. Of You / and Yet-You" (214).

*Von deinem Gott war die Rede, ich sprach
gegen ihn, ich
ließ das Herz, das ich hatte,
hoffen:
auf
sein höchstes, umröcheltes, sein
haderndes Wort— (1: 214)*

[The talk was of your God, I spoke / against him, I / let the heart that I had / hope:
/ for / his highest, rattling, his / quarrelling word—]

The interlocutor replies, "*Wir / wissen ja nicht, weißt du, / wir / wissen ja nicht, was gilt*" [we / just don't know, you know, / we / just don't know, what counts] (214-15). The *Du* and *Aber-Du* converge in the knowing ignorance of the plural personal pronoun. For emphasis Celan isolates the pronoun on its own lines. What "we" know, in this variation on the Delphic wisdom of Socrates, is that we do not know—and as in Plato's Socratic dialogues this is knowledge of a high order. Between manuscript draft (see facsimile, *Briefwechsel* 43) and publication three years later in *Die Niemandrose*, Celan had removed the quotation marks initially placed around the Sachsian interlocutor's reply, thereby reinforcing further the pronominal fusion and the validity of its utterance. Indeed the speaker has entered into a relation of witness with his interlocutor. Doubt of God becomes doubt of one's own capacity to judge of such a matter, as expressed in a strategy of verbal convergence.

Even Celan's most nihilistic poems tend to hypostatize the void. The very gap left by God's disappearance is made to assume deific agency. From its Biblical title on, "Psalm" proclaims this paradoxical mode of metaphysical renewal:

*Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
Dir zulieb wollen*

wir blühh.
Dir entgegen.
Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben, blühend:
di Nichts-, die
Niemandsrose. (Celan 2: 225)

[No one kneads us again from earth and clay, / no one conjures our dust. / No one. // Praised be you, No one. / For your sake we want / to bloom. / Towards / you. // A nothing / we were, are we, will / we remain, blooming: / the Nothing-, the / No one's rose.]

Solemnly cadenced, its very occasion the paradox of apophatic belief, "Psalm" finds its metaphysical compensations in their absence. In "God's Beloveds Remain True," a section of "The Truth about God," Carson catalogues the outrages perpetrated on human beings as though—but only as though—they coincided with divine providence :

Our hope is a noose.
 We take our flesh in our teeth.
 The autumn blows us as chaff across the fields.
 We are sifted and fall.
 We are hung in a void.
 We are shattered on the ocean.
 We are smeared on the darkness.
 We are slit and drained out.
 Little things drink us.
 We lie unburied. ,
 We are dust.
 We know nothing.
 We can not answer.
 We will speak no more.
 BUT WE WILL NOT STOP.
 For we are the beloveds.
 We have been instructed to call this His love. (*Glass 47*)

Here is another *Niemandsrose* or No one's rose, whose abjection is not the result of an absolute desolation. No more than Celan's is Carson's the Darwinian abyss of mere chance. Celan's *Griffel* is not only a "pistil" but also a "stylus" or "slate pencil," which inscribes the text ("purple-word") of a song chanted, psalm-like, beyond the ravages of unredeemed nature. The densely figurative language of "*Psalm*" and "God's Beloveds Remain True" acts as a credential, signalling specifically human resources to which the poets defiantly, on behalf of us all, "remain true." Our "dust" in Carson is

no more conjured than Celan's "*Staub*"; we know in Carson no more than we do in "*Zürich, Zum Storchen*," but as in Celan negations culminate in concealed affirmations: "WE WILL NOT STOP."⁶

Where Celan's slippery levels of irony, however, are metaphysical (rooted in negative theology), Carson's are primarily historical. Stress falls not on the inimical effects of nature or on doctrines of deliverance from it, but on the historical conviction that such a deliverance exists. "We are the beloveds," "instructed" to understand even our despair as evidence of divine favour. This instruction of course derives from the Book of Job and Rabbinical and Patristic exegesis (most influentially Origen's) of the Song of Songs, by which the "beloved" Shulamite is by turns identified allegorically with Israel, the Church, and the soul in union with God. Celan repeatedly evokes the same Biblical texts and exegetical tradition.⁷ Carson however emphasizes the gendered binaries of Judeo-Christian doctrine (see such other sections of the poem as "God's Woman" and "God's Stiff," which immediately precede this one), thereby undermining its validity in historical terms. That "we have been instructed to call this His love" is a sardonic incongruity. Human perseverance begins to seem a Beckettian endgame rather than a desert exodus to some redeeming Canaan. "*Psalm*" consequently reads both as more astringent and more consolatory than "The Truth about God." "We sang" and, in the reading, are singing still some primary psalm of praise. In Carson, we are, on the other hand, passive and very possibly hoodwinked pupils of the agents of an apathetic deity. This she presents not as a transcendent destiny but as a curious historical imperative. Her poems often ask why we construct and maintain, despite their futility, narratives of this kind. Her series of "TV Men" poems explore, for instance, the role of mass media in reinforcing the passivity and ignorance that help to perpetuate such narratives. Her poems express an aghast fascination with pain and with the metaphysical rationalizations of its causes.

A later section of "The Truth about God," "God's Christ Theory," is characteristic in deflating its own tentative metaphysical assertions by showing their conflict with history. The poem reads as an urbane and canny response to one of Celan's best-known poems, "*Tenebrae*":

God had no emotions but wished temporarily
to move in man's mind
as if He did: Christ. (*Glass* 51)

Celan's poem concerns the limitations inherent in the scheme Carson describes, for what can a deathless, apathic deity truly know of human suffering (πάθος, passion) or of death (the Passion)?

Not passion but compassion.

Com—means "with."

What kind of withness would that be? (*Glass* 51)

Unlike her phrasing of this question in the preface to *Economy of the Unlost*, here the question is dubious, indeed facetious: God cannot "feel with" (exhibit com-passion toward) his mortal surrogate.

As God translates himself into Jesus, and *com* translates into "with," so the poem translates the "theory" of "God's Christ Theory" into its application, Jesus becoming now an all-too-human friend:

Translate it.

I have a friend named Jesus
from Mexico.

His father and grandfather are called Jesus too.

They account me a fool with my questions about salvation.

They say they are saving to move to Los Angeles. (*Glass* 51)

The poet's friend in Jesus is not some Baptist projection of a personal saviour but an economic migrant whose notion of salvation is deflatingly secularized, his New Jerusalem contracted into Los Angeles. Jesus is a mere moniker, a mobile token of merely vestigial religious implication, like the name "city of angels" itself. One saves not oneself but one's money. The poem thus mocks the theological and etymological concerns of its opening stanzas. For a modernist poet these men would be passive participants in a social order intent on their physical, moral and spiritual displacement in order to advance the mercantile and imperialistic aims of an urban, secular, international elite. Carson invites a different response by dramatizing a dialectic in which the poet's judgment enjoys no priority. The local and contemporary challenge and even overturn speculation. Carson yields to the authority of history. By contrast, in Celan—and this signals his continuity with German modernism—history ultimately furnishes temporal indices of metaphysical facts.

His "*Tenebrae*" shows this:

Windshief gingen wir hin,

*gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken
nach Mulde und Maar.*

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

*Es war Blut, es war,
was du vergossen, Herr.*

Es glänzte.

*Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.
Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.*

*Wir haben getrunken, Herr.
Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.*

*Bete, Herr.
Wir sind nah. (1: 163)*

[Askew we went forth, / we went forth, to bend ourselves / toward hollow and ditch. // To the watering-place we went, Lord. // It was blood, it was, / what you shed, Lord. // It gleamed. // It cast your image into our eyes, Lord. / Eyes and mouth stand so open and empty, Lord. // We have drunk, Lord. / The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord. // Pray, Lord. / We are near.]

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that even so scabrously irreverent a poem, in which death establishes our unity with Jesus at the expense of any faith in transcendence, ultimately reaffirms Christian teaching: “By taking seriously and accepting it as the destiny of human beings beyond all hope and comfort, the poem approaches the ultimate intention of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation” (176). From its inversion of Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Patmos” (“*Nah is, und schwer zu fassen, der Gott*”: “Near is, and hard to grasp, the Lord” [Hölderlin 177]), to its faith not in the Resurrection but in commonality in suffering, “*Tenebrae*” is anything but a novel restatement of Christian doctrine. For Gadamer, who does not consider the poet’s relation to the Crucifixion in terms of his Judaism, “it is precisely this martyrdom upon which our unity with him [the Lord] and our closeness to him rests” (195). For Celan, however, the basis of any such unity would be the Lord’s forsaken state, from which human witnesses alone could rescue him.

“*Tenebrae*” hovers between blasphemy and compassion, whereby the poet may share in the Crucifixion as one mortal witnessing the final suffering of another. The “witness” that puzzles Carson and provokes her wry scepticism is in “*Tenebrae*” transferred from God to the Creation: We are with the

Lord, rather than God being with us. Shared destitution is the basis of a new covenant between crucified and witnesses, one which excludes God. By drinking from this blood sacrifice we acquire the sanction to receive, rather than to utter, a very different Lord's prayer. Here is the prayer of a non-practising Jew (whose wife was the daughter of a pious Catholic, aristocratic French family), recovering from the crucified Jew a mode of reverence at odds both with Judaism (as in the defiance of the kosher law against ingesting blood) and with Christian teaching.

In Carson and Celan God is chillingly remote and unappeasable, yet fulfillment of divine providence depends on human intercession.⁸ Such intercession must however not be confused with union. Celan's religious poetry is in the tradition of the lyric petition, of private prayer made public, inaugurated by the Psalms. They are intimate, searching, helpless. Carson by contrast is often cheeky and self-disparaging. "My Religion" announces "My religion makes no sense / and does not help me / therefore I pursue it" (*Glass* 39). This non sequitur is a comic variation on a Kierkegaardian paradox. She then speculates that, for all our blind contortions of piety, God may simply have wanted "some simple thing" that struggles in vain to communicate itself. In an echo of Donne's sonnet "Batter My Heart," Carson feels the thought of this simple thing "battering" against the walls of our unnecessarily complex conceptions of the divine: "It batters my soul / with its rifle butt" (40). The agent of violence is not God but an intellectual image of thwarted divine yearning.

Carson's "The Book of Isaiah" again presents God as deficient, because yearning, who finds completion only in human acquiescence to his (compromised) power. The poem includes other Celanesque elements, from the neologism "worldsheet" ("Inside Isaiah God saw the worldsheet burning" [*Glass* 107]), to a phrase reworked from the "*Grabschrift für François*"; when Isaiah refuses to praise God, God responds by projecting before him a vision of global conflagration: "All the windows of the world stood open and burning" (114). The image opens Celan's epitaph on the death of his infant son, quoted in full in *Economy of the Unlost*: "*Die beiden Türen der Welt / stehen offen*" (1: 105). Carson translates the phrase as "The two doors of the world / stand open" (*Economy* 86). Whereas Celan describes the doors of birth into, and death out of, the house of life, Carson describes windows onto unredeemed human suffering. The conflagration is part of God's tactic to tempt Isaiah with the role of deliverer: "I tell you Isaiah you can save the nation" (*Glass* 115). While he hesitates Isaiah has another, more

immediate vision, of God's curious susceptibility:

The wind was rising, God was shouting.
 You can strip it down, start over at the wires, use lions! use
 thunder! use what you see—
 Isaiah was watching sweat and tears run down God's face. (115)

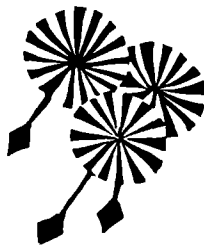
The fire projected and the effort exerted to win his prophet's submission exact a toll on God's all-too-human body. Not only Adam must sustain himself by the sweat of his brow; not only the angel who appeared before Jacob must wrestle with a mortal. Divine lack however does not imply divine impotence, and God retains in Carson as in Celan a terrible (because confused) elemental power. This violence secures a harsh covenant:

Okay, said Isaiah, so I save the nation. What do you do?
 God exhaled roughly.
 I save the fire, said God.
 Thus their contract continued. (115)

Carson's are not the plagiarisms of an unscrupulous admirer or mere borrowings for effect but encounters, efforts to overcome the formidable hindrances to passage through an alien yet exemplary body of work. Carson has, like any poet who admires his work, heard herself addressed in Celan's "*Du*," and she has answered, indeed as had Sachs, with poetic messages placed in the very bottles in which she received his. This encounter is for Carson as close an approach to "withness" as a poet may achieve: a humble and compassionate proximity, free of paternalistic anxieties regarding precedence or derivation, and inseparable finally from a higher devotion. Hers is an approach toward, an engagement with, a reply to and an accompanying of Celan, rather than a plundering.

Does Carson take from Celan?

Yes and No.



NOTES

- 1 "Yes, the estrangement, the discomfiting of the reader, has some deep purpose I'm not quite aware of. It comes and goes in my writing; it comes and goes as an emotion," Carson states in an interview, suggesting that her intentions resemble those of Gertrude Stein: "to defamiliarize and therefore cause a friction of mind and spirit in the taking up of the page into the reader's mind" (Irvine 82-83). In a later interview she says, à propos the title *Men in the Off Hours*, "If you can get your mind at an angle—you'll notice this in teaching, that when students are suddenly a little displaced from what they thought they thought, they begin to actually think. But that angle is hard to get to" (Deslauriers and Cantwell 5).
- 2 "Some difference" quotes her translation of the phrase μεταβουλία δέ τις φανεῖν Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἐκ σεο ("may some change of mind appear from you, father Zeus") from Simonides' Danaë fragment.
- 3 The italicized first person singular pronoun translates Celan's capitalization of it.
- 4 "Sharben," or "shards," is how Celan characterizes mankind in "Vor Mein"—"Before My" (*Gesammelte* 81).
- 5 See for example "Einmal" and "In den Flüssen nördlich der Zukunft" ("Once" and "In the rivers north of the future") (1: 107 and 14).
- 6 "The interesting thing about a negative, then," Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost*, "is that it posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement" (102).
- 7 The iconography of The Song of Songs, where roses and thorns proliferate, is unmistakable in "Psalm": e.g., "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valley. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters" (2: 1-2). This underscores the poem's oblique fidelity to Judaism. "Todesfuge" ("Death-Fugue") meanwhile alludes directly to the Biblical book: "Dein aschenes Haar Schulamith"—"your ashen hair Shulamite" (1: 41).
- 8 Among Celan's modern precursors this notion is elaborated upon in Rilke's prose cycle *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, but it can be traced at least as far back as Angelus Silenius (Johannes Scheffler) in, for example, the couplet "Gott lebt nicht ohne mich" ("God does not live without me").

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