

CELAN'S ACTUALITY

By Austin Carder

Notes on *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry* (FSG, 2020) and *Microliths: Posthumous Prose* (Contra Mundum Press, 2020) by Paul Celan, translated from the German by Pierre Joris

“What decides whether the world sings is whether the poet manages to hit the mark, to attain the darkness of language, as if that were something already existing in itself.”

—Theodor W. Adorno

With the publication in 2020 of *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry* and *Microliths: Posthumous Prose*, it becomes possible to fathom the magnitude of Pierre Joris's half-century spent offering Paul Celan to us in English. In *Microliths*, out from the incomparable Contra Mundum Press, the door to Celan in prose has now also been opened wide, following Rosmarie Waldrop's 1986 translation of the published writings. *Microliths* reads like a prismatic cutting room floor; scattered tesserae catch glints of light from each other and the texts they would later become. One such is Celan's favorite formulation by Valéry: “Le poème est du langage à l'état naissant” (“The poem is language in the state of being born”). Though these jottings lack the unsparing discipline of Valéry's notebooks, they are in fact heirs to those labyrinthine pages in the rigor of their condensation. *Microliths* houses a small library: personal and theoretical reflection, experiments in fiction and drama, aphorisms, interviews, and scanned manuscript pages that leaven the book with a touch of the poet's hand. Several times Celan speaks of writing poems as revelations in which the poet fleetingly enters the fold of mystery: “even the one who lifts the poem into the visible is tolerated as ‘confidant’ only as long as the poem is in the process of becoming.” This extends not only to the poet but also to readers. And the translator is only a reader who leaves traces. If the poems make us their confidants, *Microliths* makes us confidants of the poet.

Many readers of English first encountered Celan's poems in Michael Hamburger's translation, or more recently, in the selection by John Felstiner. In either case, a glance across the page at the German begs another incarnation. I remember once reading aloud (*intoning*, as the late Harold Bloom would say) from Hamburger's Celan, alternating between the German and English. I was so struck by the discrepancy in the two selves of one poem in particular, how the latter had internally severed its lifeline to the former, that I quickly scribbled down a more adequate attempt. Later, when *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech* made it into my hands, I was relieved—and not at all surprised—to find that Joris had found in the English the very contours I felt the poem required, and more bindingly than in my desperate yawp. Taking the measure of Joris's achievement is not done simply to say that it surpasses his predecessor's; we need to know *what* in the original he has given voice to, and *how*, if we are to make good on the possibilities Celan opens up in our own tongue.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890.

Unter ein Bild

Rabenüberschwärmte Weizenwoge.
Welchen Himmels Blau? Des untern? Obern?
Später Pfeil, der von der Seele schnellte.
Stärkres Schwirren. Näh'res Glühen. Beide Welten.

Under a Picture

Swarming of ravens over a wheat billow.
Blue of which heaven? The higher? Nether?
Late arrow that the soul released.
Louder whirring. Nearer glow. The world *and* the other.
[Hamburger]

Below a Painting

Crowswarmed wheatwave.
What sky's blue? The one below? The one above?
Late arrow, shot from the soul.
Stronger whirring. Nearer glowing. Both worlds.
[Joris]

The title announces ekphrasis; the psychic image that follows is and is not the Van Gogh painting in the same way that to the translation belongs a non-identity with the original. We can read this as a poem “about” translation in the specifically proximal sense that it behaves mimetically toward an anterior work of art, which is to say the poem transforms the painting. Below a painting, the original: *this*. Subordinate? Ekphrasis in English might reach for “after” or “upon,” but Celan has not. The poem bears the load of the painting and the experience to which it gives form.

“Rabenüberschwärmte Weizenwoge” conjures the image with synthetic precision and a jeweler’s economy of means. Are these words the Bild beneath which the rest of the poem unfolds? Celan stitches this pair of his characteristic compounds together with threads of delicate tension. The words darken and crowd in on themselves. Hamburger does not rise to the challenge they pose; this is the single feature that most indicts his versions. But how to produce this in English is not so straightforward as taking the literal route, the route many translators like to *imagine* they take out of deference to the original. German innately fuses words, especially nouns. In English, the same procedure draws attention to itself. But these particular words don’t exist in German either. They are coinages that remind us of language’s inorganic nature, something socially in-the-making and historically becoming in the poet’s hands. These tokens demand a hearing.

A literal translation of the first writhing word might have been “Ravenoverswarmed.” “Raven” could have invoked Poe and an entire mood that would not have been out of place. It could have lent its A to the vowels in “wave” and “late.” But the word has a specific weight in context, and Celan’s compounds are concentrated instances of what is true in every poem: each part draws its meaning from whatever it touches. “The conjunction of the words in the poem: not only a conjunction, also a confrontation. Also, a toward-each-other and an away-from-each-other. Encounter, dissent, and leave-taking all in one.” “Each word, even the seemingly slightest, searches for new connections, wants into language” (*Microliths*). In such lean poems, every syllable and shade of sense counts. Between a raven and a crow, the word takes a step. The image sheds a syllable; the bird grows smaller. But each loss yields abundant recompense. A cloud of crows becomes finer, more swarming and overwhelming, like bees or airborne ants. The cawing noise in “crow” reverberates throughout the rest of the poem, where Joris sows a field of open O sounds (“below,” “arrow,” “soul,” “glow,” “both”). They configure our gasp as we behold the painting.

Then there were two blues. Whose hues? The English apostrophe lets the object snuggle up to its possessor with no obstruction of “of”: the blue’s belonging to neither. The German “Himmel,” though it goes into “heaven” and “sky,” can become overly celestial when the former is chosen, though a counterweight elsewhere can always remedy any such hypertrophic choice. Upper and lower skies already provide a note of transcendence, one rooted firmly in earthly perception. The essence, after all, must appear. And so it does, when the next line’s arrow quits its quiver. A Celan poem in English cannot afford many inclusions of “that,” which is less obtrusive in German poetry—tied intimately as it is to its gendered antecedent. The arrow is slow, even late in arriving. It asks: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? The arrow may be the painting or the path leading inward and *à travers*. It is also a bullet, like the one Van Gogh loaded into his revolver while painting amid wheatwaves. That hint, that *reading*, resounds in Joris’s “shot.” The poem starts to feel a funeral in its brain. Dickinson, whom Celan translated into German, interpolates a gray melody in the final line. The whirring holds a treading, a beating, a creak. A musical recapitulation takes place: harvest of parataxis. Not only is the O howl heard again, but all of the poem’s movements gather in the narrow hands of the last line. It is recapitulation in another way: a surrendering again to language. “To him who yells at ‘words,’ language will refuse itself. He who yields to language, him... words will find.” To Joris’s credit, he yields: “When translating: the capitulation of the ‘counter text’” (*Microliths*).

Celan's poetry is often compared to a geode. We only know a geode when it is broken open. A translation like Hamburger's is a rock with moss growing on it, which is not to say that beautiful mossy rocks do not exist. In his *Fergendienst* (ferryman's labor), Pierre Joris has split the shell of the original to unleash the jagged cosmos it contains. His versions pose the question of Celan's actuality, an English word due for communion with its cousins: the German *Aktualität* and French *actualité*. The facticity of the English can join up with the pertinence of the German word, dripping in Hegelian becoming, while the French reminds us that actuality is news that stays news. So what is Celan *for us*, today? *For poetry*, the *poem*, today? He calls upon us to occupy his interlinear space, assist in the birth of an answer.

I do not speak of the "modern" poem, I speak of the poem today. And to the essential aspects of this today — my today, for I do speak on my own behalf — belongs its lack of a future. I cannot keep from you that I do not know how to answer the question toward which morrow the poem is moving; if the poem borders on such a morrow, then it possesses darkness. The poem's hour of birth, ladies and gentlemen, lies in darkness. Some claim to know that it is the darkness just before dawn; I do not share this assumption.

hold it to be congenital, or better, constitutive. The poem is dark qua poem. (*Microliths*)