JEAN DAIVE

PAUL CELAN: les jours et les nuits

Translated by Norma Cole
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Jean Daive: Bernhard Böschenstein, you’ve known Paul Celan, up close, on the intellectual level and at times on the level of everyday life, seeing that he stayed in your apartment in Geneva where you invited him on the occasion of a public reading at the University. How did you come to meet him?

Bernhard Böschenstein: I owe the meeting to Peter Szondi who had only met him a few days before me and a few days before Jean Bollack. All three of us met Paul Celan the same week, in April 1959. I was received at his place on the rue de Longchamp and we discussed among others, above all, Hölderlin. Later I found among his books the little Stuttgart edition and the date of my Paris visit not far from the quote from the hymn “The Rhine” that he reprised in “Tübingen, January,” in January 1961.

While I was at Paul Celan’s, the postman brought the first copies of Sprachgitter and thus I received the first copy with a dedication. Since I was on my way back from Scotland he quickly began to ask me about Scotch broom which inspired the beginning of that poem. Plants always played a part in our meetings. For instance, in Göttingen, where I had him look at the botanical garden created by the poet Albrecht von Haller, right away he took me to the flowers of the Balkans and found the star thistle that plays a role in his poetry.

JD: What held fast the thread of your friendship until the end? For you and for him, what were the centers of interest, subjects under discussion?
BB: The question of translations of great French and German poetry loomed large, not just translations from French to German, but also from Shakespeare. There were always names of translators unknown to me. For instance, for Saint-John Perse he said no, it’s not Friedhelm Kemp I admire, it’s Leonharda von Gescher, who I didn’t know. And for Shakespeare, he said it wasn’t Stefan George, the translator useful to me was Régis. When we did the Anthologie de Baudelaire à Saint-John Perse with Jean Bollack and his wife, appearing in 1962, we often asked him for help. I remember once he found a rare verb, flirren, for a Baudelairean expression.

So we often talked about translation, and he initiated me to texts he had just discovered, too, like Henri Michaux, a very compelling text in free verse, “Vers la Complétude,” that only existed as a tiny chapbook that he read to me, and when I asked him to translate it he said the poem was too difficult. We talked as well about translations begun and abandoned. For instance, “La Chanson du mal aimé” [“Song of the Poorly Loved” by Guillaume Apollinaire]. He made three versions of the first three stanzas and there also found that the poem was too difficult. Anyway, walking me around his library and looking at volumes that poet friends like Char and Michaux and others had given him, Bonnefoy among them, I noted that Celan had written in pencil the translation of just a few lines of a poem several stanzas long. If it was a poem of six or eight stanzas, he had translated maybe only six or eight lines, so that it will be quite difficult to publish these first readings. Naturally we talked a lot about Hölderlin, but we also talked about other poets and poems that were important to me and that impressed him. For example, a cycle of the Westphalian poet Annette von Droste-Hülsoff, “Ein Sommertagstraum” [“Dream of a Summer Day”]. There, it is a question of someone who received some original birthday gifts, for instance rare stones or antique coins. This poem affected him a lot,
and I read it to him in 1963, and a year later he asked me to reread the same text to him. Annette von Droste-Hülsoff impressed him because the density and the toughness of her lines and her very geological side suited him in this late creative period. But there was a baroque poet he liked, it was Quirinus Kuhlmann, with his far-reaching wordplay. He had translated Saint John of the Cross and Celan asked me to show him earlier poems that no one had ever read because they had just appeared in an edition put together by students from Heidelberg. At any rate, when he stayed with me he consulted above all the baroque section of my library, a realm that attracted him and he didn’t know deeply.

Not just poetry, not just translations were at the center of our conversations. Three times I organized readings, once in Göttingen, before an enormous public, once in Geneva, and this was one of the first times, I think, that he had read at a French-speaking site, and finally before his death, in Stuttgart. There, he had chosen Lichtzwang which had not been seen, not yet published, and the public was not made up of students, that he really liked, but of older people, because the dates fell during the university vacation, which did not please him. He thought, with good reason, that among that crowd there were some former Nazis. There was a kind of violence in his reading, a hostile side for the public that didn’t understand his texts.

**JD:** When you met the first time, where were you in terms of knowing about Paul Celan and what pushed you to meet him?

**BB:** I knew Paul Celan by the two preceding volumes, *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952), *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (1955), but I must say I had not dug in deeply. Basically, Peter Szondi, who had spent more time with the work, was certain that this meeting would be important for me and he very much encouraged me to see him. It is true that I discovered
Celan especially after meeting him, and as that first meeting was tied to the appearance of *Sprachgitter*, it’s this poetry from 1959, then *Die Niemandsrose* from 1963, and *Atemwende* from 1967 that were at the center of my connection with his poetry.

He often told me, “Read *The Meridian*. What I have to say about poetry is there, above all there.” When Giselle asked me after his death to publish the materials from *The Meridian* and when I saw the harvest’s wealth—there were a thousand fragments—I was alarmed, finding this task so terribly difficult and the order of the materials not always certain. I devoted many years to this work. I started seriously in 1988 and the book appeared in 1999.

**JD:** *The Meridian* is first of all a title and a text, and a complicated text with many levels of reading because he is relating many histories, all with the accents of a manifesto and all in homage to Georg Büchner, a figure, let us say, for many in German literature, of secondary importance, except in the eyes of some.

**BB:** I think that now people have recovered the greatness of Büchner, who was unappreciated, often in the shadow of Heine, his contemporary. Celan, I never heard him say anything critical or negative about Büchner. I find that what he draws on from Büchner’s major works is central every time, not only for Büchner but for himself as well. He has clearly made some interesting discoveries, for instance the role of Lucy Desmoulins at the end of *The Death of Danton*, when she surrenders herself to the executioner. Indeed, she looks at the water that continues to flow and says, “Nothing stops.” Here, Büchner has given a text that Celan takes up in one of his poems.

**JD:** Lucile is ready to say, “Long live the King.” In fact, she shouts, “Long
live the King.” She is ready for anything. She can do anything, she can even betray or provide the drive of betrayal. For my part, I think she is the figure of Ingebord Bachmann, as I indicate in my paper, “Suicide for Two.”

**BB:** She says that so she can share death with her husband. But Celan’s innovation is to say that this “Long live the King” is poetry in its absurdist state. Which naturally shocked the whole world. There, it is a question of the caesura, idea dear to Hölderlin in the explanations of Antigone and Oedipus, but also dear to Celan himself, above all in his second poem on Hölderlin, that appears in *Zeitgehöft.*

**JD:** Let’s come back, Bernhard Böschenstein, to *The Meridian* which you know for having edited it. You told me that *The Meridian* had a certain number of versions and that the night before the speech he rewrote this text for himself and to himself very quickly, repeating almost every version, all stages of thought. How do you understand it, this stammering, this hesitating, this extremely slow progression of a thinking that doesn’t really get the true sense of *The Meridian*?

**BB:** Celan said to me when he got to Stuttgart, “I beg you not to expect from me a speech like the one I gave in Darmstadt in 1960. It does not suit me, I only want to read, and André du Bouchet will give the speech.” What is interesting is that the moment when Celan heard the news of the Büchner prize—around mid-May 1960—right away he covered a sheet of paper with some notes that remained central to what he would say. In these notes I found for example the passage from Lenz that says that he wanted to walk on his head, but I find parallel passages, when there is a question of a speech of Hofmannsthal, “The Poet and his Time,” where it’s a question of Saint Alexis hiding under
the stairs, the position of the invisible poet, unknown to the human world. There is also the question of Baudelaire, from that famous passage that Hofmannsthal had transmitted to him, of “the barbed point of the Infinite,” this passage that he repeated in one of his poems, and that expressed a fundamental intervention, coming from on high and carving the air, carving the person, carving existence and commanding a certain manner of caesura. What I want to say is that there are first of all purely Celanian preoccupations. The part of this speech that he wrote very quickly is all the beginning passages where he abundantly quotes Danton’s Death as well as Leonce and Lena, and it’s there that he comes close to Büchner’s other aspects. What is important is that throughout the creation of the text, he was rethinking a speech that he had drafted on the obscurity of poetry and it had not held up at Wuppertal the year before. There were passages he had excluded that are in relation to the grand scale of final judgment expressing the destiny of humanity doomed to die.

We have passages where, for example, he says that syntax in our era goes much faster because we don’t have time to breathe any more, but there are other passages, like Atemwende, where I have the impression, thinking about it again, that there it’s perhaps trying to relive in a certain way the death his mother endured. It’s the extreme moment starting from when everything changes, and we have in Celan this idea of conversion, a fundamental metanoia that must be conveyed by great poetry. Why? Poetry is there, this moment is very close to his notion of “involution” that must turn toward the interior, toward an origin that, with him, is obviously closely related to the dead, beginning with everything contracting, and it’s not the motion of Louis-Sébastien Mercier that moves toward the exterior, it’s the opposite. He always says it, he says it in “Tübingen, January,” where the poet becomes a child, becomes a stutterer, becomes syllabic. It’s very important to him, syllabic speech,
it’s a way of decomposing that allows him to remake from nothing a language that first of all is a language made of intervals, made of pauses, made of caesuras, made of silences.

**JD:** You say there’s the child, there is also behind the poem the presence of Hölderlin, that man who is coming, who is none other than the patriarch. There are several fundamental figures trying to limit, circumscribe the stuttering.

**BB:** Absolutely. But what is interesting is that through the stuttering you recall bits of important moments of Hölderlin’s poetry, for instance, “What are poets for, in times of need?” and that appears solely through the syllabic rupture.

**JD:** You just used a very important word which is “recall,” there’s the word recall and also reversal. Doesn’t he surround himself with women, among others, from whom he wants this reversal? I think of Ingeborg Bachmann whose letters have just appeared. At a given moment Ingeborg Bachmann says to Gisèle Celan, “in his last letter he wants something impossible,” and I’d like you to tell me what is impossible. Is this a way of wishing to “Judaize” [enjuiver] her to win her over?

**BB:** It’s very curious, in this correspondence I mark that in the beginning it is very much in the poetic domain who is directing, who is conducting, and it’s only little by little he discovers that he has before him a partner who is capable of writing great poetry too. The “Lieder auf der Flucht” [“Songs During Flight”] have certainly impressed him, and the moment arrives when he expresses in his own poetry, where he recognizes a kind of equality, where they become partners, and each says to the other, “I love only you, truly and profoundly,” but they also both
know that they could never live together. I think that the condition of being a poet is incompatible with being a twosome, what we see each time they find each other again they are obliged to then separate again. But in *Malina* she said that he was her life, and there are Bachmann scholars who are the first to follow this track that led to all these revelations made afterwards.

**JD:** I just used the word “Judaize.” Is he teaching a lesson here? Does he want to make her the ideal Jew or the Jew that she is not? What is Paul Celan’s question, this impossible demand she can’t take on?

**BB:** Many times in *The Meridian* we have this term, *verjuden*, to Judaize, that is, basically, a term anti-Semites used and that he uses naturally in a totally different sense. In his written texts about Auschwitz we always have this idea of the relationship with the Jew appearing differently, in that there is the beautiful Jewess and the horrible Jews, and they are all equally present in thoughts of his memory which traverses a series of very strict almost ritualized silences. These texts where he says how to evoke this, he then says the one thing is to evoke the moment where one had that thought, you remember a previous moment which was a moment of silence, and it is only in going back that you can then verbalize, that is, that the work of memory is never immediate, it must be mediated by a series of successive silences.

**JD:** You think this correspondence shows at what point the language of the other, that is, Ingeborg Bachmann’s language must be other, and this quality of other, Paul Celan offers it to her?

**JD:** I think that Paul Celan gave her a reach of poetry and the poems in which he evokes this love spoke powerfully to her. One feels it too in
the poetics courses she gave in Frankfort, where she cites above all the poems addressed to her and are among the most intense you read in the volume, *Poppy and Memory*.

**JD:** Do you think that correspondence expresses a form of nightmare for Paul Celan? A kind of permanent torture?

**BB:** I believe that for both of them the pain was very great, to be so intimately connected and to know that they were definitively, at the same time....

**JD:** ...damned....

**BB:** ...but I think they also knew that poetry is not achieved without an equal sacrifice and I imagine that the ties binding them to the people they lived with were always run through by the difference of this unique relationship that nothing equaled.

**JD:** So there is a poetic oeuvre and parallel to this poetic oeuvre another oeuvre that owes its existence to translations, to meeting other languages—French (Rimbaud, Valéry, Apollinaire), Russian (Mandelstam), Italian (Ungaretti). The first question is the following: what do you think of a man who, parallel to poetry, lives another oeuvre that he is in the midst of working out, and the second question: don’t you think he is, with Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, looking for something close to a brother or a sister, something he is unable to find in his contemporaries for example?

**BB:** The link to Mandelstam is the strongest and very much in keeping with the fact that he dedicates *No One’s Rose* to him and that he ad-
dressed several poems directly to Mandelstam. Mandelstam, a Jew by
birth, whose fate was also to be driven to death and who I would say in
his penultimate act expressed it in poetry in the Voronezh Notebooks.
Mandelstam is for him the closest fraternal figure and that’s also why
this link with Russian poetry, with Blok, and then....

JD: ...Yesenin....

BB: ...with Yesenin, but also Tsvetaeva, who he would really have liked
to translate, remains central until the end. What does this complement
of poetry in other languages mean? First, it should be said that German,
which was his mother tongue, which was the language of Czernowitz
where he was born was after all not exactly in keeping with the possi-
ibility of living his life since he never wanted to live in Germany. He said
at the moment of the Büchner Prize that one should feature the impor-
tance of his work as a translator. First of all, he said, there was Rimbaud’s
“The Drunken Boat,” Valéry’s “The Young Fate,” Alexander Blok’s poem
“The Twelve” and the works of Mandelstam that counted most in his
oeuvre as a translator. Later came Michaux and du Bouchet. I would
say this: he has continued the great tradition—George with Baudel-
laire, Shakespeare, Dante; Rilke, especially with Valéry and also Louise
Labé, Michelangelo—these great poets of the preceding generation
had done the same thing, their translation work was central. So what
does this mean? After 1890 German literature became aware of Europe
much more than it had been during the nineteenth century, where it
tended to withdraw into Germany as such. Goethe already owned the
idea of world literature but this idea had been lost. It was recovered by
other means, thanks to the reception Germany accorded to the French
symbolists and English poetry of the same period. It must be said that
what George and Rilke initiated, Celan continued, that is to say a much
greater perspective compared with a purely traditional German tradition.

What does this mean? In the case of “The Drunken Boat,” Celan was very free in his version. Many people had already done mediocre versions of “The Drunken Boat.” He, in his inventiveness, went much further. In Valéry’s case, it was a fight against a presence counter to himself. Valéry’s neoclassical side disagreed with his own poetics, so he reversed and inverted Valéry. He translated him in a coarser, more irregular fashion. It is very important to see that in the last period of creativity, with Michaux, with du Bouchet, Celan was moving closer to a poetry much nearer to prose, one that allowed him to translate more literally, to translate more faithfully, with less inventing than before, especially in places with rhyme. There is a certain accord in the method of translation with respect to Michaux and du Bouchet. These translations were also a discovery for Germany, because neither one was known in German, which was not the case of the preceding poets, already translated but differently. I find it important that Celan abandoned the subjective, inventive aspect, in order to adapt, with much rigor, to the original melody of these more recent writers, and what from many different aspects was different from his own poetry, because he himself never went as far toward prose. He never stopped making lines, unlike both of them. So why did he need this other poetry? I think it was gaining other fields he wanted to introduce in his poetry. With Michaux for instance there was very great innovation with the introduction of fields that had never before considered poetic. And I noted this same evolution in his last volumes.

**JD:** At the end of Paul Celan’s life there is Ungaretti and Shakespeare. Shakespeare he translates. William Shakespeare who he reads as a youngster, in a labor camp in Romania. So it’s a very old project with a
fundamental sense to it.

**BB:** Almost a constant, this presence of Shakespeare, who it seems he considered the greatest of all poets. We even have, in part, a verse translation of *Anthony and Cleopatra* among his papers, and Peter Szondi, in an essay on a translation of a Shakespeare sonnet, discovered that Celan, translator of the *Sonnets*, could express even in translation the act of translation. George had already translated Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, but Celan didn’t care for that translation. I think he found it a little too pompous and perhaps too close to the diction of that authoritarian poet.

**JD:** Paul Celan was someone who, for instance, liked firelight to reflect aloud, think aloud. He’s someone who liked conversation very much, and I wonder whether the walk was not a part of this setting off in thought. Meaning quite soon in the birth of a friendship he brought the other person along on a walking adventure, on the pavement, under the chestnut trees. It’s a little like a world of childhood or world of adolescence suddenly recreates itself to present a tapestry of thought.

**BB:** I’ve had the experience with him of walking along the Rhône in Geneva. He told me he liked the rocks on these Rhône riverbanks better than the luminous shores of the lake where the villas of the wealthy live. There is that famous walk in the mountains of Engadine where two Jews are having a discussion and they both say: “The land around us here is not for us. A language without me and without you.” We also have here much irony faced with a tradition inspired by Yiddish and which is treated with a gaze both particular but also remote. We heard he was thinking of a meeting with Adorno that did not take place, Adorno who was for him alluring, interesting, but he also had reservations about
him, as one sees in the notes that have been discovered about that.

**JD:** One has to remember what Adorno said or could have said: after Auschwitz poetry is impossible.

**BB:** Later Adorno corrected this dictum.

**JD:** Because of Paul Celan’s pressure....

**BB:** ...and Szondi said too: if poetry was based on Auschwitz, then it would be possible again. It was the *conditio sine qua non*.

**JD:** Walking is ever-present with Paul Celan. Together let’s address one of the last great walks, the one that spilled a lot of ink, with Heidegger. What’s your version at the time of this encounter, this wish to encounter—and I think I know that it was not difficult to do, that there were all kinds of support for it.

**BB:** I can say this: in 1959, I was invited by Heidegger to help him during his last lecture on Hölderlin in Munich planned for the month of June 1959, and during that stay, Heidegger had me listen to the recording that the editor, Neske, had devoted to eight contemporary poets including Celan. And Heidegger had me listen only to Celan’s voice. I told Celan that, he was very moved. When I open *La bibliothèque philosophique*, where two young researchers who worked at Unité de Recherche Paul Celan at the École Normale Supérieure had established like a kind of inventory of notations, Heidegger has the lion’s share, it’s by far the largest piece of this big volume. So Celan had studied Heidegger very seriously. When Heidegger sent me his poems *Der Feldweg* [*The Fieldpath*], which was a succession of poetical texts, I found that
Heidegger didn’t have the gift of changing register, but, counter to my critiques, Celan defended the text in favor of Heidegger. I think Heidegger was important to Celan because he granted poetry such high status, finally priority status, even in relation to philosophy. And the fact that the poets who were the most important to Heidegger, like Hölderlin, but also Rilke, but also Trakl, even George, were the most important poets for Celan himself. So there was sort of an agreement. It is true that Celan never forgot what Heidegger had done during the two first years of Nazism. He was, I find, fairly generous, since in the correspondence we have now between Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann the question was put to them to participate in a volume of miscellany for Heidegger’s seventieth year, in 1959. And both of them didn’t just say no, they hesitated. They would have been even more in agreement with participating if the editor, Neske, in an authoritarian move, had not listed their names as contributors even before asking them. That’s what angered them, everyone understands that. But they didn’t say at the outset, “We don’t want to.” Which is astounding. There was, in spite of everything, a certain respect, a certain responsibility.

JD: Why that path toward Heidegger, to ask him what?

BB: He said repeatedly that he was waiting for Heidegger to excuse his misdeeds. He had come, he said, in a conciliatory way, but he wanted an accounting from him and that didn’t work. Heidegger was not open that way. Heidegger let Celan down. Celan was waiting for some kind of confession that didn’t take place. Anyway, he says it in the dedication, in the words he wrote, in the guest book that he was expecting a statement and this statement had not come. Later, there was also condemnatory language for Heidegger who, he said, did not use the sovereign role he had in those days as the master of thought. So we have laudatory and
critical texts from Celan.

**JD:** There is one poem I like a lot, and that I translated by Paul Celan’s side, if you will, called “Anabasis.” And I still see him so exhilarated because this poem sits very well on a whole system of syllables, and I ask you what is this reappearance about? What is pushing Paul Celan to revisit, to enter into the heart of “Anabasis?”

**BB:** I think this poem is one of the most important ones there is, because it’s really the poetics of the syllable. He says it already in the second line where there is again question of the “key syllables” and then where there’s question of the trellis of these “griefbuoys” very important, above all these “involuntary breaths” that leap in “pretty seconds,” these “quavering chimes.” Why? Because we have here this fragmented language that is at the same time a sonorous and lustrous language. So we have the challenge of the visual, of what is open to hearing, and what is linguistically divided. So in those syllables from the Mass of Mozart’s *Exsultate*, where you have the “dum-, dun-, un-, unde suspirat cor,” we have in the end the one and the other. We have the music of pain, death rattle music, and we have at the same time the musical composition made from these cut-ups, so the visual and the audible become one which creates what he calls the word “tent,” the word that means “together.” This is very important because we realize that this “tent” means that humanity is not absolute, anchored in historical sites of habitation, but is in motion. Humanity is what lives in tents. It’s the moving caravan, thus together. It is a utopia, it’s something toward which the Celanian poem turns. He wants to reach new readers from the future he wants to unify, starting from this language that first was the expression of separation. Everything takes place in a distant sea, not navigable. The sea is so important in the Breton cycles. There is a continuity and also in
the translations, not just “The Drunken Boat” but also the Supervielle marine texts for instance, and Mandelstam’s, from the Black Sea. So I find it essential to establish the parallel between navigation and poetry, for it’s about going into a territory that is not yet described, fixed, oriented but must first be explored.

JD: Do you not find that the titles—essential—are there to measure a utopia? And I’m thinking among others of the title The Meridian. What is it saying? Isn’t it a form of measure?

BB: The Meridian, strictly speaking, is that circle reuniting three birth sites: that of Lenz, the one of Karl Emil Franzos, first serious editor of Büchner’s Woyzeck, and his own Czernowitz. It is the closing off of the discourse. The Meridian is also the possibility of uniting what is at first distant and separate. It is the idea that allowed the discourse to find its end. This discourse that opened onto something unsayable has in this form finally allowed reconciliation of time, history and fate. The fate of Lenz who is found dead in the streets of Moscow, for Celan, is an absolutely symbolic image.

JD: And the Claire Goll business? How do you understand Paul Celan’s spiritual, physical, mental collapse because of this dishonor? That is, he is, in the eyes of Claire Goll, guilty of having stolen, copied, lifted Yvan Goll’s lines. How do you comprehend this man who begs for pardon, begs for acquittal, even symbolic, when he knows he’s innocent?

BB: I think that Celan sensed behind Claire Goll a whole company of people plotting against him. Claire Goll was not alone. She was like the head of an army of frauds, and more and more he had the feeling of being persecuted. Clearly Peter Szondi had demonstrated that it was
the opposite, that at the end of his life Yvan Goll had been influenced by Celan and that the imminence was going in the other direction. But Claire Goll’s attack was so premeditated, so insidious and insistent. She continued, and each blow was more murderous than the last. I believe he felt an underhanded hostility—that he had figured out already—take over this individual’s body. A foreboding materialized that he had always thought he felt in the surrounding atmosphere.

**JD:** At home you showed me a plan of a deed of adoption on behalf of the Golls with regard to Paul Celan. How could this deed exist, justify itself when one knows all Claire Goll’s actions against Paul Celan?

**BB:** Yvan Goll was at the origin of this idea of the adoption and they had told Paul they were going to adopt him. I think that as soon as Yvan Goll died, Claire Goll was going to do everything she could to counter this. There was certainly a very big difference between the two. But basically the anger begins with the translation of the three collections that Celan had promised to translate after Goll’s death. Claire Goll became involved and changed everything, rejected everything and said Celan had changed his attitude the moment when they said they wanted to adopt him. I think that the fondness and the closeness came from Yvan and not her. But you could ask yourself why the enormous discrepancy in this situation. Everyone told Paul Celan this is a harsh individual, an individual everyone despises, why grant her such importance? And he did not like you to minimize this situation. Adorno spoke to me about this. For days Celan wanted him to deal with the Goll business and to me as well he said, “you really don’t know much about it.” And it was a reproach. He thought I was going to get involved in this business that I naturally didn’t want to know up close.
JD: But why did he let himself become so captured by this business? A normal person would say, “Okay I’m not going to think about this any more. I’m moving on.”

BB: It must be said that he was already in a very troubled state. There was his illness which was progressing rapidly. And Claire Goll represented the hostile world in its entirety, in its most directly aggressive form. All the more terrifying that she was Jewish.

JD: One Sunday afternoon I saw Paul Celan in the snow. It was winter in front of the Louvre at the bridge. I watched him put his index finger in his mouth, then take it out as though looking for the wind direction, or a direction, and I think the theme of direction is fundamental in Paul Celan’s work.

BB: ...always.

JD: How could you approach all of Paul Celan’s collections or books, from first to last, when I could say this: the first starts from the south, part of the vegetal world of the south, and the last goes in a northerly direction, that is, in the direction no longer really German, but with resonances close to Flemish, very close to Dutch, actually very close to Yiddish, as though he wanted to introduce these tones into his language? Take for example the word treckschutenzeit [from Lichtzwang] that he commented on as I was about to translate it.

BB: I would say this: in German we have the word “Sinn,” the word “sense” which signifies first, above all, direction. Now the radio lecture that Paul Celan did in 1960 on Mandelstam always speaks to the action of time and the opening of the poem to time. Maybe it has to do with
the Russian Revolution, maybe it also has to do with a more general form of temporality. The materials in The Meridian make me think so. Paul Celan has always looked at poetry in relation to time. There is always an eminently temporal element in the unfolding of his poems. For example, “Matière de Bretagne” [from Sprachgitter] is a very good example. I think that this opening of time is understood in different ways. The one fact that every day he bought all the newspapers in order to inform himself about the political situation gives me reason. And these newspapers have influenced his poetry as we know now, are part of this opening to time. It is true that German poetry from 1750 has recognized the poetics of temporality much more than, say, the French, who have been frozen much longer in an archaic syntax. German experienced a very strong dynamism in its connection for instance to Pindar who already revolutionized the poetry of Klopstock and Goethe, and more so that of Hölderlin. So Celan is inscribed in that line of poets who are the essence of what Germany has given to world poetry. In Hölderlin’s case, there are the rivers, the Rhine, the Danube, also the Neckar, also the Maine, that thematize the poems, and with Celan we have these truly great poems at the end of Die Niemandsrose where we have this presence of time that I find nowhere else, not before or after. I am thinking about that very lovely poem where it also is a question of traveling on the Seine, on the Rhine and where it’s about the Pont Mirabeau, that journey where east and west meet. What’s more, it is there that his poetry uses the same dynamic of free verse that we’ve seen in the major examples I have just cited, poetry from somewhere else with the epigraph from Marina Tsvetaeva for that poem “Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa” [“And with the book from Tarussa”].

JD: The epigraph says, “All poets are Jews” but literally in the sense of kikes....
BB: And Tsvetaeva, she also is in that lineage. The last elegy Rilke wrote just before his death was addressed to Marina Tsvetaeva, it was a response to her great attempts of love addressed to Rilke. There you have quite a grand tradition....

JD: ...the material is the language, is evolution, how a language shifts geographically?

BB: You say, “geographically,” and there you are talking about the places that are so important for Celan. When he was in Göttingen suddenly he remembered Lichtenberg, right, and his relationship with a young lover. And in Geneva there are the swans at night in the BIT garden. In Paris there are the paulownias you talked about a lot in your book, *Sous la Coupole* [Under the Dome, tr. Rosmarie Waldrop], so important, the place de la Contrescarpe. And in Brittany, the menhir for instance, or the circus in Brest. Everywhere, there’s that kind of place. There’s Brest in Brittany but also in Russia. There was this sense of place when he was in Zurich, facing the cathedral, hearing the bells. Once again, you are in the place that becomes extremely vivid, that brings together so much concentrated meaning. And I felt that with him when I was in places other than where we usually were.

JD: Back to *The Meridian*. Weren’t you astonished when you read for the first time the presence, the introduction of the puppet? As though he was entering into the tradition of the marionette, dear to Kleist?

BB: It’s this passage he drew upon from a draft of *Woyzeck* but also from *Leonce and Lena*. It’s the circus theme, and someone told me he really loved circuses, he always liked going to the circus, just like in the Brest poem, right? I think it’s there, what we were just talking about, the
speech from the tent. The circus takes place in the tent. And the tent is a place that moves. The circus changes place, night after night. The tent also corresponds to Celan’s image of existence. The way of not being anchored for good somewhere, not inhabiting or representing a particular country. At the circus you also have this possibility of transformation. You have virtuosity, acrobatics, but you also have profound melancholy. It’s a symphony, I would say, where many inclinations meet.

**JD:** The puppet from *The Meridian* is a figure of the doppelgänger, of the mechanical doppelgänger, the manipulator-manipulatee doppelgänger?

**BB:** Yes, there is that. Now I never talked to him about Kleist, I must say. Do you remember Kleist’s marionettes in the conversations you had with him?

**JD:** No. When you read *The Meridian* you inexorably come upon the word “puppet” you can’t not think of reading about Kleist’s marionettes.

**BB:** Yes...for Kleist there was a kind of path through the text that eventually again leads, after all the falls and more falls, to paradise. But through the back, by the opposite route....

**JD:** ...through the wings?

**BB:** This side, coming back through the front. Maybe it’s something that one can compare to involution. It’s possible, I hadn’t thought of it, can’t be ruled out. There is also this aspect of play, right? There’s this aspect of expressiveness. With Celan we have poems for instance that borrow the tone from Villon or Heine. A tone at once playful, satiric, bitter, cynical
exists. He did not follow the route, often called pontifical in Germany, of a classic Goethe. Hans Mayer said he talked with him about Goethe. I have no memory of that.

**JD:** Would you say that Paul Celan’s is a brilliantly abstract poetry? With a contradiction called *The Meridian* where it seems to me Paul Celan plays his life through all the characters. He seems to be all the characters at the same time. He is Lenz, he’s Büchner, he’s Lucile, he’s…

**BB:** …he’s even Woyzek…

**JD:** …he is Woyzek. He adjusts the clocks for himself. While in the poem, abstraction is such that there are no more clocks.

**BB:** The texts where he is involved with Husserl and phenomenology explain to us that this poetry is never meant to be mimetic, never means to depend directly on reality. Any image must go through a transformative intellectual process and exists in another time and another place. So he is able to call upon very concrete materials he’s borrowing, from geology, the terminology of navigation or astronomy, or even aviation technology. I mean by this that this very concrete outcome could be the last stage after reflection that separated the poet from any immediacy, and in relation to feelings, and in relation to concrete reality, he can never use as is. I’ve seen it above all in the Husserl passages.
ANABASIS

Dieses schmal zwischen Mauern geschriebne unwegsam-wahre Hinauf und Zurück in die herzhelle Zukunft.

Dort.

Silben- mole, meer- farben, weit ins Unbefahrne hinaus.

Dann:
Bojen-, Kummerbojen-Spalier mit den sekundenschön hüpfenden Atemreflexen --: Leucht- glockentöne (dum-, dun-, un-, unde suspirat cor), aus- gelöst, ein- gelöst, unser.
Sichtbares, Hörbares, das frei-
werdende Zeitwort:

Mitsammen.
Cette
marche vers le haute, ce retour
vraiment impraticables
inscrits dans les interstices des murs
dans le future clair-coeur.

Là.

Môles
de syllables, couleur
marine, au loin,
dans le non-navigable.

Puis :
bouées-chagrin : espalier
aux
reflets de souffle, bondissants,
accomplis comme des seconds -- : vibrations
de la cloche lumineuse (dum-,
dun-, un-,
undesuspirat cor),
tendus
rachetés,
nôtres.

Du visible, de l’audible, le
mot de tente
apparaissant :

L'ensemble.
ANABASIS

This
narrow between walls written
impassably-true
up and back
into the heartbright future.

There.

Key-
syllables, sea
color, far
into unspun beyond.

Then:
buoys-
griefbuoys-trellis
with the
pretty seconds bouncing
involuntary breaths --: quavering
chimes (dum-,
dun-, un-,
unde suspirat
cor),
un-
claimed, re-
claimed, our.
Visible, audible, the free-becoming tent word:

Together.
I want to tell you about an episode in the life of Paul Celan, translator, for whom translation, always so essential, played the role of a veritable struggle against death.

One evening in the autumn of 1969, in his office on rue d’Ulm, at the École Normale Supérieure, Paul Celan asks me, with unusual gentleness and firmness, if I would like to translate from German—with him—some of Johannes Poethen’s poems.

From a drawer he takes out some typed pages, holds them out to me, received, he said, a few days ago.

And I read the title: *So lang das Spiel dauert*, literally, *As Long As the Game Goes On* which becomes *The Space of a Game*.

He suggests that I take them and read them at home in order to share what I thought of them at our next meeting, which he sets.

The poems shock me, obviously reminding me at the same time of those from Gottfried Benn’s *Morgue* that I got to know well. I tell him that. Paul Celan listens without any physical or audible response. Suddenly, from my hands, he grabs the orange folder with his Johannes Poethen poems. He silently reads them one at a time in front of me, ticking them off with a neat checkmark in the right upper corner of the poems he keeps: a total of eight of the fourteen that make up the cycle. And *L’Ephémère*, the journal the translations are meant for, will retain six of the eight translations. No more room, according to one of the readers on the editorial committee. We are sitting at his desk. Face to face. Paul Celan breaks the silence.

“The lexicon is strange but that mustn’t put us off, right? It isn’t scary, not scary, nothing scary about it, not repellant. It’s the lexicon of
a medical world. It’s not the lexicon of a sick world in the hour of the human world. The body is putrefaction like the soul, no doubt. Even the sister is putrefaction with Trakl. Johannes Poethen tells us how the poison circulates around us, right into our bodies, in us, and sees. It’s life. It’s the poem that nothing comes to infect. And yet...is it that simple? These poems of Poethen are toxic prayers addressed to God, for it’s God that man wants to infect— inoculate—in his turn, with poetry. It’s the great dream, right...since birth, even before birth...since the waters breaking, since the amniotic fluid, as you’ve read. And this dream has to be able with the eyes, not only with the very eyes embedded, to reach the system of the constellations and perhaps their organism. Remember, the world forces us to drink no more to the serpent but to the hemlock. Until what end, before what end, by what power? What difference is there between past sacrifices, the blood of yesterday and today’s drug? Start translating them please and I’ll read the beginning of your translation at our next meeting. How about next Saturday? And we could also maybe work all Sunday together.”

I’ll give you a few recollections relating to the translation sessions I’m choosing from the third volume of *The Infinite Condition—Under the Dome*:

“A word comes back to me today that he taught me, ’handle with care.’”

“All words have a life. Some more than others. It’s our relationship, happy or unhappy, to words that inscribes the agreements with vision and syntax.”

“Johannes Poethen’s lexicon reminds me of that in Gottfried Benn’s *Morgue.*”
“It’s a lexicon of putrefaction. The medicine is in life. Putrefaction is in life. Death is in our limbs. Limbs and the putrefaction of limbs are in the resurrection.

“Mmmm....”

“Strange Sunday I am making you have, don’t you think....?
Translation and the seventh day.”

“Mmmm....”

“in front of Poethen’s poems.”

The obsessional word to handle from Johannes Poethen is “inoculate.”

The following Sunday we continue discovering Johannes Poethen’s lexicon. Paul Celan indicates a refusal, a distance, perhaps a reject. He remains absent, deliberately. I sit facing the table, he is at an angle, his two hands on the table. His lips are moving. Then his right hand and thumb grip his left wrist. Time passes. He is counting time. His lips move. I understand that Paul Celan is checking his pulse and that he is counting, too. Translation episode.

“For it is said that you will translate on the seventh day.”

“In what Biblical passage is that written?”

“In a passage I am thinking.”

“Ah!”

“The seventh day is language in pure expectation.”

“And what happens to speech for the first six?”

“It yields to duplication.”

“You mean to say speaking doubles the world?”

“Speaking doubles the world...yes.”
The flicker of words in an icy room and the pulse beat. I see the thumb almost digging in. I see the thumb seeking. And I see myself alone before the words, seeking meaning on the seventh day. Paul Celan seeks his pulse almost deliberately looking at me. And I dive into the medical book. “Inoculate.” “Yes, handle with care.” Suddenly my heart throbs and the room throbs and the book throbs. The cold calms me down. Paul looks at me. I translate. Inoculate. Etc.

It starts to rain outside. Outside it is raining, it begins to rain and I look at the rain. I look at Paul, backlit before the rain, tense, cutting and without a word.

“Man is without words. He is perhaps born from words, but he loses them. Life makes him lose them.”

“Life gives him the opportunity to lose them....”

“In the game, are you saying....”

“The die.”

“The invisible die that rolls onto our path. The idea is appealing. I’ll turn on the lights. You can’t see a thing anymore. Will you stay and have dinner with me? We’ll go to La Chope. I’ve never asked you if you like coming up to the Contrescarpe.”

“The village is sweet.”

“The passer-by is still a passer-by. The crowd is less anonymous than the passer-by.”

“Mmmm....”

“Leave that translation. We’ll look at it next time. “
Ich wich zurück vor den werkzeugen der väter
gegen die ich geraten war beim auszug ins delta
wohin mich die ängste vorschlugen

wich zurück unter die totenmühle bei der ihre wasser verdamfen
folgte dem schein aus den körpern noch einmal aufwärts
stand neben der verschlossenen freitrepppe zum denkmal

und sah mich wieder gegenüber den werkzeugen der väter
mit denen sie impfen und das blut übertragen.
Je reculai devant les instruments des pères
qui m’avaient atteint pendant l’exode vers le delta
où les angoisses m’avaient exilé

reculai sous le moulin aux morts où leurs eaux se pulvérissent
suivis une dernière fois la lueur qui montait des corps
me tins à côté des degrés scellés du monument

et de nouveau je me vis face aux instruments des pères
dont ils inoculent et reconduisent le sang.
I recoiled from the instruments of the fathers
attacking me at the exodus to the delta
where dread had exiled me

recoiled beneath the death mills where their water vaporized
followed one last time the glow arising from bodies
held me beside the sealed steps to the monument

and again I faced the instruments of the fathers
with which they inoculate and circulate the blood.
Das strafmaß zerfiel nicht mehr im mark
aus der verdrahteten sicht war das netz über die haut gefallen
der strom stieß in die weichteile die jetzt sprachlos empfingen

im umgang zähltest du alles her von den anfängen
gingst deine zungenschläge zu opfern vor die Madonna im bluhtag
trugst dich ein beim palaver unter das kainszeichen

nun löscht du noch im freihafen deine übrige leere
kämmst das gewesene aus und versilberst die reste

verhüllst deinen puls
vertreibst deine zukunft in särgen.
La peine infligée ne se décomposait plus dans la moelle
depuis la vue embarbelée le filet envahit la peau
le fleuve s’enfonça dans le sexe qui muet l’accueillit
dans les rapports tu comptais tout depuis les origines
allais sacrifier tes coups de langue à la madone dans le buisson de sang
tu te mêlais aux palabres au-dessous du signe de caïn
maintenant tu t’attardes à décharger dans le port libre
ce qui te reste de vacuité
de ton peigne tu démêlés ce qui fut et argentes les résidus
tu voile ton pouls
répands dans les cercueils ton avenir.
The sentence decayed no more in the marrow
from the wired perspective the net had fallen over the skin
the stream plunged into soft tissue receiving it speechless

in dealing you counted everything from the beginning
went to sacrifice your tongue lashes before the madonna in blooming day
subscribed to chatting under the sign of cain

now you even erase in the free port your remaining void
you combed out and silver’d the rest

cover your pulse
sell your future in coffins.
Deine landschaft
tödliche nährmutter—

nach dem untergang kam es auf zwischen grundwasser und asche
den die erde war gespalten und die welle vermodert
das feuer niedergemacht und die bö aufgedunsen

so kam es auf
stieß sein serum in die leiber
essenzen aus schreien
elixiere vom röcheln gewonnen
dem wasser zugemischt in die mauern geträufelt
ausgeteilt an die feuerstellen eingesprüht in the luft
dann hißte es seine heraldischen flüche—

tödliche nährmutter deine landschaft
mit kaldaunen behängt
tätowiert mit bewaffneten blicken

immer noch mildäugig
erstarrtehenkerin.
Ton paysage
mère
qui donne la mort—

après le déclin surgit cela entre cendres et seaux souterraines

car la terre était fendue et l’onde décomposée
le feu foulé et la rafale boursoufflée

ainsi surgit cela
enfonça dans les corps son serum
essences faites de cris
élixirs arrachés à des râles

mélange à l’eau versée goutte à goutte dans les murs
réparti sur les feux disséminés dans l’air

puis arbora ses imprécations héraudiques—

ton paysage
mère
qui donnes la mort

drapée de boyaux
tatouée de regards armés

toi figée encore
aux regards cléments
femme-bourreau.
Your landscape
deadly nurse

after the fall it arose between groundwater and ash

for the earth was split and the wave mouldered
the fire put out and the gust swelled

so it arose
stuck its serum into the bodies
essences from screaming
elixirs won from death rattles

mixed with water dripping from walls
dispersed to the hearth sprayed into the air

then it proclaimed its heraldic curses

deadly nurse your landscape
hung with tripe
tattooed with armed looks

ever mild-eyed
frozen executioner
In dieser lage  
waagrecht unter den querschlägen  
die dich nicht suchen

wen betrifft solch ein grab

in dieser lage  
reißt du den vorhang ab  
nie warst du verborgener

und wirfst dein spiel in die leere  
wie es dir einfällt  
silbe um silbe

ortlos  
zeitlos  
überlebt.
Toi gisant
sous les éclats
qui ne viennent pas te ressaisir

pour qui donc pareil tombeau

toi gisant
tu arraches le rideau
jamais tu ne fus plus secret

et tu lances ton jeu dans le vide
selon le hazard
syllable après syllable

sans lieu
sans heure
survécu.
In this situation
horizontal under the crosscuts
not looking for you

who concerns such a grave

in this situation
you tear away the veil
never have you been more hidden

and cast your game in the void
as you like
syllable by syllable

placeless
timeless
survived
Solang das spiel dauert
fliehen um nicht zu erblinden
sich tarnen um nicht zu töten

mit grundwasser tarnen
mit seinen kristallen

annehmen die kugel die schwebt über dem handteller
die sich öffnet am pol um dich einzulassen
die sich um dich dreht inwendige erde
du spannst dich aus von äquator zu äquator

saité die schwingt und irhe körper entsendet

solang das spiel dauert.
L'espace d’un jeu
fuir pour ne pas devenir aveugle
se dissimuler pour ne pas tuer

dissimuler
avec des eaux souterraines
avec leurs cristaux

accueillir le globe qui flotte au-dessus de la paume
qui s'ouvre au pôle pour te laisse entrer

qui tourne autour de toi terre intérieure
tu te déploies de l'équateur à l'équateur

corde qui vibre et répand ses corps

l’espace d’un jeu.
As long as the game lasts
escape not to go blind
disguise yourself not to kill

disguise with groundwater
with its crystals

accept the sphere hovering over your hand
that opens at the pole to let you in

that spins around you inner earth
stretching from equator to equator

string that vibrates and sends out bodies

as long as the game lasts.
Inwendige erde
du berührst die haut die um dich ist
ob sie dich niederschweigt

du erhebst dich
du schreittest die spielfläche ab

zelt auf der insel im grenzfluß
zwischen ufern die man nicht sieht

im fruchtwasser über dem seltenen strömen von der
fliehkraft gehalten

auszüge von hüben
einfälle von drüben

im fruchtfleisch beißt du dich fest.
Terre intérieure

tu touche la peau qui t’environne

tu te redresse

de tes pas tu mesure la surface du jeu

tente sur l’île dans le fleuve frontière
entre les bords invisible

dans des liquides amniotiques au-dessus des rares courants
soutenus par la force centrifuge

exodes en deçà
invasions au delà

dans la pulpe tu t’agrippes.
Inner earth
you touch the skin around you
if it stuns you silent

you rise
you walk the playground

tent on the island in the border river
between unseen banks

in the amniotic fluid on rare streams
held by centrifugal force

codes from here
ideas from there

you bite into the pulp
Ein waghalsiger duft
spende des leeren
das künftige horn geschmückt mit dem sturm der käme

und segte die tenne rein von seufzern
liefe mit der furcht um die wette
ihre beißende grotte über den krallen zu illuminieren

dem sog sich aufzudrängen der noch zweifelt
ins münden sich einzuschmiegen das noch zögert
sich anzuwerfen gegen riffe weil sie die panik schüttelt

waghalsiger duft
spende des leere
die hoden prall vom sturm

der noch algen weidet
das schupppige fohlen
ungeflügelt.
Une odeur téméraire
don du vide
la corne future décorée de la tempête qui vient

et balaie l’air de tout soupir
cours en compétition avec la peur
pour en illuminer sa grotte mordant par-dessus les griffes

s’imposer au courant qui encore doute
s’insinuer dans l’embouchure qui encore hésite
se jeter contre les récifs la panique les secouant encore

odeur téméraire
don du vide
les testicules tendus de tempêtes

qui paît des algues
le poulain à écailles
non aillé.
A reckless scent
granting the void
the future horn adorned with the coming storm

and swept the threshing floor with sighs
competing with fear
its biting grotto over the claws to light

the draw to impose who still doubts
in the mouth to burrow who still hesitates
throwing themselves against reefs because the panic they still shake

reckless scent
granting the void
testes swelling from the storm

feeding on seaweed
the scaly foal
wingless.
Am ende
berührst du die steine die noch um dich sind
ob sie dich niederschreien

ob sie zersählen
ob sie verhoffen

die niederlagen gingen über dich hinaus

in ihrem rücken gräbst du dich ein
deckst dich zu mit den eigenen worten
die dir keiner mehr abnimmt.
À la fin
tu touches les pierres qui encore t’environnent
pour savoir
si elles t’abattent de leurs cris
si elles se décomposent
si elles se figent dans l’attente
les défaites allaient au-delà de toi
dans leurs dos tu t’enfuis
tu te recouvres de tes propres mots
dont personne ne te délivre.
At the end
you touch the stones still around you
if they shout you down

if they disintegrate
if they hope

the defeats went beyond you

in their back you dig in
cover yourself up with your own words
that no more can be taken from you.
What sense do we make today of Johannes Poethen’s poems and what do we find today in Paul Celan’s determination to push me to read and translate them?

If I draw two columns to place into the first the words expressing a liquid and in second the action or movement of the actors, I get:

First column: delta
waters
inoculate
blood
port
river
underground streams
essence made of cries
elixirs pulled from rales
wave
serum
spilled water

Second column: instruments of the fathers
exodus
exile
windmills for the dead
you unravel what was
you hide your pulse
mother who gives death
woman-executioner
you pull the curtain
you throw your game
And what I get, when I realize that these poems appeared in January 1970, in *L’Éphémère* 12, isn’t it a hidden testament from Paul Celan, the double of an *art poétique*?
Paul Celan finds himself on the 21st of March, 1970, in Stuttgart. He reads poems from his as yet unpublished book, *Lichtzwang*. On the 22nd of March he is in Tübingen and visits the Hölderlin Tower on the banks of the Neckar, accompanied by André du Bouchet and Bernhard Böschenstein. In the guestbook, André du Bouchet inscribes the date as the 21st, whether in error or still affected by the reading of the night before, in homage to Paul Celan.

As remarkable a center as Czernowitz, where Paul Celan was born six years after the famous summer event of 1914, perceived by the author of *The Man Without Qualities* as universal Easter, must serve as the object of a most particular attention. Paul Celan, digging in Babel’s pits, will encounter an inevitable fate: the response in a way of the genius of a place called Mitteleuropa. This place, first a Principality, then a Realm, then an Empire whose end concluded with a dominating annexation with the great Romania, today a Republic, complicated until the appropriation, meaning amalgamation, the literatures of the German language, the nationalities like the minorities and their language, intensified to the extreme the cultural transference, demanded the precedence of languages. It is in Czernowitz where Paul Celan places *The Meridian*, where he will permanently audition an entire life and toward which he ceaselessly will remain focused.

Czernowitz is to Paul Celan what Prague is to Franz Kafka, who wrote to Max Brod in June, 1921, “The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing differently, to which one could add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility
of writing... so it was from all sides an impossible literature, a gypsy literature that had stolen the German baby out of the cradle....”

With this perspective I situate the text of my lecture, “The Meridian of Czernowitz,” delivering it on the 21st of March, 2000, in Tübingen, thirty years to the day—plus one day—after Paul Celan’s visit to Hölderlin’s Tower.


*
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I want to speak. I want to bear witness. I want to remember. I remember in my childhood bedroom a pink radiator against which, uncomfortably seated in winter, I read the first sentence of a book, “Today my mother died.” Thus the Man became the Stranger at the death of his mother. Stranger to himself and to the world, that is, indestructible, he makes some eggs and eats them straight from the pan. Standing. Smoking a cigarette at the window. He buries Time in himself, and all the questions, no doubt to protect the ultimate blindness. The Algeria of Albert Camus like the Bukovina of Paul Celan are two paradises they will lose—at the mother’s death—and that they will learn to incorporate. The word “paradise” indicates something missing, will be missed, must be missed, is missing not by being left out or by default, but by too much sun for one or an excess of languages for the other.

It is never easy to speak, whenever, about sacred ground—“Mother of everything and who bears the abyss”—or of the native land, of homeland, of origin, when they identify themselves at the border. The house is paradise and abyss. The border is the experience of madness. I say that homeland is paradise and abyss, in proportion to thought—to depth—where the Man founders there, the native land, sinking to the bottom, all the way to ashes.

I remember that first train ride, departing from Vienna, in that spring of 1996, where I discovered Bukovina and Czernowitz: the whole region out in the country eating cherries, on the roads, in the fields, in gardens, in front of houses, in train stations, on the docks, in the street. Women, elegantly dressed in fabrics of every color carry baskets cov-
ered with newspapers, and children hawk in the streets, climb onto the moving trains, and I see from afar the heights of Czernowitz, built on the hill and its gentle slopes, mouth full of stones. I see beech woods all around the hill planted with chestnuts and paulownias. I am talking about the valley and the river, opening onto the great avenues, squares, to an architecture, to an imperial grandeur. I am in the city of a country that no longer questions the lived history of a people, nor the historical time of Babel. But there is something of the Empire at its collapse: an urbanism of thought and its trace, its courtyards, its cafes, its hotels, its sumptuous theater, a botanical garden worthy of the Empire. Impressive buildings, back courtyards and gardens with splendid chestnut trees, formal city hall, nature with its mosses and ferns surrounding prophetic peaks. It is not difficult to think of Heraclitus, fragment 52: “The time of the world is a child playing, he plays at moving the pieces of his game around; to that child is the royal power of Being.” The ages of the world, the ages of time order a game the gods play with people, with men.

Like Hölderlin’s image in “The Rhine,” sitting at the border of his native land, Paul Celan on the hill of Czernowtiz, that is, at the border of his native land, thinks about what is strange and far away. Staying at the border, Hölderlin awaits to welcome in his country’s name his stern gods. Paul Celan assumes that the real gods are dead. He learns that only at the borders do the ordeals, the expiration dates, the fates, the decisions collapse that justly shift the borders or the absence of borders. The gods will not come. Other gods will come. “Today my mother died.”

But why justly that? It is not impossible to answer the question. Because the native land is only approached by the perspective of preparatory experience, with the help of knowledge that enlightens
the historical destiny of a people: all the languages it speaks and that it
founds – that which Paul Celan prepares for on the hill. That for which
he has prepared. It’s because the earth is home and border that it is pre-
pared to receive both gods and men. This preparation, notes Heidegger,
transforms the ground to homeland, which can “also decline and fall to
the level of simple domicile.”

“One needs to be without god and insane to seek a path shel-
tered from any attack,” says Hölderlin, and Robert Musil responds later,
“Everything our era dreams of is anti-home. Voyages, automobiles, spas,
hotels, theater, sports, sartorial elegance, sleeping cars, luxury trains.”

Because speaking deports. Speaking deports. Writing deports. Translating all the languages deports, and the direction – the one
direction of all possible directions – is that of a path – on the table, on
the rue de Longchamp, on the hill of the Contrescarpe – of a deliber-
ate direction, of a deliberate distance, of an affirmation, of a return, of
a detour, of an encounter: poetry. The poem is a direction. It is even
a circle. It is a topological exploration of the Meridian. It is order like
the Meridian. It unfurls like the Meridian. It is place, it is memory or
proximity to the abyss, arced like the Meridian. It is a fluid tonality like
the Meridian. It is a wave like the Meridian. It is mirror of a paradise. I
haven’t yet written mirror of Utopia. The poem is revelation of a return
to the birthplace along the Meridian.

Ladies and gentlemen, regarding the poem able to overturn the
mountain, that is, opening the way to the Encounter, this ground hewn
in the form of a circle, running from pole to pole and making it curve
on itself and return—what Paul Celan names a Meridian—I will not
go without reading you these lines taken from the introduction to the
Phenomenology of the Spirit:

“Death, if we want to call this unreality so, is the most dreadful, and to keep what is dead requires the greatest strength. Beauty without strength hates understanding for believing it capable of what it cannot do. But it is not this life that apprehends death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather life that carries death and maintains itself in that which is the life of the spirit. It only gains control over its truth by finding itself absolutely torn apart. This power is not something positive, which turns away from the negative, as when we say of something: it’s nothing or not true, and now that’s enough, let’s not talk about it, turn to anything else. On the contrary, there is this power only by looking the negative in the face and sojourning with it. This sojourn with the negative is the magical power that inverts the negative into being.”

This sojourn is the house of the Meridian that transforms the negative into the poem.

The negative—that which is unreadable right side up—how to show it? The child is the occasion, because the child heralds (like Heraclitus who plays at moving pieces in his game), assumes nothing.

For the earth is innocent, also assumes nothing, in the game of the gods.

The first Jewish child is enrolled in 1820 at the high school in Czernowitz, attended by Polish, Romanian, German, Armenian, Ruthenian children. What are the challenges? Opening offer of the German language and German culture. Thus assimilation of the Jews,
who attain economic prosperity and strengthen in Bukovina bourgeois enclaves and outposts of Western civilization. Books, newspapers, cafes, terraces, shops: Czernowitz has only one rival: Vienna. Under the sign of the German culture of the Enlightenment, a new life begins in Czernowitz that feeds the haunting dream of the Jewish community: how to make up for lost time? Most of the population speaks German. Jews control the judicial offices, the administration, the liberal professions. The emancipation is such that for the first time they are finally at home. The ancient dream of home is theirs. No more shame. There are Jews and normalcy. They take on the virtual responsibility of the representation of Germanism. In spite of the anti-Semitic outbreaks coming from Romanian, Ruthenian, Polish or German nationalisms, no one intuits a real threat hovering over Bukovina felt as a tolerated alterity. Utopia.

The cosmopolitan and German-speaking civilization of Czernowitz in 1900 thus gives rise to a Viennese type culture open to modernity. Czernowitz is a metropolis.

In spring 1919, in spite of a tentative general Romanization and eviction of the German speaking bourgeoisie from political and administrative posts, the Austrian era is confirmed, no doubt by inertia or influence.

In this linguistic identity of the civilization of Czernowitz and its paradoxical continuity Paul Celan is born in 1920.

The social situation he knows is the result of an imperialist Germany that, according to Robert Musil, is not an expression of the German man. “Thus there are no more individuals informing the masses, but a very complex process.

*The Meridian* of Czernowitz, that is, Paul Celan’s poem, is a pro-
jection of this complexity that he must ceaselessly face up to and tame, hold, listen to, take as he takes his pulse at every moment, furtively.

Robert Musil’s Notebook 26 is perfectly clear about this. I read:
“This man, the war takes him by surprise. The famous event of summer ’14....
This event was like a religious experience.
All the people were seized by something irrational but enormous, strange, a stranger to this world, later judged a hallucination.
Remarkable aspects from this experience: for the first time, everyone had something in common with everyone else. One dissolved in a suprapersonal event. One felt the nation in flesh and bone. An original, mystical tendency as tangible as the factories. Other relationship with death. For the average man in particular, the feeling of living something big.
One can’t call it drunkenness, psychosis, suggestion, illusion etc.
An analogous experience recurred at the end of the war. Universal Easter. Nor was that pure illusion, etc. It was a Trojan horse: a decoy – but framed like a divine event.”

Even an engineer, even a master in ballistics takes aim at us men and gods.

Hölderlin’s poetry as a people’s original language has a space and a place. That is why Hölderlin is the poet’s poet and the poet of the Germans. As for Paul Celan, from 1943—fate is cast, fate’s trajectory will follow, will be the poem, that is, *The Meridian*. The sacred mourning (Czernowitz) imposes a directed wandering and a tonality that in their turn impose a tone after imposing a directed direction: Czernow-
itz, Bucharest, Vienna, Paris and at last the Contrescarpe hill with its paulownias.

It is true that, during our walks under the chestnuts on the avenue des Gobelins, Vienna reappeared without fail like a tale, without fail like a native land. It is true that during our walks under the paulownias on the Contrescarpe, gazing absentmindedly at the earth and the tree roots, Paul Celan recounts the shovels used in the labor camp. It comes back like an obsession: “We dug.”

The compulsory labor camp where he started translating Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* he confided to me, and that is one of the Meridian’s poles. It is in the labor camp—autumn 1942—where he receives a letter from his mother informing him of his father’s death, no doubt after having contracted typhus. It is in the winter of 1943 that he learns in the labor camp from the mouth of a relative that his mother had been murdered by a pistol shot to the neck. The Meridian is congenital, biological and fluid. Cord wrapped around his body and the world. Cord and navel.

What falls into place is nothing other than a state symptom whose activity uses and composes the poem in German, inciting trouble and conflict, thus to the clear-sighted: “Are we?”

The German language has not lived as a punishment, but as a command that conducts a work of undermining and delivering the war directed against the principles of legitimate defense.

I remember my question asking Paul Celan, “Why do you write your books in German?” And his response, “I can’t write them in French like Yvan Goll.” And I juxtapose Nietzsche’s response to the same question, “All the more reason for me to do justice to the Germans.”
The German language doubles the poetic experience and the work of the translator doubles the oeuvre at the same time as a negative autobiography. One example among the numerous translation: “The Drunken Boat”—it leads to the witnessing of the poem “Engführung.” The translation metamorphoses the idea of the voyage into thinking about the deportation and renders Rimbaud’s truth (descent into Hell) apocryphal.

In Hegel’s time, a poet like Hölderlin who tempts the gods at the border is charged poetically to launch their essence and perhaps a historical world for the Germans.

Ladies and gentlemen, today, turning to the Tower bathed in the calm waters of the Neckar, I ask myself how still to listen not to just the sound and the fury of the world, not its fundamental tone, but an urgency that tones our disintegration. There is this, which forever silently beside us goes tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc. Until where? Until which court? Until what crash? Until what complete urgency?

The exile or the flight begins as Utopia, literally signifying “nowhere.” A place that exists nowhere. A presence and an absence. Is that not a definition of The Meridian? Nostalgic (melancholy) presence and absence? An alterity without the Other. A world not in reverse but negative?

All of spirit’s requirement is utopia and I verily add when it finds itself in the presence of the double experience of Germanness and Jewishness.

Listening begins there, in wandering. Listening allows the
wanderer to take part in the world, in the moaning of world and wind. Above all, it’s about offering an ear without really taking part in the moaning. The moaning is a keening, a sound. The wanderer lives flight. And Heidegger asks, “But this flight, is it not also a listening?”

The fundamental tone tests fate, I mean oppression. Oppression is a wave. Most often urgently in suffering, it wins the poem. It keys the calling, the trade of the poet— “Until the loss of God wills.”

But poetically, Utopia is not on its own feasible. It can’t think itself nor write unless in the presence of two altercations, the two sources of strength or symptoms: Germanness and Jewishness. Together, with Utopia, they determine the key to each poem, together, with Utopia, they weave each poem, like “Engführung” for instance or “Todtnauberg,” the poem sealing the encounter between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger. All would be read or reread from that angle, not forgetting that “the civilization of the sun begins at the border,” which could be the ultimate definition of The Meridian of Czernowitz.
At seven o’clock in the evening on a Saturday in December, 1958, I am going up boulevard Saint-Michel in the direction of the Contrescarpe, in the amazing cold. Night has fallen on the crowd in a climate of revolt. Civil disobedience and the right of rebellion begins to take effect. History runs through the streets of the capital and its crossroads as in the newspapers. End of an Empire. Paris is in a state of siege. France asks if it is still a state. The Algerian War is nothing but a police operation.

I am going to the Cinématèque française on rue d’Ulm, as always taking rue Soufflot. In spite of a full house, I get my usual spot in the tenth row, beside a seat that doesn’t remain empty for long. In the dark, a young woman, painfully gorgeous, with a weird look, crazy weird, moves forward and sits down, unbuttoning her heavy winter coat with one button looking to me like the size of a macaron. Extreme awkwardness on both sides about the armrest, where no elbow dared rest. From the credits of the Jacques Becker film, none other than Casque d’Or, our eyes transmit images, our bodies match the movements of the action, the clinch, the crime. Very quickly our hands find each other. The film becomes hot as desire.

All year we see each other almost daily. Greta is Viennese. She got a grant from the CNRS [Centre national de la recherche scientifique]. She is working on a memoir of Elio Vittorini whose Italian texts she reads perfectly, whom she met in Milan and whom she sees from time to time in Paris. Friend of Marguerite Duras, Elio Vittorini is, after, all a familiar on rue Saint-Benoît.

This taste of weirdness or more likely the weird weirdness,
comes back to me at each moment in what Greta looks at, what she says, what she reads, what she absorbs from the world. Her observations, always with incomparable acuity, a rare intelligence, find their references or landmarks in the spirit of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which I discover at her side and that I sum up with a remark of hers, not without ironic and antic insubordination. “You have Proust, we have Robert Musil. You have Rimbaud, we have Trakl. You have Bataille, we have Wittgenstein. Who do you have for Paul Celan?”

The following morning, surprising me yet again, Greta takes me to an “extraordinary” bookshop she wants me to get to know. And I discover the two store windows at Martin Flinker’s bookshop, quai des Orfèvres, marked by the presence of Complete Works expressing by themselves the spirit of the bookshop – the Spirit of an Empire – and acting on me like a veritable manifesto. Showing all. Showing all of thought, meaning, language. Showing the course of this totality. Showing the beginning and end of knowledge – Gesammelte Werke – Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Hermann Broch, Nietzsche, Herman Hesse. Complete Works of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Kant, Hölderlin, Gottfried Keller. Correspondence of Hegel, Mozart, Kafka. And books that, to Martin Flinker, seemed to be the events of the month: Doctor Faustus, The Glass Bead Game, Der Hochwald by Stifter, The Novices of Sais by Novalis, Danton by Büchner. Knowledge that functions here as decoration reveals the relationship of man and language and records without melancholy the obvious lesson of the Aufklärung.

Opening the door, I enter first of all into a quality of half-light gently carving tables covered with stacks of books, shelves and the desk behind which is seated Martin Flinker. He recognizes Greta. He gets up nervously and talks to her in French about the books she ordered.
The collection covers enormous wall space but most important is what welcomes the visitor at the front. It faces you as you come in, it is at an angle to the furthest window. It contains everything I think, everything I know, everything I sense but without having words for it yet. Words will come. Words are here, in these books. With Gottfried Benn, Else Lasker-Schuler, Georg Trakl, Rilke, Hölderlin, Martin Heidegger, Paul Celan.

Vertigo or the obvious stand out to me: Gottfried Benn’s first lines that open the *Complete Works of Poetry*. Linking and joining of the sister and stinging nettle in Georg Trakl, juxtaposition and fusion of poppy and memory in Paul Celan.

Reader of Francis Ponge, for whom the poem is twin to his critical method, I find in Martin Flinker’s bookshop this same resoluteness: giving the reader the means of an indispensable measure. A sense of order that Louis Zukofsky in *Poetry* defines perfectly. “The choice for science and poetry when symbols or words stop measuring is to stop speaking.”

The order comes from this political store window that displays its archeology and without wanting to polemicize, at the same time but on the other side of the river François Maspero and his bookshop, “La joie de lire,” presents windows that are the opposite, windows of political spectacle.

Like a window display, poetry is political because the organization of everything is science or art of government, as Charles Olson’s letters often recall.

Thereafter, with regularity, I often go to quai des Orfèvres. We implement two strategies: one of speaking, one of silence. Martin Flinker allows me to read books standing for hours, and for hours he stays seated behind his desk. How to describe a permanent impatience, tension, anxiety, in short a body left to itself and assailed by anxieties,
a body giving itself up to centrifugal impulses that communicate to limbs, to nerves, to muscles a disarticulation? While near the book and the reader – standing – the man gets back his elementary harmony, an attention, a charm, a lively impishness as alive as the musical speech that was his gift. He can afford it as Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Blanchot are calling him, Jacques Lacan orders the latest unpublished Freud and Thomas Mann’s signing of *Doctor Faustus* has been a triumph.

At these close and charming moments he confides, “All Germany has come here.” “They’ve all come to sign their books.” In fact, the two store windows, his desk and the whole bookshop are decorated with signed photographs of famous writers such as Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Berthold Brecht.

One day, Martin Flinker says to me, “You know, Paul Celan sometimes comes to see me. He’s a great translator and also a great reader. You should drop him a note. I’ll give you his address. He lives in the sixteenth arrondissement, rue de Longchamp.”

In the third volume of *La Condition d’Infini* [*The Infinite Condition*], titled *Sous la Coupole* [*Under the Dome*] I tell the story of my first encounter with Paul Celan and of sending him my first manuscript, *Décimale blanche* [*White Decimal*], published in *L’Éphémère* (1966), then at Mercure de France the following year.

I’d like to evoke another memory. Between 1965 to 1970, Paul Celan and I saw each other quite often. It was normal for us to work on translations in his office at the École Normale Supérieure – which gave us, among others, the translations assembled in *Strette et autres poèmes*, published by Mercure de France – or we went for walks under the paulownias on the Contrescarpe or under the chestnut trees on avenue des Gobelins.

One beautiful sunny morning, we are walking along the Seine
from Notre-Dame towards boulevard Saint-Michel and looking at the used books displayed in their boxes by the open air booksellers. Paul Celan says, “By fate or by chance, you find assembled here all the poets, possible, imaginable. And without any bad puns, ...right?...you have even the largest concentration – along the Seine, along the water – from the first, with Guillaume Apollinaire, to the last, with Tristan Tzara, as if the poet – mortal or immortal – had no other ends, he also, but ashes and water and sometimes both.” His voice is calm and calmly we continue to read book titles that strike us when suddenly Paul Celan, very determined, expresses his decision. “Let’s go see Martin Flinker!” Why at this very moment is Martin Flinker in front of his door? Who is he waiting for? After passing the first part of the Henry IV bridge, I saw what human alacrity was made of. I saw this alacrity, I saw two men rush like magnets to meet each other. I saw this alacrity, that is, with fervor, with warmth, with lightness, carefree, happy, bright, with a joy of sharing not just German but a language as distinct as Mozart’s music, the Viennese tongue, which defers grief. And Paul Celan’s voice was not without it.

I go toward the bookshop to leave them alone chatting in the street and watch in the window, in short, two birds whistling their cheer in the shade of the poplars and talking about the world in a Papageno aria. I saw this inspired encounter describe a magic circle that seemed to underline the site of passage from the Meridian of Czernowitz. At the end of a long moment I hear the conversation wind down. They say goodbye. From a distance, I wave to Martin Flinker. Paul Celan comes to fetch me and we resume our walk along the Seine in the other direction. The pace is not the same. The tone is no longer the same. Paul Celan seems to shield or badly master an awkwardness. “Jean Daive,” he says quietly, “I rarely am seen in such an avid state of volubility. Forgive me again. Forget this.” His pace is calm, no urgency. He confides, “It’s
here that I’ve found – in a box like these in front of us – rare books... really... for nothing... sometimes. Like for instance *Le Grand Jeu* [*The Great Game*]. You were talking to me the other day about *Le Grand Jeu*. I’ll ask Gisèle to send it to you and you’ll see I’ve left the price in it. It’s my gift.”

This is how, from then on, Paul Celan sees the relevance of our face to face meetings, by introducing, in the name of the book, the necessary triangulation.

A few days later, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange sends me the copy of number two of *Le Grand Jeu* with a little note.
Suicide for Two

Russet moon over the sea where I follow like a foe. Barefoot, I walk into the waves. Water and sand blend on that bright night of March 27 that I must tell about, this whole other child that I will become perhaps, because that night that seems different from all others is that of the Exodus from Egypt. Questions remain. I want to respond to them and say how.

I am walking in a straight line in the water, I think I am tracing a straight line in the water, where behind me I am describing curves almost naturally, when a kind of momentum seizes my whole body, picks me up and ruptures my very center of gravity making me swerve. Where is the link I lose walking? The link that disappears from the center of gravity when thought finds itself at some other point that affects the structure of curves. This motion of semicircles indicates that this night imposes a measure and that this night forces me not to measure activities but to dance them.

According to a rhythmic motion. With a body and all its parts. I walk. I describe in the sea concave and convex curves in the presence of a succession of structures: structure of Time, structure of waves, structure of History, structure of love.

In these conditions what does automaton mean? What is the provisional state of a term like automaton? Without the requirement of fate, or the notion of beauty or radical ugliness. Automaton must be understood in its infinity and in its art. The only requirement is not to achieve life. The only requirement is to copy life. Without thought and without reason. I fulfil, I join. I possess a substitute structure—a cold watch spring—for instance, God. The parts of the body even articulate
and redistribute as far as the body’s extremities. Right up to the offspring, which does not outsmart the mechanical power of a lever. The articulations do not obey any disorder. They know the reconquest of an abyss following a score played and danced, according to how puppets reproduce without attempt to stem the sublimated movements of the body.

Suicide for two has the quality of weightlessness that loosens and throws the high-strung human being into the air.

It is the weightlessness of the last breath. What is it about the automaton’s last breath and its direction inevitably preoccupied with encountering the Other?

An extreme attention can also be called: a secret. I kill myself with you, because you signify the fabric of artifice, therefore art. I kill myself with you because you signify too far away and too late.

To live theatrically and die theatrically, that is to say on stage, can’t in any way call into question the reconciliation with the world, whereas speech proves the triumph of the marionette and its strings. Who in life is forever out of tune still agrees with the death scene.

Direction and fate maintain her thread whose speech is round, without direction or fate, for whom speech is nothing and no one’s. No stage. The one who writes that letter of July 16, 1790—Lucile, to Camille Desmoulins, “...which will be then the the end of everything that we will become of us one and another maybe separated for ever we will moan our fate in silence we will remember each other—and we will say it’s together that we get happy time will pass thus death surprises us we die...and at that cruel moment that we xx...this thought rips me to pieces o xxx come come place a veil on the future.”

It’s Lucile too—because Camille is committed to her—who cries out, “Long live the King!” It is not about dying to join Camille. Literally it’s about suicide for two. Against all expectation. On a stage.
And Camille—beyond death—succeeds in having her avow, “Long live the King!” The automaton has spoken.

Lenz and a January 20th. Büchner and Danton’s Death. Heinrich von Kleist and On the Marionette Theater. Büchner and Lenz, the one who walks on his hands has under him the sky as abyss. Paul Celan and The Meridian (1960). Paul Celan and Jean Paul (Richter) whom the author of The Meridian reads and admires. Jean Paul with The Invisible Lodge introduces the automatons’ thread and the infinite’s doubling, characters seen through a prism with Hesperus oder 45 Hundesposttage.

Moving on. Wound and pain find their correspondence. Wound and pain reproduce. Why?

It is a thread that never finishes running after death in the name of art, it comes from the abyss, it goes toward the abyss, it goes in only one direction, in the name of love, like the last note from Lucile, in prison and awaiting execution, “good evening dear mama a tear escapes from my eyes it’s for you I am going to sleep in the calm of innocence.” A thread that lets life go between two infinities.

Horrific scene in the conjugal home between Gisèle and Paul Celan, suddenly interrupted by Paul’s brutal departure. He takes the steps four at a time on the building’s staircase, reaches the top floor, locks himself in the maid’s room. He tries to kill himself by driving a butcher’s knife into his chest. Gisèle Celan tells me one evening on rue de Longchamp the why and how of the scene and proceeds, “He often asked me to die with him. I always remained mute or was non-committal. And that night, that question was in play.” Strange request regarding a wife and mother whose survival instinct is vast, enormous, continuous. More on edge and even more the intent to escape. In the most desperate and the extreme situations, she always found within herself the means to glimpse the next day. The act of liberty, more than muteness, allowed Gisèle Celan to leave the thread unbroken and leave, and even open a
way out. The thread is an invisible and natural material going back to Lucile. And Lucile is Ingeborg Bachmann. Paul Celan, when he invokes Lucile in *The Meridian*, addresses the author of *Malina*, novel by Ingeborg Bachmann completed in July 1970, published in 1971 in Germany, and must be read following the same thread (called January 20th or suicide for two), for the reader has understood that the character of Malina is none other than Paul Celan. The lever does not succeed in using up the thread of a January 20th.

I maintain—*completed* in July 1970. This signals that the novelist, at the public announcement of Paul Celan’s death, completes her book taking into account the fatal act. She completes Malina writing therein Paul Celan’s end at the beginning of her book—on the second page—“Today is a word to which only suicides should be entitled....” *Completed* two months after Paul Celan’s death.

Lucile is there with her orthographic arrhythmia. But how does she remain there? She who looks at speech without knowing what it says. She is far from clocks. She, directed, climbs the scaffold. And she comes back in the form of a siren in “Undine geht,” the story by Ingeborg Bachmann who completes her book, *The Thirtieth Year* (1961). Paul Celan reinvents Lucile. And the response was not slow: Ingeborg Bachmann dreams up a Stranger of the waves. Undine perceives more in the distant call, “is it far where you are?” And the Echo answers, “Far for me too.”

The map of life is tilted, tilts with its own collapse. It is barely holding destiny’s thread. I recopy this fragment of a letter addressed to his cousin, Marie von Kleist, with whom Heinrich von Kleist plans to die, even though he does choose suicide with Henriette Vogel. He says, “This decision to die with me that grew in my soul, drew me to its breast with an irresistible force that I knew not how to say; do you recall how many times I have asked you if you would die with me? But you always
A January 20th, Lenz ascends the mountain. He walks through
the snow. What is in appearance beyond repair is the promise made
to himself: break with his father and leave between them an entire
mountain. The poem begins. A January 20th is a journey toward the
truth he never knew anything about or so little under the progenitor’s
surveillance. Lenz travels. What he wants is to travel in a storm space
that moves with him, that travels with a promise as fair a state of mind
as the torment of returning to one’s birthplace. A January 20th
keeps in memory an inscription of the rupture, even if a thread—always the
same—has the intention of setting back on the path both the father
and the birthplace. The outcome of such a return is not undecided. A
disorder presents itself to him, come from madness. Without worrying
about the dearth of strength at his disposal, Lenz knows that the thread
serves the truth and drives the fate that a center of gravity accelerates
toward the abyss while rigging the series of reigns, that is, the series of
lines of descent. History and a January 20th prescribes the loss and each
signs it, his death by suicide.

A sadness is at the origin, ennui is at the origin, a cynical wager
is at the origin and no one wants to take notice of it. How to fulfil this
obligation, how to kill the father? By building an insurmountable wall
or by writing books? A barricade, a mountain is not enough. And speed-
ing up the execution of a plan reverts to reactivating the thread always
governing collapse and farewell.

Heinrich von Kleist writes in the letter of June 3, 1801, “... Everything is inextricable in me, snarled like fibers on the spindle, and
I force myself in vain, with the hand of understanding, to put back in
order around the bobbin of memory the thread of truth that the wheel
of memory must pull.”

Coming down the mountain in the snow on a January 20th,
feeling the earth give way beneath one’s feet and becoming brighter than a wandering star, this is called pulling the thread of truth with the emptiness of anguish and what darkness inspires of the unbearable. The thread transmits exhaustion without rest. How does *The Meridian*’s author pull the thread of truth, conjugally? By possession! Conjugally in everyday life with Gisèle? Conjugally in romantic life with Malina and Ingeborg? By possession! Conjugally with Gisèle Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann, when the two women meet in Rome in 1965 with the author’s blessing and the sense of a profound deliverance in the name of an elsewhere or a utopia? By possession! The thread closes the triangle.

The truth implies an order in relation to the lie, an order that has the function of Law. Even if each thinks that this truth of all moments is guided by making believe that at each crossroad, the chosen road is always the best. But the register of the Law is held by the thread at the end of which is the imaginary father. He pulls the thread, he captures with the thread, he intervenes with the thread, he governs connections, functions, he develops identifications. There is nothing but following the thread. To where? To the primal scene of seduction or hostilities to recover a liberty without constraint (without a catch) and control without obstacle.

I listened to those who have had access to the correspondence, under seal for fifty years (now published), between Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann. The highlights are already found inscribed clearly in *Malina* and possession is at the heart of a seduction and a pathological hostility. The confrontations permit the characters of *Malina* and Ingeborg Bachmann (“me” in the novel) to approach four obsessions: the father, the ring, meaning kin, life, meaning the being speaking one’s language, the war.

Everything transmitted from these four subjects in a declension
and an infinite exchange is an automatism of repetition whose nature expresses as much intolerable absence as painful presence. The father: I have no father. The father: who is my father? The father: where is your father? The ring: I slide it onto your finger. The ring: it is not on your finger anymore. The ring: it is not mine anymore. Life: where did it go? Life: what is your life? Life: who is your life? War: I make war. War: you are my war. War: neither cost nor rest. It is a rehash in the shape of relentless exchange with no possible address and unrivaled questioning, both based on a tidal drive: the improbable—barren or fertile—where the child is made. The improbable that establishes the experience of the imaginary crime, which enters into the order of the Law. When the passage takes place between the four subjects, an echo reflects degradation, rupture, dispossession, inquisition, suffering, the disjunctive relationship.

I was a witness at rue de Longchamp when Gisèle Celan, in a gesture of exasperated decision, removed her wedding ring where the mark left on her finger did not escape Paul Celan a few days later on the rue Emile Zola when the couple got together. Mark that he grasped and understood, for he took his off right away. Far from staying silent. Dejection, agitation, sadness, loss of speech replaced outrage. Concern for Gisèle and what would happen. These are Paul Celan’s words she repeated to me, “Why this, Gisèle?”

Malina is a work of fiction where autobiography—motive—surfaces at every moment, leaving memory in which the last drive picks up exhaustion. Exhaustion constitutes the narrative threads, details, points of encounter and flight that present all the possible sanctions as structure in itself of the multiple ways of dying. The first one playing victim. “Long live the King!” rings again while altering the formula across the generations. Lucile and Ingeborg Bachmann are the victims. The narrator is another, writing in regard to Malina, “From the beginning, I was
placed below him.” Malina is her fate. Malina has his place in her—before—entering her life.

There are the ready autobiographical details: the narrator lives on Ungargasse, rue de Hongrie in Vienna, in the third borough, which corresponds to Ingeborg Bachmann’s Viennese address. The narrator was born in Klagenfurt like the author. Particularly, there are hidden autobiographical details. Incomparably lifelike is the complicated encounter between Malina and the narrator continually deferred, postponed, thwarted, pushed aside, following an accumulation of misunderstandings, missed rendezvous over several years between Munich and Vienna. Lost in the crowd. The musicality of these two bodies captive from another space, from another direction, another desire, is always pending a return to the favor of the crowd, where they lose each other again, plays a preponderant role. And it is in the throng where the bodies meet again, colliding and missing each other, the time to prompt Malina’s first word, the single one after so many years of intermittent desire, “Pardon” that leaves the narrator perplexed while Malina vanishes. But the word was accompanied by a voice qualified with three styles belonging by rights to Paul Celan saying, among other things, pardon: quietly, in monotone, politely. Paul Celan had the art or the strategy to provoke conflicting circumstances where the pardon plays an active role. Like placing the Other back to the wall, in condition of unease or accusation, forced to submit to imposed conditions or forced to disengaged.

“Pardon” is the challenge word. The first letter Paul Celan sends me has the configuration, “Pardon me.” Others will follow. Until one day when he announces, with that distant, deaf, far-away, neutral, indifference-feigning, monotone voice, “I must go to Germany to meet Heidegger.” At his return, he confirms his visit with Heidegger, his sadness, his disappointment, the meeting’s failure, and as I was readying myself to ask why, he continues, “I wanted to hear him say pardon me
and to convince him to say it publicly.” Which he repeated to me later, when he gave me number 4 of his poem, “Todtnauberg” written not to focus on the meeting but to measure the utopia of it. The “Pardon” in Malina marks the utopia—the secret—of the meeting for two, the utopia of love with the deepening shadow of an executioner.

For the narrator as for Ingeborg Bachmann, the executioner was called father. “My father started taking off my mother’s clothes…. he’s wearing the executioner’s red coat and goes up the steps....” These lines are not excerpted from Büchner’s Danton’s Death, where they show me Lucille climbing the steps to the platform. They are from Ingeborg Bachmann and meant for Malina’s narrator.

This is not simply to short-circuit things and say that the executioner is an executioner or that the executioner is the Father. In truth, who is he, always appearing in nightmares or dreams? Ingeborg’s father? Germany? The German language? Or rather Ingeborg herself and Paul Celan?

The theme of devouring is entirely the thread that controls the ordeal of confusion. The thread captures and woos, entertains a refining of relationships that go from deprivation to suicidal death with a marvelous ease sometimes recalling that of a fairy tale, “Once upon a time...”—for the message is always the same. A thread follows like a child. It is also the first garment the thread takes. The plot is there to direct and distort the roles because no one can give what the thread already possesses nor take it back. Thanks to this thread, I live in a land where nothing presents the least feature at the same time of presence and danger. Everything is located at a precise and shifting distance, and I discover the father, the ring, life, war, these objects under glass found at the back of an armoire I just opened. These objects have had a history, a face or function, and the thread where I end up indicates exactly where I am abandoned to an irreconcilable and imaginary game that does not
escape misalignment.

The man is vacant like an empty bathtub. He has lost his body or maybe he has no body without thread. Certain objects transmit a back and forth motion. They belong to a transportation system or approach the loading or unloading ramp. They are simply objects, used-for use like a chair, a bed, an armoire. With certain others begins the idea of mobilization accompanying a suffocating reality, sometimes paralyzing where anxiety puts the body in real danger. Danger of the platform. Danger of the scaffold. Shadow of the executioner. The bathtub has that scenic power that authorizes or draws out the most complex acts.

I am taking my bath one Saturday afternoon. I am thirteen years old. I am of course naked in the tub water which is getting cold and holding my body prisoner. My mother is rushing about strangely, going over the entire house like a relentless carpet with the vacuum cleaner at breakneck speed. It is a race against speed itself or against me. I know it. But what, why or how? The motor revs at full speed and resonates on the staircase landing. Something about it I associate with a siren, then something about an emergency. I don’t react. I remain subject to a paralyzing mobilization and reality. It is too late. The motor stops. My mother climbs the steps four at a time, opens the bathroom door and discharges the vacuum cleaner’s contents into the tub. All the dust, all the household dirt. Insane bathtub. Dissolute bathtub. Dissolute and delinquent scaffold. This is what I thought many years later when Paul Celan wants me to see his new apartment on avenue Émile Zola. The rooms follow one another. After the large living room to the empty library that looks out onto the Seine and leaves one to imagine the Pont Mirabeau, he shows me his bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom. He bends down and plunges his hand into the soapy water in the half-filled tub. Some washing floats up, soaking in the laundry detergent. Towel or shirt? His hand grasps and plays with it, then introduces a back and
forth motion. And everything stops there. Eyes on the tub. Scene almost without words for the “wolf wash,” and he picks up his narrative and repeats the words I have in mind, “it’s the wolf’s washing.” That hand that grasps the soaking wash with a necessary calculated malleability, I see again clearly. A hand twists, manipulates what has no more body at the core of the thing that is both form and absence, the gigantic bathtub like a ramp.

A thread troubles that moment. A thread transmits an inner current coming from a threat, transforms a state of localized terror to crisis performing as a bathtub. The mechanism is promised to obligation. It is obligation. I am articulated. The articulations are linked to a thread. The thread pulls. What? The decomposition of the Other. The decomposition separates the inside from the outside, the pursuit of truth and the science of the possible. The combinatorial rules only emit torn, stippled, unbound language variations, inductor of an ordinary silence, of an ordinary impossibility and of geometrically outdated space. It is the unstamping of everything, of life without its flow. Not even five seconds, disjunctions included. I’m done.

The man who holds a dominant position, that is, the position of struggle, so, of order, is taking his pulse. He is in front of me on rue d’Ulm, and his desk is between us. He is counting. At the moment of bringing truth into daylight in the silence preceding active violence, Paul Celan furtively takes his pulse. With that searching and fleeting look. Language will break out. And it breaks out looking to return violence with violence. Looking above all to speak and to conceal. I have lived through these borderline limits. First of all, stunned immobility, body in suspense as though prostrate seems to invest all the space from within. Next, I find concealed beneath his desk the left-handed motion and the fist offered to the right hand. Paul Celan takes his pulse. And the whole body is listening in my presence and in spite of it. The body
seems to want to return the object of violence to the words that determine it with disjunction, counterattack, including threats, revenge, warnings, brutality, including exclusions, evasions, defections, including intransigence. The body foresees every instance of shape—from guilt to insubordination—without forgetting the suspicion to which Paul Celan easily gives in. During this moment of great introversion, of concentration where all strategies are screened, Paul Celan inhabits the house of language. He takes his pulse. It is the due date in terms of expressible reality, intractable at the expense of all against truth, of all sensitivity. He is a Master, because he knows he can play everything, so risk everything—without ever having to pay his bill. “I’ve paid. I’ve already paid.” Phrases that often return to his lips during our walks.

Paul Celan takes his pulse. He also takes the pulse of his victim. Malina takes Ingeborg Bachmann’s pulse in the novel where she has the narrator’s role. “Me” tells. Three characters, Ivan (the lover), Malina (the husband) and Me form one: threefold. The thread resets the triangle. In truth, nothing can be written that is not tautological. The usual circumstantial remark is always in good time to know that all this is an autobiographical novel dominated by a system of splitting, of transfers, of projections, of metamorphoses, and ensures the fusion of a work essentially resting on autobiography, memory, nightmare or dream where most often appears the narrator’s father, the diary, real places and people, a manner of asserting that the elements spill out in language like wildfire.

With Paul Celan, the existence of property, melancholic, linked to possession, is imposed by the permanence of botany. With the aster, cornflower, Turk’s-cap lily, arnica, colchicum. The flower is a promise, because speech is nothing but a promise. It is also the opposite: rupture of a promise. The grass, the tree wait for the moment that marks the approach of man, the absence of the woman, or the embrace, the disap-
pearance, the failure of the encounter, the arrival always more existential of nature, always more dramatic or tender. What was lost finds its way in a flower’s name. The loss of the object or the abandonment of the object finds itself in the name of a tree.

And *Malina* is a veritable grammar of active identification: the Turk’s-cap lily is named at the beginning of the novel and at the end of the book. The Turk’s-cap lily is at the heart of Paul Celan’s “Conversation in the Mountains.” I read in *Malina*, “Distracted by an ambulance siren, I could have looked at the street instead of at the bouquet of Turk’s-cap lilies.” I read, “...once upon a time there was a bouquet of Turk’s-cap lilies and a black coat...” On another page, the narrator waits for someone deep inside in her own grief, in her own denial. She is wearing the “Siberian Jewish Coat.” Tale of deportation with bookshelves falling over under the snow, labyrinth, moisture eats away the photographs. Camps and camps. Crowd and chaos, the narrator is not herself. Seek and wait. Perceives a bouquet of Turk’s-cap lilies. Who is she waiting for? “I find him at last, where he is waiting for me, exhausted, there’s a bouquet of Turk’s-cap lilies in the empty room.” She finds her lover who says to her, “Be calm, think about the Park, think about the greenery, think about the garden in Vienna, about our tree, the paulownia is blooming.” Malina-Paul Celan speaks of the promise, the Promised Land, the banks of the Danube where Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan met and loved one another.

Who is Ivan? Who is Malina? Two faces of the same character: Paul Celan. Each is double. Each has its double. Each is the double of the Other. Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann in their meeting in Vienna in Edgar Jené’s studio in January 1948 together find the gates of hell. In truth, Ingeborg Bachmann encounters on the same day and at the same time two men: Paul Antschel and Paul Celan, that is, Ivan and Malina. Paul Celan is preparing in his name his first book of poems,
Der Sand aus den Urnen, appearing that year, accompanied by two lithographs by Edgar Jené, and of which he prohibits their distribution because of the numerous typographical errors, as my copy testifies.

*Sand from the Urns* evokes the memory of the “sisters” murdered in the camps and the decisive role played by Ingeborg Bachmann in inspiring the whole poetic tone of the book. She is the Stranger. She is the Enemy. She is the Promise. Nothing but her presence is a fulfillment that never separates Paul Celan from his “sisters” who he finds again at the Promise.

This descent into hell, directed end to end by Malina, is a constant need for trouble, I mean to say a consent lived to the end: in a death for two.

And what is the secret of the encounter for two that is in question in *The Meridian*?

It is made of much intimacy, a relentless knowing of one another, a familiarity of you and me, fulfillment always at fault, of desire and, no doubt, pleasure. The melancholy appeal is stronger than anything.

Two more obsessions accompany this autobiography. The vagrants on the Contrescarpe and the ritual of the mail. On the rue de Longchamp, Paul Celan established a veritable mail ceremony during breakfast that, according to Gisèle Celan, quickly turns into nightmare and retribution. Paul Celan wages war on every envelope, (folded or not), on its legibility (or not) of every address, on its wording, its intent, its placement, its lies. He is suspicious of the position and placing of the stamp. He knows all the mysteries of franking and the omission of Mister or Mistress or their abbreviations. Gisèle Celan speaks of it as an inhuman trial that sometimes lasted until late morning. At the beginning of the third section of *Malina*, “Last Things,” there is the development by the narrator of the fate of postal workers, and then the fate of one of them and of the secret of the mail—after having dealt with secreting some beribboned
letters from Ivan in her desk.” These letters are the only letters that reached me…”.

The Contrescarpe is a privileged place, inhabited by Paul Celan like a fortified camp from 1965 to 1970. The Contrescarpe is a hill, like Czernowitz with its paulownias and its very particular occupants he never stops watching, his eyes tracking with benevolence and interest: the tramps. They occupy the square on the Contrescarpe, sleep in crates at the foot of the paulownias, dispersing in the neighboring streets, hanging around “La Chope,” which is the only café he went to except for the Royal Panthéon. In the evening, the tramps disappear behind fences you just need to shove to enter, a wasteland covered with cans and empty bottles. They live there with their first names and their no place. Paul Celan pays considerable attention to this freedom of movement, as he goes to work in his class on the rue d’Ulm, at the École Normale Supérieure and comes home to his rue Tournefort studio. The moving about of the tramps is predictable, almost scheduled, and punctuated the daily routine. Before nightfall, some of them make for the side of the Bain-douches on rue des Patriarches. The single word patriarch makes Paul Celan smile, for he identifies tramp with patriarch. The patriarchs of the Contrescarpe have a secret and they do not have an effective language to give it up. They are mute or beat each other up or grunt or break empty bottles against the walls. Malina does justice to this state of wandering about in the Contrescarpe air. On one page, for instance, the narrator tells the story of Marcel’s death.

I often think about this motivating force driving a destiny at lightning speed with the result of an arrow’s trajectory. It travels through the thickness of time, of space, with effortless reality or dream: Czernowitz – Tours – Czernowitz – Bucharest – Vienna – Paris. And suddenly the ordeals collapse, begin to weigh and transform into too much guilt whose outcome the exit is named Pont Mirabeau – in spite
of reconciliation with the father – the father found finally it seems to me during the trip to Israel.

With Ingeborg Bachmann, I observe this same driving force, but with the effect of fire that spreads, gains permanence, preexists the arrival of everything – as with Paul Celan where the Pont Mirabeau introduced into the poem, “And with the book of Tarussa,” preexists the fatal action. I read in Malina, “With my burnt hand, I write on the nature of fire.” And on a later page, I meet Ingeborg Bachmann’s Pont Mirabeau. She writes this promise, “I stand up, my face burning from the red stovetop, where so often at night I pick up scraps of paper, not to burn the written pages, but to light a last cigarette.”

I read in Philippe Jaccottet’s translation, “Malina feels for my pulse, counts and seems dissatisfied.” Malina feels for the pulse of the narrator who just suffered her father’s murderous attacks. In the midst of a final fall, the father falls asleep in the crisis. “I lie down beside my father, in the devastation, for here is my place next to sleeping him, limp, sad and old.” The narrator asks, “How did I get into this, how did I fall into his power, in whose power?” And the narrator pursues, “Malina looks worried, his fingers on my wrist, I guess I’m in bad shape. He takes my pulse, counts and doesn’t appeared satisfied.”

The question of the father is what keeps – according to a hierarchical sequence in the form of a spiral – the three characters together.

“Me: ...Who could be my father? Do you know for instance who your father is?

“Malina: Leave it alone.

“Me: I would like for once to get you... How did you come to think that my father is not my father?

“Malina: Who is your father?”

A father is destruction, takes over the descent into hell without ordering it, separating the witnesses. The connections are broken, to all
appearances. For it is about – and I have the choice between the word
dream, theater, novel – it’s about maintaining the thread by all means.

“Malina: I’m looking for the word end. Why is your ring missing? Did you ever wear a ring? I never saw it.”

The ring is the connection with kinship or conjugality. It is the
ring of possession that indicates possession. Possession is the space of all
excesses, that is, of the infinite.

“Malina: For one who has survived, the fact of it obscures your
judgement, and you don’t even know which lives came before and what
is your life right now, you even mix up your own lives.

“Me: I only have one life.

“Malina: Leave it to me.”

The map of life is tilted, tilted with its own collapse. What do
I mean by that? The map of life is tilted, tilted according to the laws of
disaster and this disaster is a response to how I can continue to make
one – decay included – at the edge of an inexhaustible dependence
whose logic looks a lot like the permutation of sucking stones offered in
Samuel Beckett’s Molloy. A permutation allows a permutability without
limitations of time, space, motion. The tilted map of life constitutes a
condensation of energy and a field of fission exemplarily in the poems of
Paul Celan (mother and smoke) and of Ingeborg Bachmann (father and
executioner). The silences, words, voids, disjunctions inscribe themselves
like a thread as far as the characters organize themselves and don’t stop
displacing the end, confronting the end – without ever being able to
exhaust it: the end whose discontinuous existence quantifies the incest.
Exhaustion proceeds with necessities like negative representations or
phantom superimpositions. Exhaustion frees incest and carries it out
more in a flux of positions, furtive images, knowing it stays indecompos-
able.

Paul Celan asks Ingeborg Bachmann to give him her life. Why?
Because she is perfect or because he wants to write it totally as Jewish or because this recovered life, he wants to deGermanize it? He who comes from the east, he even wants to Hebraize and Judaize. He wants to speak it for her and for her to act on it politically.

Being the Other implies speaking the language of the Other. The Other is always the holder of all possible worlds to which the voice does or does not lend itself their recognizable or hoped for reality according to the knowledge it has or the silence it creates. The Other is the Stranger with her German, it is Ingeborg Bachmann. It is the Other who lives. The Other who speaks. The Other who writes. In German. She speaks in the language of crime and of the executioner. Paul Celan can at any moment recall her and shape her. Why? Because Malina knows that the voices are the Masters.

The voice is a possible world that needs practice and even wears out by means of a combinatorial language or a combination of words. Which Paul Celan wants to try with the German that the novelist would give back to him, with the life she would give back to him. Having the last word is what accelerates the descent into hell. Speaking of the world, even empty, even after Auschwitz, is introducing oneself using – why not – Ingeborg Bachmann’s German.

Connecting with the unfathomable makes the Third Man, that is, the father or the executioner, disappear. It’s throwing the center against itself.

Lucile, Undine, Ingeborg Bachmann: three individuals bound to the same thread and made from the same sand, the same fluidity determined by unstructured and unorganized forms. The sand is Ingeborg Bachmann. The sand from the first encounter. I have written that they found the door to hell after opening the door to paradise. Paradise and hell mixed together from childhood, in Czernowitz for Paul Celan. Viennese paradise – Ungargassenland – where Ingeborg Bachmann is
located at 6 Ungargasse (Vienna and Paris no doubt the choice of Paul Celan’s mother). Memory of these paradises in the air of the Contrescarpe which Paul Celan discovers very quickly once he arrives in Paris on the 14th of July, 1948. He said to me one day, “These were the same paulownias as in Czernowitz, but on that day, with the tricolor, I saw tricolor paulownias.” Paradise and hell mixed together with this presence of sand accompanying the Lover. Lucile, Undine, Ingeborg Bachmann undulating like sirens run aground on the sand, were programmed by separation, good-byes, thorns. The sand of Paul Celan’s first book holds to a deciding hypnotic role: the sand was made of as many grains as there were people who died, incinerated in the camps. The sand makes up for, represents The Lover, born, enduring, dying according to the Master’s breath who disposes of her as he disposes of the empire of words as well as the empire of the dead, in which she is numbered. Ingeborg Bachmann’s whole oeuvre rests on the insistent will to become free. By all means.

If in a novel Malina asks Ingeborg Bachmann to give him her life, can’t Paul Celan, in a letter addressed to the novelist of Malina, can’t he ask to have his language back: Give me back your life! Give me back your German! To teach her the language of the ring finally worn, the language of Auschwitz she does not know, the language of a January 20th, the language that recognizes its words: suicide for two. The language of war.

From the Pont Mirabeau, Paul Celan threw himself into the Seine on the night of April 19, 1970. Ingeborg Bachmann visited the year of her death – three years later – the extermination camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. The night of September 25-26, 1973, she was found, her body badly burned, in the bedroom of her Roman palace, in a series of circumstances still not properly explained. The most accepted version is that Ingeborg Bachmann fell asleep in bed with a lit cigarette.
I recall these lines from Thomas Bernhard. “In a Roman hospital, the most intelligent and the most important poet our country has produced in this century has just died of self-inflicted burns in her bathtub, according to the findings of the authorities.” She died on October 17, 1973.

Paul Celan wrote in _The Meridian_ that every poem must keep its inscribed 20th January. With the double request I offer him: Give me back your life, give me back your German, possession achieved, that too, a 20th January.
The Question of the Triangle

For a new friendship, a new connection is to be expected. It must inevitably put in play in a new order the words which we, Paul Celan and I will use, arranged in a shape that for me is not strange and to which I could only familiarize myself with the greatest astonishment. This shape carries its own utopic coefficient and aleatory manipulation. It is the triangle. It is triangulation.

Two men together, two friends together don’t operate anymore like lone elements of exchange. It isn’t a matter anymore of living the intensity of it, or giving it the lie or appearance, but by means of the triangle, to free it from what is eternal and constant. The shape of such an encounter manifests its sphericity even as it depends on the rotation of a triangle where one of the angles is busy with an indefatigable messenger, myself and the other two by a desire into the infinite.

What do I not understand? What do I understand? What do I want to understand?

From infancy, I learn to move in a triangular space from a three-thousand-year-old tradition. I think and move around with the features of a thinking threesome. Speech that rings in me rings for three.

In my world of representation, I find expression in a thinking for three, to know in a thought what indicates “what is missing” and gives it measure.

There are, then, three human semblances—Me, You, Self—and they separate as follows: the experience of Me who is not unaware of the notion of projection (You and Self).
The acquisition of a truth rests on the stammering of the triangle’s proxies, because, narratively an I assumes a You and because, narratively, an I and a You assume a third. This narrative map is what I call a desire into the infinite, drawn by “what is missing.” And “what is missing” is the requirement of the triangulation. Whence, since forever, the position played by the lover. Whence, since forever, the part played by the lover and what he is, in effect, assumed to introduce or to reveal: the fusion, followed by a fundamental malfunction.

What leads to Paul Celan is a path and what leads Paul Celan to himself is a path—a path that pushes right to the edge, but without going over the edge, a path that presumes no beyond, but affirms the passage, a path that in evaluating the triangle, overcomes the sick passions. Such a path, always protected, does not begin with the decline, but finishes with the overcoming of a beyond called “what is missing” and adjusts itself preposterously to all the supposed foundations, dis-assembled and overcome.

“What is missing,” the suffering of the past is concerned with intensification and accumulation up to the limits of a path that grants the most to thinking the collapse itself, to knowing the guilt.

The Goll affair functions like fate, like a being of truth that clarifies the unveiling of that which is veiled. A truth invented by all parts and that can never stop, because it is the path of vengeance and the path of misery like that of punishment.

“This, yes this alone is revenge itself: the resentment of the will against time and its 'here was.'” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

Revenge is named Claire Goll. “What is missing” revives this guilty feeling without guilt, this guilty feeling without real guilt. “What is missing” is the food of sick passions. This is the resentment in the will
that Paul Celan finds insurmountable so much his guilt had the appearance of right. Then without illusion of possible safety, while Nietzsche aims for the spirit of vengeance and deliverance of revenge. Paul Celan had to collapse there. Why? Why and how?

At the top of his hill, conceived by him as a stronghold, Paul Celan establishes an itinerary in the shape of a triangle. He spends long hours in his office as German Lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure on rue d’Ulm, where we pass afternoons or entire days talking, reading, or exchanging our poems, writing, translating or sometimes being very quiet. He likes to have dinner at “La Chope,” on place de la Contrescarpe, with the view of the clock and the paulownias. I accompany him, at his request, to rue Tournefort, to the front door of the apartment building where he rents a studio.

Rue d’Ulm, place de la Contrescarpe, rue Tournefort: three stops of new triangle at the time of our encounter in exchange for the conjugal household he had been forced to leave. So the abandoned rue de Longchamp gives birth to the triangle whose use is a precarious tent. “I must plant my tent,” he says to me one day regarding the new apartment on avenue Emile Zola, where he is hesitant to live, then furnish.

Isn’t the real subject missing in the sentence, “It is snowing”? Is it not customary to advance with no subject, towards no subject, for no subject? Isn’t the missing subject at the origin of the triangle? Or does the gap resonate with the real subject deliberately forbidden, discarded, passed over in silence? Isn’t the impersonal sentence comparable to a life in appearance impersonal? To write, for example, “It is raining” is connected to nothing, to no one. There is life and many objections for living it in keeping with the fundamentals of the past: Czernowitz, the
murdered parents, Nazi Germany, German poetry, celebrating with speeches, flowers and welcome of rabbis at the train station, conjugality, home on the rue de Longchamp where all Germany marches past. To face the suffering day after day, Paul Celan bluffs while protecting himself, wary with all the restraint needed for the impersonal life, who locks himself in a succession of triangles and who hands over to fate the triangulation. Holding back before jumping.

It snowed. It stopped snowing. The snow at Sainte Geneviève des Bois melted. The wide meadows surrounding the psychiatric hospital of Vaucluse were blazed with white tracks. I didn’t know that when Paul Celan asked me to come visit I would discover a world from the Middle Ages.

I’m looking at trolleys pushed by men in white coats splashed with blood moving down the corridors. Nurses, the sick or butchers? The sick or nurses? The white coats covered in blood. Half beef, half lamb. Pails filled with tongues, livers. It’s my first visit to Paul Celan. It’s a Sunday. Sunday the 4th of January, 1968. A parade of meat.

From this freezing labyrinth where, in spite of myself, I drift along looking at dark scenes of disturbing brutality, I am shown into a room: it is wide, deep, sunny and I go in towards very long refectory tables where I catch a glimpse from afar of Paul Celan. He smiles at me. He waves. Calls. He is at the end of the table facing the door, on his right a woman looking straight ahead, apparently removed from what is going on, scrupulously dressed all in grey. Paul Celan, always ordinarily so precise in his appointments, has extended the time or maybe his wife has extended the time in order to bring about the meeting. Someone extended. Someone brings about the meeting. Who? Why? Paul Celan has the art of isolating or of handling. The meeting not only unfolds but
takes shape, correlates, projects into the time to come. “Jean Daive, you must go to see Gisèle’s engravings. You should go to rue de Longchamp.” “You must make a book together. Jean Daive, give Gisèle some of your poems. Start a book, you two, with the poems you’ve given me to read. I will write about this to my editor, Robert Altmann.” The books will in fact follow: *Devant la loi, Monde à quatre verbes, Le Palais de quatre heures*.

What should happen? What is missing? To whom? Hospital image. Hospital smell. Hospital scenes. Hospital life. In the company of a man so brilliantly beyond pathological passions and who will yet give in many times and finally one night.

What is the nature of this life? What is the nature of speaking? And how not to be confused for determining whether all you say can be determined or not and how? How to evaluate if everything to say is to be said or divided up or kept quiet and how? The path to follow by the indefatigable messenger is a path covered in brains of mud. Suddenly, it’s not about showing whether snow is falling, but to take heed of whether thought itself is a path in the midst of warm flesh. I learn to render thought compatible with muddy brains and desire into the infinite. Saying and controlling, orienting, tempering the unfolding of words. Knowing that attention, which to me is kind and questioning, indoctrinates desire into the infinite.

Thought, above the sick passions, is able to grasp in its approach what is missing, omission, avoidance, silence, the immeasurable question, the most unconsidered questioning, the stammering.

Here, the expression of all thought is prisoner of its cage. Each one of our encounters becomes involved sooner or later in the triangle that Paul Celan stimulates and provokes. “Did you see Gisèle? What did
she say?” Or else, “Did you call Gisèle? Did she tell you that I called her when I got back from Germany?” Or yet, “Call her tonight at dinner time and tell her I’ll call her tomorrow morning.” Or even “I’m entrusting you with this message for Gisèle. Call her and see her. And give her this message. And tomorrow morning call me at my office.”

I don’t know if speaking responds disproportionately to an endless questioning. I don’t know if speaking can arise and settle in an endless questioning, without response and without end. No response has desirable clarity. No response has sufficient meaning, because life and time are thought simultaneously, sometimes even explained in terms of guilt. Everything appears to move further away, while the power of the triangle always gets to reintroduce the questioning, always gets to mean desire into the infinite. According to all possible perspectives and according to all possible ambiguities facing an always undecidable clarity.

On the other hand, on rue de Longchamp, Gisèle wants to know everything. “What did he say?” “What did you do together?” “Paul told me that you spent all Sunday together translating him.” “I saw Paul. He told me about your next meeting. Call him. Tell him we talked.” “Come over to see my new engravings. I know from Paul that you like the ones I showed you last time.” “Our book is progressing. The engravings are done. I’d like to show them to you.” “What are you doing this evening? Come for dinner.”

What does this kind of triangle portend? It expresses that which is decisive, because each hears the call of the other two and proves the leap of which each is capable, the leap and what is caught with a look.

Paul Celan’s look misses nothing of the look of the other. Noth-
ing, not one particle. Nothing is taken for granted and everything is suspended to the nothing which is ruthless and thankless.

His look has clear sight and closed sight all relationships expressed or not, evoked or not, isolated or not. His look offers a true look, a true thought, the thought of what he offers to thinking. His look wants to be thought and requires a true thinking. At the risk of provoking a rupture, a blow-up, a leap. The risk is sometimes very great.

We think each of us is unique. Paul Celan thinks everyone is unique and never returns. And I observe that no one is unique and each returns until exhausted, until letting come to us what each look thinks as the most required proof of each one of us, required of guilt and vengeance in dark references and sometimes intolerable exaggerations.

Paul Celan misses this measure where he really expects safety and where the triangle is not able to bring it to him. Claire Goll must be a real phantom measure. A real measure of vengeance and disgrace. Powerfully there. Why? Until when?

At the top of the Odéon crossroad, the question raised by him is the following: “Should a poet be able to write in a language other than his own?” That morning, going up the rue de l’École de Médecine in the direction of rue des Écoles, Paul Celan evokes with nostalgia Rilke’s French poems, with much innuendo. And to my question, “But why not you?” he responds painfully, almost lowering his voice, “The reason for this is Yvan Goll. I could not write in French after him.” A little later that evening, Gisèle Celan confirms what I heard and what I confided to her. “It’s always this Goll affair There’s no end to it.”

Going onto the rues des Écoles, we continue on our walk. Still
the choice of language. Choice decided and undecidable. Choice that can at any moment reach the undecidable. This is what I understand. And to my question, “But why Yvan Goll? What happened there?” He responds at length, at times stopping and at times emphasizing certain words with his mouth or with his hands. “Claire Goll says that I came to see her dying husband at the American Hospital and that I wore him out because I made him repeat his poems with the little strength he had left. She even says that I was bending over him, drinking in his verses, and that, still bending over him, I inhaled, mouthing whole stanzas in order to publish them later in my name. Do you realise, Jean Daive, from the mouth of a dying man I extorted his poems in order to publish them in the name of Paul Celan! Believe me, Jean Daive, everything I am telling you is the truth.”

I think of Paul Celan, of his ire, of all those letters written and sent, of all those written and not sent, of all those petitions that converge toward one end, towards a single obsession: to show his innocence, express the obvious. Implore. Beg for signatures. Prove he is not a plagiarist. How does Claire Goll’s infamy reach him at his deepest and more than deepest level? What is expressed through Claire Goll’s vengeance? Claire Goll who has publicly sworn Paul Celan’s death. Claire Goll who herself falsified lines, fabricated all the proofs, designed a dreadful absolute that signifies: Paul Celan is a poet guilty of plagiarism. How can this triangular construction turn mortally against Paul Celan?

Here is Paul Celan in front of me, standing in the street, standing on the sidewalk: true, simple, distressed, poignant and droll, shy and moody. Why? Because with a lot of distance and all the threat with which he measures the unbelievable horror of horrors, he is telling about what he calls the infamy, while keeping the smile on his face: he
imitates the scenes with his mouth as well as his hands. Why or how did he not keep this distance with regard to the Goll affair? In fact, the Goll affair precipitated something, caught up with a mass of guilt, decisive and tragic.

I find myself at Annemasse to carry out some work over ten days, and Bernhard Böschenstein invites me to the other side of Lake Leman for a Sunday with him near Lausanne. Before lunch, he has me visit his apartment, noticeably invaded by study, with piles of books and files, from room to room. One round table seems heavier with different papers from the others. This is what I sense. His look confirms to some extent my fears. He hands me from one of a number of folders a typed document, in German, unsigned, where Yvan Goll and Claire Goll testify to the plan of an adoption request. This document establishes between Yvan Goll, Claire Goll and Paul Celan the legal relationship analogous to those resulting from paternity and filiation. “This document,” explains Bernhard Böschenstein, “proves that the Golls were thinking of adopting Paul Celan.”

Alone, I walk along the lakeshore, I imagine what secret a man requests from a woman. I think about the image of the sister that comes back often in conversations with Paul Celan. Paul Celan who evokes the presence of the sister, Kafka’s, Ottla. “Kafka has found his angel,” he says. But in evoking her presence, does he not also want to evoke her real absence? And I ask myself if Claire Goll isn’t disappointed, thwarting this dream sister to distortion in the name of revenge? Paul Celan has found his dark angel.

The will traveling through me as I walk along Lake Leman endures. The will facing everything I understand of this triangle capable of
all the negative attitudes of the world. And I lay out the information in front of me and I analyze the three individuals haunted by themselves, captured by an infernal triangulation: Yvan Goll, Paul Celan, Claire Goll. Three people in search of a place needfully interchangeable or inseparable. Until this unreasonable demand by the very ill Yvan Goll, “Take my place beside Claire in my absence.”

I lay out the information I have in front of me. What? Two poets meet and recognize each other: one born in Metz, ill, has a history with Germany and France, with German and French; he writes in both languages. The other, born in Czernowitz, young and brilliant, has a history with all the languages and translation. They are close. Mohn und Gedächtnis appears in 1952 in Germany. These poems by Paul Celan, according to Claire Goll, are plagiarized from those of Yvan Goll appearing in 1951. Now the book is the republication of Der Sand aus den Urnen, published in Vienna in 1948 and removed from sale by Paul Celan. QED.

Yvan Goll is fighting a pernicious leukemia. His state requires long blood transfusions. He writes, “at 9 o’clock, Claire arrives with Paul Celan and Klaus Demus who want to offer their blood for the first transfusion.” In the end, only Klaus Demus’s blood corresponds to his. But before that, Paul Celan has brought Claire Goll eight red roses, “from him, languishing without a penny in the Latin Quarter,” writes the transfusee. Who is who?

Is Paul Celan poet or Yvan Goll’s translator or his putative son? And Claire Goll? According to her own words, she always consults the bust of her husband located on a chest of drawers before altering one of his poems. This bust speaks to her, authorizes her excision or not. The day after Yvan Goll’s death, Claire Goll reveals in a letter addressed to
Paul Celan the existence between them of a poetic pact. Which? Everything in this triangle is a reminder of the fundamental determination summarized by Paul Celan in a letter to René Char. “They isolate me. They diminish me. They exile me. They move me around. They stone me with pieces pulled from my self. They liquidate me. They empty me, for the Lie perpetuates its creatures.”

Second liquidation that Germany inflicts on a poet recognized by her, celebrated by her, crowned by her. Second liquidation of post-war Germany echoing the first Nazi liquidation. German liquidation with the help of the lie, of plagiarism, of infamy. Liquidation made up with the help of Germans of the right and the left.

Germany the Great of the unconditional surrender instills an occult power. The rise of Nazism and the Second World War authorized extermination and the Final Solution. Postwar puts in place a secret, occult, invisible device, that of a second liquidation for whom retired authors are “Nazi gangsters, the left behind.” Germany the Great, living in the shadows, acts.

According to Nietzsche, the origin of the Saint Lie is the will to power. The Lie is a new concept of the truth. The sole reply that Paul Celan reaches in opposing it is delirium. Saint Lie overtakes him and the poet lives his own collapse with the poem. The sacerdotal species can’t in any way keep hold of what is best. Saint Lie is not inventing a new happiness nor the good of humanity.

I believe thought is one source and speech another. Is the decline a third summit of what currency and in exchange for what? Paul Celan’s decline seems to be a response expected by the enemy obviously
from a whole other register, nevertheless like symmetry and echoing that of Claire Goll. She is the error. She provokes the error, invents it, makes theater of it, feeds it. And he gives it to her, shares as though the error was true, since it must be refuted to its end, without respite. Even beyond Claire Goll’s death. Always explaining. An error indefatigably confronted. Also there is identification: inexplicable and real.

The image of crime personified will never exist. It is too multiple, too ambivalent, too ambiguous, too hidden, excessively occulted and utterly there. Paul Celan believes that the poem can do anything, destroy evil and found man’s sovereignty on a power of negation.

Power of negation that would insinuate a state of sovereignty as powerful as the common act of destruction, as powerful as the cadaverous state.

Indefatigably he gave chase to the lie “the Nazi gangsters” from the left as from the right until the day he confronts the most obscene lie instigated by an adoptive mother. The birth of space gives birth to the void, writes Nietzsche. A rejected desire thus gives birth to a vengeful lie whose power had the effect of “the drop of nothingness that the sea lacks.” Lack that wins Paul Celan’s heart and the guilt to an intensification without appeal.

Life itself is tragic, because living in Germany – from abroad, that is, Paris – is tragic, and the Eternal Return’s life itself is the ordinary representation of the tragic. Guilt and despair discover in the Germanic will to destroy more than a sick resignation and the sickness itself develops in cycles confronting the language of the lie, actively infinite and disquieting pathology.

Life is no more than ashes of the dead. Life is nothing more
than the knowledge of who is dead. How to go on without taking into account and showing that space discovers empty space?

Who is Claire Goll? Does Paul Celan have the means to know who she is? She is the daughter of Joseph Aischmann and Malwine Fürther. She was born in Germany at Nürnberg on 29 October 1890. She has a brother, Justus, dead at the age of 37, with whom she was very close. He protects her. He protects her like Yvan Goll will protect her. Tyrannical mother. She beats her daughter Claire bloody. She times her as well as the servants, using with unconcealed joy instruments of punishment. A bourgeois façade hides the child martyr. Malwine Aischmann is sent to Theresienstadt, then deported with her sister Henrietta to Treblinka 19 September 1942. First marriage to a man who beats her. Birth of her daughter Dorothea-Elizabeth whom she leaves in the charge of her husband in exchange for separation. On 10 February 1917, she meets Yvan Goll who declares, “you are my fate.” She responds, “you are not mine.” 19 October 1917, symbolic marriage of Claire Studer and Yvan Goll, with the exchange of gold rings. Winter 1918, she meets Rainer Maria Rilke again in Munich. First night. The poet sends the poem, “Die Geschwister” to the happy Liliane. Affected by acute leukemia, Rilke dies 29 December 1926. After her father in 1923, after her brother in 1924. Liaison with Yvan Goll and with Paula Ludwig between 1931 and 1939. She writes in La Poursuite du vent, “Goll and Rainer Maria Rilke made me a dream princess floating on a bubble.” On the 26 of August 1939, Yvan Goll and Claire Goll who have sealed the “Clairivan-Pakt” leave for the United States where he learns in 1945 that he acquired leukemia. Return from the United States to France in 1947. November 1949, they meet Paul Celan, who comes with a letter of introduction from Alfred Margul-Sperber.

Yvan Goll asks Paul Celan to translate him into German. He
dies on the 27th of February 1950. At first, the time of mourning did not bring Paul Celan and Claire Goll closer together. Paul Celan has met Gisèle de Lestrange. Then, Claire Goll, beyond the ordeal of the death, decides to consecrate herself to Yvan Goll’s memory. The effect of apathy is followed by anger very quickly becoming permanent in the form of letters, registered letters, of protest. The Lie then takes all the room in Claire Goll’s mind, the theatrical lie. In 1960 she decides to reveal everything to the reader with the support of a journal from Munich. She accuses Paul Celan of plagiarism—supreme accusation that crushes him and brings on an increasing process of distress.

The press campaign that Claire Goll provokes allows Paul Celan to have before his eyes—and to be the victim of—this certainty: post-war Germany is living a resurgence of antisemitism. Postwar Germany proves that Nazism has not been vanquished. A very famous photograph shows the members of Gruppe 47 in session in Berlin in 1952. Around the table, among others, Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan. But Paul Celan’s reading of his poems has been compared to the tone of Goebel’s speeches. In the course of the press campaign led by Claire Goll, Paul Celan put together the German left and right. The position of Gruppe 47 with regard to Paul Celan’s tone reveals the political climate of the time.

What is introduced into the German world and beyond its borders is another logic where the irrational naturally finds a place outside reason, develops and is fulfilled with all its intangible determination until paralyzing the ancient world of truth which does not agree with anything ever again. Everything unglues, goes out of tune facing the new roads taken by Nazism. A letter from 1962 addressed to Jean-Paul Sartre contains the words of visionary acuity. Paul Celan writes, “For some years, and above all since last year I am the object of a defamatory
campaign of which the scale and ramifications outdistance far more of what one would call at first sight a literary intrigue. I will astonish you no doubt by telling you that it is here a real Dreyfus affair – sui generis, understood, but well characterized.” I follow the reading of the letter and I simplify. The Goll affair reveals a new mirror of Germany with the roads of Nazism as real as the forces and complicities that a certain left coordinates with a considerable number of “Jews.” He finishes, “added to it as well, for some months, a real ‘psychological action’ taking aim at my psychic destruction.”

The question of the triangle develops a process observed in the determinism of a past event afterwards forgotten. And this event comes back under the pressure of repetition that reproduces it under the form of a displacement, that of analogy and its inexplicable manifestations that sometimes the triangulation explains or loses in the gaps.

One thing to add: when Paul Celan remarks that the new roads taken by Nazism are reproduced by the left and a considerable number of “Jews,” he underscores that the sickness crystallizes a conspiracy of brothers and sisters.

One last thing to add: when Claire Goll appears like an analogy, for Paul Celan she inoculates the specter of guilt – guilt meaning the establishing of doubt. How to understand Paul Celan’s fury to go to battle, to defend himself, to secure a tireless defensive struggle, if not as a desperate attempt to gather the dispersed elements all powerful capable of resisting a suicidal narrowing of life.

Very soon, Paul Celan’s guilt is recognized as unique trauma (besides the original obsessive task, this other obsession: his parents died because he could not save them), besides which it is impossible to conceive another. A woman, in the name of the triangulation and to the principle of the real, invokes the analogy and arrives at communicating
the obligation of catastrophe in all its being.

I think, I write, I speak because I don’t want totally forgotten events to remain inaccessible to memory. Life in its entirety unfolds as though in the fullness of amnesia, interrupted by scraps of images and injuries. And I have resorted to struggling against forgetting towards an ideal of objective truth and an ideal of mythic truth. So there is the fixation by writing of an event and its oral transmission. Meanwhile, trauma, spoken or written, is exposed to use as deformation and falsification. All that continues in an ordinary way and my unconscious lends itself to the adoption of interference and doubtless to the exercise of dissimulation, because – always – at a given moment, the sense of counterfeit doesn’t escape a woman.

Jürgen Serke never covered up the sentence or even Claire Goll’s confidence he helped reveal: “I killed three people: my mother, Kurt Wolff and Paul Celan.” “Ich habe drei Menschen getötet: meine Mutter, Kurt Wolff und Paul Celan.”

Claire Goll’s sexuality, real or fantasy, only exists in relation to literary fusion, said otherwise: with Yvan Goll’s death, the collapse is such that fusional literary life is pursued by all means including the lie. Claire Goll, in 1960, at the age of 70, uses it relentlessly. Until her death. Ten years later.

The press campaign instigated by Claire Goll perhaps and doubtlessly has orgasmic value on the part of a woman who grants, in *La Poursuite du vent* (1976), that she had her first orgasm at the age of 76. She dies eleven years later.

Day and night, negation fulfills itself, that of the criminal doubling as a sick person. Together, they are gods on earth and add victims to the annihilation in the name of divine right.

Faced with the spirit of corruption, Paul Celan gives in to distraction where he seizes nature and the great laws as far as dreaming the idea of nothingness sharing the world, as far as dreaming the idea of nothingness sharing the crime. The spirit of death continues to feed the death machine, pushing Paul Celan to his end point.

Repetitions dedicated to hate and revenge are infinite like the idea of prolonging till the end the mortal anxieties of being, the tortures and a greater quantity of murders striking the same individual. It’s daily life and the horizon during the 50s and 60s in Germany. The perpetual effect of destruction finds in a man a disorder, his life. Remains the impossible crime: that of the poem. That of friendship. Unattainable. How? Because the poet always returns the distress. Returns the chaos. Until the end. Until the end, the language of the poem.

For Paul Celan, is there a difference between being killed and killing oneself? Does he not realize the subordinate relationships where to be killed didn’t distinguish killing oneself anymore, where the cor-
ruption of one decrees the death of the other? Killing oneself regularizes all situations appearing no more like real life.

Who will he be?
Who will we be?
Why is each of us fate?
Time, the fate of time will open the book in the reader’s hand.
I find myself one Sunday afternoon, late July, in Ménilmontant, at Micheline Catti’s and I think of that meeting late May at Gherasim Luca and Micheline Catti’s, a little less than forty years ago, in their double studio from which they were both evicted.

I went to show them my new magazine, *fragment* that I published with the help of Robert Altmann who was also Gherasim Luca and Paul Celan’s publisher and in which both of them were published: *Zéro Coup de feu* for the former, *Deux Poèmes* for the latter.

Today I’m meeting Micheline Catti alone, without the friendly presence of the author of *Chant de la carpe*. Gherasim Luca threw himself into the Seine on February 9, 1994 after sending her one last message. Did Gherasim Luca really write that he had no place anymore, that the poet had no more place in the world?

No, certainly not, Micheline Catti replies. That’s not possible. That was me trying to explain Gherasim Luca’s gesture with those wretched words picked up by journalists and critics.

Gherasim Luca had a place. He occupied a place and he knew it. We had found ourselves in Oslo in May 1985 on the occasion of the first International Festival of Poetry, and on the last evening taking place at the Royal Theater where each poet was invited to read for a few minutes.

Gherasim Luca emerged, truly passive ghost, dressed in black, with a pallor and ghastly thin. He walked across the stage, positioned himself. Just a whole body holding a book to its chest. The book made body. During the whole reading of “Passionément,” rolled, wound and
unwound the book by pressing it against him. He opened it very close to his eyes, very close to his face. His face was dark with upsetting intensity. The stuttering, I mean the repetition of the same syllable, the silence he kept around it and its words, everything led to a thrilling, even stupefying dramatization. The reading over, silence literally crushed the hall. Then the shocked public rose, applauded wildly, ran onto the stage, it wasn’t a commotion, it was a riot. I want to claim the word “kindly”: Gherasim Luca stood smiling “kindly.” Then he left, disappeared, uplifted by an extreme lightness.

There was no night in Oslo. Night never came. Night never came because the sun didn’t set. It was white. Night was made of white powder. The absence of night was such that the houses were cutouts in a sort of white inundation at midnight.

I asked Micheline Catti why this act, this will to suicide. The question didn’t surprise her. I knew she wouldn’t avoid it. She took it with a smile as quietly obvious.

Ghérasim Luca had always been frightened of the Apocalypse he could feel inside himself, and he began to see it around him, much too visible. He let himself be seized by the projection of a third world war and saw it as imminent. It expressed itself in the world, close to him in Europe. It was coming closer. It was threatening him. His internal Apocalypse had a human face, through the Nagasaki annihilations, through civil wars, through the genocides in Serbia, Kosovo.

It is true that the stuttering is indicator or symptom of the Apocalypse. Language explodes, language burns, language gets locked in. Language turns to ash. This muffled threat in him little by little finds his face, through the books he completes with, among others, Wilfredo Lam, *Apostroph’ Apocalypse* (1967) where I read in capital letters printed
across the page: APOCALYPSE.

I believe too that Ghérasim Luca gave it another resonance with the form of the passive vampire. Younger, he calmed it down. He asked from it gentleness, understanding, attention, passivity. That made a remarkable book, *Le Vampire passif*, which inspired method, proposed devices, virtues of coincidence and equilibrium. The two Apocalypses, metaphysical and historical, were joined.

I open a parenthesis. Twice, very strange, the same emotion seized me, first the reading of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and later on reading *Le Vampire passif* by Gherasim Luca. Both books make narrative and theoretical equations, on one side a world of objects (Gertrude Stein) that imposes a protocol of the still life and on the other a theater of objects (Gherasim Luca) which is a presentation of our emptiness and our façade and from it emerges as if from a hat the O. O. O., that is, the Objects Objectively Offered. This object inspires another protocol of the still life, whose undesired effects bring about instability of thought, dispossession, persecution, circulation, granted theft, apocalypse. Both books sanction delirium, deregulation, dream life, by example they manipulate trompe-l’oeil perspective. The object is out of luck visually because it belongs to the life of a dreamer. I close the parenthesis.

The Word “Apocalypse” appears mightily in the books Micheline Catti shows me. Besides the book made with Wilfredo Lam, above all in the books of *Cubomanies* where the visual stuttering announces a generalized chaos.

This visual stuttering that has in essence the body as its site. The body disintegrates, dismembers, displaces itself, reorganizes itself, invents itself in the direction, may I say, of universal disaster. There is
a magnetism that disavows the order of the body, a metabolism that pursues, torments the body with the vision of chaos. It’s the stuttering and the language of a war orphan, a stateless person.

“...In what concerns the stuttering,” continues Micheline Cat-ti, “Gherasim Luca spoke every language. Maybe they superimposed themselves in him. He worked the voice to perfection. He prepared each reading for many months. When he was in that way, in a state of such tension and such euphoria, I would go out. He worked a lot in his studio repeating the same words, the syllables. Do you know he liked to work lying down?”

The stuttering set fire to the Apocalypse, it started in Bucharest early on, in a climate of terror and repression. And the lying down position is a secret I can clarify with a quote from Nietzsche. “The hero, in this state of pure passivity, attains the highest degree of his activity.”

“...Anyway, his obsessive fear was having to go back to Romania without his papers. Life in Bucharest was difficult. He belonged to a group of provocateurs and wrote tracts, pasting them up in the streets while they were all under surveillance by the Minister of the Interior who sent the police to arrest them. It was an incessant back and forth between the street and the tracts, the police station and prison. Meanwhile, it was in a cell where he met a printer who he convinced to collaborate on the review, La Parole libre.”

He left Romania via Israel. In reality, the war happened with the connection to clandestine surrealism, then forbidden. He left Romania with Héros-Limite already begun and written on Bible paper, because there was always the possibility he would have to chew and swallow the
manuscript.

In *Héros-Limite*, a word is a trap, every word is a trap, every syllable and two thoughts placed side by side enclosed Gherasim Luca in an unsustainable vise, forcing Gherasim Luca to crush himself against his despair. For instance, “the lover is the lover never lover, the lover lover forever.”

Why I love Gherasim Luca and what I understood when Paul Celan, on one of our first walks asked me with that second voice, pressing me to respond, “Do you know Gherasim Luca?”

This is a man inclined to transform perfect books written by unlimited youth. That is, written in Romanian then translated from Romanian, written in French. I’m thinking about those two books, *Le Vampire passif* and *Héros-Limite* but also “Passionnément.”

The Apocalypse is what brings Gherasim Luca and Paul Celan together. A language dematerializes, decomposes itself and poetry fulfills itself as though across a syllabic phantom that would be the filter.

“It’s not literature that brought them together,” Micheline Catti tells me, “but heart. We spent weekends in the country in the house at Moisville and in the walled garden. We played volleyball. We had fun, the four of us.”

I imagine the scene in the walled garden in Moisville, Micheline and Gisèle, the artists, Gherasim Luca and Paul Celan the poets, or perhaps Paul and Gisèle, Gherasim Luca and Micheline. In any case, almost a poetics that would revolve around the volley, falling service, ground tackle. I see very well hands hitting the ball, I see very well Paul Celan’s
fist, and Paul Celan’s two wrists brought together to score and finish. I
also see Gherasim Luca’s natural, even spontaneous, feints.

After Auschwitz, poets continue to play volleyball and write
poems.

At the bottom of the walled garden is a barn that Gisèle Cel-
an rarely takes her eyes off during the day. One day, I see her watching
through the kitchen window something in the garden. “An owl is living
with us. The garden and the fields around it are her hunting ground,” she
told me, “and every evening or late afternoon she lands on the roof of
the barn.”

Paul Celan very likely shared Gisèle’s observation and seen from his
direction the owl serene on the roof of the barn. She was going to hunt
moles from the nearby fields. A rabbit appears at the end of the poem,
“Engführung,” whose flight announces the momentary end of the Apoc-
alyse.
Rimbaud and “The Drunken Boat”

Jean Daive: Bernhard Böschenstein, together we are going to attempt to compare two “Drunken Boats”: Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat,” “The Drunken Boat” translated by Paul Celan. “The Drunken Boat” by Arthur Rimbaud was written in 1871, Rimbaud was 17 years old. “The Drunken Boat” translated by Paul Celan was published in 1958 and we have both original editions. Paul Celan was 38 years old. A word about Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat.” Rimbaud is getting ready to leave for Paris and confides to Ernest Delahaye, in Charleville in 1871:

I made this to present to people in Paris. Yes, no one has written anything like it, I know that. And meanwhile in this world of letters, artist, salons, elegance, I don’t know how to hold myself, I don’t know how to speak. Oh for the thought, I am not afraid of anyone.

For the translation of “The Drunken Boat” by Paul Celan, a word. I remember. One day walking along the Contrescarpe Paul Celan was talking to me about the different translations of “La Jeune Parque” and “The Drunken Boat,” and he said to me, “I was waiting for the moment of translation. It was a very long wait, and one day this translation seemed obvious. I worked on it seriously. And this translation,” he said, “is an inspired translation.”

Bernhard Böschenstein: Paul Celan used all the resources of a great poet to create something that is not a servile copy of an original but is an original, new, of an equivalent quality and that could draw from what in the German language can bring something new, innovative, in relation to the language of the original.
JD: I might ask myself why Paul Celan turns to “The Drunken Boat”: what does he want from “The Drunken Boat” and how and in what does he identify with “The Drunken Boat”?

BB: When I look at the differences between the two versions, I tell myself that the theme of shipwreck must have attracted Paul Celan. There is the movement of descent from the beginning. The first movement of Paul Celan’s translation is “Hinab,” that is, downwards, down to the depths.

JD: “As I went down imperturbable Rivers”

BB: And Celan’s last word is “nimmermehr,” that is, there’s a negativity that strongly attracted Paul Celan.

Paul Celan is a poet of the crossing, a poet of the spatial and temporal trajectory. And he saw in this journey of “The Drunken Boat” also a journey in poetry.

There, where it is a question of poetry with Rimbaud, Celan accentuates much more the importance of this theme. We have, for instance, this passage where Paul Celan will say “Des Meers Gedicht,” “the poem/of the sea,” not like Rimbaud’s in an enjambment but at the beginning of a stanza and not at all like part of a phrase but like an autonomous expression ending with an exclamation point. That really shows that Celan changes Rimbaud’s syntax in an almost revolutionary manner. Everywhere where Rimbaud includes like, participles in the present tense, Celan arrests the sentence, creates shorter elements and decidedly more separate, one from another.

JD: Just now, you used the word shipwreck. What’s the shipwreck, according to Celan? Is it literally “The Drunken Boat,” is it the man, is it
the poem or is it the desire for failure?

**BB:** I think it’s important to see here that the depths are explored and sounded, for Paul Celan is haunted by the image of the abyss. The whole of *The Meridian* is a poetic text on the abyss. It’s about Pascal’s abyss and it’s about the abyss of the poet Lenz and Büchner’s abyss but mostly about the abyss where the dead live, the dead of Auschwitz, of Treblinka, that Paul Celan remembers in every poem. So here there is also this dimension of the abyss and each time Rimbaud points to that direction toward the deep, Celan accentuates it even more. Now I can also say he does the opposite. When there’s a taking flight in the French text, Celan accentuates the flight even more. So then there are both senses: there’s the verticality towards the low end the verticality toward the high.

**JD:** He overdetermines.

**BB:** Yes, exactly.

**JD:** Third stanza of “The Drunken Boat.” I’ll read for you: “Me, the other winter, more deaf than the brains of children.” I noticed that the word “children” often came into it.

**BB:** What strikes me here is that Celan adds. Instead of saying “I ran,” “I fly,” “flog Ich.” This moves in the sense of what I was just saying, that there’s verticality towards height. Here we see that the movement is much stronger in the translation. For example, instead of talking about “Unmoored peninsulas,” he says: “and if it was possible that the islands were swimming,” “dass Jemals Inselm schwämmen” – “Jemals Inselm,” that is, the movement of swimming appeared in the translation clearly.
more often than in the original.

**JD:** “The Drunken Boat” is at the same time a cerebral journey and extraordinarily physical. It has a vocabulary that is physical. And with Paul Celan, the translation goes in what direction? More towards a cerebral adventure?

**BB:** Listen, I’ll say this. There are cerebral terms one can’t translate into German. For example, when it’s a question in French of “the ether,” he just leaves that term out. Because there’s a German metaphysical tradition that goes in a whole other direction and that would derail the atmosphere he wants to create here. So he speaks simply, he says “ins Vogellose” and one waits in vain for something corresponding to “the ether without birds.”

This is an example where one sees something that, being able to yield in the imagination’s cerebral dimension, was not preserved in the German translation because of the metaphysical webs that have existed from the time of Hegel and Hölderlin, the poets and philosophers of the ether.

Now in terms of the physical aspect, there where it’s a question of vomit for instance, Celan is more withheld – he uses the word “Gespie,” spit. Less strong.

So I would say, in accordance with the original situation, he can either intensify or tone down the physical aspect. But in a general sense, Celan brings something eminently strong beginning with his lexical choice above all in the compound words he invents. If for instance Rimbaud says, “I who pierced the reddening sky” Celan translates “ich stiess durch Feuerhimmel,” it’s “fireskies.” The word “fire” doesn’t appear in “The Drunken Boat.” With Celan, it appears in many places. Alcohol with Celan is “Branntwein.” So it’s wine that burns. And he takes up the
burning again there where Rimbaud goes markedly not as far. From that aspect, there is a kind of intensification in the sense of heat.

I don’t think it’s a general rule. The act of translation could be in essence deficient if it’s not completed with new treasures and new creative resources.

**JD:** In the end, it’s about a barge, passive, neglected, almost unusable and I insist on the word passive because for me in “pas-sive” there is a feminine resonance, femininity. Don’t you find that “The Drunken Boat,” Celan’s version, is even more feminine?

**BB:** In a certain sense, yes. Because if Rimbaud says I “drifted, when across fragile channels/ Drowned men came down asleep, backwards” Celan says, “I swam,” “ich schwamm,” and “one swam across me,” “und ward durchschwommen.”

Adding the active and the passive side by side, this aspect of crossing, sustained and not directed appears with more force. On the other hand, then, we notice that, for instance, the theme of the dead is stronger with Celan. Not just the drowned, they are cadavers one sees come down “ein Leichnam um den andern.” Not just the drowned but one cadaver after another, that is, there is here a precision in this descent toward the abyss of the dead that goes much further with Paul Celan.

I know skies caving with lightning, and waterspouts
And backwashes and currents. I know night,
Dawn glorified as a flock of doves
And I’ve seen at times what man thought he saw.

I’ve seen the sun low, stained with mystical horrors,
Bright with long violet clots,
Like actors of very ancient dramas
Waves rolling afar their ripples of folds!

I dreamed the night green with stunning snows,
Kiss arising to sea eyes slowly,
The circulation of unheard of sap,
And the yellow and blue stirring of phosphorus singers!

I followed, for months, like hysterical
Cow barns, the swell to the onslaught of reefs,
No thought that the radiant feet of the Marys
Could force the muzzle to the wheezing Oceans!

**JD:** I can say that “The Drunken Boat” is an awareness of integrity, the steady integrity that doesn’t vary and that, meanwhile, is devoured by its interior with Rimbaud. And with Paul Celan, what about this integrity?

**BB:** With Paul Celan, there is a feeling of explosion, of fragmentation, the temporary, and of precarity. And that expresses itself when we arrive at the decomposing of this boat. These moments of decomposition in Paul Celan are clearly more forceful. There is obviously also that radicalization with regard to the translation of everything that can still give the impression of an aesthetic decoration. For instance, if it’s a question of the “exquisite preserve of a fine poet” that can in no way translate the word “preserve” he doesn’t want to. He takes the word “munde.” “Munden” means something tastes good. But why? Because poets are artisans, mouth workers. It is by means of the mouth that there is speech. And that’s taken very seriously. Thus with Celan the word “munden” takes on a new sense. It is not simply culinary pleasure but it’s genuinely what comes out poetically.

**JD:** I’m going to read to you, Bernhard Böschenstein, two quotes from
Arthur Rimbaud.

“I know nothing that one needs to know.” “I am doomed always forever.”

Paul Celan could never say anything like that. And yet, I think that Paul Celan could understand this sort of testimony.

**BB:** Yes, but Paul Celan was obviously a poet who knew all the fates he had to witness and that absolutely exceeded his own. And so he had to be a poet of memory, which must be seen above all in his relationship with Mandelstam.

**JD:** He couldn’t say, “I am doomed, always, forever, in the name of poetry?”

**BB:** This he could have said but would not have said it on his own behalf. He would have said it as evidence of a historical situation, fundamental, of which he was the authorized delegate.

**JD:** Does he use “The Drunken Boat” in order to recount or to fix his fate?

**BB:** I think that it would be going too far to say that. There is, even so, a great difference between the two poets that’s marked here too. I am not saying that he pulls the poem entirely toward self. I can say, on the contrary, that he was attracted by the challenge to go in a different direction from his in imagining this cosmic marine space, dreamed, also in a certain manner of innocence, almost magical, with means that are now his, but meanwhile knowing he was going to give the equivalent of something very different from him. But the relationship to the original is not the same as with “La Jeune Parque” that he translates not long
after, for he says, “I am going to go against Paul Valéry.” The harmonious neoclassicism that Paul Valéry always got almost from line to line, Celan often countered by adding enjambments and dislocating elements of syntax.

In Arthur Rimbaud’s case it’s different. There is a kind of solidarity with Rimbaud here even as long as he is the translator. This doesn’t mean he completely identifies with Rimbaud but no more would he make of Rimbaud something Celanian. I would say that he’s absolutely conscious of the distance that separates them and this translation is full of marvelous findings, yet nonetheless it is also run through by a consciousness that there is a dialogue between two works separated by many decades and by an altogether different poetics.

JD: Rimbaud, with this, “The Drunken Boat,” has become the poem himself, so no more need of others or of God. That is, that there is a nod in the poem according to Rimbaud, one that goes in Paul Celan’s direction.

BB: Indeed. The word of benediction we have here: “The storm blessed my awakenings”. “Die erste Meerfahrt haben die Stürme benedeit.”

When one takes this archaic word “benedein” in relation to bless, one expresses something sacred that reverts here to poetry and that Celan dons like a sacred task.

JD: “The Drunken Boat” is drunk and imprisoned. Is it there also in the German translation: prison by water, prison by the boat’s drunkenness?

BB: I would say they are both there. The word “deine Wehren” – the parapets – is in German much more a word of the fortress, of the consciousness that imprisons but there are other instances where I feel that
Paul Celan highlighted this double significance that you just expressed. For instance, instead of saying, “force the muzzle to the Oceans” he says, “sie Schloss kein Heiligentritt.” “Schloss” that means lock, more than just force.

JD: Would you please read the eighteenth stanza:

Now I, lost boat under the hair of the coves,  
Thrown by the hurricane into the birdless ether  
I whose monitors and sails of the Hanseatics  
Could not recover the drunken carcass from the water;

BB:

Und, ich—verstrickt, verloren im Haar geheimer Buchten,  
Hinauf ins Vogellose geworfen vom Orkan;  
Sie fahren nicht, die Klipper, die Koggen, die mich suchten  
Des wassertrunknen Rumpfes nimmt sich kein Schlepptau an.

When Paul Celan gifted me this first edition in April, 1959, he immediately pointed out these two terms, “Klipper” and “Koggen,” which are nautical terms, quite rare. He didn’t find them right off, he had to do some research to discover them. There were earlier versions where you don’t yet see these terms. He was very proud to have found them. I can say again that a word like “fockstrick” in Celan invites also “verstrickt,” that is, what one uses for a hanging. With another poet, I wouldn’t need to recall the origin of this word, but with Celan I know that the etymology and the elements that form the root of a word are always present, in a more fundamental significance than is usual.

JD: You told me he did some work based on the article.
BB: Yes, very curious to see, for example: “And I saw sometimes what man thought he saw.” In German he says, “Und manchmal sah mein Auge, was Menschenauge träumt”.

That is, that there he leaves all the articles out. He didn’t put in either the definite article or indefinite article in order that it be particularly specific. When we have, for example, “The circulation of unheard of sap,” “Ein Kreisen wars von Stäften, ein unerhörtes Weben.”

There are numerous examples where it’s different. “The puddle, black and cold,” “ein schwarzer Tümpel, kalt.” It’s sadder, this “ein,” than if he had said “die schwartze.”

I noticed that the differences are almost more frequent than the agreements: “Ineffable winds,” “Der Wind, der Wind.”

Now in a poem, the article is not what it is in standard speech. Very often, for instance, an indefinite article, I note this when du Bouchet translates Hölderlin, can be more precise than a definite article. I think that the usual rules don’t function at all in the use of the article when it’s poetry.

BB:

Also
Stehen noch Tempel. Ein
Stern
hat wohl noch Licht.
Nichts,
nichts is verloren.

Ho-
sianna.
In der Eulenflucht, hier, 
die Gespräche, taggrau, 
der Grundwasserspuren.

*

(—taggrau, 
der 
Grundwasserspuren—

Verbracht 
ins Gelände 
mit 
der untrüglichen 
Spür:

Gras. 
Gras, 
Auseinandergeschrieben.)

“Engführung” (excerpt)

Ainsi, 
il y a encore des temples une 
étoile 
a peut-être encore 
de la lumiére. 
Rien, 
rien n’est perdu.

Ho- 
sanna.
A l’envol du hibou, ici,
le parler, gris-jour,
des traces d’eau souterraine.

(—gris-jour,
des traces d’eau souterraine—

Dé
porté
dans l’étendu
à
la trace sans faille:

Herbe.
Herbe,
Ecrive: désassemblée.)

So
still stand temples. A
star
has likely still light.
Nothing,
nothing is lost.

Ho-
sanna.
At owlflight, here,
the talking, daygrey,
groundwater traces.

*

(—daygrey,
the
groundwater traces—

Deported
on terrain
with unmistakable
trace:

Grass
Grass
written apart.)

**JD:** Didn’t Paul Celan write his “Drunken Boat” with a poem like “Engführung”?

**BB:** “Engführung” is in *Sprachgitter*. *Sprachgitter* appeared in 1959 but was written years earlier, in effect, the same period. There is maybe a passage where one can particularly really see it, where there’s a question of what I would call a deportation. There where he’s speaking of the night, “ins Nächttige and schlagen,” and where in Rimbaud one sleeps or is simply exiled, one sees a thematic that is close to “Engführung”: “is it nights without end that you sleep and are exiled,” “Hats dich dorthin, in Nächstige und Nächttigste verschlagen.” Were you deported toward the nocturnal, toward the most nocturnal? This is really Celan’s theme.
JD: That is, “The Drunken Boat” would no longer be a physical, mental voyage but the voyage of convoy, the voyage of deportation.

BB: Here it is true. I don’t know whether it’s true at other points but there particularly it struck me.

JD: There’s the water, the water element which is extraordinarily unchecked and which is blended through and through by Paul Celan.

BB: The drowned in Celan, I’ve already said...

JD: ...the cadavers.

BB: The cadavers are enumerated very concretely. In any case, with him death takes a more defined, more precise dimension, unlike Rimbaud who had experienced death. It will apply later in a dreadfull way, but Celan has already done it for a long time.

JD: Curiously, the one poem, “The Drunken Boat,” allows two fundamentally different experiences for Rimbaud and for Celan.

BB: I would say that romanticism, old-fashioned or rather pronounced, intensified by Rimbaud, does not play a large part anymore for Celan. There, we have something more mature, something more hardened, something more determined.

JD: More stripped down.

BB: That makes all the different between the two periods.
JD: And the two experiences.

BB: Yes, no doubt.

JD: The Commune is not Auschwitz.

BB: It’s evident when for example it is a question of “steiler Welle Martenholz,” of “the stiff wave. In French I can’t say, “I dance on a ‘stiff’ wave,” but it’s there in many passages where Celan radicalizes the side of hardness. At the beginning, instead of speaking of targets, he speaks of “Materholz.” This is the torture rack.


Und gäb es in Europa ein Wasser, das mich lockte, so wär es ein schwarzer Tümpel, kalt, in der Dämmernis, an dem dann eins der Kinder, voll Traurigkeiten, hockte und Boote, falterschwache, und Schiffchen segeln liess.

Wen du unschmiegt hast, Woge, um den ist es geschehen, der zieht nicht hinter Frachtern und Baumwolträgern her! Nie komm ich da vorüber, wo sich die Fahnen blähen, und wo die Brücken glotzen, da schwimm ich nimmermehr!

Mais, vrai, j’ai trop pleuré. Les Aubes sont navrantes. Toute lune est atroce at tout soleil amer: L’âcre amour m’a gonflé de torpeurs envirantes. O que ma quille éclate! O que j’aille à la mer!
Si je desire une eau d’Europe, c’est la flache
Noire et froide où vers le crépuscule embaumé
Un enfant accroupi plein de tristesse, lâche
Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.

Je ne puis plus, baigné de vos langueurs, ô lames,
Enlever leur sillage aux porteurs de cotons,
Ni traverser l’orgueil des drapeaux et des flames,
Ni nager sous les yeux horribles des pontons!

But truly I cried too much. The dawns are hopeless.
Each moon is atrocious and each sun bitter:
Acrid love fills me with intoxicating torpor.
Oh that my keel would explode! Oh would I go into the sea!

If I want water from Europe, it’s the puddle
Black and cold where around fragrant twilight
A crouching child full of dolor lets go of
A boat as frail as a Mayfly.

I can no longer, washed in your languor, oh waves,
Take their wake down to the cotton bearers,
Nor cross over the hubris of flags and flames,
Nor swim under the dreadful eyes of the pontoons!

Once more, he will say it: “Um den ist geschehen,” “this one is
sacrificed.” And it is much stronger than the original that says simply: “I
can’t.” The difference is again very great here. And look at “amère” and
“bitter wär.” The same vowel sound.

JD: This is a very attentive man.
BB: It is very important to see what he keeps and what he sacrifices.

JD: How are these decisions made?

BB: Look for instance at “rotting” in the “rushes.” He says “verwesend.” “Wesen” is a word Heidegger uses, being as verb. “Verwesend” is the description of being, it’s much more than rotting.

JD: But, finally, Rimbaud is rural, whereas Paul Celan, he’s reading Heidegger. They are not the same cultures: earth on one side, philosophy on the other.

BB: I don’t want to make too much of Heidegger here. It’s just the term “verwesend” that makes me think of him.

JD: How does it go from rotting to being? This is wild.

BB: It’s the German creating this term here, mystical German. There is a kind of philosophy, and poetry, and creativity of death in the mystical German tongue.

JD: It’s a mystical poem we haven’t talked about enough. In French. In German?

BB: The word mystical appears anyway: “tasked with mystical horrors.” Celan says: “mystisch geflecktes Grauen,” that is, the horror with him is in the position of the rhyme at the end.
Knocks at the Door

EINMAL
da hörte ich ihn,
da wusser die Welt
ungesehn, nachtlang,
wirklich.

Eins und Unendlich,
vernichtet,
ichten.

Licht war. Rettung.

The poem “EINMAL,” when I read it for the first time, in German, resonated in my whole chest with a deafening crash—this starts in fact with the word written in the infinitive “ichten.” Its presence, for me unbearable, transmits concentric waves that reach all the lines to number nine. I feel an end to the world and the infinity of time in the use of the unconjugated verb I translate in my mind as “an-nihilate.”

I let my translation rest. Time passes. On one of our walks in Paris, I deliver my reading and this feeling of the end of the world and finish my account with the question, “How would you translate this word?” Without the least hesitation on his part, he responds, “annihi-late.”

Much later, after his death, I find myself in the country house in
Moisville, with a few translated poems I need to read to Gisèle, at her request. I am settled in a small room I like for its intimacy and also because, facing the bed, Paul Celan gathered, on shelves all along the wall, all the available journals: *N.R.F., Cahiers du Sud, Mesures, Bifur, Les Temps modernes, Commerce* and *Nouveau Commerce*, Princess Gaetani’s *Botteghe Oscure*. Chiefly. And many more. I read the poem:

UNE FOIS,
je l’entendis alors:
il lavait le monde,
non vu, à la longueur de nuit,
réellement.

Un et infini,
anéanti,
néantir.

Lumière fut. Délivrance.

ONCE,
I heard it then,
it washed the world,
not seen, all night,
really.

One and infinity,
annihilated,
nihilated.

Light was. Deliverance.
Gisèle, sitting on the edge of the bed, listens very intently. My reading seems to create nothing but intimidation, maybe a real emotion, since she has tears in her eyes. She is not crying. She is visibly under the spell of the poem, she too. Suddenly she keeps silent no longer. She says, “This very beautiful poem tells of our last night together, in this room we are in, in this room that you love so much. This is where we spent our last night together and where we made love for the last time. A stormy night, with rain of a rare violence that came lashing the windowpane and banging on the door. It rained torrents, it was a diluvian rain with repeated thunder, constant, that repeated, unrelenting, that continued rumbling endlessly. Flashes of lightning lit up the room. Then the night plunged into sudden darkness. It was the last time, very difficult, I will never forget.”
Latin Quarter, an afternoon in May ’68. Crowds in every direction in the streets with itinerant groups. Groups in all directions. Crowds crossing with drifting groups. Drifting, agitated crowds looking for a center. Separate crowds. Crowds moving in all directions in the streets and crossroads. Streets and crossroads are blocked with people, dark and blocked with scattering masses. Running, not walking. I am the only person walking and watching. What? Surely a fear that seemed to express what I never stop hearing around me, formulated thus: “I didn’t see it coming and I don’t understand.” The entire country comes to the news, to Paris, mostly to the Sorbonne and asks in a chorus, “What’s going on? My kids won’t listen to me. What am I doing?” Big confusion and big uproar. There is euphoria, draws the crowds in spite of themselves. May ’68 and the events follow one another on very quickly. Barricades on the rue Gay Lussac, apparition of cobbles and stripped streets. Plane trees on the Boulevard Saint Michel cut down by chainsaws. Strikes. Demonstrations. The Sorbonne occupied. Utopia strikes. The students meet the workers, the meeting memorable. Each constructs its sanctuaries. Each displays its icons. Mao, Marx, Guevara, USSR, Lenin, Castro, Cuba, Artaud. And the Situationists. How to describe the climate? Effervescence, euphoria, urgency enter everyday life. We call each other. One morning, Paul Celan calls me. “We meet at 4 o’clock, rue Grands Augustins. André du Bouchet asked me to tell you. In short, he is convening us. He wants to see us and speak to us. It’s urgent. Let’s meet in front of the building. We’ll go up together.”
I arrive a little before the appointed hour and find Paul Celan in the street. We direct ourselves toward the building. Smiling. The door opens violently and we see André du Bouchet very busy, really not himself, come out followed by Louis-René des Forêts. They were both holding something looking like a rolled up camp bed. They were accompanied by a strange third character, thick moustache, silent. Everything went very quickly, into the crowd and into the din. André du Bouchet already swept up by a surge he couldn’t control threw out a muffled growl that Paul Celan identified by his roars. “I called you. It’s urgent.” I turned toward Paul Celan standing behind me and discovered a very amused man, very close to a fit of laughter he was keeping under control. And I turned toward the two characters in charge of a camp bed. They were moving ahead, they were already far off, totally absorbed by the crowd. Paul Celan asked me, “Do you see the poet or the stretcher-bearer going off?”

Days go by. One morning I am at the École Normale at the door. I knock. No response. I knock again and faced with silence I open the door and see in the distance Paul sitting at his desk. He is calling someone. He signals me to come closer. But between the open door and the classroom, I again notice a camp bed occupying the rather large entryway. The camp bed, unfolded this time, in appearance the same. What’s it doing there? Why urgent? Who did it help? Who needs help?
Acknowledgments

“Intime” (“Close Up”)
CCP 17, dossier Paul Celan-Gherasim Luca, 2009

“L’espace d’un jeu” (“The Space of a Game”)
In Czernowitz, on the occasion of the Colloque international “Paul Celan et Czernowitz,” organized by the Université de Tchernivtsi, Institut français d’Ukraine, the Goethe Institute of Kiev and the Austrian Embassy in Ukraine, 4-5 June, 1998.

Le Méridien de Czernowitz ("The Meridian of Czernowitz")
Conference, 21 March 2000, in Tübingen, in the Hölderlin Tower, accompanied by the book of the same title appearing the same day (Les Conférences du Divan).

“Les vitrines de Martin Flinker”
Published in the exhibition catalogue for Martin et Karl Flinker, 17 January to 5 May 2002, Musée d’art et d’histoire du Judaïsme, Paris.

“Se tuer à deux” (“Suicide for Two”)

“Gherasim Luca”
CCP 17, dossier Paul Celan-Gherasim Luca, 2009.
duration press