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Foreword Review

Paul Celan: Selections

Paul Celan
Pierre Joris, Editor
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Consider the fateful paradoxes of exile that haunted this poet's fragile yet tenacious lifework. Born Paul Antschel in 1920 to a prosperous Jewish family in Bukovina (grimly ceded to Romania in 1940), he adopted the name Celan after his labor camp youth in Romania (his parents were deported and killed in the death camps). Though he would then write exclusively in his mother's native German, he never lived there, rarely visited. Despite the German critic Adorno's famous dictum, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," Celan wrote the hauntingly surreal classic *Death Fugue* in the mid-1940s.

Yet, his subsequent career was to repudiate its Holocaust-inspired history as a poetic albatross. He re-invented himself as a French citizen, a Parisian émigré intellectual, family man, teacher of German, and translator. After his suicide by drowning in the Seine in 1970, his greatness as a German poet, anthologized as an inheritor of the great tradition of Hölderlin and Rilke, expunged France from his history. He lived and died inside the murdering language of his mother, a de facto literary executioner of the fatherland's language.

Much like Osip Mandelstam, himself a victim of the Stalin camps, and for whom Celan felt an intense kinship, Celan's extreme nervous sensibility was both appeased and inflamed by a language already deeply infested with the barbarities and sadistic obscenities of political despots. His paranoia that the New Germany was much like the old was not unfounded: even his enlightened German audience in 1952 hearing his *Death Fugue* complained that his voice reminded them of Goebbels. In the late 1960s he read in Germany and visited the philosopher Martin Heidegger, but the teacher's stony silence about the Shoah or his own involvement with the Nazi regime was one more grave silent stone, another unbearable betrayal.

As part of a commendable series by the University of California to bring world poets to English speakers, *Selections* gives not only a generous offering of Celan's poetry and prose poems but also essay observations by his peers, as well as letters to and from his wife and son, all grounded in a literate commentary by the editor, a Berlin prize fellow of the American Academy and a professor of English at the State University of New York, Albany.

As for the sadistic poison of the German language, Adorno's fiat was one of fear, that transcendence in language is dead, and Celan's vocation to turn these mute stones into silent witnesses was one of success and perpetual fear of failure. Yet the fragile truth of his last poems speak volumes: "Threadsuns / Above the grayblack wastes. / A tree- / high thought / grasps the light-tone: there are / still songs to sing beyond / mankind."

LEETA TAYLOR (August 18, 2009)