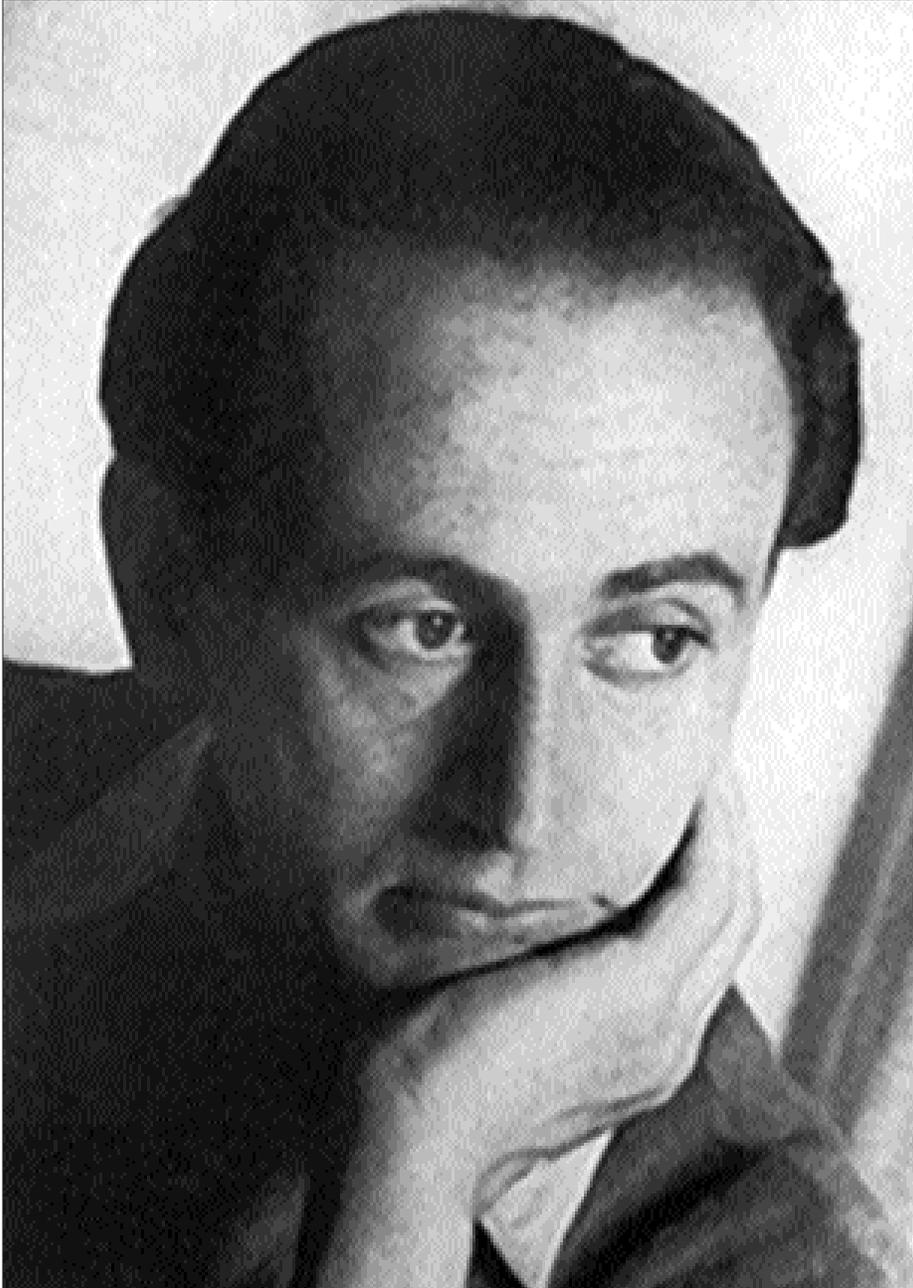


P OETS --- ON POETS



STANLEY KUNITZ on PAUL CELAN and the Poetry of the Holocaust

I WANT TO START WITH A FEW COMMENTS ON THE FUNCTION OF THE POET IN SOCIETY.

“The writer’s function,” said Albert Camus in his 1957 acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Literature, “is not without arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it.” Those are words I’ve never forgotten.

Paul Celan had this to say: “The poem, being a manifestation of language and therefore essentially a dialogue, can be a message inside a bottle, sent out in the not always secure belief that it could be washed ashore somewhere, sometime, perhaps on a land of the heart....”

Poems, he said, are solitary. “They are solitary and on their way;” and he insisted that true poets communicate despite, and even because of, this solitude. The poem wants to reach out beyond itself, it yearns to be immersed in otherness.

Poetry, I have insisted, is ultimately mythology, the telling of the stories of the soul. This would seem to be an introverted, even solipsistic, enterprise, if it were not that these stories recount the soul’s passage through the valley of this life—that is to say, its adventure in time, in history.

If we want to know what it felt like to be alive at any given moment in the long odyssey of the race, it is to poetry we must turn.

I am infinitely indebted to my mother for having written for me, in 1951, when she was eighty-five, one year before her death, an account of her family background and early years that has helped me understand, if not always forgive, this world, and to honor my heritage.

Excerpt from *My Mother’s Story*

Without my consent I was brought into the world in the year 1866, much too early and in the wrong place as if I had any choice in the matter. It was a Godforsaken village of three hundred families in Lithuania in the province of Kovno. My name at birth was Yetta Helen Jasspon. We were one of about a hundred Jewish families in Yashwen. The rest of the population consisted of Lithuanians and Poles, with a sprinkling of Germans.

My father was a descendant of Sephardic Jews who had left Spain in the sixteenth century. He and his family were proud of their Spanish origin. In fact, their adopted surname Jasspon, in Russian “Yaspan,” means “I’m Spanish.” Ever since I can remember he was in poor health, as the result of an incident that happened before I was born, when he was strung from a tree by a band of Polish troopers during a pogrom and almost died of hanging before he was rescued. If my mother had not appeared on the scene, waving a letter of safe-conduct from Count

OPPOSITE TOP: Stanley Kunitz

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Paul Celan 1947/48



Radziwill, he would surely have perished. At that time, the Poles and the Russians were fighting for possession of the land. My father was caught in the middle, since he was a grain merchant, whose chief customers were army horses, regardless of their nationality. He also owned several lime-pits, which were under contract to the Russian government for use in the construction of buildings and railroads. He was a learned man, who loved to give orders, and his orders were law. We all feared our lord and master and would never dare to contradict or disobey him. He had come to Yashwen from Vilna in 1846 to marry my mother's older sister, who died six years later, leaving him one daughter. A year or so later he married my mother, who bore him five children, of whom I was the fourth.

My mother's family, named Wolpe, had lived in Yashwen for six or seven generations; she and I were both born in the same house. The Wolpes were a large clan, who had settled all over Poland and near the German border. My great-great-grandfather on my mother's side was reputed to be the wisest man of his time. He was very pious and could perform miracles. People came from miles around to receive his blessing. As for the miracles the only one that ever convinced me was that he lived to the age of a hundred and one.

I can recall that my mother told me that story about the pogrom very early and one day when my teacher in the 6th grade—her name was Miss Ryan—asked me to tell a story before the class, I rose and told what had happened to my mother's father in Lithuania. When I finished, Miss Ryan said to me, "Stanley, thanks so much, but next time will you please tell us something more pleasant?" I never forgot that.

Another memory that I have lived with is of sitting in the library of our house in Worcester, Massachusetts, ensconced in my favorite green Morris chair with the elephant folio of Dante's *Inferno* on my lap. I loved the feeling of that heavy book on my lap and I was particularly thrilled by the fantastic illustrations—fantastic and frightening to a child—by Gustave Doré. Those illustrations cost me many hours of sleep until years later, images of the death camps in the Holocaust superceded Dante and created a hell that was even more terrifying.

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When I was drafted into the Army in WWII, my conflict in feelings tore me apart. On the one hand, I am against war in principle; on the other, I have spent a good part of my life opposing fascism and anything that resembles it. And I'm reminded of that time by a poem I wrote during the weeks I was waiting to be drafted:

REFLECTION BY A MAILBOX

When I stand in the center of that man's madness,
Deep in his trauma, as in the crater of a wound,
My ancestors step from my American bones.
There's mother in a woven shawl, and that,
No doubt, is father picking up his pack
For the return voyage through those dreadful years
Into the winter of the raging eye.

One generation past, two days by plane away,
My house is dispossessed, my friends dispersed,
My teeth and pride knocked in, my people game
For the hunters of man-skins in the warrens of Europe,
The impossible creatures of an hysteric's dream
Advancing with hatchets sunk into their skulls
To rip the god out of the machine.

Are these the citizens of the new estate
To which the continental shelves aspire;
Or the powerful get of a dying age, corrupt
And passion-smeared, with fluid on their lips,
As if a soul had been given to petroleum?

How shall we uncreate that lawless energy?

Now I wait under the hemlock by the road
For the red-haired postman with the smiling hand
To bring me my passport to the war.
Familiarly his car shifts into gear
Around the curve; he coasts up to my drive; the day
Strikes noon; I think of Pavlov and his dogs
And the motto carved on the broad lintel of his brain:
"Sequence, consequence, and again consequence."

I have never written a poem overtly about the Holocaust because it has been my feeling, especially after Celan, that the Holocaust belongs to those who have suffered it directly. But nevertheless, through the years, I realize that the Holocaust has been the basic subtext of a good part of what I have produced in poetry.

One of my poems I want to present to you in this context is entitled “Around Pastor Bonhoeffer.” My note on this poem reads,

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian whose Christian conscience forced him, against the pacific temper of his spirit, to accept the necessity of political activism and to join in a conspiracy for the murder of Hitler. The plot failed, and he was arrested by the Gestapo (1943). On April 9, 1945, he was hanged at Flossenburg extermination camp. His brother Klaus and two brothers-in-law were also destroyed. Some of the details of the poem have their source in Bonhoeffer’s two posthumous publications, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Letter and Papers from Prison*, and in the biography by his disciple Eberhard Bethge.”

My feeling about Bonhoeffer was that he represented my two dominant drives at that time, my pacifism and my determination to fight to the last against fascism and Nazism. I want to present that poem.

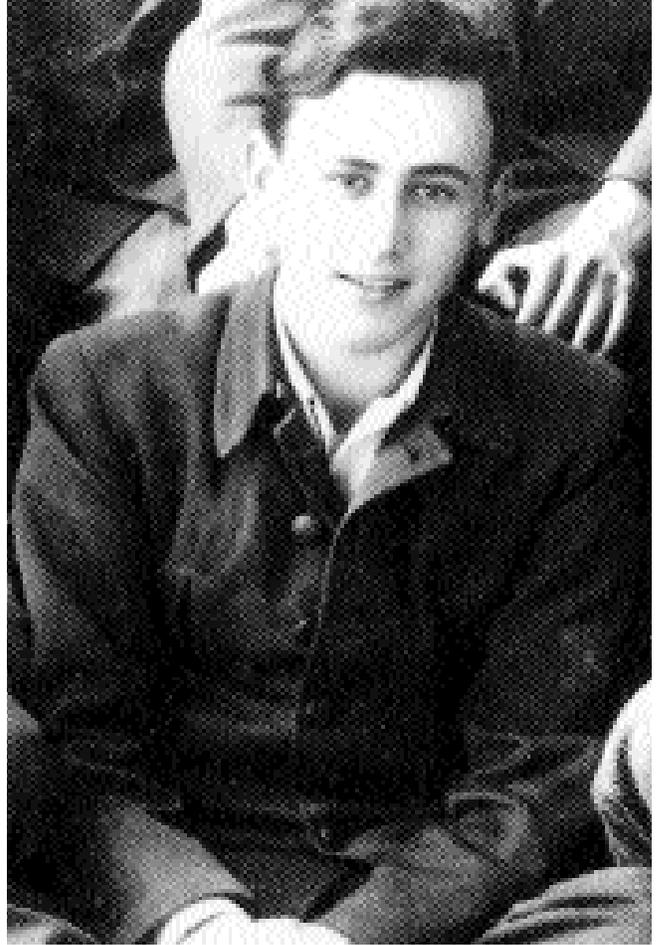
AROUND PASTOR BONHOEFFER

The Plot Against Hitler

Jittery, missing their cues,
Bach’s glory jailed in their throats,
They were clustered round the piano
In the Biedermeier parlor,
sisters and brothers
and their brothers by marriage,
rehearsing a cantata
for Papa’s seventy-fifth birthday.
Kirie eleison: Night
like no other night, plotted
and palmed,
omega of terror,
packed like a bullet
in the triggered chamber.
Surely the men had arrived at their stations.
Through the staves of the music
he saw their target strutting,
baring its malignant heart.
Lord, let the phone ring!
Let the phone ring!

Next-to-Last Things

Slime, in the grain of the State,
like smut in the corn,



Celan in school, 1936

from the top infected.
Hatred made law,
wolves bred out of maggots
rolling in blood,
and the seal of the church ravished
to receive the crooked sign.
All the steeples were burning.
In the chapel of his ear
he had heard the midnight bells
jangling: if you permit
this evil, what is the good
of the good of your life?
And he forsook the last things,
the dear inviolable mysteries—
Plato’s lamp, passed from the hand
of saint to saint—
that he might risk his soul in the streets,
where the things given
are only next to last;
in God’s name cheating, pretending,
playing the double agent,
choosing to trade
the prayer for the deed,
and the deed most vile.
I am a liar and a traitor.

The Extermination Camp

Through the half-open door of the hut
the camp doctor saw him kneeling,
with his hands quietly folded.
"I was most deeply moved by the way
this lovable man prayed,
so devout and so certain
that God heard his prayer."
Round-faced, bespectacled, mild,
candid with costly grace,
he walked toward the gallows
and did not falter.
Oh but he knew the Hangman!
Only a few steps more
and he would enter the arcanum
where the Master
would take him by the shoulder
as He does at each encounter,
and turn him round
to face his brothers in the world.

In writing that poem, I learned that the creative imagination is essentially ecumenical.



I want to turn now to Primo Levi. In *If This is a Man*, Primo Levi's evocation of Auschwitz, he recalls:

Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.

On the subject "God and I," Levi commented:

In Auschwitz I had only one moment of religious temptation. It happened during the great selection of October 1944, when the group that picked out prisoners to send to the gas chambers was already at work. In short, I tried to commend myself to God, and I recall, with shame, having said to myself: "No, you can't do this, you don't have the right. ...Because you don't believe in God..." I gave up the doubtful comfort of prayer and I left it to chance...to decide my fate.

I escaped death and I really do not know why. After my return to Italy I met a friend, who was a believer of sorts, who said to me: "It's clear why you were saved: God protected." His words set me in a state of extreme indignation which I did nothing to hide from the man who caused it. They seemed to me grotesquely out of proportion, as I had seen suffering and dying all around me, thousands of men more worthy than [I], even innocent babies; and conversely, I had seen deplorable, most certainly malicious men survive. Thus salvation and death did not depend on God but on chance. Now we could call that chance 'God.' But that would mean accepting a blind God, a deaf God, and I don't see the merit in even considering that.

Of the 650 men, women and children who had arrived at Auschwitz with Primo Levi, only three lived to return to Italy. Inga Clendinnen, in her book *Reading the Holocaust*, remarks,

That bitter calculus leaves no space for quirks of individual personality or personal history. It was indeed 'blind luck' that Levi, this man we cannot do without, did not fall victim to a selection, the boredom of a guard, the bite of an infected louse—any one of the 'accidents' which obliterated so many other irreplaceable individuals in that artificial world, slung as it was between the twin poles of arbitrariness, and utter contempt for the value of human life.

Clendinnen continues:

The significance of a moral rule or restriction of one's own choosing—never to steal bread from a fellow-prisoner; to struggle to keep clean in the midst of filth—could be extinguished in a moment of irritation, while other actions, however innocently taken, could swell to monstrous consequence. [One survivor,] Olga Lengyel [reported how] deeply relieved she had been when an SS officer on the disembarking platform at Auschwitz consented to her request that her eleven-year-old son, who had been placed with her, be allowed to join his little brother in the children's group. She was confident that not even Germans would put children to work. She was even more relieved when the officer agreed to her mother leaving her to join her sons, to 'take care of them'. Days later, she learned that her loving interventions had sent her mother and her boys direct to the gas.

Here are some relevant lines from a poem entitled “Could Have,” written by the great contemporary Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska:

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck—there was a forest.
You were in luck—there were no trees.
...

So you're here? Still dizzy from another dodge,
close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.

(tr. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh)

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Like Celan, Dan Pagis (1930 – 1986) was born in Bukovina at Cernowitz, that extraordinary enclave of high German Culture, as it has been called, first part of Austria, then of Romania, and now in Ukraine. Sent to a concentration camp in the Ukraine, Pagis escaped after three years of incarceration in 1944. He emigrated to Israel in 1946 and taught on a kibbutz, then moved in 1956 to Jerusalem, where he earned a doctorate and was for many years a professor of Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University.

Here, in the voice of the Old Testament Abel is how he opens a poem entitled “Autobiography”:

I died with the first blow and was buried
among the rocks of the field.
The raven taught my parents
what to do with me.

If my family is famous,
not a little of the credit goes to me.
My brother invented murder,
my parents invented grief,
I invented silence.

(tr. Stephen Mitchell)

In another brief poem, Pagis assumes the identity of Abel's mother, Eve:

WRITTEN IN PENCIL IN THE SEALED RAILWAY CAR

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

(tr. Stephen Mitchell)

And the poem stops there. We are left to imagine the fate of Eve.

One more poem by Pagis, this one especially pertinent in the aftermath of the Holocaust:

DRAFT OF A REPARATIONS AGREEMENT

All right, gentlemen who cry blue murder as always,
nagging miracle-makers,
quiet!
Everything will be returned to its place,
paragraph after paragraph.
The scream back into the throat.
The gold teeth back to the gums.
The terror.
The smoke back to the tin chimney and further on
and inside
back to the hollow of the bones,
and already you will be covered with skin and sinews
and you will live,
look, you will have your lives back,
sit in the living room, read the evening paper.
Here you are. Nothing is too late.



Celan, 1958

As to the yellow star:
it will be torn from your chest
immediately
and will emigrate
to the sky.

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Perhaps the most quoted judgment on poetry connected with the Holocaust was delivered by Theodor Adorno, the German critic and philosopher: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”

These are words that depressed and infuriated Celan.

No poem has challenged Adorno’s statement more persuasively than Paul Celan’s “*Todesfuge*” (“Death Fugue”), a mad, jangling and broken song of indescribable strangeness and power.

“*Todesfuge*,” the iconic poem of the Holocaust, appeared first in 1947 in Romanian, under the title, “Tango of Death.” Remarkably, this poem was Celan’s first published poem. It has since been translated into countless languages in every corner of the earth. It can be compared to Picasso’s *Guernica*, which became the iconic work of art for The Spanish Civil War.

Which brings to mind Picasso’s answer when a Gestapo officer in occupied Paris asked him, “Did you do this?” He replied, “No, you did.”

In the summer of 1942 Celan’s parents were deported to an internment camp in Transnistria, where his father died of typhus and his mother was killed later by a bullet in the back of the neck. Paul Celan managed to escape arrest until conscripted for service in a labor camp in Southern Moldavia, where he worked on road building.

When asked later by friends what work he did in the labor camps, he replied, “I shoveled.”

The following is an excerpt from his poem “THERE WAS EARTH INSIDE THEM, and they dug.”

They dug and dug, and so
their day went past, their night. And they did not
praise God,
who, so they heard, wanted all this,
who, so they heard, witnessed all this.

They dug and heard nothing more;
they did not grow wise, invented no song,
devised for themselves no sort of language.
They dug.

There came a stillness then, came also storm,
all of the oceans came.
I dig, you dig, and it digs too, the worm,
and the singing there says: They dig.

(tr. John Felstiner)

The translator of that poem, John Felstiner, one of the
great historians of that period, with specific attention to
Celan, wrote:

*During [Celan's] nineteen months at forced labor, he wrote
poems regularly while also translating Shakespeare sonnets,
Verlaine, Yeats, Housman, Éluard, Esenin, and others. At
least seventy-five poems survive from this period, almost all
rhymed, many in traditional quatrains. Imbued with melan-
choly, homesickness, and longing for his beloved, and laden
with expressionist nature imagery, they also deal in literary
and mythological references.*

*When he returned to Czernowitz in 1944, he seems to have
brought with him his notes for "Todesfuge."*

*Not far from Cernowitz, at the Janowska camp in Lemberg
(now Lvov), an SS lieutenant ordered Jewish fiddlers to play
a tango with new lyrics, called "Death Tango," for use dur-
ing marches, tortures, grave digging, and executions. Then,
before liquidating the camp, the SS shot the whole orchestra.*

*At Auschwitz too, the orchestra played tangos, and prisoners
elsewhere used the term "Death Tango" for whatever music
was being played when the Germans took a group
to be shot.*

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I want to say a sentence or two about the two names that
appear over and over again in "Death Fugue," the name,
Shulamith and the name Margarete.

Margarete, the tragic heroine of Goethe's *Faust*; Shulamith,
the beloved of Solomon's *Song of Songs*, symbolic of the
Jewish people, represent conflicting elements in the German
cultural tradition.

The version of "Death Fugue" that I will present is essentially
a combination of two of the major translations of "*Todesfuge*,"
one of them by Christopher Middleton and Michael
Hamburger, the other by John Felstiner. To this amalgama-
tion, I have contributed some occasional modifications.

DEATH FUGUE

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
drink it and drink it
we are digging a grave in the sky there's plenty
of room there
A man lives in the house he plays with his snakes
he writes
he writes when the night falls to Deutschland your
golden hair Margarete
he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter
he whistles his dogs up
he whistles his Jews out barks Dig a grave in the earth
he commands us play up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and midday we drink
you at nightfall
drink you and drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with his snakes
he writes
he writes when it darkens to Deutschland your
golden hair Margarete
Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave
in the sky there's plenty of room there.

He shouts dig the hole deeper you there you others
you sing and you play
he grabs for the shaft in his belt he swings it and
blue are his eyes

dig the hole deeper you there and you others play
on for the dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday and morning we drink you
at nightfall

drink you and drink you
a man lives in the house your goldenes
Haar Margarete
your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays with his snakes

He shouts play sweeter death's music death comes
as a master aus Deutschland
He shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you
shall climb to the sky
you'll have a grave in the clouds there's plenty of
room there

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon Death comes as a master
aus Deutschland
We drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you
and drink you
this Death is ein Master aus Deutschland his eye
it is blue

he pumps you with lead shoots you dead on the mark
a man lives in the house your goldenes
Haar Margarete
he sicks his dogs on us grants us a grave in the air
he plays with his snakes and dreams death comes as
ein meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

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Some concluding remarks:

The tragic sense cannot exist without tradition and structure, the communal bond. The big machines of industry and state are unaffected by our little fates. All the aggrandizement of the ego in the modern world seems a rather frivolous enterprise, unattached to anything larger than itself. Number 85374 on the assembly line may have a life important to himself and his family, but when he reaches retirement age and is forced out of the line, another number steps in and

takes his place—and it doesn't make any difference.

The artist in the modern world is probably the only person, with a handful of exceptions, who keeps alive that sense of the sharing of his life with others. When he watches that leaf fall, it's falling for all of us. Or that sparrow...

The opportunity for confrontation with evil was greater in an earlier age. It becomes more and more difficult to intercede on behalf of one's own fate. The overwhelming technological superiority of the military apparatus and the control of information in the modern world protect the dictator and tyrant, as an emblem of evil, from his people. As Pastor Bonhoeffer learned, you cannot get at evil in the world. Evil has become more a product of manufacture; it is built into our whole industrial and political system, it is being manufactured every day, it is rolling off the assembly lines, it is being sold in the stores, it pollutes the air. And it's not a person!

Perhaps the way to cope with the adversary is to confront him in ourselves. We have to fight for our little bit of health. We have to make our living and dying important again. And the living and dying of others. Isn't that what poetry is about?

A writer in the *London Times Literary Supplement* wrote in 1967 of Celan's late poems, that they convey "the tragedy, as well as the hard-won, ever menaced triumph, of a poet deprived of a society (even a linguistic ambience) in which he can feel at home, and a profoundly religious temperament that cannot identify itself with any creed. It shows a poet projecting his breath into emptiness and feeling it return, on the wind or in the snow, charged with a numinous power."

Celan wrote: "In the midst of all losses one thing remained within reach and not lost: language."

While he was living in Paris toward the end, he wrote in a letter to relatives living in Israel:

"There's nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German."



Orchestra playing "Death Tango" in Janowska Road Camp, Lvov, ca. 1942

After intermittent periods of depression, Celan committed suicide in 1970, at the age of forty-nine, by throwing himself into the river Seine, but not until after he had written:

THREADSUNS

Threadsuns
 over the gray-black wasteland.
 A tree—
 high thought
 strikes the note of light: there are
 still songs to sing beyond
 mankind.

(tr. John Felstiner)



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