

BALÁZS KÁNTÁS

Message in the Bottle

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Essays around Paul Celan's Poetry

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Preface –

On Paul Celan's Poetry in General

Paul Celan, originally named Paul Antschel, the German-speaking Jewish poet from Bukovina was evidently one of the most prominent figures of the post-war European literature. Although he is frequently called the poet of the Holocaust, many literary historians agree that apart from his well-known poem entitled *Deathfugue* (*Todesfuge*) and his early, by and large understandable poetry, his late and much more mature, clearer poetry is more interesting for literary studies.

According to Jacques Derrida Celan was one of the most important poets of the 20th century, because all of his poems were *dated*; i. e., they were in a sense separated from the dimension of time and place, reaching some artistic eternity (Derrida 1986: 46). Furthermore, the hermetic and mysterious poetry that Paul Celan wrote mainly after 1960, as it is also mentioned by one of the most prominent Hungarian translators of Celan László Lator, Celan's poetry was completely appropriate for the ways of analysis of the new trends in literary scholarship spreading in the 1960-70s, such as Deconstruction, Hermeneutics or Discourse Analysis. Although Lator appreciates Celan's literary importance, but it may seem that he also sees Celan's poetry too theoretical as for his concepts about language and the expressibility or the lack of expressibility via language (Lator 1980: 94).

According to Imre Oravecz, another Hungarian poet and literary critic who also translated some poems by Celan into Hungarian, Celan's poetic reality is not based on experience, and it can be grasped only from a philosophical perspective. Oravecz defines Celan's poetic language as a 'meta-language', a language about language, poetry about poetry itself (Oravecz: 1970: 292).

I myself believe that Celan's literary importance is constituted by the fact that he managed to create a kind of poetry that did not exist before, although certainly he, just like other

authors in literary history, had his predecessors and sources; that is, his poetry is not completely original, but completely original poetry, due to the continuity in literary history simply does not exist.

Celan's late poetry – speaking about the volumes and poems published after his volume of poetry entitled *Atemwende – Breathturn* is mainly constituted by short, hermetic, hardly decidable poems containing several intertextual and cultural references. The system of references and the recurrent, but difficultly interpretable motifs of this poetry create a poetic world within each poems in which the meanings in the traditional sense may overlap, or even contradict each other, and the concept of 'meaning' in the traditional sense may even disappear in certain poems, making the interpretation difficult or even impossible.

Although, as mentioned above, Celan, due to his strong Jewish identity and his controversial relationship to the Jewish religion and traditions, is considered one of the most important poet of the Holocaust, according to the point of view of most of the analyses about his work it is not only to be considered a poetic lifework about the tragedy of the Jewish people, and his poetry has a much stronger character that derives from deeper, from more abstract lyrical and spiritual depths, giving a more universal message and a sense out of certain contexts to this kind of poetry. As Hungarian Celan-scholar Béla Bacsó states it at several places in his monograph, Celan's poems cannot be evidently included in some category of literary history or theory – the poems has their own world enclosed into themselves, and this world is really hard to be discovered by the readers (Bacsó 1996).

Although in his early poems Celan uses many poetic images and easily decidable references (e. g., in the volumes entitled *Mohn und Gedächtnis – Poppy and Memory*, *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle – From Threshold to Threshold*, *Der Sand aus der Urnen – Sand from the Urns*, *Sprachgitter – Speech Grills*), around the end of the author's life, in the 1950-60s the extension of his

poem decreased, their contextualising elements gradually faded away, and only the nucleus of the poems remained for the reader. In his early poems Celan knowingly and deliberately made poetic confessions about the Holocaust, the controversies of Jewish, the horrors of the Second World War and the social-spiritual breakdown after the war. It is testified by his probably best known poem entitled *Todesfuge – Fugue of Death* that would be hard not to symbolically interpret as a poem about the horror's in Hitler's Germany. However, as Celan's poetry made headway, concreteness and easy interpretability gradually disappeared from his works. Undoubtedly, *Todesfuge* is one of the most significant poems of the 20th century written in German; however, the later products of Celan's poetry from which metaphors and lyrical material nearly vanish may be much more interesting for literary analyses.

Postmodern trends of literary studies like Deconstruction, Discourse Analysis and Hermeneutics became widespread around the date of Celan's death in 1970. Although Celan himself is not or only partly to be considered a *post-modern* author, it is doubtless that Deconstruction, the most known literary trend that nearly or completely ignores the context of a literary work rather concentrating on internal structures of the text itself proved to be the best one for the posterior analysis of Celan's (mainly late) poetic works.

One of the key term of Deconstruction is the ignorance of context, the existence of the text as and independent entity, the other is the instability of meaning, including its permanent re-explainability. If we only examine a few poems of Celan's shorter, fairly late works, we can easily see that they are in fact enclosed structures, poems enclosed into themselves. By poems enclosed into themselves I mean that under one certain layer of meaning of a given poem there is always another, and this way these enigmatic, bizarre poems that most of the times possibly generate associations in the sensitive readers, creating another text, another poetic world, another system of associations within themselves, even up to infinity.

The lean and hermetic minimalism the semantic depths of Celan's late poetry may highlight the fact that in certain cases the number of possible readings can be very high, even infinite. If we have a glance at, for example, one of Celan's emblematic poems entitled *Unlesbarkeit – Illegible*, we may see that the same poem can be interpreted as a poem of the Holocaust, a decadent poem criticizing the given age, a philosophical poem about the aspects of life, etc., and in many cases, Celan's poems can also be seen as meta-poetic works, poetry about poetry.

John Felstiner's English translation:

*IlLEGIBLE this
world. Everything doubled.*

*Staunch clocks
confirm the split hours,
hoarsely.*

*You, clamped in your depths,
climb out of yourself
for ever.*

The original German text of the poem:

*UNLESBARKEIT dieser
Welt. Alles doppelt.*

*Die starken Uhren
geben der Spaltstunde recht,
heiser.*

*Du, in dem Tiefstes geklemmt,
entsteigst dir
für immer.*

If the world is *illegible*, then the poem itself is also practically illegible – at least in the sense that in vain we *read* the poem, we cannot be certain about the whole sense of the small signs constituting the poems. If the text is, according to the Deconstructionist view, amorphous, then practically the poem is able to create new poems within itself – as many new poems as many times we read or re-read, re-think, re-interpret the same text, deconstructing it, dividing it into small elements, then mentally reconstructing it. In the second half of the 20th century, in a world spiritually destroyed, in Europe after the Second World War – but even ignoring the context of time and space, considering the general loss of human ideas and the finite character of obtainable knowledge – poetry does not want to *teach* (docere) anything to people any longer, it does not want to didactically tell what it exactly *means*. Poems rather offer possibilities to the reader for thinking about, creating further poems concealed within themselves, for the continuous revision and re-thinking of everything in the world. In my opinion, it is one of the key points of Paul Celan's poetry, at least as for his semantically deep, short, hermetic late poems. Hermetism and semantic depth can be seen as the poetic embossments of this poetry. Can an artwork have a more universal value if it intends to tell the *untellable* out of the context of time and space, enclosed into itself, creating a poetic world independent of reality? The Celanian poetry locks a poem within the poem, but there is another layer under every single poem, giving possibility for permanent re-thinking and re-interpretation of the same texts, granting intellectual and aesthetic experiences to the sensitive reader that was succeeded by few European poets in the 20th century. The weight of the poem is constituted by the fact that its meaning is not stable, it is not fastened to something or somebody – partly in accordance with Deconstruction, but in fact independently of this given theoretical approach, the poems secede from the author, the age, the culture and the space. It becomes an independent whole withdrawing to its own existence, becoming complete within its own hermetic textual reality within

which the sensitive reading is able to generate newer and newer poems, exploring more and more possible semantic layers. It is true that the universal character of these poems appears in abstract and complex form, and the understanding of the texts may require increased attention and sensibility, but if the poem enclosed into itself is finally able to open up to the reader via the reading process, then the semantic richness of the layers opening up, the productivity of the re-interpretable character of the poems is effectively infinite. Celan's short late poems can constitute the nucleus, the starting point of a potential mental textual universe the existence of which is maybe a prominent cornerstone of modern European poetry.

Due to the multi-layered character of Celan's poetry and the hermeticism of his poems, however, the translatability of Celan's poetry – unfortunately – becomes questionable, at least up to a certain degree. The question whether or not these complex poems originally written in German can be translated into any other language successfully becomes important and justifiable.

Certainly, as every other poem, Celan's poems can be transliterated from the source language into a given target language in a certain form, as it is discussed by Noémi Kiss in her doctoral dissertation as for the comparison of the different Hungarian translations of Celan's fairly well-known poem *Tenebrae* (Kiss 2003). The problem is rather the fact that in the case of hermetic, enclosed poems, the given translation nearly automatically becomes a certain reading of the translated poem in the given target language – that is, we do not only speak about simple transliteration in the traditional sense. In this case, if a translation is at the same time a reading, an interpretation of a source-language text, the question arises whether the reproduced, translated poem is able to transmit the same poetic power as the original one, however strong, faithful and aesthetic a translation it may be. Although I do not want to go into details about the Hungarian philological reception of Paul Celan and the translation history of his poems into Hungarian, since the author of the present essay is Hungarian, it may be mentioned that examining some

of Celan's poem if they exist in several Hungarian translations, it can be concluded that there can be significant differences between them. The translators do not only translate, but necessarily *interpret* the poetic text in their own native language, and in the case of such a complex, multi-layered poetry the interpretation, the result of the translation process is not always the same. The question is whether the poems enclosed into themselves can be transliterated from one language into another, or the translated poem is already another, partly independent text creating new layers of meaning within the original one, making further readings, mental re-thinking and re-writing possible. Is it language-specific that the poetry of a prominent poet can be transposed to the reader with another native language without or with minimal loss, creating an infinite, or at least nearly infinite textual universe of potential mentally re-formed poems? In my opinion, if I consider the philological facts available in my native language, Hungarian as for the translation of Paul Celan's poetry, Celan's poems considered significant or less significant exist in several good translations by prominent Hungarian poets (László Lator, Gábor Schein, Imre Oravecz, etc., just to mention a few of them), and for the Hungarian-speaking reader the answer of the question asked above is that this lyrically enclosed character of the poem, this hermeticism and productive re-interpretable character that can be considered on of the cornerstone of Celan's poetry can be mediated between the given languages to a certain degree. Celan's poems enclosed into themselves are not completely lost in translation, but they evidently change, in a way as they are changing via reading.

And if the poem enclosed into itself can be treated as a universal concept, it is independent of the context of time and space, even of the linguistic context. That is, it can be re-created, becoming more universal, and it can be mediated between different cultures.

However, I do not think that what seems to be valid in a German-Hungarian context is necessarily universally valid in a German-English relationship. The main aim of the present

study is to examine John Felstiner's English translations of Paul Celan's poem. But before I start examining the concrete English translations, I think that mentioning one thing may also bring us closer to the understanding of the problems deriving from the translation and translatability of Celan's hermetic poetry – and this is the poet's concept about the entity that makes it possible for poems to write – *language*.

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Language Enclosed in Speech-Grills –

On Paul Celan's Relationship to Language

It may sound as a commonplace for certain literary scholars that Paul Celan's view of language is dual, i. e., controversial – on the one hand, the poet undertakes the task to destroy language in the traditional sense, since it is not appropriate for gaining and communicating knowledge, information, emotions in the form in which it was thought by men earlier; on the other hand, his aim is to create a new kind of language that will become capable of everything that we expect of it.

According to Hungarian literary scholar Mihály Szegedy-Maszák Celan's main aim is to destroy the traditional principles of linguistic edition, and he considers traditional language use a veil that must be torn apart (Szegedy-Maszák 1998). The Holocaust may have contributed to the fact that many writers concluded that language that had been in use up to then simply became invalid. Many artworks created after the Second World War connected the notion of the so-called *furor poeticus* ('poetic fury') to the linguistic disorder, creating the poetics of silence.

That is, the *furor poeticus*, the poet's fury manifesting itself in the language destroys the traditional linguistic structures, departing in the direction of silence – it is demonstrated by Celan's late poetry by their hermeticism and shortness, they hardly exist, everything that was superfluous was exiled from them, burnt out of them.

Noémi Kiss in her doctoral thesis among others refers to the well-known Hungarian literary historians Ernő Kulcsár Szabó and Lóránt Kabdebó, stating that due to the spiritual crisis after the Holocaust the human factors are left out of the formation of meanings (Kiss 2003: 120). In one of his articles Lóránt Kabdebó claims in the language of late modern European poetry tragedy and irony appear in parallel, using the term *tragic joy*; that is, Paul Celan's poetic language is not without antecedents in the European literature (Kabdebó 1997: 188-212). According

to Ernő Kulcsár Szabó the recognition of the fact that language can be both tragic and ironic at the same time may be linked to historical tragedies like the Holocaust in Celan's case – therefore, the loss of the belief in language and the change of paradigms in literature are induced by history, by human factors, not some external, aim-like progress (Kulcsár Szabó 1998: 69).

It is also Noémi Kiss who reveals in another research paper that Celan's late poems, in fact, cease the notion of narration and offer a chance to the reader to return to a more ancient form of art that also manifests itself in language; at the same time, the possibility and the difficulty of expression cease to exist in parallel – that is, the poem does not explicitly *mean* something as earlier, but it rather foreshadows something deeper content the exploration of which is upon the reader.

In his monograph about Celan Béla Bacsó states that language does not refer to only one thing, but it is capable of permanent renewal, and Celan's poetic language carries much more than it can be read out of it for the first sight. In unusual context like the Second World War and the Holocaust poetry and poetic language step out of usual categories, it lets the reader experience what is there between the words, and this way the creation of meanings can always move into another direction. (Bacsó 1996: 24-32). As for Jewish Mysticism Bacsó also refers to Harold Bloom who claims that according to the traditional view of the Jewish religion the creation starts with the phenomenon that appears in the *self* itself, concentrating on one single ancient point. This notion is *tzimtzum* according to which God is condensed into one single point, withdrawing himself from existence in order to create the world. The unification of the creator and the creation chases humankind into a radical isolation, being separated from the chance of salvation. In fact, Celan's concept of language is very similar – men reaches the state of distress in the linguistic universe (Bloom 1985: 80).

As for Emmanuel Levinas's Talmud-readings Béla Bacsó claims that the reading of the Bible / Torah demands extreme sensibility, but there is nearly no reading that does not deprave

the original texts (Levinas 1994: 46). According to Bacsó Celan's poems also demand deeper understanding, since a given text cannot simply be treated as equal to its message, it only inspires the understanding of a higher message existing beyond the poem itself. On the grounds of Celan's view, language does not explicitly express something, it rather gives orientations to the decoding of further and higher messages, it is only an instrument that expresses the existence of some message, but under no circumstances is it identical to the message itself.

Imre Bartók also refers to Levinas – he raises the possibility that if rhetoric, the use of linguistic instruments following Levinas is treated as the deprivation of words by others, then Celan's poetry can be poetry that paradoxically considers even itself helpless, since it is able to manifest itself only via language depraving other people. However, the evolution of such a poetry demands the cessation of the distorting tendencies of everyday – poetry must be honest, but it does not refer to reality, to the events of our life, but rather to itself, creating independent realities (Bartók 2009: 35; Levinas 1999: 51-53).

Erika Mihálycsa states Celan believes in poetry as an own existence against the alienation of art / language. Poetry can appear only where art is liberated or murdered. Poetry is a step towards the spheres outside art and language, the suspension of art. Stepping out of art carries the possibility of the German Freudian concept of the *Unheimliche* ('uncanny', 'alienation') – language becomes the medium of the *Unheimliche* itself (Mihálycsa 1990).

If language is in fact the *Unheimliche* itself, then poetic language is a kind of own existence for Celan – a state that is outside language and art, something that is even beyond art and language, a transcendent entity within which the rules and limits of human language are invalid. Human language is the *Unheimliche* where men, and mainly creative men, artists feel strange, but it is a state in which men are imprisoned, based on Paul Celan's fairly well-known poem and volume entitled *Sprachgitter – Speech Grills*.

Celan's poetic language is an attempt to get out of the spiritual state of the *Unheimliche*, to go beyond the limits of human language, to break out of the *speech-grill*. This way, Celan's poetic aim is not only to cease and destroy human language, but only to get out of it, go beyond it, granting the chance to tell the untellable, express the inexpressible, reach where it is impossible to reach via language.

In my opinion, Paul Celan in his late, mature poetry became capable of breaking out of the grills of language limiting expressibility – but this apparent destruction is at the same time a creative process, since something evolves, a type of poetry, poetic language, a form of expression that did not exist before.

Even if we accept the point of view of several Celan-scholars according to which Celan's poetic language does not explicitly mediate some message, but it foreshadows something beyond itself via art and poetry, we may also state that the secession from language itself, going beyond the limits of language can be, at least partly, considered successful. Via Paul Celan's poetry a unique and paradigmatic poetic language that had its antecedents, but evidently managed to become original evolved in the 1950-70s, and this poetic language still has a strong influence on the contemporary European poetic trends. This poetic language that intends to go beyond the limits of human language, and in a period of history when the belief in the expressing character of language became doubtful, it takes the assignment to destroy the borders of traditional human language and cease linguistic standards; on the other hand, it makes an attempt to create a completely new form of language that may become able to tell, or at least foreshadow what the old, traditional language was unable to mediate. If this poetic assignment can be considered successful, then what else could we expect from a paradigmatic poet who is considered significant by literary scholars?

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Lost in Translation

Possible Problems around the Translatability of Paul Celan's Poems
in the Mirror of
John Felstiner's English Translations

The translatability of Paul Celan's poetry has been a current problem in literary studies arresting the attention of literary translators and scholars about since the 1980s, not only in Hungary and Europe, but also in the United States.

If we have a glance at George Steiner's opinion about the translatability of Paul Celan's poems, we may see that he approaches the issue with serious doubts. Steiner claims that it is also doubtful whether Celan himself wanted his readers to *understand* his poetry, conceiving his statement connected to the analyses of the poem entitled *Das gedunkelte Splitterecho – The darkened echo-splinter (?)*. Steiner writes that meaning is a temporary phenomenon, and the poems can be understood only momentarily, since another interpretation of the same poem will decode the text in a partly or completely different way, exploring different layers and structures of meaning. Literature wants to break out from the frameworks of everyday human language, becoming the author's own idiolect, heading for untranslatability, unrepeatability in another language (Steiner 2005: 158-159).

In her doctoral thesis Noémi Kiss refers to the approaches of Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin (Kiss 2003: 76-77). According to Benjamin, translation is only the temporary dissolution of the alienation of language; at the same time, historically it becomes more canonised, since in an optimal case a translated text cannot be translated further. Translation is a text that has its own identity, serving for *reading* together with the original artwork, constituting the metaphor of reading (De Man 1997: 182-228). However, according to De Man the situation of the translator is ironic, since the danger of mis-translation, misinterpretation is hiding in every single translation; i. e., translation

itself automatically makes re-translation(s) necessary. Translation is not a progress that has a final goal, it has no final result, but each translation is a new station towards the more complete understanding of a given text written in a foreign language, interpreted by the given translator.

According to Noémi Kiss in case of a translation the translator and the reader evidently have to consider the possible differences between the two languages, and in the analysis of a translated poem the text cannot automatically be treated as identical with the original source language poem, and the possible similarities and differences of the source text and the target text must also be examined in a literary analysis (Kiss 2003: 69). The question may arise how much Paul Celan is still *Paul Celan* in a given translation. Would be a more exact statement that a given translation is the common artwork of the poet and the translator, since the translator always necessarily adds something to the original text, and he or she also takes certain elements from the content and semantic structures of the source text, mainly if the literary translator is also a poet who forms the translated text according to his/her own notions, integrating it into his/her own artistic works.

Jacques Derrida claims that the radical differences between languages necessarily mean serious problems for literary translators (Derrida 1997: 119). Noémi Kiss, referring to Derrida quotes the so-called Babel-metaphor according to which translation, at least the exact translation saving every single element of the meaning from one language into another is almost impossible, since different human languages after their evolution constitute enclosed structures, and the passing between them is not completely possible. This approach is very similar to Paul Celan's concept of language – human language generally has its limits and is not able to express everything, then why would it be possible to *translate* something said or written in a given language into another, similarly imperfect and limited language?

However, if we accept the supposition that translation in the traditional sense is nearly impossible and we had better speak

about interpretations, re-writings of a given poem, it may also be stated that translating poetry itself is also poetry, since it does not only transliterate the foreign author's work into the literature and culture of the target language, but it also re-thinks, re-interprets, rewrites the given work, creating another poem that is close to the original one, but it is not identical to the source text. It raises the question whether or not poetry translation can be treated as an intertextual phenomenon, since the translated text evidently refers to the source text, a discourse evolves between them, but the two texts – and it may be agreed by most of literary scholars and translators – cannot be treated as identical structures.

Hans Georg Gadamer states that no-one can be bilingual in the hermeneutic sense of understanding – one's own native language plays a more serious role in understanding; that is, translation should necessarily be a kind of trans-coding of the source text into the mother tongue of the translator (Gadamer 1984: 269-273). Noémi Kiss states about Gadamer's and Benjamin's approach of translation that Gadamer describes understanding, our universal wish to defeat the alienation of language as a permanent act of translation – understanding and translation are a compromise with the alien character of language, recognising that everything can be *understood* only up to a certain degree (Kiss 2003: 155). According to Gadamer's approach the task of the literary translator is to create a third language as a bridge between the source language and the target language, and this bridge language somehow should integrate both of them. Via this process, translation also becomes a historical phenomenon that makes it possible to understand a given text in a given historical age up to a certain degree (Gadamer 1984: 271). Walter Benjamin's concept of translation is very similar to Gadamer's notion – translation gives the chance to a given text to live on, not only to survive. As the sentences of life are harmonised with the living themselves, without meaning anything for them, the translation of a given text is evolving from the original one (Kiss 2003: 66).

Perhaps the above cited pieces of scholarly literature reveals that the translation Paul Celan's poetry into any language from German is not a simple task for a literary translator, and it may hinder the complete understanding of the texts that they were written in German, in the poet's mother tongue to which he had a controversial relationship and from which he wanted to break out. Is it possible to *translate* poems that intend to destroy even the standards of their own language, heading for something outside human language?

Different scholarly literatures by and large agree that the translations made from Celan's poems, due to the multiple coding, the frequent intertextual references and the obscurity and hermetism ruling between them nearly always have some interpretative nature; that is, the translation of a given text written by Celan also necessarily becomes a reading of the poem.

Hungarian poet and literary historian György Rába states that a kind of 'beautiful faithlessness' can be observed in certain poetry translations comparing them to their original source text, and the translator's own poetic voice frequently speaks from translated poem, combined with the poet's original voice (Rába 1969: 12). That is, a literary translator does not only mechanically transcribe words based on the use of a dictionary, but makes an attempt to decode and understand the text written in the foreign language. Since translation often involves interpretation, the translator has to make decisions – on these grounds, the result of the translation of Celan's or any other author's given poem can be considered as the result of poetic activity, and the translation is not only the author's, but also the translator's artwork that may be integrated into the oeuvre of the translator. A poem can be understood differently by different translators, if a poem exists in several translations in parallel, then it is nearly necessary that the readings of the same poem in the target language shall also be slightly or completely different.

After examining some aspects of the possible problems around the translation of Paul Celan's poetry, now I attempt

to examine some concrete examples of translation within the sphere of the English language – John Felstiner’s English transcriptions, beginning with a few earlier poems by Celan, but mainly selecting from the author’s more mature late poetry that may be more interesting for scholarly analysis. I would like to begin with one of Celan’s emblematic poem entitled *Tenebrae*, which is a reference to the biblical darkness falling upon the world after Jesus Christ’s crucifixion.

John Felstiner’s translation:

Tenebrae

*Near are we, Lord,
near and graspable.*

*Grasped already, Lord,
clawed into each other, as if
each of our bodies were
your body, Lord.*

*Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.*

*Wind-skewed we went there,
went there to bend
over pit and crater.*

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

*It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.*

It shined.

*It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.*

*We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.*

*Pray, Lord.
We are near.*

The original German poem:

Tenebrae

*Nah sind wir Herr,
nahe und greifbar.*

*Gegriffen schon, Herr,
ineinander verkrallt, als wär
der Leib eines jeden von uns
dein Leib, Herr.*

*Bete, Herr,
bete zu uns,
wir sind nah.*

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

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

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

Es glänzte.

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

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

*Bete, Herr.
Wir sind nah.*

The above cited poem entitled *Tenebrae* is one piece of Celan's fairly early poetry, full of biblical and other religious references. First of all, the title probably refers to the darkness that fell upon the world after Jesus Christ's death on the cross. It can be interpreted as a so-called counter-psalm or anti-psalm, since it is written in the traditional psalm form (a prayer to God), but it is turned upside down, since it is the poetic speakers, a group of people wandering in the desert who calls up God to pray to *them*. Probably, the poem intends to express the controversies of the world after the Holocaust and the Second World War, suggesting that the traditional order of the world simply turned upside down, and nothing can be considered as holy anymore.

Comparing Felstiner's translation and the original German poem written by Celan it can be seen that the first two lines of the poem are nearly literally identical in the original text and in the translation, the translator even preserves the inversion 'Nah sind wir...' – 'Near are we...'. What can be spectacular as for comparison, in my opinion, at first appears in the seventh line of the poem. 'Pray, Lord...' – 'Bete, Herr...' in itself may mean in English that 'We pray to us, God...'; i. e., in English this traditional form is not unconditionally imperative, whereas in German it is evidently a second person singular imperative form (or a first person singular declarative form, but it lacks the obligatory grammatical subject 'ich'). Furthermore, the verb 'beten' in German does not only mean 'pray' in the religious sense, but it also means 'beg' to someone without even any religious

connotation – 'beten' and 'beg', since it is spoken about closely related Germanic languages, may also have some common etymology. In the ninth line of the poem, in my opinion, it can be questioned whether the German compound 'windschief' is evidently 'wind-skewed' in English, since it may also mean something like 'chased by wind' or 'hindered by wind', but the translator had to make certain decisions. It may also be one of the remarkable characters of the translation that in the thirteenth line of the poem, while Celan wrote 'Zur Tränke gingen wir...', Felstiner wrote 'Went to the water-trough...', simply omitting the grammatical subject present in German, and it could certainly be also present in the English translation – i. e., the omission of the subject does not seem to be justified, although it may mirror the translator's intention to preserve Celan's fragmented poetic language. In the fourteenth and fifteenth line it seems also that the translator manages to remain faithful to the original version – in German, the lines 'Es war blut, es war, / was du vergossen, Herr.' may either refer to the blood of men that God 'shed' as the punishing God of the Old Testament, or God's, i. e. Jesus Christ's blood that he 'shed' for the salvation of men. As we can see in Felstiner's translation, 'It was blood, it was, / what you shed, Lord.' makes the same interpretation possible, not deciding whether it is the punishing God who 'shed' the blood of probably pagan / disobedient men, or it is God who 'shed' his own blood for the salvation of men. In the twentieth line of the poem it is also interesting that the line 'Wir haben getrunken, Herr.' is 'We have drunk, Lord.' in Felstiner's translation; i. e. the translator even wants to preserve the tense of the original version of the poem – the so-called *Perfekt* is the German counterpart of the English Present Perfect Tense, although little differences may occur; e. g., in German where there is *Perfekt*, in English there may also be Simple Past in many cases. In the last line it is also interesting that although it is nearly the same as the first line of the poem, there is no inversion: 'Wir sind nah.' Felstiner's translation also preserves this lack of inversion with the very simple sentence 'We are near.'

It may be stated that Felstiner's translation of *Tenebrae* is a fairly exact, form- and content-faithful English transcription of the original poem that can rather be treated as a *translation* in the traditional sense than an interpretation / adaptation. The main reason for this fact may be that this poem is one of Celan's early, linguistically simpler works which I intended to use as an example of this period of the author's poetry, but henceforth I would like to examine with a few later, more mature poems by Celan, comparing them with their English translations.

John Felstiner's translation:

IN RIVERS *north of the future*
I cast the net you
haltingly weight
with stonewritten
shadows.

The original German poem:

IN DEN FLÜSSEN *nördlich der Zukunft*
werf ich das Netz aus, das du
zögernd beschwerst
mit von Steinen geschriebenen
Schatten.

The above poem is one of Celan's much later and much more hermetic poetry that probably means a much larger challenge to any translator. It was published in the volume entitled *Atemwende – Breathturn* in 1967, only three years before the author's tragic suicide.

I am aware of the fact that the poem above cannot simply be *analysed* in the traditional way, since it has its own hermetic poetic world; therefore, I only mention that the poetic speaker

symbolically casts his net in the rivers in some imaginary country where someone that he calls as 'you' weights his fishing net with 'stonewritten shadows'. Stone is a traditional element of Jewish Mysticism that may have several connotations; e. g., Jewish people often put a stone on the grave of the dead to express their respect and memory felt for them. The shadows may refer to the fact that what appear in the net are not real, only their shadows can be perceived by the speaker – it can be a reference to one of the greatest dilemmas of Celan's poetry, the incapability of language to communicate or express any explicit content. It can be mentioned German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer deals with the topic of the relation of 'you' and 'I' in Paul Celan's poetry, but in the present article I would rather concentrate on the similarities and differences between the original and the translated version of the poem (Gadamer 1993: 421).

It may be a spectacular difference between the original version and the translation of the poem that while Celan starts his poem with the beginning '*In den Flüssen*' – '*In the rivers*', Felstiner translates it only as '*In rivers...*', omitting the definite article present in German, annihilating (!) the definite character of the poem, placing it into an indefinite landscape. Seemingly it is only one little word, one little difference, but it may change the whole atmosphere of this otherwise very short poem. It is also questionable whether the German very 'aus/werfen' meaning 'to cast out' is simply 'cast' in English, since as if in the German version it were stressed that the poetic speaker 'casts out' his net in the rivers. Whether the German word 'zögernd' is the most appropriately translated into English with the word 'haltingly' may also be a question. It is also interesting that while Celan does not use a compound neologism in his original poem in the penultimate line while neologisms are very characteristic of his poetry, Felstiner translates the expression 'von Steinen geschriebenen' literally meaning 'written by stones' into a compound neologism 'stonewritten' as if he would like to become '*more celanian*' than Paul Celan himself.

After the short examination of the otherwise also short poem it may be established that there are spectacular differenc-

es between the original version and the English transliteration of the same text; i. e., they cannot be considered identical, and their separate analysis may even lead to slightly different readings. Felstiner's English translation has a strongly interpretative character that digresses from Celan's original text, making certain decisions within the process of reading and translation.

John Felstiner's translation:

TO STAND *in the shadow
of a scar in the air.*

*Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you
alone.*

*With all that has room within it,
even without
language.*

The original German poem:

STEHEN *im Schatten,
des Wundenmals in der Luft.*

*Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.
Unerkannt,
für dich
allein.*

*Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,
auch ohne
Sprache.*

The above cited poem is one of Celan's emblematic work from his late poetry that was also published in the volume entitled *At-
emwende – Breathturn*. Although it is also a hermetic and hardly decodable poem, it may be stated that in fact it refers to the task of the poet – 'to stand', under any circumstances, to stand, fight and write, without any reward.

Examining the first two lines it can be spectacular that while Celan writes 'im Schatten des Wundenmals' that literally means 'in the shadow of the scar', Felstiner translates the German definite article into an indefinite article – 'in the shadow of a scar'. The definite 'Wundenmal' – 'scar' created by becomes indefinite in the translation, and via this little modification the whole poem may lose its definite character.

However, despite the seemingly little difference between the original and the translated text, in the second paragraph of the poem the translation and the original version seem to be nearly completely identical. The neologism by Celan 'Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn' is translated by Felstiner into 'Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing', although the 'Stehn' – 'stand' element of the original and the translation are in different places, Celan's original text ends in 'Stehnn', while Felstiner's translation begins with 'stand', but this difference probably derives from the grammatical differences between German and English.

The third paragraph of the poem may show differences in its first line – while in German Celan writes 'Mit allem, was darin Raum hat', Felstiner translates this line into 'With all that has room within it'. However, Celan's original line may also mean 'With all for which there is enough room / space within'. Felstiner made a decision, but this decision is not unconditionally the best one and the meaning of the two lines in German and English, although they can mean approximately the same, they can also be interpreted differently. It is not evident whether the German noun 'Raum' should be translated into its German etymological counterpart 'room', since it may rather mean 'space' in this context. Nevertheless, there may be

no doubt about the fact that the lines 'auch ohne / Sprache' are well-translated into English with the expression 'even without / language'.

Similar to the previous poem compared in original and in translation, in the case of the present poem it can also be established that the translation has a strongly interpretative character, and the translator digressed from the original version at several places. The lack of a definite article, as seen above, may modify the whole atmosphere of a given poem in translation compared to the original text. That is why I think that it would rather be more exact to speak about 'adaptations / interpretations' instead of 'translations' in the case of the transliterated versions of Paul Celan's certain, mainly late and mature poems.

John Felstiner's translation:

THREADSUNS

over the grayblack wasteness.

A tree-

high thought

strikes the light-tone: there are

still songs to sing beyond

humankind.

The original German poem:

FADENSONNEN

über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.

Ein baum-

hoher Gedanke

greift sich den Lichtton: es sind

noch Lieder zu singen jenseits

der Menschen.

Fadensonnen – Threadsuns is one of the emblematic and well-known pieces of Celan's late poetry. The poem is not so hard to decode as several of Celan's late texts, since it seems to mirror the author's philosophy of art. The short piece consisting only a few lines is probably a vision about the *language beyond human language*, a system of representation that may be able to tell the untellable beyond the limits of human language and sing the 'songs beyond humankind'. However, this vision can also be interpreted in a negative way, since it is possible that in the world in which the songs are to be sung humankind exists no more – the question whether or not human beings are necessary for the existence of art and poetry may arise.

Analysing the translation and the original text, it can be observed that the beginning word of the poem is a neologism that probably means late autumn sunlight, but it is questionable in the case of Paul Celan's word creatures. The unusual neologisms in Celan's poetry may be treated as the elements of an independent, new poetic languages in which the words get rid of the limits of their traditional meanings. Felstiner's translation of Celan's neologism may be treated as precise, since the German word 'Faden' means 'thread' in English, although other interpretations are also possible.

It is also an interesting character of Felstiner's translation that the German compound adjective 'grauschwarz' is translated into English as 'grayblack', which is an exact translation, but it may also be considered that the German adjective grau – gray has a common stem with the noun 'Grauen' – 'horror'. Certainly, this semantic fact cannot be translated into English, but something is necessarily lost in translation. The compound adjective 'baumhohe' ('baumhoch' in an undeclined form) is translated into English as 'tree-high', and Felstiner even preserves the poetic hyphenation of the word in his own text.

Another difference between the original and the translated version of the poem can be that while in the original version Celan uses the verb 'greift sic' that approximately means 'grasp something', in Felstiner translation we can read that the tree-

high thought ‘strikes’ the light-tone, and this verb creates a much stronger poetic imagery than Celan’s original verb use. In this sense, Felstiner’s translation is rather interpretative, creating the text’s own reading in English. Furthermore, the last word of Celan’s original poem is only ‘Menschen’ that means only ‘men, humans’, while Felstiner translates it into ‘humankind’, which gives a much more solemnly connotation to the English version of the poem, digressing from the atmosphere of the original.

It may be established that the English translation of one of Paul Celan’s classic poems by John Felstiner strongly *interprets* the original one, creating its own poetic world in English; therefore, reading the English counterpart of *Fadensonnen* demands the analyst to consider the fact that not each translated text can be treated as identical with the original one, mainly when it is spoken about poetry translation.

John Felstiner’s translation:

WORLD TO BE STUTTERED AFTER,
in which I’ll have been
a guest, a name
sweated down from the wall
where a wound licks up high.

The original German poem:

DIE NACHZUTOTTERNDE WELT,
bei der ich zu Gast
gewesen sein werde, ein Name
herabgeschwitzt von der Mauer,
an der eine Wunde hochleckt.

The above cited poem was published in the volume *Schneepart* – *Snow-part* in 1971, one year after the author’s death. It is also

a poem that mirrors poetic and epistemological problems. The poetic speaker claims himself to be only the guest of the world, identifying the world (or himself?) with a name that is sweated down from the wall. The hermetic, visionary world of the poem may even be terrific – the world is to be ‘stuttered after’; i. e., no knowledge can be conceived, communicated by human language. The limits of human language and the wish to create a new poetic language is one of the main topics of the celanian poetry – the present, fairly well-known poem may represent the same approach to language.

Comparing the original text of the poem and its version translated into English it can be seen that the strange tense structure, the Future Perfect in German, ‘bei der ich zu Gast gewesen werde’ is preserved in the translation – Felstiner writes ‘by which I’ll have been a guest’, suggesting that the poetic speaker *will have been* a guest in some point of the future; i. e., the unusual temporal dimension of the poem is not lost in translation. However, what is a compound participle in German – ‘nachzutotternde’ cannot be translated into English with a similar compound, only with the expression ‘to be stuttered after’. This solution, on the other hand, means that the unusual composition of words that is one of the main characteristics of Paul Celan’s poetry is lost in this case of translation, the translation adds and takes certain elements, but this untranslatability of the compound structure derives from the differences between English and German. If we have a glance at the German compound ‘herabgeschwitzt’ which really means ‘sweated down from somewhere’ in English, we may see that it is not translated into English with another compound either. However, Felstiner maybe could have translated the compound into English as ‘downsweated’ which would certainly sound strange, but since Paul Celan is a master of the creation of strange, unnatural poetic compounds, it might even be preserved in English – i. e., what sounds strange in German should also sound strange and unnatural in the English translation, although it is merely a supposition.

Concluding Remarks

Hungarian literary historian Mihály Szegedy-Maszák examines the issue of untranslatability and the chance of translatability in a general aspect (Szegedy-Maszák 2008: 235-248). It may seem evident that in case of translation the issue of the differences between languages and the question of temporality arise; that is, the phenomenon of untranslatability must exist to some degree, as it is impossible to create completely form- and / or content-faithful translations. Certainly, reading the English translations of Paul Celan's certain poems it becomes evident that as it is mentioned by Imre Madarász that in parallel with untranslatability, translatability also exists to some degree, rather it is worth dealing with the question how much the translation of a given text is able to represent the atmosphere and references of the original text (Madarász 2005: 86-88). As it seems to be justified by the translations above, the translation of a given artwork in the target language is an independent literary entity, and the parallel translations of the same source text may not be considered identical to each other either. Perhaps it is not an overstatement that there can be as many Paul Celan as translators within the literature of a given language into which certain works of the author were translated – all translations speak differently, mediating certain elements of the original poem in a different proportion being a reading in itself, and it may depend on the attitude of the analyst which translation he or she chooses or whether he or she draws back to the original text of the poem avoiding the translations. Certainly, it has to be done if a given work to be analysed has not yet been translated into the native language of the analyst, but if a text was already translated into a certain language, in my opinion, the translated text should not be avoided and ignored by the analyst, since it is an already existing reading of the source text that is part of the literature belonging to the target language. I do not think that it would unconditionally mean a problem in interpretation if a given text exists in translation, even if in several different trans-

lations, since a translation may add more aspects to the analysis of the same work. Although meaning may really be enclosed in language, and Celan's complex, self-reflexive, hermetic poems evidently mean challenge to literary translators, their translation, if not even completely faithfully, but is possible and is able to contribute to the success of understanding them.

Although as if some scholarly literatures in Hungary and elsewhere had mystified the issue of the translatability of the celanian poetry, it seems that the hermetism, obscurity and self-reflexive quality, at least in the majority of the cases, can be transliterated from the source language into several target languages including English. However, when analysing a poem by Celan in translation it cannot be forgotten that the given text is a *translation / interpretation*; i. e., it is worth knowing and examining the original German version of the given poem, but it does not evidently mean that the translated quality of a given text leads to incorrect interpretations. In my opinion, on the contrary, the translated and the original version of a given poem may even complete each other, adding extra aspects to the analysis and interpretation. The celanian poetry and its transliteration in any language require specially sensitive reading, but the original poem and the translated version do not unconditionally disturb each other's interpretation, they rather add something to each other, supporting each other's textual structures. A *good translation* (I use this term very carefully, since it is a very subjective judgement which translation of which poem is 'good' and how) may be able to legitimise a foreign text within the culture and literature of the target language, and even a higher, more complete interpretation may evolve from the interaction of the translated and the original text. In my opinion, John Felstiner's interpretative English translations of Paul Celan's poetry evidently added something to Celan's Anglo-Saxon reception, supporting the fact that on the one hand, all texts of the world literature are translatable to some degree; on the other hand, Celan's textual universe, since it does not always intend to be unambiguous even in its original German language, via the

translations richer, deeper, more complete interpretations can evolve than only in German. All national literatures into which he was translated can have *their own Paul Celan* that makes the segments of unusual and richly whirling poetic world sound from different points of view, not falsifying the original version for the readers.

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Paul Celan's Speech 'The Meridian' as a Manifest of Art Theory

Paul Celan's well-known speech 'The Meridian' can be interpreted as a manifest of a complete theory of art. If we depart from the text itself and less from the critical reception, then we may state that poetry, the production of beauty via language, according to Paul Celan, is evidently a lonely and bitter, excruciating activity.

Celan, although he does it in a little obscure and esoteric way, evidently separates the categories of poetry and art from each other. As if poetry, this way of language use of exceptional power took place at a much higher level, as the embodiment of (an idea of) beauty standing in itself, cleaned up from any external factor, outside any system of reference.

For Paul Celan beauty, in the aesthetical sense of the word can be – and here we should think of something similar to words spoken by God, some type of sacralised poetic speech – what is free of every kind of ornament or external reference, and authentic beauty is created in this completely naked state of existence. It is enough if we think of Celan's poem entitled 'Stehen' – 'To stand'. Celan in his speech 'The Meridian' makes an attempt to destruct the hierarchical systems of reference (first and foremost, those of artistic and aesthetical nature), or at least to ignore and / or by-pass them.

As for the idea of beauty circumscribed in the speech, it seems certain that the text can be connected to Martin Heidegger's paradigmatic essay 'The Origin of the Artwork', even because, as testified by mere philological facts, Celan might have read this work already in 1953, together with the other items of Heidegger's collection of essays 'Off the Beaten Track' (Holzwege). According to Heidegger, authentic artistic beauty is created without artificial human factors, without the dominion of technology over art. The result of this creation process is not some static, unmoving content of beauty and truth in the art-

work, but it is rather 'event-like' (Ereignis), close to the ancient Greek philosophical conception of 'aletheia'. Aletheia does not mean some factual truth, it is not an answer to a question to be decided that can imply the dichotomy of true or false. It is not a static fact whose content of truth can simply be checked in the external reality, it is rather an event, truth taking place via which something that earlier was concealed becomes visible to us. Under no circumstances is this content of truth related to the scientific sense of the word, since the truth of art and the artwork helps man to become more in some sense than earlier, reaching a higher level of existence. This type of truth shows itself, opens up via the artwork – for example, via a poem, the artistic use of language – and reaches the receiver.

Heidegger evidently had a powerful impact on Celan's thinking, as testified by the text of *'The Meridian'*. The speech can be read as an implicit conversation with the philosopher. For example, Celan conceives objections against technology and the technicalisation of human society, and these notions can be related to another of Heidegger's paradigmatic essays entitled 'Die Frage nach der Technik' ('The Question Concerning Technology') that was evidently read by Celan, true, only after the composition of 'The Meridian', around 1968 (K. Lyon 2006).

If we read Celan's text cautiously, then we can see that he speaks about 'automatons' at several loci, in a very negative voice (and at the same time, referring to Georg Büchner's work, since 'The Meridian' was written on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize):

"Please note, ladies and gentlemen: 'One would like to be a Medusa's head' to ... seize the natural as the natural by means of art!

One would like to, by the way, not: I would.

This means going beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human, but uncanny – the realm where the monkey, the automatons and with them ... oh, art, too, seem to be at home." (Celan 2003: 42-43)

"The man whose eyes and mind are occupied with art – I am still with Lenz – forgets about himself. Art makes for distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road.

And poetry? Poetry which, of course, must go to the way of art? Here this would actually mean the road to Medusa's head and the automaton!" (Celan 2003: 44)

Celan imagines authentic art as being independent of technology. Perhaps he also refers to the neo-avantgarde trends of arts spreading in the 1960s (here we may mention Walter Benjamin's prominent essay about the degradation of art to consumption and the reproducibility of the artwork) (Benjamin: 2006), together with Heidegger's concepts of existential philosophy 'Technikpessimismus' (technological pessimism) and 'Machenschaft' (the wish to dominate the world via technology) (Heidegger 2006). That is, the artwork, mainly the artwork existing in / via language should be free / independent of technology that depraves the human being, the 'Dasein' and alienates him or her from 'Being'. Based on it, Celan sees the essence of the truth and beauty of the linguistic artwork in its uniqueness and irreproducibility.

For Paul Celan, poetry (Dichtung) is not only the art of placing words beside each other, that is why art (Kunst) is used in *'The Meridian'* in a very restrictive (and sometimes negative, bound to social systems of reference?) sense. Returning to Heidegger's and Celan's intellectual relationship, although Heidegger himself never strictly separated the notions of *Dichtung* and *Kunst* in his writings, in his post-war essays he seemingly tries to define the artwork as an entity outside the artificial frameworks of human society. According to him, it is also a realistic danger that moderns society may deprave language itself – considering Celan's well-known concept of language, mainly of his mother tongue German violated and abused by the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the poet is seeming-

ly afraid of the same, or he even considers this thought as a fact that already came true.

In contrast to Celan's negative opinion about modern(ist) poetry (despite the fact that literary history thinking in epochs considers him as one of the last poets of the paradigm of late modernity), there is a conception according to which 'real' (meaning free of artificial elements) poetry is similar to the concept of the absolute poem conceived by Mallarmé, also mentioned by Gottfried Benn in his ars poetical essay 'Problems of the Lyric' ('Probleme der Lyrik') written in 1951 (Benn: 2011). Implicitly debating with Benn, Celan conceives his aversions in 'The Meridian' against the neo-avantgarde trends of literature like concrete and experimental poetry which, according to him, seem to be too artificial:

"Ladies and gentlemen, what I am actually talking about when I speak from this position, in this direction, with these words about the poem, no, about THE poem?"

I am talking about a poem which does not exist!

The absolute poem – it, certainly does not, cannot exist.

But every real poem, even the least ambitious, there is this ineluctable question, this exorbitant claim. " (Celan 2006: 51)

In Georg Büchner's drama referred to by Celan *Danton's Death* the exclamation 'Long live the king!' is pronounced after the king's death. This absurd verbal manifestation is, according to Heidegger's philosophical terminology, a 'counter-word' (Gegenwort), which is not else but an action deriving from man's instinctive desire for freedom. It cannot be excluded that in this certain counter-word Celan also sees the possibility of the realisation of politically motivated poetry – although he himself did not write so many poems of explicit political content, but he produced text that allow political interpretation, for example his poem beginning with the line 'In Eins'.

For Celan, Counter-word is the manifestation of 'real' poetry, a manifestation of language that is clear, free of interests and

true – that is, beautiful in aesthetic sense of the word, a type of language use that is free of the distorting, rhetorical and artificial characters of language. Celan's 'The Meridian' contains even more radical and provocative elements than Heidegger's philosophy of destruction, intending to re-evaluate the whole history of human thinking. His concept can be related to the pair of notions 'Rede' (speech) and 'Ge-rede' (babble) from among which 'Rede' may also refer to the clear, pure (poetic?) way of language use, while 'Ge-rede' can serve in order to deceive the other and conceal the truth (K. Lyon: 126).

In contrast to Heidegger, Celan accentuates in 'The Meridian' that it is the poem itself that speaks and states itself, not the person of the poet. Although Heidegger states it at several loci in his writings that it is not else but the subject language itself that speaks via human beings, according to Celan, the poem is an artwork bound to a certain time and place – referring to Georg Büchner's short story 'Lenz'. Büchner's Lenz lives in an enclosed, very narrow state of existence, in a type of exile, and he always speaks out of this state. This experience of being locked up, being exiled entitles him to pronounce the truth. The poem exists thrown into, locked within the dimensions of time and space in the same way, being defenceless, and this defencelessness can encourage it to pronounce contents that may not be pronounced via other forms of utterance of language.

Despite the similarities, we may state that Celan's 'The Meridian' conceives a theory of lyric poetry, and more generally, a theory of art that is very different from Heidegger's and Gottfried Benn's. Poetry, as both Heidegger and Benn states, basically has a monological nature. Nevertheless, according to Celan, the poem exists in a state similar to the monologue only at a certain level of its creation process.

Although Heidegger writes about 'answers given to utterances' (Entsprechen) at several loci, Celan seems to interpret it in a different way. According to 'The Meridian' the poem becomes 'present' (Präsens), as if it, as a product of language, became also personalised, individualised, giving some answer it-

self. The poem is 'pre-sent' in the present tense, in the temporal dimension of a certain moment of time, but it speaks out of the present (K. Lyon: 131).

As Celan states, the poem is 'lonely and underway', as he conceives it, being 'en route', and it is also possible that Celan adjusted Heidegger's thoughts to his own thinking, even if he did not misinterpret the philosopher's complex system of thinking. The poem is not else but 'a message in a bottle' tossed in the ocean, sent to an unknown addressee – as Celan borrows this notion from Osip Mandelstam –, and it either reaches the potential addressee / receiver or not. However, Celan does not only suppose some encounter, but also dialogue, conversation with 'the Other', based on reciprocity, realised via the poem. Although the poem exists in a lonely state, it is not to be forgotten that it is permanently 'en route', moving towards someone (the receiver?), and this movement, this dynamism is much less accentuated in Heidegger's writings on language.

That is, Celan evidently refuses the monological nature of language / pronounced words / poems, since the poem, as mentioned above, always has a (potential) addressee and a destination. The poem is not else but a performative type of language use that also has an aesthetical function – if it reaches the undefined addressee, the Other, and it is not only words shouted into nothingness, it becomes an artwork of language. For Celan, poetry is the path of voice in the direction of the "you", a metaphorical meridian connecting two – or more – subjects.

Art is not else but homage to absurdity, a dissonant secession from the monotonous context of weekdays, but at least an attempt to get out of this context. Art is the phenomenon that distances man from his own self, placing him in the context of the unknown, the terrific, the Uncanny (Unheimliche). As if artistic beauty, in Celan's interpretation, existed in symbiosis, or at least in a complementary relationship with horror. With the horror that we, human beings are forced to control in some way. The horror (Entsetzen) and silence (Verschweigen) also mutually suppose each other's existence, since the poem carries so

ponderous contents that are nearly impossible to pronounce – it implies that Celan's late poems written in the period around the composition of 'The Meridian' also show a powerful tendency towards the poetics of silence:

"It is true, the poem, the poem today, shows – and this has only indirectly to do with the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis, none of which we should under-rate – the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence.

The poem hold its ground, fir you will permit me yet another extreme formulation, the poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-here'." (Celan 2006: 49)

Conceiving the aesthetics of dialogue, according to 'The Meridian' poetry means 'Atemwende', breath-turn, as also referred to by the title of one of the late volumes of poetry by the author. It is the return to a primordial, natural state of existence that existed before art, and in a certain sense it is free of every kind of art, since in Celan's interpretation, art is a constructed, artificial formation, and poetry of artificial nature only deceives us and conceals the truth:

"Poetry is perhaps this: an Atemwende, a turning of your breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way – a way of art – for the sake of just such a turn? And since the strange, the abyss and the Medusa's head, the abyss and the automaton, all seem to le in the same direction – it is perhaps this turn, this Atemwende, which can sort out the strange from the strange? It is perhaps here, in this one brief moment, that Medusa's head shrivels and the automatons run down? Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed here, in this manner, some other thing is also set free?" (Celan 2006: 47)

Perhaps the poem is created from the recognition of some danger (Bacsó 1996: 71-83). From the danger that prevents the lonely artwork that is thrown into the ocean like a message in the

bottle from reaching the addressee / the Other, from fulfilling its aesthetical function, from initiating a dialogue. The poem undertakes an endangered mode of existence (Bacsó 1996: 81), even risking to be thrown out of time and space, but at the same time, it finally becomes free. Celan asks the question whether or not the task of the linguistic artwork is to enlarge, to expand the frameworks of art?

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have come to the end – I have come back to the beginning.

Elargissez l’art! This problem confronts us with its old and new uncanniness. I took it to Büchner, and think I found it in his work.

I even had an answer ready, I wanted to encounter, to contradict, with a word against the grain, like Lucile’s.

Enlarge art?

No. On the contrary, take art with you into your innermost narrowness. And set yourself free. I have taken this route, even today, with you. It has been a circle.” (Celan 2006: 51-52)

As ‘The Meridian’ suggests it, we can speak about much more. The goal is rather to create a (poetic) space that is so narrow that implies horror and fear, and within which there is no place for circumlocution.

As for the notion of the author, reading ‘The Meridian’ in its textual reality, less based on the critical reception, we can see that Celan has a very specific concept about the role of the author – although he personifies and individualises the poem, he also claims that the poem is the travelling companion of the poet.

The poem is an entity bound to a given date, and as an utterance it speaks for itself, but it is also able to speak for someone else – interestingly, Celan perhaps does not even question the validity of poetry representing others:

“Perhaps we can say that every poem is marked by its own ‘20th of January’? Perhaps the newness of poems written today is that they try most plainly to be mindful of this kind of date?

But do we not all write from and towards some such date? What else could we claim as our origin?

But the poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks on its own, its very own behalf.

But I think – and this will hardly surprise use – that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the strange – no, I can no longer use this word – on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of altogether other.” (Celan 2006: 47-48)

The poem that is beautiful in the aesthetical sense of the word, the poem that carries and / or generates aesthetical beauty holds its ground somewhere on its own margin, and shows a strong tendency towards silence – it pronounces only as much as unconditionally necessary. At the same time, the poem behaves as the extension of its author (perhaps similar to the Dasein in Heideggerian sense?), and it is evidently searching for the chance of encounter.

The poem is searching for the Other like a person, an individual, and in the sense of the aesthetics of dialogue it makes the receiver to turn to the Other; that is, to initiate a dialogue, a conversation. The poem becomes the property of the receiver, the receiver’s own, and evidently makes him or her think it further:

“The poem becomes – under what conditions – the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation – often desperate conversation.

Only the space of this conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather into a ‘you’ around the naming and speaking I. But this ‘you’, come about by dint of being named and addressed, brings its otherness into the present. Even in the here and now of the poem – and the poem has only one, unique, momentary present – even in this immediacy and nearness, the otherness gives voice to what is most its own: its time.

Whenever we speak with things in this way we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an ‘open’ question ‘with-

out resolution', a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces – we have ventured far out.

The poem also searches for this place.” (Celan 2006: 50)

Celan's statement according to which there is no absolute poem has a paradoxical nature. The poet may rather conceive a kind of requirement, claim, expectation towards the poem that does not, cannot be completely met with.

The poet / reader who follows the poem as a travelling companion goes on by-passes, detours, and although he or she can also reach someone else, as Celan autobiographically refers to it in 'The Meridian', finally one gets closer to oneself, returning to oneself. 'The Meridian' is circular geographical formation that connects places that are very far from each other, but compassing the whole Earth it also returns to its own starting point. As we can read in the final paragraphs of 'The Meridian':

“I shall search for the region from which hail Reinhold Lenz and Karl Emil Franzos whom I have met on my way here and in Büchner's work. I am also, since I am again at my point of departure, searching for my own place of origin.

I am looking for all this with my imprecise, because nervous, finger on a map – a child's map, I must admit.

None of these places can be found. They do not exist. But I know where they ought to exist, especially now, and ... I find something else.

Ladies and gentlemen, I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road in your presence, this road of the impossible.

I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters

I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics: I find ... a meridian.” (Celan 2006: 54-55)

If we make an attempt to read Celan's speech with the technique of close reading, by and large ignoring the constant references to

Georg Büchner's works, we can see that it conceives essentially simple statements – it formulates the aesthetics of dialogue and the aesthetics of the return to ourselves and self-understanding, in some way following the thinking of the philosophers of the German hermeneutical school Wilhelm Dilthey and his 20th century successors Heidegger, and finally his disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is not to be forgotten, as mentioned above, that among other possibilities of interpretation Celan's speech can be read as in implicit conversation with Heidegger. Furthermore, it is also a well-known philological fact that Gadamer wrote a whole booklet on Celan's poetry, finding the poem cycle 'Atemkristall' – 'Breath-crystal' to be the most appropriate example to apply his hermeneutical method of interpretation, also conceiving a dialogical aesthetics of poetry (Gadamer 1993). As we can read it in 'The Meridian':

“Is it on such paths that poems take us when we think of them? And are these paths only detours, detours from you to you? But they are, among how many others, the paths on which language becomes voice. They are encounters, paths from a voice to a listening You, natural paths, outlines for existence perhaps, for projecting ourselves into the search for ourselves ... A kind of homecoming.” (Celan 2006: 53)

Finally, it may be a risky, speculative statement, but Celan's 'The Meridian' perhaps does not only conceive the aesthetics of dialogue and self-understanding, an art theory very close to the German hermeneutical tradition, but, since this tendency is strongly present in Celan's poetic oeuvre, the text also seem to conceive the desire to by-pass media and mediality, the wish to reach immediacy, mainly in the linguistic sense of the term. Basically, the poem is not else but a medium, a vehicle of a message and a message at the same time, but in a certain moment of the encounter the receiver / addressee gets closer and / or returns to himself or herself. The poem and the receiver nearly become one, united, and the receiver is allowed, via the (personified?) linguistic artwork, to glance into a privative, enclosed reality

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within which the dichotomy of *mediatedness* and immediacy has already nearly no sense, since this reality exists enclosed in itself, at a certain level in an immediate way, but at least without multiple *mediatedness*. Certainly, this immediacy might only be an illusion – an illusion that the receiver can experience only during the (short) time of the encounter with the poem / the Other, and for a moment he or she can become part of some higher, less mediated, purer and more essential poem-reality / art-reality: the autonomous reality of the artwork.

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Introduction

In the present research paper I intend to examine one of the very important aspects of Paul Celan's poetry – namely *mediality*, the problems of mediality and immediacy, highlighting how the problem of *mediatedness* by media and the impossibility of immediacy, and the fight against the medial nature of the world appear in several works by the poet.

Nowadays, we may speak about a number of types of media, that is why I think that it is worth examining poems that permit interpretations from the direction of mediality. First and foremost, perhaps it is worth investigating what Paul Celan could think about one of the most primordial media that were also considered an imperfect means of communication even in the age of the poet – a few words about language.

Language as Medium by Paul Celan

Paul Celan's view about language is very controversial, and it has a dual nature. On the one hand, the poet wished to demolish the limits of human language considered as an imperfect medium for communication; on the other hand, Celan's poetry permits an interpretation according to which he wanted to create a new poetic language that is beyond the human language used in everyday communication, even if not ceasing, but perhaps somehow reducing the *mediatedness* and mediality of the world. To illustrate this view of human language, one of the author's well-known, programme-like poems entitled *Sprachgitter – Speech-Grille* may serve as a good example, in which Celan makes an effort to cease the limits of human language:

John Felstiner's English translation:

"Speech-Grille

Eyes round between the bars.

*Flittering lid,
paddles upward,
breaks a glance free.
Iris, the swimmer, dreamless and drab:
Heaven, heartgray, must be near."*

The original German poem:

"Sprachgitter

Augenrund zwischen den Stäben.

*Flimmertier Lid
rudert nach oben,
gibt einen Blick frei.*

*Iris, Schwimmerin, traumlos und trüb:
der Himmel, herzgrau, muß nah sein."*

Metaphors – at least according to Celan's concept – increase the distance between two subjects; that is, they increase the *mediatedness* by language, and it may be the metaphorical nature of language because of which there can be no clear communication mediating messages over the everyday language. If we have a glance at the above cited lines, we may see that the poetic images lack the reference to something, which would be the gist of the traditional definition of metaphor. As it is mentioned by Celan himself, it was the above poem in which he tried to conceive that he was bored with the permanent hide-and-seek

game with metaphors. (Felstiner 1995: 106-107) Although the American monographer of the poet John Felstiner writes that at the time of writing *Speech-Grille*, in 1957 Celan did not yet completely cease the use of metaphors in his poems, but he did his best to divide them into an internal and an external reality. This way, symbolically, the *mediatedness* by language is not ceased, but it may be decreased, and words are perhaps able to speak to the reader in a more immediate way.

Celan's fight against metaphors may be read as an experiment of the clearance of the language and the decrease of the *mediatedness* by language to some degree (Mihálycsa 1999). In the poems written later than *Speech-Grille* the words do not function as metaphors, do not refer to anything, only *stand* alone, constituting poetic realities (Bartók 2009: 29). The wish to clear language from metaphors also appears in one of Celan's late, fairly known poem entitled *Ein Dröhnen – A rumbling*:

John Felstiner's English translation:

A RUMBLING: *it is
Truth itself
walked among
men,
amidst the
metaphor squall.*

The original German poem:

EIN DRÖHNEN: *es ist
die Wahrheit selbst
unter die Menschen
getreten,
mitten ins
Metapherngestöber.*

That is, human language is not more for Celan than a *metaphor squall*, a chaotic medium lacking any sort of system. Some transcendent *Truth* walks down, among men amidst this chaotic squall of metaphors, and it may make us remember Nietzsche's theory about metaphors (Kiss 2003: 112). According to Nietzsche – and it is no novelty for Linguistics – even linguistic commonplaces are metaphorical. Thinking after Celan, the language of our everyday life is an inadequate medium to mediate unambiguous information, because it is too medial and mediated. May there be *Truth* only if we conceive it in a language that is free of metaphors? The question evidently has no adequate answer, but based on Celan's above poem it may seem that a language cleared from metaphors could be able to express truths, and the cessation of *metaphoricalness* may decrease the multiple *mediatedness* and mediality of human pronunciations and experiences.

In some of Celan's poems, the poet perhaps tries to demolish, or at least by-pass the excessive *mediatedness* of human language by the method that certain poems are not written in one of the concrete national languages, but the poet borrowed words from different foreign languages – that is, it is hard to establish in which language the given poem speaks, unless we do not count the words of different languages on a statistical basis. The poem entitled *In Eins – In One*, or at least the beginning verses of the poem can be a good example to this tendency:

John Felstiner's English translation:

“In One

*Thirteenth February. In the heart's mouth an
awakened shibboleth. With you,
Peuple
de Paris. No pasarán.”*

The original German poem:

“IN EINS

*Dreizehnter Feber. Im Herzmund
erwachtes Schibboleth. Mit dir,
Peuple
de Paris. No pasarán.”*

The above extract was originally written in German (the English translation of the German elements also tends to cease the borders between languages), but foreign expressions can be found in it nearly in the same proportion. The word *shibboleth* (originally meaning river, but in the Bible it was a secret tribal password used at border-crossing) is from Hebrew, the expression *Peuple de Paris* (people of Paris) is from French, while the expression *No pasarán* (they will not break through) is borrowed from Spanish. As for the poem, Derrida says that in the text a border-crossing takes place between different languages (Derrida 1994: 23-24). Although there is no doubt that the text of the above extract *is* a pronunciation in human languages, it is not easy to define in *which* language the poem speaks. The cessation of the medium of a concrete human language can also be interpreted as a poetic experiment to cease, or at least decrease mediality and *mediatedness*.

It may also seem that Celan's poetry treats the natural human language as a disaster (Lacoue-Labarthe 1996: 193-213). The poetic word wishes to demolish the limits constituted by the language of the everyday life, and necessarily, it wants to transgress these limits. The non-conventional words of Celan's poems and their new, surprising meanings also serve as the basis of this intention, since Celan ignores the earlier forms of poetic behaviour, and experiments to re-define the concept of *poeticness*.

There can also be a radical notion according to which poetry is not else but the cessation of language itself, and poetry *takes place* at the spot where language is already absent (Lacoue-La-

barthe 1996: 199-200). This language certainly does not mean natural language, since if the poetic word is an autonomous entity, then poetry is not else but the liberations from limits. When the word *takes place*, that is, it is pronounced, the continuous speech is suspended, and the word as an autonomous entity rises above the system of the language, in a similar sense to Hölderlin's notion of *caesure* and *clear word* (Reines Wort). Celan's compound words created only in poetic constellations exist outside natural language; therefore, they may be treated as *clear words*. Poetry is constituted by the word that testifies human *being* and *presence*. This type of word is called by Celan *counter-word* (Gegenwort) in his speech called *Meridian*, after Georg Büchner's drama *Danton's Death* (Paul Celan 1996). Poetry's intention is to pronounce existence, mainly human being within it. The gist of the pronunciation of existence is that although poetry cannot reverse the tragedy of the imperfection of human language and man's scepticism about language, but at least it writes down and archives the tragedy of language (Lacoue-Labarthe 1996).

Despite the fact that language can be experienced as a tragedy, it may seem that written, mainly literary texts and poetry is trying to fight against the extreme mediality and language's tendency to distance subjects from each other. Language may lose its accentuated role and become one medium among many, and maybe it is language's main tragedy (Lőrincz 2003: 164). That is why I think that it is worth examining how written texts are represented in Celan's poetry as media.

Writing as Medium in Paul Celan's poetry

Writing and written texts, literary texts within them are recurring motifs in Paul Celan's poetry, and writing seems to appear a somewhat clearer medium than any other one.

Thinking with Gadamer, knowing Celan's cycle called *Atemkristall – Breath-crystal* the poem can be the medium of the encounter of "I" and "You" (Gadamer 1993). Although a poem

is a medium consisting of language, the written text is evidently beyond the spoken language, since it is more imperishable – and at the same time, more material. This materiality, however, implies that a written text can place itself outside of its own historical existence, and a literary work may become a classical work (Gadamer 1984) that is historical, past and present at the same time – a material, that is, mediated entity, but at the same time existing outside the dimension of time, becoming immediate and in some sense transcendent.

Derrida highlights the primacy of the medium of writing and, despite the Saussurean paradigm, its original nature that may have been existed even before the appearance of language (Derrida 1991: 21-113). For Celan as a poet, writing is evidently a primary medium, several poems by author refer to it, and although he apparently does not believe in the exquisite capability of mediation of language, following Derrida's thoughts it is imaginable that poetry / poetic texts can function as media beyond the spoken language, as according to Derrida writing can express any message much more clearly than a spoken text.

Poetry is the possible medium of the expression of superior messages. The truth value of the these messages may remain undistorted, and beyond all of this we may think about non-linguistic, electronic and optical media, to which Celan's well-known poem entitled *Fadensonnen – Threadsuns* may refer (I will deal with it in detail later on).

One of Celan's late poems entitled *Das Wort Zur-Tiefe-Gehn – The word of in-depth-going* can also be interesting for us, since it contains strong references to the motif of writing:

English translation:

THE WORD OF IN-DEPTH-GOING

that we have read.

The years, the words, since then.

We are still the same.

*You know, the space is endless,
you know, you do not need to fly,
you know, what wrote itself in your eyes,
deepens the depths to us.*

The original German poem:

DAS WORT VOM ZUR-TIEFE-GEHN

das wir gelesen haben.

Die Jahre, die Worte seither.

Wir sind es noch immer.

*Weißt du, der Raum ist unendlich,
weißt du, du brauchst nicht zu fliegen,
weißt du, was sich in dein Aug schrieb,
vertieft uns die Tiefe.*

In the closing lines of the poem something is *written*, writes itself to the poetic addressee, and this undefined entity *deepens the depths* (vertieft ... die Tiefe); that is, it is able to open up deeper spheres of sense. Eye is the medium of sight – based on the last verse of the poem above, we may conclude that writing, written text is a phenomenon that *written in the eyes of someone* is able to mediate messages that may not be mediated by spoken language. The writing of the text into the eye is an important motif, because one decodes any text through one's eye. Writing, written texts are primarily optical media which we are able to decode based on our sight.

We may even risk the statement that human life is organised by linearity and continuity because of the continuity of phonetic writing systems (McLuhan 1962: 47). Starting from this thesis of McLuhan we may presume an opposition between verbal and written culture, just like between visual and acoustic media.

Certainly, it is worth mentioning that one of the monographers of McLuhan completely doubts that writing would be a pri-

marily visual medium, since it can operate as a reflected sight if the reader, for example, reads foreign texts, and these times he or she comprehends the meaning of the text without decoding the form (Miller 1971: 10). The phonetic alphabet does not only separate the sight and the sound, but also separates each meaning from the phonemes signed by the letters, which results in meaningless letters referring to meaningless phonemes (McLuhan 1962).

Considering the same problem, we may cite George Steiner, according to whom the system of the phonetic alphabet and the printing that uses moveable letters based on it are not metaphysical inventions that are able to express transcendent messages – the reasons for their inventions is to be sought in the linear structures of the syntax of Indo-European languages (Steiner 1998: 253-257). However, this way writing would be degraded to a completely material level, while literature and literary texts may be able to express transcendent messages, even if the medium containing the message is physically tangible. As McLuhan states it, it is possible that writing makes texts uniform, but this uniformity concerns only the physical appearance, the medium of the work of art, but the artwork itself is able to remain unique.

Among others Walter J. Ong deals with the history and spread of printing and with the dominance of sight that in the history of humanity gradually replaced the dominance of hearing (Ong 1998: 245-269). Due to printing one has a different relation to texts already written by someone, since although handwritten texts counted as irreproducible, unique objects, in some cases artworks created by their author, printed texts are distanced from their author, are uniform in some sense, and can be reproduced in an unlimited number. Speaking about lyric poetry this revolution can lead to the conclusion that certain literary texts are able to mediate their complete message only in a printed form – for example, let us just think of the typographic image poems by E. E. Cummings. Apart from handwritten texts, printed texts can be treated as finished works, since they cannot be written any further. As for Paul Celan's poetry, it may have

importance in the case of the late, hermetic poems by the author – these short poems consisting only of a few lines or words in many cases are evidently finished texts, as for their printed form. In Celan's work even punctuation marks play an important role and may modify the opportunities of interpretation. Some poems, as Derrida emphasises, are even *dated*, and the appearance of the date in some editions below the printed poem may also accentuate their finished character (Derrida 1994: 3-74).

Gadamer emphasises that written, literary texts can have some specific truth value. According to the traditional definitions, a text is poetic if it lacks the factor justifying the truth value of the utterance (Gadamer 1994: 188-201). Literary / poetic texts can be adequately *heard* only by the so-called interior ear. However, when Gadamer speaks about the interpretation of an artwork, he metaphorises it as *reading*. All artworks in the world must be *read* so that they should become *present* in the Heideggerian sense. As for Paul Celan's poems, we may state that a poetic text always carries some message and has some truth value – even if in a negative way. In Celan's case, the message is perhaps pronounced by its *withdrawal*, its negative form of pronunciation. In the 20th century literature a new norm of truth appeared that belongs to the essence of poetry (Gadamer 1994: 200). Celan's poems tell the truth to the reader in a way that by their hermetism, hard interpretability and self-enclosed nature *withdraw* themselves from the reader and from the word. The truth is expressed in a negative form, seemingly withdrawing itself from the poem, not explicitly stating itself. Connected to the metaphor according to which the whole understanding of the world is not else but *reading*, it may be worth having a glance at one of Celan's late poems entitled *Unlesbarkeit – Illegible*:

John Felstiner's English translation:

ILLEGIBLE *this*
world. Everything doubled.

*Staunch clocks
confirm the split hour,
hoarsely.*

*You, clamped in your depths,
climb out of yourself
for ever.*

The original German poem:

UNLESBARKEIT *dieser*
Welt. Alles doppelt.

*Die starken Uhren
geben der Spaltstunde recht,
heiser.*

*Du, in dein Tiefstes geklemmt,
entsteigst dir
für immer.*

Based on this poem the *illegibility of the world* means that things, phenomena of the world in their complex relations cannot or can hardly be interpreted, understood in any way. The nature of all phenomena is *doubled*, on the one hand, they are visible and tangible, but there must be some hidden essence behind everything – and this hidden essence, this *behind* is not reachable or tangible. The only way to *read* the world, says Celan poem, may be that the subject should *climb out of oneself*, alienates oneself from one's own identity. In the state of this ecstasy one may experience the world in a more immediate, deeper way, at least in the world of Celan's poem. It is, certainly, only one of the possible interpretations of the poem above, and it can be acceptable only in a poetic context, since it contradicts the hermeneutical principle according to

which no form of understanding is possible without mediation and mediality.

Perhaps it is an acceptable reading of the text that literature, the literary text is some kind of partaking in some experience that would otherwise finally deny us itself. The art of the past, due to mediality and material representation, may serve the needs of the men of the present (Stierle 1996: 286). Following Gadamer, it is possible only through media – one cannot step out of historical time, and one's existence in time has its end. Certain artworks can become permanent within time, becoming classic works, and – even if it is not an adequate statement within scientific frameworks – they may place themselves out of space and time, becoming eternal.

Literary text can be an eminent example of the phenomenon when something is not an answer to some question, but the representation of real things within imaginary frames. Lyric poetry may be the best example of the often debated relationship of artworks and media. Poetry can also be interpreted as the transgression between the schemas of literary genres (Stierle 1996: 270). A literary text through the written / printed material mediates much more towards the reader than just itself. The “You” appearing in lyric poems, the addressee of a given text can always refer to several subjects, can have an inter-subjective character. Considering Celan's late poems often referring to themselves, it can be an interpretation that not simply the poetic speaker speaks to the reader / addressee, but the text becomes the speaker itself, and this way, the degree of *mediatedness* between speaker and addressee may be reduced. Even if the text of a poem is a phenomenon of language, something mediated by the medium of language, the artwork-character and literariness of the work fills the whole medium. After McLuhan's notion, in a poem the message and the medium may be able to become one, and speak to the addressee in a more immediate and less mediated manner, even if mediality cannot be completely ceased. However, it seems that poetry, and in the present case Celan's hermetic poetry makes an attempt to cease the mediated nature of reality.

Possible References to Optical and Electronic Media in Celan's Poetry in the Mirror of the Poem *Fadensonnen* – *Threadsunns*

As stated above, writing, written and printed texts can be treated as optical media, it is only a question of approach. Paul Celan's poems permit the interpretation according to which written texts may be considered as a kind of primary medium, at least for the poet, and written texts are able to mediate and archive information and meanings which are lost or incompletely mediated in spoken language.

One of the fairly well-known poems by Celan may refer among others to the technicalising culture and optical and electronic media of our present. This poem is called *Fadensonnen* – *Threadsunns*.

John Felstine's English translation:

THREADSUNS

over the grayblack wasteness.

A tree-

high thought

strikes the light-tone: there are

still songs to sing beyond

humankind.

The original German poem:

FADENSONNEN

über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.

Ein baum-

hoher Gedanke

greift sich den Lichtton: es sind

noch Lieder zu singen jenseits

der Menschen.

The above poem, similarly to other minimalist and hermetic poems by Celan, permits several possible interpretations, even if the number of possible readings is not endless. The text consisting of only seven lines turned the attention of literary scholars to itself a number of times during its history of reception.. We may presume that the text speaks about not more than the transcendent character of poetry, and the *songs to sing beyond humankind* refer to transcendent meanings that cannot be mediated by everyday language, only by art, namely poetry (Gadamer 1997: 112). In parallel the poem permits an ironic interpretation, according to which nothing more exists *beyond humankind*, reaching the transcendent in any way is impossible, and the poetic speaker is only thinking about it in an ironic manner (Kiss 2003: 175-177), and this way under no circumstances can we take the statement of the last line serious.

The phrase *beyond humankind* and the songs sung there / from there may refer to the transcendent, metaphysical world beyond the visible universe (either the world of platonic ideas or the underworld in the religious sense), but it is also possible that this *beyond* is to be understood in time, in an age from where *humankind* has already disappeared in the physical sense.

Is it possible that Celan's poem does not only refer to mystical, transcendent entities and meanings, but also to the quickly evolving technical media of the poet's own age? It cannot be decided whether this interpretation is legitimate or arbitrary, but if we read Celan's poetry from the direction of mediality and *mediatedness*, it can evidently prove an interesting approach.

Examining the opening line of the poem the poetic text makes the reader *see threadsuns* (the sun's radiation through the clouds?) over a certain *grayblack wasteness*. A landscape is presented to the reader; that is, the poetic text is based on the sight, the imaginary sight created by the power of the words before the eyes of the reader. As we read the text further, we may *read a tree-high human thought that strikes the light-tone*, which is an acoustic and optical medium at the same time. Light-tone, as John Felstiner translates it, *Lichtton* in German is not Celan's

neologism, but an existing technical term used in film-making; that is, the name of an optical medium.

The technique called *Lichtton*, namely *Lichttonverfahren* in German, translated in English as *sound-on-film* (apart from Felstiner's possible misunderstanding / poetic interpretation of the text) refers to one of the oldest film-making technologies. It implies a class of sound film processes where the sound accompanying picture is physically recorded onto photographic film, usually, but not always, the same strip of film carrying the picture, and this process did not count as a very new technology even in Celan's age, in the middle of the 20th century. As the poem suggests, the human thought is *recorded on film* – mediated by light, an optical medium, and sound, an acoustic medium at the same time. The dual usage of these media may also make us remember the more developed technical media of the present days, for example DVD-player, television or the multi-medial, virtual world of the internet. Is it possible that this *striking of the light-tone* is, as a matter of fact, equal to the *songs beyond humankind*? The mystery of the connection between the opening and the closing lines of the poem may be solved by this interpretation.

Medial cultural techniques and the incredibly quick development of electronic technical media in the 20th century provided completely new types of experience to people, and in the modern age it also led to the radical change and re-formation of poetry (Ernő Kulcsár Szabó 2004: 166-178). Mechanical archiving systems and discourse networks were invented, discourses multiplied themselves, and it is not clear at all to whom messages – if we can still speak about messages at all – are addressed in the seemingly chaotic context of human culture that is mediated multiple times. Medial changes also caused changes in the field of literature, and Celan's poem which has been interpreted many times, may be considered as the imprint of these changes.

It is Friedrich Kittler who states that no sense is possible without some kind of physical carrier, medium; that is, our human world and culture are necessarily mediated and medial.

However, the notion of noise introduced by Shannon nearly always enters the process of mediation, disturbing factors never can be excluded (Kittler 2005: 455-474). Poetry is maybe one of the clearest manifestations of language, a use of language that in principle should not be disturbed by any noise. The gist of poetry is that it creates its elements as self-referential elements, and it was the well-known model of communication by Jakobson that increased the distance between sign and noise as large as possible. Poetry is a medium, a form of communication that defends itself against disturbing factors called *noises*. If we consider the hermetic poetics of Celan's works and their wish to place themselves out of space and time, out of all networks that can be disturbed by noises, then it can be interpreted as a wish for a kind of immediacy.

Despite all of this, nowadays, numberless kinds of noise shadow the communication in our culture. Today noise can also be technically manipulated, and it is even used to mediate secret, encoded messages, as it can be observed in secret technologies of military communication (Kittler 2005). The relationship between noise and sign has been gradually blurred since it became possible to manipulate their relationship and since the mathematically based communication systems became able to change the nature of noise. It may even lead to the conclusion that it is not certain at all that the addressee of certain messages can be called *man*. By and large it seems to be compatible with the possible interpretation of Celan's poem according to which the addressee of the songs that are sung *beyond humankind* we necessarily cannot call man / human.

The conquest of the electronic and optical media and the strong tendency of technicalisation in our society make it possible to conclude that we can gain knowledge about our own senses only via media. Art and technical media can serve the goal to deceive human senses. The technical media of our days, similarly to Celan's poetry and the above cited poems, create fictional worlds, illusion. Furthermore, in some cases this illusion may be so perfect that even the definition of *reality* becomes

questionable (Kittler 2005: 7-40). These medium are first and foremost optical, and only secondly acoustic, since for the man of the present day the sight, the vision is becoming more and more primary.

Optical and electronic media, compared to the historical past, treat symbolic contents in a completely new manner. While the human body in its own materiality still belongs to the (physical) reality, media are more and more becoming the embodiment of the imaginary, the unreal existence and bring this unreality closer and closer to man. Paul Celan's above cited poem may also turn our attention to this tendency. Perhaps it is worth speaking about technicalisation and the new types of media in a neutral manner, not judging them, but the extreme presence of technology in our society and the possible disappearance of *humankind* as such, the message, the songs *beyond humankind* in a temporal sense may be a fearsome thought. We are not to forget that the poem entitled *Fadensonnen* speaks about a *grayblack wasteness* (a landscape burnt to ashes?), a deserted waste land, in which we may see only a *thought striking the light-tone* – but no human being. Due to the extreme presence of technology in the (material) human culture, certain phenomena can be liberated that cannot be dominated by man anymore. Celan's poem, and the possible negative utopia that it suggests can be read as a warning. Citing Georg Simmel, the tragedy of human culture (mainly in terms of mental values) is in the fact that after a while it may cease itself – man means the greatest danger to oneself, and not some external factor. (Simmel 1999: 75-93).

The Illusion of Immediacy

We may presume a tendency in Paul Celan's poetry according to which the poetic texts intend to cease, or at least decrease *mediatedness* and mediality, mainly the medium that has been proved to be imperfect for communication by these days: language. However, if art is not able to overcome the *mediatedness*

by language, then it may experience to withdraw itself from all systems and laws of human world, creating its own reality. As it was mentioned above, art frequently mediates the world of the imaginary.

As if some of Celan's poems also tended to make art completely *privative*, ceasing or defying mediality and *mediatedness* by resigning from any type of mediation. Poems do not *mediate* anything more, only *stand* in themselves, beyond everyone and everything. This intention may be conceived in the late poem entitled *Stehen – To stand*.

John Felstiner's English translation:

TO STAND, *in the shadow
of a scar in the air.*

*Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you,
alone.*

*With all that has room within it,
even without
language.*

The original German poem:

STEHEN *im Schatten
des Wundenmals in der Luft.*

*Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.
Unerkannt,
für dich
allein.*

*Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,
auch ohne
Sprache.*

The poem places itself out of the dimension of time – it is also testified by the infinitive form of the first word of the text, lacking grammatical aspect or tense. This *standing* does not take place sometime, even the *where* of the poem (*in the shadow of a scar in the air*) is questionable. We may not even state that it is some poetic speaker who *stands* – no more speaker, no more subject exists, it is merely the poem itself that withdraws itself from everywhere, into its own reality where nothing else exists beside it. This standing is also imaginable *even without language*, as the poem says – no more language, no more medium is necessary anymore, since nothing more is mediated. McLuhan's statement according to which all media contain another medium (McLuhan 1964) is suspended in this poetic context, since the poem refers to only itself without mediating any linguistic or non-linguistic message, placing itself out of technical media, meanings, or anything tangible. From outside the poem is not graspable anymore, and anything can be valid only in its enclosed world. This way, the enclosed and seemingly unreachable world is able to create the illusion of immediacy, lacking any kind of mediation and mediality. Certainly, we can ask the question how understanding is possible if the poem speaks merely within its own reality, mediating, carrying no more meaning. This statement is evidently valid only within imaginary, artistic, poetic frameworks, and just for a certain time, since the reader, nevertheless, is *granted* something from the poetic world of the poem defining itself unreachable and free of mediation by reading and interpreting the text, at least receiving the splinters of this poetic reality, remaining at the level of intuition and suspicion, even if complete understanding does not seem possible anymore.

Essentially, the same idea of the cessation of mediality may be conceived in one of Celan's last poems entitled *Schreib dich nicht – Don't write yourself*:

John Felstiner's English translation:

DON'T WRITE YOURSELF

in between worlds,

*rise up against
multiple meanings,*

*trust the trail of tears
and learn to live.*

The original German poem:

SCHREIB DICH NICHT

zwischen die Welten,

*komm auf gegen
der Bedeutungen Vielfalt,*

*vertrau der Tränenspur
und lerne leben.*

In the above poem the metaphor of understanding the world as *reading* repeatedly appears – the poetic speaker / the poem itself calls itself on not *writing itself between worlds*; that is, it should not take the role of the medium or experiment to mediate anything between the different dimensions of existence, for example between man and man, subject and subject, since due to the *illegibility of the world* and the extreme *mediatedness* the exact mediation of meanings is maybe impossible. The tragedy of language – and of other media – is in the fact that after a while they tend to eliminate themselves. Human culture evidently needs media (Pfeiffer 2005: 11-49), and medium can even be the synonym for art in certain contexts. However, a question arises: what sense does it have to try to mediate anything, if nothing

can be perfectly mediated? Certain pieces of Paul Celan's oeuvre lead to the conclusion that they give up the intention of any form of mediation. The poem *rises up against multiple meanings* and does not intend to mediate anything from the chaotic and dubious flow of meanings, departing to a lonely travel (Celan 1996) and reach a world where *mediatedness* and mediation is no more necessary. This world is concealed within the poem itself. The poem can only trust *the trail of tears* – the tears shed for the pain of the lack of immediacy and the multiple *mediatedness* of the world. The poem can *learn to live* only if it reaches the self-enclosed state of immediacy, standing for itself alone, where it is not exposed to language or any other technical medium. Certainly, this poetic withdrawal is only illusory, yet for a moment, perhaps, we may feel as if the experience of immediacy became possible.

It may be an interesting observation that after the gloomy decades of the linguistic scepticism the desire for immediacy gradually recurs in the discourse of literature and literary studies of the present days (Kulcsár-Szabó 2003: 272-307), as it also seems to appear in some of Paul Celan's late poems. Although we know well that our culture and all human experience are originally mediated, and mediality belongs to the essence of human existence, the immediate experience of phenomenon seems to be impossible, it is good to hope that somehow it is possible to bypass mediality. Art and poetry within it as a way of speaking clearer and perhaps more immediate than everyday language – as Celan's poetry intending to demolish linguistic limits – may grant us the hope that we can experience certain phenomena in an immediate way, accessing their substance.

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Paul Celan's Biography

Celan was born in 1920 under the name of Paul Antschel, into a German-speaking Jewish family in Cernăuți, Northern Bukovina, a region then part of Romania and earlier part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, among others (now part of Ukraine). His father, Leo Antschel, was a Zionist who advocated his son's education in Hebrew at *Safah Ivriah*, an institution previously convinced of the wisdom of assimilation into Austrian culture, and one which favourably received Chaim Weizmann of the World Zionist Organization in 1927.

His mother, Fritzi, was an avid reader of German literature who insisted that German should be the language of the house. After his Bar Mitzvah in 1933, Celan abandoned Zionism (at least to some extent) and finished his formal Hebrew education, instead becoming active in Jewish Socialist organizations and fostering support for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War.

Paul Celan chose the Lyceum Mihai Great Governor (now Chernivtsi school No. 5 before school No. 23), where he studied from 1934 until 1938; the students there had ample opportunity to develop their language and literary skills. At this time Celan secretly began to write poetry. Celan graduated from the gymnasium/preparatory school called Liceul Marele Voivod Mihai (Great Voivode Mihai Prep School) in 1938.

In 1938 Celan travelled to Tours, France, in order to study medicine. The Anschluss precluded Vienna, and Romanian schools were harder to get into due to the newly-imposed Jewish quota. He returned to Cernăuți in 1939 to study literature and Romance languages. His journey to France took him through Berlin as the events of the Kristallnacht unfolded, and also introduced him to his uncle, Bruno Schragar, who was later among the French detainees who died at Birkenau.

The Soviet occupation of Bukovina in June 1940 deprived Celan of any lingering illusions about Stalinism and Soviet Communism stemming from his earlier socialist engagements;

the Soviets quickly imposed bureaucratic reforms on the university where he was studying Romance philology and deportations to Siberia started. Nazi Germany and Romania brought ghettos, internment, and introduced forced labour a year later.

On arrival in Cernăuți July 1941, the German SS Einsatzkommando and their Romanian allies set the city's Great Synagogue on fire. In October, the Romanians deported a large number of Jews after forcing them into a ghetto, where Celan translated William Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and continued to write his own poetry, all the while being exposed to traditional Yiddish songs and culture. Before the ghetto was dissolved in the fall of that year, Celan was pressed into labour, first clearing the debris of a demolished post office, and then gathering and destroying Russian books.

The local mayor strove to mitigate the harsh circumstances until the governor of Bukovina had the Jews rounded up and deported, starting on a Saturday night in June 1942. Celan tried to convince his parents that they leave the country to escape sure prosecution, however they wanted to stay in their home. After an argument about this topic, Celan was so angry with them that he spent the night at a family friend's house. It was this night, June 21, that his parents were taken from their home and sent by train to an internment camp in Transnistria, where two-thirds of the deportees perished. Celan's parents were sent to a labour camp in the Ukraine, where his father likely perished of typhus and his mother was shot dead after being exhausted by forced labour. Later that year, after having himself been taken to a labour camp in the Romanian Old Kingdom, Celan would receive reports of his parents' deaths.

Celan remained imprisoned until February 1944, when the Red Army's advance forced the Romanians to abandon the camps, whereupon he returned to Cernăuți shortly before the Soviets returned to reassert their control. There, he worked briefly as a nurse in the mental hospital. Early versions of "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue") were circulated at this time, a poem that clearly relied on accounts coming from the now-lib-

erated camps in Poland. Friends from this period recall Celan expressing immense guilt over his separation from his parents, whom he had tried to convince to go into hiding prior to the deportations, shortly before their death.

Considering emigration to Palestine and wary of widespread Soviet antisemitism, Celan left the USSR in 1945 for Bucharest, where he remained until 1947. He was active in the Jewish literary community as both a translator of Russian literature into Romanian, and as a poet, publishing his work under a variety of pseudonyms. The literary scene of the time was richly populated with surrealists – Gellu Naum, Ilarie Voronca, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, and Dolfi Trost – and it was in this period that Celan developed pseudonyms both for himself and his friends, including the one he took as his own pen-name.

Due to the emergence of the communist regime in Romania, Celan fled Romania for Vienna, Austria. It was there that he befriended Ingeborg Bachmann, who had just completed a dissertation on Martin Heidegger. Facing a city divided between occupying powers and with little resemblance to the mythic city it once was, which had harboured the then-shattered Austro-Hungarian Jewish community, he moved to Paris in 1948. In that year his first poetry collection, *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (“Sand from the Urns”), was published in Vienna by A. Sexl. His first few years in Paris were marked by intense feelings of loneliness and isolation, as expressed in letters to his colleagues, including his long-time friend from Cernăuți, Petre Solomon. It was also during this time that he exchanged many letters with Diet Kloos, a young Dutch singer and anti-Nazi resister who saw her husband of a few months tortured to death. She visited him twice in Paris between 1949 and 1951.

In 1952, Celan’s writing began to gain recognition when he read his poetry on his first reading trip to Germany where he was invited to read at the semi-annual meetings of Group 47. At their meeting in May he read his poem “*Todesfuge*” (“Death Fugue”), a depiction of concentration camp life. His reading style, which was maybe based on the way a prayer is given in

a synagogue and on Hungarian folk poems, was off-putting to some of the German audience. His poetry received a mixed reaction. When Ingeborg Bachmann, with whom Celan had a love affair, won the group’s prize for her collection *Die gestundete Zeit* (*The Extended Hours*), Celan (whose work had received only six votes) said “After the meeting, only six people remembered my name”. He did not attend any other meeting of the group.

In November 1951, he met the French graphic artist Gisèle de LeStrange, in Paris. He sent her many love letters, influenced by Franz Kafka’s correspondence with Milena Jesenska and Felice Bauer. They married on 21st December, 1952, despite the opposition of her aristocratic family, and during the following 18 years they wrote over 700 letters, including a very active exchange with Hermann Lenz and his wife, Hanne. Celan made his living as a literary translator and lecturer in German at the École Normale Supérieure. He was a close friend of Nelly Sachs, who later won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Celan became a French citizen in 1955 and lived in Paris. His sense of persecution increased after the widow of a friend, the French-German poet Yvan Goll, accused him of having plagiarised her husband’s work. Celan was awarded the Bremen Literature Prize in 1958, and then the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960.

Finally, Celan committed suicide by drowning in the river Seine in Paris, around 20th April, 1970. Literary historians consider him to be one of the most important poets of Europe in the 20th century.

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