

Stefanie Heine/Paul Celan Recycling (Cannibalizing?) (Ricercar)

There is much good information in Stefanie Heine's book *Poetics of Breathing* (SUNY Press, Albany, 2021). Some of the best comes from her study of Paul Celan and his *Breathturn* is an inspiration for her studies. A book marking a change in Celan's poetics not long before his death by suicide, it also has been the subject of much speculation as to its meaning. From his acceptance speech in 1960 for the Buchner Prize, *The Meridian*:

Poetry: that can mean an Atamwende, a breathturn. Who knows, perhaps poetry travels this route – also the route of art – for the sake of such a breathturn? Perhaps it will succeed, as the strange. I mean the abyss and the Medusa's head, the abyss and the automatons, seem to lie in one direction- perhaps it is exactly here that the Medusa's head shrinks, perhaps it is exactly here that the autonomous break down – for this single short moment? Perhaps here, with the I – with the estranged I set free here and in this manner – perhaps a further other is set free?

It could mean “the poem/ the trace of breath in our language” or could be alluding to that. Heine uses the phrase “pneumatically touchable.” She also goes into an interesting sub-chapter on an unpublished Celan poem, written just after the Meridian speech (after the breathturn) and after reading Walt Whitman and translating poems by Osip Mandelstam.

What is outlined here is the work of *my* hands: intervening with Celan's translation, tying it to his poetics and Whitman's poem. My reading also involves conspiracy and acts of cutting breath. The knots I make between loose textual threads and the contours I draw (contours of syncopnea—my argument turns back on itself at this point) momentarily close what Celan deliberately leaves open. In his poetic reflections and poems, the encounter enabled by pneumatic touchability is always left indeterminate; for academic interlocutors, this leads to a dilemma. Through my attempts at outlining a model of pneumatic touchability—and despite offering more than one, thus leaving multiple breathroutes open—I necessarily impose some closure. Addressing this dilemma does not resolve it; in fact, attempting to resolve it might be the ultimate violation of the text. I thus go on.

Following the routes of pneumatic touchability in Celan's poetry leads me to a poem that was planned for the collection dedicated to Mandelstam, *Die Niemandsrose*, but eventually not included: "Ricercar." The poem, which was written shortly after Celan held the *Meridian* speech, ties in with both the thoughts for the speech and his translation of Mandelstam's "Дано мнѣ тѣло." At the outset, a few words about the several recorded versions of "Ricercar" are necessary; designating it as "one" poem, as the preceding sentence might suggest, would be wrong. The two reconstructed versions printed in *Die Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß* are based on several typescripts. Two (A and B)⁵⁴ are dated 5/21/1961; typescript A includes minor handwritten revisions, and typescript B is an almost clean copy that constitutes the reading-text of the version titled "Ricercar."⁵⁵ There are two further typescripts (C and D) and a copy (E) with mayor revisions (*Die Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß* 368–69); there are three copies of C and two copies of D; E is a further copy of D. Copy E constitutes the untitled text reproduced in *Die Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß* and includes handwritten additions that are transcribed as the second part of the third, indented, stanza; these additions are dated 6/29/1962.

1) RICERCAR

Es geht,

was durch die Hände dir ging,

RICERCAR⁵⁶

It goes⁵⁷

what went through your hands

den Weg deiner Hände, den
Nacht-,
den Schicksalsweg geht es.

the route of your hands, the
night-,
the destiny-route it goes.

Doch: eine Zeile, einmal
über ein Blatt gehaucht, auf
dem gestern ertrunkenen
Tisch—:

But: a line, once
breathed over a page, on
the table drowned
yesterday—:

Über,
über Nacht, über Nacht, da
werden,
da werden
die Tage
weiß.

Over
over night, over night, the
days
turn
the days turn
white.

Der auf den Händen ging,
die
dies schrieben: er,
der die Nesselschrift las,
der Un-
verstandene, nur er,
versteht auch die anderen.

(Die Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß 55)

2) Es geht,
was durch die Hände dir ging,
den Weg deiner Hände, den
Nacht-,
den Schicksalsweg geht es.
Es geht seiner Wege.

Die Zeile, einmal
über ein Blatt gehaucht, auf
dem schwimmenden Tisch:

Über Nacht, über Nacht,
da werden,
da werden die Tage, da werden

die Tage
weiß.
Kola—Atem-
Meere. Dorthin
taucht der Sinn, taucht der
Uhrzeiger, zu
den Namen.
Auch unter
dir, vom Maulwurf auf-
geworfene Erde, hat
das Herz eine Uhr.

Hauchschrift, Handschrift.
Der auf den Händen ging,
die
es schrieben, er,
der die Nesselschrift las, der
weiterlas, der Un-
gelesene, Un-
verstandene, er
schrieb:
an die Atem-, die Ich-
Diebe.

(Die Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß 311)

He who went on his hands
that
wrote this: he,
who read the nettle-writing,
the mis-
understood, only he,
understands the others.

It goes,
what went through your hands
the routes of your hands, the
night-,
the destiny-route it goes.
It goes its ways.

The line,
breathed over a page once, on
the swimming table:

Over night, over night, the
days
turn, the days turn

turn
white.
cola—breath-
seas. Thither
the sense dives, the clockhand
dives, to
the names.
Beneath you
too, earth, churned
up by mole, the
heart has a clock.

Breathwriting, handwriting.
He who went on the hands
that
wrote it, he,
who read the nettle-writing, who
read on, the un-
read, the mis-
understood, he
wrote:
to the breath-, the I-
thieves.

While Mandelstam's poem relates to Celan's poetics on the basis of the scenario being depicted, "Ricercar" explicitly names some cues that invite a reading of the poem alongside the thoughts pursued in *The Meridian* and the notes and drafts: "Hände" (hands), "Schicksal" (destiny), "Weg" (route), "Atem" (breath), "Kola" (cola), "Sinn" (sense). The poem's words are designed to perform breathturns in both versions individually as well as between the two versions. As such, the constellation of "Дано мнѣ тѣло" and Celan's translation represent a scenario that can be read hand in hand with Celan's notes on the possible reception of poetry. In the case of "Ricercar," it is rather the poem's material history that accounts for a peculiar reception situation: the fact that it was written with the intention of being published in a collection of poems, was then rejected and left unpublished, before finally ending up being published nevertheless, posthumously, in Celan's *Collected Works* and the *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*.

In this respect, the poem's title is significant. "Ricercar" is derived from the Italian verb *ricercare* ("to seek" or "pursue," going back to the Latin, "to seek again"). In contrast to the poems Celan destroyed, the unpublished poems of his estate were well preserved and ready to be found by those who searched for them (see *Die Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß* blurb). "Ricercar" is also a technical term in music. Celan's poem alludes to a striking number of implications "ricercar" has had in the context of music history and translates them into another medium, *into* a constellation of words.⁵⁸ Rather than transposing musicality by means of tonality or sound, "Ricercar" silently alludes to the musical genre and the uses of the word in music history. The only line where the acoustic dimension of the words is highlighted by alliteration is "Hauchschrift, Handschrift." These words *refer* to writing and thus point to their written rather than spoken quality. Acoustically, they bear only a faint sound: the repeated puff of the "H" is, phonetically speaking, a voiceless aspiration. "Ricercar" is a poem on the threshold of silence: it was left unpublished by the author and was not meant to be encountered by a public. Dwelling unnoticed in the archive, however, the work always bore within it the potential for later discovery and exposure to the eyes and voices of readers and critics—a possibility the poem itself seems to reflexively anticipate.

PRELIMINARITY

In its musical uses from the sixteenth century onward, *ricercare* refers to a kind of preliminarity, a prelude, attempt, exercise or exploration in which a composer “seems to search or look out for the strains and touches of harmony, which he is to use in the regular piece to be played afterwards” (Burney qtd. in Scholes 876). The fact that Celan chose not to publish it in *Die Niemandsrose* lends the typescripts he left behind a preliminary quality; it’s unprinted and thus provisional. The line “Hauchschrift, Handschrift” (breathwriting, handwriting) gestures, moreover, toward a preliminary stage in the writing process. Celan almost always wrote the first drafts of his poems by hand while the second stage of his writing process mainly consisted of typescripts (Zanetti 211). From the perspective of the “completed” printed text, the handwriting represents a provisional stage. As a practice used for early text stages, handwriting marks a transitional phase and thus becomes comparable to Mandelstam’s vanishing breath blown onto the glass—what is written by hand seems as fleeting as what is written by breath. However, in contrast to Mandelstam’s poem, in which the traces of the breath on the

glass surface evaporate, handwritten manuscripts are often preserved and remain accessible as traces of the early stages of the writing process, which is true in the case of Celan, who meticulously archived his own writing.

No handwritten manuscripts of “Ricercar” survive—all archived versions of the poem are typescripts. Handwriting is notably absent from a poem that explicitly concerns it, the only exceptions being some minor corrections and the additions in typescript E, where a major part of the third stanza in the second version is added. While it is unclear whether there was a handwritten first draft, it is significant that all the records of the poem that Celan left behind, “Hauchschrift, Handschrift,” are rendered in print. For readers with access to the poem—either in the posthumous publication or by viewing the typescripts at the Literaturarchiv Marbach—“Handschrift” does not appear as handwriting. The printed word only indicates an absence of the actual trace of Celan’s hand on the page of the typescripts. On those pages, the actual “Handschrift” is only invoked as an *absence* and thus semantically coincides with the invisible “Hauchschrift.” It is a vestige of something that may have been found in a preliminary version but was either not recorded or disappeared, or perhaps it was never there in the first place.

Cannabalizing! Now we get to the meat of the exercise. (If you skipped ahead to this point, that's ok.) Taking from others (using quotes or italics like Robin Blaser) or borrowing (even stealing) from dead poets in the Japanese tradition of honkadori, or from our own past poems that did not make the cut (see Berrigan's *The Sonnets*) is ok. I tend to note my sources and put lines or phrases from others in quotes and make a note of it in the book somewhere. Sometimes in the poem.

EXERCISE: Take some old poems of yours and write something new from that, ideally incorporating some of the now and here (this could go in your class poetry journal) and write two versions of the poem, like Celan did above. Mackey tends to do this now and then; have a "second take" ala Jazz musicians and when it shows up in his book there is a moment that feels a little unnerving. It's good to have that quality now and then. You can even take a while manuscript of yours, or maybe a week of journal entries or some other text and put it in a Wordcloud program (see: <https://>

from]" (89). In "Stimmen," these lines are immediately preceded by "*Stimmen vom Nesselweg her* [*Voices from the nettle path*]" (*Gesammelte Werke* 1: 147; *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 89), which resonates in "der die Nessenschrift las" (who read the nettle-writing) in "Ricercar." Moreover, the poem "Stimmen" already contains other word-material that Celan uses in "Ricercar": "Herz" (heart), "Atme" (breathe) and "heranschwimmt" (swim toward), and "Nacht" (night)⁵⁹ (*Gesammelte Werke* 1: 147). Apart from these clear references to earlier texts, "Ricercar" also contains more extensive self-citations. The sentence "über Nacht werden die Tage weiß [over night the days turn white]" already occurred in one of Celan's aphorisms. The last lines of the earlier version, "der Un- / verstandene, nur er / versteht auch die anderen" takes up the aphorism "Nur der Unverstandene versteht die anderen [only the misunderstood understands the others]" (*Mikrolithen* 25; my translation). These references and self-citations indicate that Celan used his own words as experimental material in the framework of poems in progress. The poem becomes a stage for *ricercar*, for exercise and experimentation with poetic ideas and recycled word-material.

REPETITION, VARIATION, CITATION

In cannibalizing old material, Celan's "Ricercar" recalls another dimension of the musical term: "imitative ricercar" was a type of instrumental music in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries characterized by repetition and variation, the "imitative treatment of one or more themes" (*Harvard Dictionary of Music* 732). In a letter to Walter Jens, Celan himself suggested considering his self-citations (in the context of the letter, "Aschenblume" echoing "Aschenkraut") as ricercars: "In the musical sense, I would maybe describe it as a 'ricercar'—the anamnesis in your sense would probably be more emphasized" (*Die Gedichte* 924–25; my translation).⁶⁰ The mention of anamnesis is significant here: for Celan, taking up his own material in the manner of a musical ricercar involves commemoration. The word "Ricercar" precedes one of the already quoted notes for *The Meridian*, containing one of Celan's most explicit references to the concentration camps:

Ricercar --- z.B.

|Your| reversal—what is that? ~~Only when~~ Is it the word of the almond-eyed beauty, that I hear you repeat, varied most opportunistically? Only when with your most own pain you'll

www.wordclouds.com/) and write the two poems from the word you recycle that way. Always keep in mind that you may get some awareness of your own personal myth, something that may surprise you about yourself.

As always, you will not be forced to share this exercise with anyone.

peN

3:55pm - 13-JAN-2022

Casa del Colibrí

