

The Paradox Of Pain: The Poetry of Paul Celan and Sō Sakon

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Paul Celan (1920-1970), to quote the words of George Steiner, uses 'the butcher's tongue',¹ and this use of the German language, argues Steiner, creates massive difficulties for a poet, again to quote Steiner, 'having to write poetry "after Auschwitz"'.² Steiner argues Celan does not speak in his poetry, rather it is language itself which speaks. 'The poet is not a *persona*, a subjectivity "ruling over language", but an "openness to", a supreme listener to, the genesis of speech.... We do not "read" the poem ... we bear witness to its precarious possibility of existence in an "open" space of collisions, of momentary fusions between word and referent.'³

This is Steiner's interpretation of Celan's solution to the problem of saying the unsayable: letting language speak for itself. In discussing these issues I begin with Steiner quite deliberately for it is he who has articulated the problem most dramatically in essays like 'The Hollow Miracle' (1959) and in his study of the holocaust and its literary implications, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971). Of course, earlier still, philosophers like Theodore Adorno had declared that it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz,⁴ thus concisely expressing the dilemma that Steiner wishes to resolve. This conundrum of 'saying the unsayable', or expressed more precisely, the 'paradox of pain' becomes my starting point. Before I start, however, I record some reservations and hesitations. I do not know German and therefore have to rely upon English-language studies and translations for my understanding of Celan. But as this paper is preliminary and partial, focusing only on one aspect of Celan, perhaps my ignorance can be overlooked.

Opinions vary widely about the degree to which 'Jewishness' or the 'holocaust' are central to Celan's poetry. According to Jerry Glenn in his book-length study of the poet, no-one denies the

1 George Steiner, 'On Difficulty' in *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, New York, 1980, p.44.

2 Steiner, p.45.

3 Steiner, p.46.

4 Quoted in Jerry Glenn, *Paul Celan*, New York, 1973 [Twayne's World Authors Series 262], p.35.

importance of these issues to the early poems, in particular to the poems collected in *Poppy and Memory* (*Mohn und Gedächtnis*, 1948) and *Language Mesh* (*Sprachgitter*, 1959), but many critics contend that the later books such as *Thread-suns* (*Fadensonnen*, 1970) and *Snow-Part* (*Schneepart*, 1971) centre more on the problem of language, than on the poet's increasingly open embrace of his Jewish faith. Of course, if we keep in mind Steiner's 'solution' to the problems outlined earlier—namely, the notion of 'openness' and the corresponding disintegration of 'persona'—then language-centred poetry can be read as an ideological strategy.

However, I will begin with Celan's early poetry where the problem of the holocaust figures prominently. One characteristic that Celan shares with Sō Sakon, a poet who, as we shall see, grapples with a private version of the larger nightmare of the fire-bombing of Tokyo, is a sense of guilt arising from the horrific events of World War II. Quite apart from the 'survivor guilt' that most post-Holocaust writers experience—(Celan himself escaped the fate of being incarcerated in a concentration camp but his parents did not, being deported in June 1942 to a concentration camp where they were subsequently murdered by the SS)—Jerry Glenn hypothesizes that Celan suffered 'from a burden of personal guilt dating from a specific event which took place during the war'.⁵ Israel Chalfen in his biography of Celan's youth (published four years after Glenn) states that Celan sought refuge in a friend's house the night before his parents were deported from their home and thus avoided the fate of which he had warned his parents in vain.⁶ Therefore we may presume that this was the specific instance of guilt that Glenn hypothesizes.

The only reference to this personal anguish that I can find in Celan's earliest book of poetry *The Sand from the Urns* (*Der Sand aus den Urnen*, 1948)—later repudiated by the poet—comes in a couplet from the 'Nearness of Graves' (*Nähe der Gräber*). The couplet reads in Glenn's translation:⁷

And can you still bear, mother, as formerly, alas, at home
the soft, the German, the painful rhyme?

Here the paradox of pain is addressed directly, as it is also in the collection recognized by critics as being his first major poetic achievement, *Poppy and Memory* (1948). One of the most celebrated

5 Glenn, p.19.

6 Quoted by Sharon Barnett, 'Paul Celan and *Todesfuge*: A Legacy of Nazism', B.A. (Hons) Thesis, University of Sydney, 1988, p.4.

7 Glenn, p.48.

poems in this collection which focuses on the personal is 'Aspen Tree' (*Espenbaum*), which I quote in the translation by Michael Hamburger.⁸

Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.
My mother's hair was never white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My yellow-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, above the well do you hover?
My quiet mother weeps for everyone.

Round star, you wind the golden loop.
My mother's heart was ripped by lead.

Oaken door, who lifted you off your hinges?
My gentle mother cannot return.

This collection not only includes poems of personal anguish but also contains poems which dramatize the anguish of all Jews. The best-known example of such a work is 'Fugue of Death' (*Todesfuge*). Indeed this particular poem has probably become the acclaimed of all of Celan's work. I quote the poem in full from the translation by Christopher Middleton.⁹

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
drink it and drink it
we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter he whistles
his dogs up
he whistles his Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in the earth
he commands us now on with the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the mornings at noon we drink you at nightfall
drink you and drink you
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes

8 Michael Hamburger (tr.) *Poems of Paul Celan*, London, 1988, p.39. Permission to quote has been most gratefully received.

9 Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton (tr.) *Modern German Poetry 1910-1960*, London, 1963, pp.319-321.

he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the sky it
is ample to lie there

He shouts stab deeper in earth you there you others you sing and
you play
he grabs at the iron in his belt and swings it and blue are his
eyes
stab deeper your spades you there and you others play on for the
dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon in the mornings we drink you at nightfall
drink you and drink you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He shouts play sweeter death's music death comes as a master
from Germany
he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you shall climb
to the sky
then you'll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie there

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death comes as a master from Germany
we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you and drink
you
a master from Germany death comes with eyes that are blue
with a bullet of lead he will hit in the mark he will hit you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a grave
he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a master
from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

This famous poem has been analysed so many times that it has even been criticised on the grounds that it sublimates and artistically transforms the actual horrors of the concentration camp into something resembling beauty and thus vitiates any critical edge. This charge seems to be patently ridiculous as every line reeks of the odour of death and the repeated comparisons between the archetypical German maiden Margarete with her symbolically blond hair and the Jewish Shulamith (*cf.* the beautiful Shulamite in the *Song of Solomon*: 'the hair of thine head is like purple') with her hair burnt to

ashes by the Nazi ovens, render the reality of the death camps transparently clear. Celan's hatred of the German people is also made obvious in the brutal personification of death, the master from Germany, the Nazi official who whistles 'Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in the earth' as easily as he 'whistles his dogs up'.

In *Language Mesh* (1959) his poetry first takes on the shape that it is later to explore and develop. The 'openness' of which George Steiner speaks is undeniably more apparent here than in the earlier books. Also in this book the anguished tone of the survivor becomes the accusatory tone of the poet as Celan confronts God by describing the terrible dilemma faced by Jews: in Richard Rubenstein's words, 'How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz?'¹⁰ This dilemma is decisively articulated in 'Tenebrae', again in Michael Hamburger's translation:¹¹

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

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

Askew we went there,
went there to bend
down to the trough, to the crater.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

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

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

Here we see God who must pray to the dead, for it is God who

10 Quoted in Glenn, p.10.

11 *Poems of Paul Celan*, p.113.

has sinned by failing to save his people in their hour of need. The tone is bitter and almost vengeful. This bitterness is later intensified in the ironic and questioning 'Psalm' a poem from his next book *No-one's Rose* (*Die Niemandrose*, 1963). Once more in Michael Hamburger's translation:¹²

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
for your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you.

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose.

With
out pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.

So we can conclude that to say the unsayable, to resolve the paradox of pain, Celan had to destroy language by first destroying God. And it is obvious that in the poems discussed here Celan is attempting to do precisely this. In his later books only language in its most elemental and therefore most hermetic form seems to survive. Although in this last poem I quote from *Thread-Suns* (1968) Celan seems to be expressing regret at the loss of death—the last existential monster. In Michael Hamburger's English:

You were my death:
you I could hold
when all fell away from me¹³

12 Hamburger, p.175.

13 Hamburger, p.275.

Sō Sakon (b. 1919) also embraced death, in his case it was quite literal. The circumstances surrounding his 1968 book of poetry *Mother Burning* (*Moeru Haha*) are explained in an essay he wrote in 1972:¹⁴

On the evening of 25 May 1945 the temple outhouse in Samon-chō, Yotsuya, where my mother and I were staying was burnt to the ground by a US airforce incendiary raid. When we fled we were left in the middle of a firestorm. We ran through the sea of flames, hands grasped tightly together. We ran anywhere. Our hands slipped apart. I kept on running alone. I left my mother behind. I killed my mother who had given birth to me and raised me.

This book, which was greeted with instant acclaim on its publication, almost literally embraces death. It is in fact a recreation of hell. Thus it anticipates George Steiner when he wrote *In Bluebeard's Castle*:¹⁵

the loss of Hell is the more severe dislocation ... To have neither Heaven nor Hell is to be intolerably deprived and alone in a world gone flat. Of the two, Hell proved the easier to re-create. (The pictures had always been more detailed)

In *Mother Burning* Sō has anticipated Steiner's solution to the problem of how to write poetry after Auschwitz, how to utter the unutterable, by describing a many-layered hell, a hell of event, a hell of memory, a hell of being itself.

Mother Burning was published in 1968 by the Yayoi Shobō company in Tokyo and is described by the author on the title page as a long poem (*chōhen shi*). In fact the long poem, packed into 313 pages of closely printed text, consists of 96 individual poems which are divided up into six sections: 'That Night' (*'Sono Yoru'*), 'The Fairy Tale inside the Telescope into which you Look Upside Down' (*'Sakashima ni Nozoku Bōenkyō no naka no Dōwa'*), 'Origins' (*'Raireki'*), 'Bright Faintness Inorganic' (*'Akarui Awasa Mukishitsu no'*), 'Prayer' (*'Inori'*) and 'Goodbye! Goodbye' (*'Sayonara yo Sayonara'*).

The first section 'That Night' (*'Sono Yoru'*), consisting of 14 individual poems, describes that night when the poet set out with his mother to walk to Ueno station where his mother was to catch the last

14 Sō Sakon, 'Wadatsumi no Itteki' ('A Drop in the Ocean') in *Gendai Shi Bunko 70: Sō Sakon Shishū*, Tokyo, 1977, p.140.

15 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture*, London, 1971, p.48.

train leaving at 10:30 pm to join the family who had been relocated to the countryside. But by poem 4 entitled 'Flame Birds: That Night 4' ('*Honō no Kotori: Sono Yoru 4*') the raid has begun: '... like rain falling harmlessly / As if it were perfectly normal they fell /... each one glittering throwing off flames like immaculate umbrella-shaped petals ...'¹⁶ By poem 9 'Wooden Ladder' ('*Kibashigo*') the poet and his mother are sprinting to avoid the flames: 'Panting / My mother and I were panting / With my panting / My mother panted / With my mother's panting / I panted even more.'¹⁷

With poem 10 'Topography' ('*Chiri*') of 'That Night' the sense of foreboding and menace which permeates the poem-sequence from the very beginning comes sharply into focus in the last line: 'Brightly too too brightly / Here since the very topography was a mass of flame / (forgive me)'.¹⁸ In the last poem of this first section 'Running' ('*Hashitte iru*') mother and son are running. I translate the poem in full:¹⁹

Running
through the sea of fire a road of fire
Stumbling like a pier is
Running
On the road of fire
Like a red nail
I am running
Running
Because the flames on the straight road are
Running I am running
Because I can't stop running I am running
Because I am
Running I can't stop running
I'm running
Because I can't stand still I'm running
Beneath my running feet
Before my running feet
Scorching
Burning
Those running are running
Running running
Overtaking those running
Darting between those running

16 Sō Sakon, *Moeru Haha*, Tokyo, 1968, p.24.

17 Sō Sakon, p.35.

18 Sō Sakon, p.40.

19 Sō Sakon, pp.53-57.

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Those running are running
Running
Those

Not running
Are not
Those not running
Are not running
Those running
Run

Run
Those Running
Are not running
Are not
Those who
Ran
Are not running
Are not
Those who

Are not

Mother!

Is not

Mother is not
Running ran running
Mother is not

Mother!

Running
Me

Mother!

Running
I
Am running
I cannot
Not run

Slippery slippery
Slippery
The thing that
Slipped through slithered down slid away
That was
That was

That hot thing that
Slipped through slipping through
Slithered down slithering down
Slid away sliding away
It was greasy so greasy so so greasy
Was that
My mother's hand in my own?
My hand in my mother's?
Running

Who
Is it?
Who is it in whose hand?

Running
Looking back
Running
Looking back
Running
Tottering
Hopping on a red-hot plate
Hopping looking back at what's behind

Mother!
You
Have collapsed flat on your face
On the road of fire
Raising up
Your face like a summer orange
Your right arm aloft
Like the withered branch of a summer-orange tree
Thrusting out your right hand
Stretching out your right hand
Out towards me

Me
I am hopping on a red-hot plate
A single red nail hopping
Hopping but already
Running
Hopping running
Running hopping

On the road of fire

Mother!
You
flat on your face

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Like a summer-orange your face
Burning
Like the withered branch of a summer-orange tree your right hand
Burning
Now
Burning

The road of fire

Running
Can't stop running
Hopping running hopping
Beneath my running feet
Before my running feet
Scorching
Burning
Those running are running
Running hopping
Darting between those running
Overtaking those running
Runners are running
Running
Mother!
Running
Mother!
Road burning
Mother!

In this poem the biblical imagery employed by Celan is in a sense paralleled; here the hell of flame has been made immanent.

The hell that Sō fashions becomes four sections later, 'Prayer' ('*Inori*'), a hell where God is absent. In Celan's last books metaphysics seems to disintegrate into the chaos of unformed language. Michael Hamburger describes Celan's state in these works as 'being God-forsaken', he continues, 'Negation and blasphemy were the means by which Celan could be true to that experience.'²⁰ Negation, or at the least the possibility of a world where God is absent, also signifies Sō's response to his 'God-forsaken' nightmare. In one poem in the 'Prayer' section, the poem 'Unforgiven' ('*Yurusarenai*') this dilemma is laid bare before us. The poem reads as follows:²¹

20 *Poems of Paul Celan*, p.29.

21 *Moeru Haha*, pp.216-221.

The active voice
'Forgive' is impossible
Because God alone
Can forgive
Then only the passive voice 'forgiven' is possible
In reality many people are forgiven
But forgiven what?
Only sin can be forgiven
But forgiven by what?
If a forgiving God does not exist
Only Satan can forgive
Mother
I have lived for 22 years
Praying that my sin of murdering you be forgiven
These 22 years what do they mean?
They cannot mean that I have lived in forgiveness
Mother
I do not seek the forgiveness of Satan
And I will not invent a God to forgive me
Then what shall I do?
I do not seek forgiveness for myself
As I do not wish to become a pig
But I cannot live even for an instant
Without being forgiven
I want to keep on living I do not want to die
So it is for this reason that I sought forgiveness
Because there was no-one else
Mother I sought your forgiveness
But what does it mean for
The murderer to seek forgiveness from his victim?
Please forget that I murdered you
Please don't appear any more before me
Please vanish from my world
That is what I wish
In other words this time
I want to kill you off completely
Haven't I wanted that
In every pore of my body?
Mother
These 22 years I've left my wife abandoned my children
Dreamt of revolution taken women buried myself in European
writings
Drowned myself in *saké* gone abroad made speeches written books
I've done all sorts of things
It's an out and out lie to say

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I did nothing but try to forget you
I lived quite an easy-going life
Nevertheless I am not at all happy
Far from it my breast was burning
My heart was constantly aching
In no time at all it grew difficult
To cast away my burning breast my aching heart
So it is for these reasons truly for these reasons
Mother
That I sought your forgiveness
It was not only
Because of your fire
That my breast burned and my heart ached
Making my breast burn and my heart ache
Was not only the fires of all types and variety of people
Who in the same way as you
Had to be turned into fire while still alive
Had to be turned into fire that would not blaze
Mother
The reason why I sought your forgiveness
Was because unless I asked for forgiveness little by little you
would
Turn your back to me and go away
And also because from the first
You never blamed me
Mother
When I appeal to you to forgive me
You smile a dry, stupid smile like a pine-cone split open
And offer up your breasts to me
Mother
You cannot not forgive me
You cannot comprehend the word forgive or the act itself
The fact that you gave birth to me and raised me
That in return for your breast-feeding
You were struck with an open hand and were cremated while you
were still alive
That you were wholly a mother and could be nothing else but a
mother
These facts alone and more than that with what happened
It is unthinkable that you could be anything other than the one
flesh and one body with me
Mother Mother of me who is still alive
You cannot forgive me nor can you not forgive me
So it is for this very reason that I

Seek your forgiveness
How absurdly spoilt I am
Mother
To seek forgiveness is to desire salvation
The knowledge that I will not be saved even if I die I will not be
saved
Is forced upon me because like it or not you whom I murdered
Continue to burn within me
It is for this very reason I ask you
Just who will save me? And where?
Since I have no God in me
Neither is there God in you
Together we burn one ball of flame
You and I tumbling in space for 22 years
Ah must I now believe this?
That this empty green darkness Japan is hell
That being saved means only to be delivered unto hell
By the hand of Satan since there is no-one else
Mother

At the end of the book Sō attempts to loose the hold that these nightmare images and memories have had over him for the past 22 years. But, even at the end of this long poem-sequence, in one of the final poems 'Goodbye! Goodbye!' ('*Sayonara yo Sayonara*') the poet states 'I will not say goodbye I cannot say goodbye'²² and the poem concludes with the line 'There is no goodbye To goodbye! goodbye!'²³ The final line of the book itself is composed of simply three words 'Mother mother mother'.

For Sō the problem of confronting the paradox of pain, of saying the unsayable is not primarily a linguistic conundrum but a meta-physical quandary. The reason *Mother Burning* strikes such a common chord with Holocaust narratives, with George Steiner's delineation of the almost existential crises created by the wars of our century, is its underlying nihilism, the sense of a vacuum or even worse of a malignant evil that the poet locates in the place where he might have found God. The sense of despair created in Sō's long poem parallels Celan's own sustained process of struggle, that process which his poetry reveals. Celan struggles against not only the God who has forsaken the Jews but also against the very language in which the being of this God may be constituted. Both poets attempt to utter that which is not, if only to confirm by its utterance, that there is

22 *ibid.* p.305.

23 *ibid.* p.307.

left something that can be said. We end with a familiar paradox: with the realization of Hell poetry may play with the possibility of Heaven, or at least, of salvation.

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Four Poems by Asabuki Ryōji (1952-)

Translated by Leith Morton

Winter fruit, winter whispers, wisps of whispers
strung out in row, frozen, filled with transparent colours,
suspended, in light hanging
not knowing how to ripen

The corpses of many pairs of small birds revolving slowly
around the hollow in your breast
Finally closing our gentle marriage

Countless words caught in a small ray of sunlight

Angels raise a clamour, trumpets in the blue sky where
Angels fly, small cumulonimbi flicked by angels
Angels ring bells, scatter stars, while
Roaring with laughter exchange nameless words, silent bodies