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Corona by Paul Celan

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Paul Celan
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Out of my hand autumn laps its leaf: we are friends.
We shell time out of the nuts and teach it how to walk:
then time goes back into its shell.

Sunday in the mirror,
in dreams room for sleeping,
truth in the mouth's discourse.

My eye climbs down the sex of my beloved,
we see each other,
we say dark things to each other,
we love each other like poppy and recollection,
we sleep like wine in the conches,
like the sea in the bloodray of the moon.

We stand embracing in the window, they see us from the street:
it is time, that they knew!
It is time, that the stone made an effort to flower,
that disquiet found a beating heart.
It is time, that it were time.

It is time.

Commentary

It is well known that the death of Paul Celan's parents in the Holocaust and his own experiences during the Nazi occupation conditioned his attitude towards the possibilities of his own language. Especially in the later Celan poems we see fragment, coinages and a completely idiosyncratic use of German which reflect his probing of whether art and poetry, secularized sources of transcendent meaning, were even possible after the Holocaust. Even the relatively early "Corona" can be read as a poem that explores whether love is even possible given Holocaust experiences, but in this commentary I am going to focus on how this poem from Celan's first major book, *Mohn and Gedächtnis* (1952) relates to the theme of vision.

I would suggest that we might read the poem in terms of describing a progression from unseen to seen, that is to say, from the speaker's being as continuous with the natural world around him, to being an item of public recognition. In this commentary I will explain some of my translation choices as they relate to this theme.

The first two stanzas foreground the speaker as primordially unseen, one who is subject only to the rhythms of nature and the seasons. "Autumn" and "time" are each reified in mixed metaphor to underscore the speaker's continuity with nature. Celan's *frisst* in line 1, which refers specifically to how animals eat as opposed to humans (German uses *essen* to refer to the way humans eat) I have chosen to translate as "laps" in order to underscore the gentleness of the speaker's relationship with nature in the first stanza. Thus autumn "laps leaf," while time is "shelled" and taught to walk, attributes suggestive of unimpeded, yet also unquestioned natural growth.

That life moves in cycles, habits, and that humans can move with them without concern or self-consciousness is represented in the second stanza. Structurally and in terms of how the syntax jumps out of the page, the repetition of *im* [in] suggests a kind of enclosing element around the speaker, which will later be shorn off. Translated into natural English, however, this repetition which occurs in the first two lines of the stanza is less impactful since it is placed now in the middle of the sentence.

Thus, instead of translating line 6 *der Mund redet wahr* literally as “the mouth speaks true” I reiterate the “in”: “truth in the mouth’s discourse.”

The present translation of this line also serves to reinforce the sense of the habitual and familiar that is thematic of the stanza. Much as “Sunday in the mirror” detaches us from what is seen in the mirror and any broader significance such as self-reflection—the mirror becomes one among many of the human artifacts that surround us—similarly, truth itself becomes habitual, questions such as: whose truths, which truths? are denuded of significance at this stanza in the poem.

The speaker’s position in the poem only changes with the introduction of another, “the beloved” (*Geliebten*). What initially seems a sort of double of objectification—as it is expressed metonymically as the speaker’s eye which “climbs down” the sex of the beloved—is revealed in the next lines as expressive of a kind of mutuality (“we see each other”) that mimics the dreamlike and possibly a-temporal sequences in the natural world (the poppy and recollection, the wine in the conch shell, the sea in the moon). There is a savory mystery in such images, and I would venture to say that they recapitulate the sort of natural enclosure the speaker experiences in the first stanza, but in terms of a new relation to the beloved: love.

In the third stanza this mutuality turns to solidarity as a third party is introduced with respect to which the lovers feel the need to announce their love. Here the title “Corona” (from the Latin meaning “crown” or “wreath,” but also the ring of light during an eclipse) is relevant. By placing the pair in the window, presumably above onlookers in the street, Celan poses the question of what it means to bring to light that whose nature is changed once it is brought to light, love made public, christened as an object of recognition which previously existed only as a gesture of intimacy. Does the triumphal expectation of the speaker’s love set it up for failure?

The speaker, the poet and the translator each recognize the violence and rupture that may be wrought from such an abrupt transition between intimacy and public recognition. The penultimate line, as I have translated it, “It is time, that it were time,” poses difficulties in capturing the violence of the intended transition. It is obviously a matter of preference, but the “were”

of the subjunctive mood, in my opinion, conveys something of the impossibly, or perhaps, ironical ill-timing of the lover's public unveiling. The main alternative I considered: "It is time for it to be time" seems to me to salvage coherence at too high of a cost, as it imports onto the line a sense of inevitability or closure which is absent from the violence of "beating heart."

The "time," as it were, as it is, as it will be and whose own existence in any given tense feels uncertain in the text, is intimacy, familiarity. It's what moves with seasons, what we teach how to walk, perhaps how to talk, what crawls back into its shell; yet there is also a time for everything, and hence a time for this very same intimacy to stand in face of the social order—even if it is as impossible as a stone's flowering.

Source text:

Celan, Paul. "Corona." *Mond and Gedächtnis*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt DVA, 2000, p. 33.