

## the SPIRASTICE [*Atemwende*

THE DESIGNS OF MY PEN

THE OBSCURE DESIGNS OF PROVIDENCE

*A pure spirit has neither a beginning nor an end and it never changes. The fall of the angels is therefore senseless. I mean that it is lacking in sense to the extent that it recalls films being run backwards.*<sup>1</sup>

*EINMAL,*

*da hörte ich ihn,*

*da wusch er die Welt,*

*ungesehn, nachtlang,*

*wirklich.*

*Eins und Unendlich,*

*vernichtet,*

*ichten,*

*Licht war. Rettung.*

TIME WAS

I'd heard him,

washing the world,

unseen, nightlong,

real.

One without end,

annihilated,

I'd,

light was. Aid.

The right hand column is an attempted translation, one amongst others, of the concluding poem, the sixth part's sole entry, of Paul Celan's volume *Atemwende*. Its first translator, Michael Hamburger, drew the poet's rebuke for reading 'ichten' as an echo of the previous line, pointing rather to the imperfect of 'ichen' ['to I'] there darkly to clarify the destiny of that 'light': night consummates an I'ing of the One [*Eins*] as it recalls the ablutionary colligation (real and unseen) in which a people were *entichtet* ['an/I'ed'] for being in essence unclean.

The poem is no more translatable for this, as 'ichten' turns no less on the reverberation of the verb above, sounding the turn (*nicht-et*)[*icht-en*] carried through by the line below (*ver-nicht*)[*Licht war*], while in its turn the last line of the second sentence syllabically commutes the last line of the first

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Opium* (trans.) Crosland and Road (Icon, 1957), 53.

[*wir(k)lich / Lich(t)war*]. Yes, there was once such a night. In it lodges, like a bursting mirror, the indigestible metaphor of God's cleansing; a circuit from Flood to fire. And no doubt for this reason the *Einmal* of the first line is weighed by its repercussion—by its percussive muting—in the disarming *Mal* of the last (*einmal*: once; *ein Mal*: a wrong or evil (as in *malträtiert*), also: a mark or fleck (as in *Muttermal*)), whose mute fulcrum disabuses the ear that would hear in all that came before, the 'rescue' that crosses it: restoration of the day ('light was our salvation' [*Licht war Rettung*]). Not only does it show that *Licht* is not the active subject of *Rettung* but the passive object of *Vernichtung*, with deft subversion it plays the signifying dissonance of the heard and seen against the One: if the night covers a washing 'unseen' but 'heard', this hole, *unheard* but *seen*, now breaks through the light's aporia turning 'Ret-' back on '-t war' (as its '-tung' mitigates, in the form of an anodyne rhyme, the lethal substantivating suffix of the previous line (-*ten*))—that in each case the 'ich' be brought out in '*Licht*'. Whether or not the immanence of *this* differential first person can be traced to a Hebrew anagram of 'nothing' (*ayin* [*aleph-yud-nun*], from 'I': *ani* [*aleph-nun-yud*]<sup>2</sup>) it is clear at least that it is not dawn that saves in dividing light from night but this in-temporalisation of an (annihilating) infinity, bringing the sky to buckle to its call; compressing a covenant roused by this cry for help (*Rettung*!) coming too late for the sinking ones (the period has closed that door) but not too late to re-weave the backward scansion of salvation's dis-astering measure, its anti-genealogy dispersing the voice through this mirror of its end.<sup>3</sup> '*Licht war*' heralds that turn by its syllabic transposition of '*wirklich*', the 'real' that had opened the guttural cascade of

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<sup>2</sup> John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: poet, survivor, Jew* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995) 227.

<sup>3</sup> Something I have attempted to retain in my translation of '*Rettung*' as not only a corruption of 'I'ed' but as night's Double: the reverse homonym of 'day'. (For the reader unfamiliar with German it should also be said that liberties have been taken with the opening lines, rendered by a literal translation as: 'Once, / I heard him there, /...')

the second stanza (*-endlich, -nichtet, -ichten*), while *at the same time* leasing its latter half (*-t war*) to the dawning inversion (*Ret-*) drawn by the silent tocsin of ‘.’. Prismatic and phonic, its chiasmic radiation now aims backward at both the seen and said, heaven bowing to the shattered incomprehension after/before the light source-sundering name.<sup>4</sup> The *Atemwende* rousing the reader, an hermetic breathing pore, hangs the anxious onrush of speech in its balance that *at last* [*endlich*] ‘*Licht war*’ disassemble the endless night of ‘*ver-nicht*’ for the preterite’s plural shades to ‘also hear’, washing back between the lines, beneath the waves, where time impales on the sign that tells this orphaning world...the ‘i’ of *Light* or pulse—‘again’—of antediluvian man.

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<sup>4</sup> Following a suggestion of Eva Meyer’s in her conversation with Jacques Derrida, (*Labyrinth und Archi/Textur*), the drying up of language into the reservoir of a single tongue will lead, via an Indo-Europeanist archaeology, to Shem, to the father of Shem, and to his sons, the tribe named ‘Name’, the ‘Sem-ites’ also by whom Babel’s spire was raised, a corruption perhaps of the untranslatable [*Balal*].