

Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, and:
Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan.

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Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, and: Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan (review)

James Brasfield

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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John Felstiner, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, Norton

Perhaps, I must tell myself now - perhaps even a meeting between this "wholly Other" - I'm using a familiar term here - and a not all that distant, a quite near "other" becomes thinkable - thinkable again and again.

A poem's lingerings or longings - a word related to the creature - touch such thoughts.

No one can say how long the breath-pause - the longing and the thought - will last.

- Paul Celan, "The Meridian"

Paul Celan was born in 1920, in Czernowitz, in a searing time, in what was once the capital of the Hapsburg province of Bukovina, two years after the province became Romanian, after World War I. Czernowitz had become Cernauti, which it remained until the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1940, when Cernauti became Chernovtsy of Soviet Ukraine. In 1941, German and Romanian armies invaded. A year later, Celan's parents were taken to a concentration camp in Transnistria, east of Chernovtsy. There, his father died of typhus; his mother was shot by the SS. Celan was imprisoned for a year and a half in Romanian labor camps. After the war, Celan returned to Chernovtsy and completed his university studies. During the Hapsburg period, the dominant language of the region was German, though Ukrainian was spoken in the surrounding villages. With Soviet occupation, Russian was the official language and Stalinist strictures and anti-Semitism replaced Nazi rule.

Early on, Celan admired Mandelstam whose work Celan translated and whose influence, along with Hölderlin, Rilke, and Trakl, is significant in Celan's poetry. In Soviet Chernovtsy, Celan learned Russian and Ukrainian. A classmate recalls one of his Chernovtsy professors, a Ukrainian, reciting the forbidden poems of Mandelstam to the class. "Mandelstam became Celan's secret sharer," George Steiner has said. Mandelstam "found in Celan the guardian of his afterlife, the chosen partner in a posthumous dialogue." Mandelstam died in a Siberian transit camp, in 1938, at the age of forty-seven, when Celan was eighteen and writing poems. Though both men, at times, show a dark humor, a cunning streak of wit, in their poems, their poetry is dominated by tones of loss. A dry heartfelt, sharp-edged, and fierce intelligence informs a deep awareness of human loss, intimate, brought on by the scale of Soviet and Nazi destruction of life and civilized cultures.

Celan left Chernovtsy in 1945 for Bucharest as Soviet reality took hold in Western Ukraine, then left Romania in 1947, before it entered the Soviet imperium. He would eventually settle in Paris in 1948 where he lived until **[End Page 174]** his suicide at the age of forty-nine. His poem "Todesfuge," or "Death Fugue," written at the age of twenty-three, in Chernovtsy, was first published in Bucharest under Celan's first title of the poem, "Todesango," or "Tango of Death," in a Romanian translation, "Tangoul Mortii," from the German.

His life of transformations, his poetry, encompasses memories of childhood, his mother and Austrian culture, the Holocaust and displacements, his deepening awareness of his Jewishness, his breakdowns. In Celan's poems we hear the influence of the mysterious quietude of Trakl on the edge of silence, and Celan achieves the expanse of Rilke's interiors by subtraction: the expanse is concision's unspoken abyss. Irony, an I-beam. From word depths, words are allowed on the page, placed in relationships by Celan's scalpel-like intelligence - a poem, as much sculpted as written. Each poem is more than a moment's response, the poem in route from its origin for a long time before its release onto the page, no matter the brevity of the poem. We sense the depths of origin and the gravity on the surface, yet the poem refuses to go under - the obstinacy, the absolute tension of refusal. To capture the emotion, the dark resonances in translation,

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John Felstiner, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, Norton
Nikolai Popov & Heather McHugh, *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul
Celan*, Wesleyan / New England

Reviewed by James Brasfield

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