

TRIBUTE TO PAUL CELAN

Didier Sicard – I wish to talk about Paul Celan because I believe that he and Claude Lanzmann are the two artists who will survive oblivion. Celan was born in 1920, and his centennial should have been commemorated. He was French, though Romanian-born ; his education was German. There wasn't the least memorial ceremony in France. And he died just 50 years ago: one evening, he plunged from the Pont Mirabeau.

The flood of emotion I feel when reading Paul Celan is unlike any other. For me, Shoah is the ultimate tragedy of the XXth century, and humankind has never overcome it. It is assumed to be part of our past. As far as I'm concerned, it's a rift, an ever-present fissure in humanity, in the very concept of human beings. As though there were a Before and an After. Of course, we have known the Armenian genocides, the genocide in Rwanda. The genocide of the Jews seems far more frightening to me, because it was infused with contempt and degradation shared among nations. Having read the antisemitic libels of the past, seeing one come out today is an open wound. It makes me feel that I belong to a horrifying species.

In the poem *Todesfuge*, Paul Celan says :

« *We dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined* »

Indeed, the six million Jews who went up in smoke are at ease in the air - those few words condense a universe that would require three or four hundred pages in any book. Here, all the horrors are assembled and melded in a few words.

Maybe I can read the following verses:

« *A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents
he writes*

he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair

Margarete

*your ashen hair Sulamith we dig a grave in the breezes
there one lies unconfined*

*He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you
others sing now and play*

*he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his
eyes are blue*

*jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play
on for the dance! »*

It's terrifying to see the relation between an individual, Hitler in this case, and an entire population ready to find a future in an insane voice. History, at that point, is very humbling. So I can't just be an onlooker. I'm a human being and have attempted - all my life, almost desperately - to find an explanation. And since there is no explanation, I hang on to anything that can keep a little candle burning so the light doesn't go out.

Passing on doesn't mean reviving a description of past events. It's to keep stating that humanity has failed and will fail again. We're a species whose inhumanity is riveted in every heart, and if we don't work endlessly to understand our own basic flaw, that terrible crater within ourselves, memory is meaningless. Memory is not the sum of horrible events that occurred eighty years ago. Memory is the fact that we are the same humans as we were eighty years ago, the same! With the same possible chasm.

So for me, a tribute to Paul Celan isn't just a tribute to a poet; it is a tribute to the unique person who found the words that enable us to share the terrifying - what one might call black enigma - nestling inside humanity, that surfaces repeatedly.

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