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# Death as Meridian: Paul Celan's Translations of Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" and "Let down the Bars, Oh Death"

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Death as Meridian: Paul Celan's Translations of Emily Dickinson's

"Because I could not stop for Death" and "Let  
down the Bars, Oh Death"

Alyssa Devey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Death as Meridian: Paul Celan's Translations of Emily Dickinson's  
"Because I could not stop for Death" and "Let  
down the Bars, Oh Death"

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Paul Celan's translations of Emily Dickinson's poems "Because I could not stop for Death" and "Let down the Bars, Oh Death" illuminate the global metaphor inherent in both poems' exploration of death. Celan's "The Meridian" speech, coupled with Dickinson's poems "I saw no way" and "Tell all the truth," suggest that language can move in different directions across a globe at the same time. When these different lines meet, they reach a meridian of the spiritual and the material. As Celan translates Dickinson's two poems, he uses this global metaphor to place more emphasis on death and to further illuminate how ambiguity is used in the poems to represent what death is, thus highlighting Dickinson's original project in her death poems.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Paul Celan, meridian, ambiguity, death, global

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**Introduction:**

Paul Celan never expressed why he decided to translate eight of Emily Dickinson's poems, which he published in 1961 (Rosenthal 134), one of only two women's poetry that he translated. Several scholars have conjectured why he was fascinated with Dickinson. Odile Heynders argues that Celan's translations are a private attempt to reconstruct German cultural memory after the Holocaust, while Kerstin Behnke and Timothy Bahit, along with others, argue that Celan's seemingly loose translations are not meant to be semantically exact because they are the "rewriting" of one poet's work by another (Bahti 126). Behnke also acknowledges that Celan's "poetic sensibility is most congenial to Dickinson's own" (143). John Felstiner defines this "sensibility" with his argument that "a century after Emily Dickinson, he shared her solitary, baffled, spiritual yearning and her sense that death dwells close and poems speak truth, if anything can" ("Paul Celan Translating Others"). Celan, then, would have found a kindred spirit in Dickinson because both poets found religious meaning through unorthodoxy, were fascinated with death, and believed that poetry "speaks" spiritual "truth." Yet Felstiner's answer, though insightful in many respects, does not fully explain why Celan was drawn to Dickinson's particular, often personified representation of death. Celan translated Baudelaire and was obviously drawn to his images of the grotesque in death, yet his fascination with Dickinson went beyond mere exploration of mortality and decay. Dickinson's approach to death is closely intermingled with her view that the best way to write poetry is through ambiguous language that leads a reader in multiple directions simultaneously, a concept that Celan also emphasized in his poetry. Celan's translations of Dickinson's death poems illuminate how Dickinson's work uses a global metaphor, where one point can lead in many directions, in order to write about death.

Celan was born in 1920 in Romania and loved German poetry and language. In fact, his first poems seem reminiscent of the German Romantic philosophers Novalis and Rilke (Anderson). But after losing his parents in an extermination camp during the Holocaust and being placed in a labor camp himself, Judaism became “a challenging ambiguity” for Celan (Felstiner, “Apostate Only” 198), and Celan’s relationship with the German language also demonstrates this ambiguity (Anderson). As Lyon explains, “As a German-language poet he [Celan] sensed deeply that the Third Reich had debased and almost destroyed his mother tongue. Therefore he assaulted and defamiliarized it in the hope of rejuvenating it and re-creating it” (192-93).

Celan demonstrated his desire to restore his mother tongue when he gave “The Meridian,” a speech he presented upon accepting the prestigious German literary award the Georg-Büchner-Prize. Near the end of the speech, Celan declares, “I find something—like language—immaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while—cheerfully—even crossing the tropics: I find...*a meridian*” (12). Celan’s meridian is a geographical metaphor, where the two poles, like north and south, connect across the circle. The globe itself is “terrestrial” while the line that crosses is “immaterial” because it can be imagined but is not physically present. The two poles could be life and death as well because they cross between the “terrestrial” and the “immaterial.” Each point on the globe can therefore move in two different directions until circling back and meeting each other. Thus, language moves across these poles by splitting between life and death at the same time and then “returns to itself” again. Earlier in his speech, Celan argues that “Art—‘oh art’: besides being mutable, has the gift of ubiquity” (4). By being ubiquitous, language or “art” is in a state of being everywhere all the time. Each of the lines in the Celan’s global metaphor can be everywhere at once, crisscrossing

in various directions, only to meet again. Consequently, language's movement, or journey, consists of lines branching in different directions thus allowing language to be everywhere at once.

Dickinson herself also explores a global metaphor in her poem "I saw no Way":

I saw no Way—The Heavens were stitched—

I felt the Columns close—

The Earth reversed her Hemispheres—

I touched the Universe—

And back it slid—and I alone—

A Speck upon a Ball—

Went out upon Circumference—

Beyond the Dip of Bell— (Fr 633).

In this poem, the speaker discusses Earth's "Hemispheres," similar to Celan's poles. When the Earth changes these hemispheres, the speaker is able to touch the "Universe." Yet in the second stanza of the poem, the Earth changes her hemispheres again, leaving the speaker "alone" as "A Speck upon a Ball." This "Speck" branches across the "Circumference" as the Earth moves, allowing the speaker to move in multiple different directions.

Celan demonstrates his fascination with how this global metaphor works to represent death by the Dickinson poems he decided to translate. All of Dickinson's poems that Celan translated are poems on "death; teleology; theodicy; [and] redemption" (Wolosky 2). The death poems Celan translated explore the ambiguity that the moment of death can separate in a line of decay and a line of redemption simultaneously, thus pointing to how life can only be understood



through death. In his translations of both “Let down the Bars, Oh Death” and “Because I could not stop for Death,” Celan is able to intermingle the poles of life and death as language crosses the meridian. As Celan explores these themes in his translations, he illuminates how these two Dickinson poems are utilizing a spatial/global metaphor in order to represent death.

### **Dickinson and Celan’s Language:**

Celan and Dickinson were both influenced in one way or another by the German Romantics’ view of language. Dickinson met these philosophies through American transcendentalism. Celan met them through Novalis, whom he read before the Holocaust. And even though Celan moved away from Novalis after the Holocaust, he read Walter Benjamin in December 1959 (Felstiner, “Paul Celan” 164) and his translations are influenced by Benjamin (Rosenthal 134) and Benjamin’s assertion (derived from early German romanticism) that a “language of things” exists beyond just human language (“On Language as Such and the Language of Man”). In many ways, like the German Romantics, Dickinson and Celan viewed language as something that “does not understand itself, nor wish to” (Novalis 5) because speaking matters even without meaning. Language does not need to “understand itself” because it moves in multiple directions. Dickinson and Celan allowed language to travel in different directions in their poetry to more fully communicate how poetic language goes beyond and independent of merely the “content of what is being said” (Busch).

Dickinson’s poetry demonstrates how language does not need “to understand itself” by expanding this global/spatial metaphor. One of Dickinson’s most famous poems states the following:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth's superb surprise  
 As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind— (Fr 1263).

While this poem does espouse a rhetorical argument (“Tell all the truth but tell it slant”), the poem does give insight into how Dickinson imagined implicit language working. The word “Circuit” in the beginning of the poem signals a global metaphor. Circuit is usually defined as a line or journey, with the line meeting itself again in a circle. Like Celan’s globe, this line meets itself after its journey. Another less common definition of circuit is a path of communication between two separate points. The line can thus join two differing points as it moves across the globe, just as Celan’s line joins the “immaterial” and the “terrestrial.” In the last two lines of the poem, Dickinson states that “The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—.” By reading the end of the poem in conjunction with the global metaphor, the line of poetry must move “gradually,” stretching the reader across the space, before it can circle back on itself and join the two points. It cannot meet too quickly or the poem would become explicit in its exploration of the two points.

Celan’s poem “A Leaf Treeless” explores a similar theme about not making language explicit:

Was sind das für Zeiten,  
 wo ein Gespräch  
 beinah ein Verbrechen ist,

weil es soviel Gesagtes  
mit einschließt?

What times are these  
when a conversation  
is almost a crime  
because it includes  
so much made explicit? (319)

Celan laments that language has become a “crime” because it is too explicit and meanings are too obvious, perhaps too viscerally evocative of post-war Europe. He instead urges that language not be made explicit, an argument similar to Dickinson’s own that “The Truth must dazzle gradually.” The poet cannot stop the line too quickly by letting language become explicit. By doing so the poet would end the line prematurely, before it could meet across the globe.

Celan and Dickinson believed part of language’s ability to move across global poles is because language speaks. On April 15, 1862, Dickinson asked *The Atlantic* poetry editor T.W. Higginson if her “Verse is alive?” (171) and again reinforces that language lives in “A Word made Flesh is Seldom”:

A Word made Flesh is seldom  
And tremblingly partook  
Nor then perhaps reported  
But have I not mistook  
Each one of us has tasted  
With ecstasies of stealth

The very food debated  
 To our specific strength—

A Word that breathes distinctly  
 Has not the power to die  
 Cohesive as the Spirit  
 It may expire if He—  
 “Made Flesh and dwelt among us”  
 Could condescension be  
 Like this consent of Language  
 This loved Philology (Fr 1715).

In the poem, Dickinson states that “A Word...breathes distinctly,” suggesting that it speaks of its own accord and on its own terms. Celan also believed that language should speak on its own, saying in “The Meridian”:

But the poem does speak! It stays mindful of its dates, but—it speaks. For sure, it speaks always only on its own, its very own behalf... It stands fast—after so many extreme formulations, permit me this one too—the poem stands fast at the edge of itself; it calls and brings itself, in order to be able to exist, ceaselessly back from its already-no-longer into its always-still. This always-still can only be a speaking. But not just language as such, nor, presumably, just verbal ‘analogy’ either. But language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation that at the same time, however, remains mindful of the borders language draws and of the possibilities language opens up for it. (8-9)

Language is able to “stand fast” because it has multiple “possibilities,” each crossing a meridian that explores multiple poles at once and leads to poetic indirection. Celan continues, arguing that “language actualized” must be “set free under the sign of radical individuation,” a statement similar to Dickinson’s own in “A Word made Flesh is Seldom” when she states that the “Word” that is “tremblingly partook” leads “To our specific strength.” Dickinson’s religious imagery throughout the poem suggests that language is spiritual and that the language that consents to human use still maintains an eternal ubiquity, where language is everywhere. Celan recognized that language must “remain...mindful of the borders,” a statement that relates to Dickinson’s own circuit, that sees the borders of a line, but still moves between two points. Thus, language is set “free” as the poet refrains from being too obvious and allows it to speak, as Celan explains, on “behalf of...exactly *on another’s behalf*—who knows, perhaps on behalf *of a totally other*” (8). It is only when the poem finds this connection with the “other,” that it creates a space where Celan “had...encountered myself” (11).

Wolosky contends that both Dickinson’s and Celan’s views of language are inextricable from theological concerns (3), but I think that for Celan at least, his understanding of language and its ambiguity was also greatly influenced by his experiences in the Holocaust. The committee who gave Celan the Georg-Büchner-Prize was filled with Germans who were in some way, whether consciously or not, involved in the Holocaust and the Nazi party. The literary critic Günter Blicher, who remarked on Celan’s otherness as a Jew, had even criticized Celan’s poetry (Eshel 59). As Amir Eshel argues, Celan’s “Meridian” speech was in many ways a response to the very Germans who had committed the atrocities of the Holocaust and were responsible for the desecration of Germany and the German language. Eshel concludes by arguing that the “Meridian” speech offers “the dream and the reality of a literary language beyond the confines

and burdens of ethnicity and nation, the dream and the reality of a literature that in its uncompromised literariness, that is, its otherness, serves as a school for real humanity” (77). Celan’s dream for a pure language that is not inhibited by “ethnicity and nation” drove him to understand death through ambiguity, leading to his “Meridian” speech and to his translations of Dickinson.

### **Death:**

Celan’s experiences in the Holocaust must have influenced the way he viewed his own meridian and how to represent death. In describing the atrocities of the camps, Giorgio Agamben explores the phenomenon of the Muselmann, a person who is “not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman” (55). This Muselmann, who is biologically living but spiritually dead, becomes the witness for the atrocities of the Holocaust because “the complete witness is he whose humanity has been wholly destroyed” (82). The Muselmann is able to be a witness of death because he is simultaneously dead and alive. Like the Muselmann, language is able to give testimony of death as it explores both the “immaterial” and the “terrestrial,” the ambiguity between life and death. As explained by Maurice Blanchot, a contemporary of Celan’s who wrote an essay on Celan’s work (Hill 987), “The deep does not reveal itself directly” and because death is not explicit, it can only be “disclosed” if it is “hidden in the work” (171). Just as Orpheus can have the dead Eurydice “only in the song” and “within the hymn” because Eurydice’s absence signals death’s pervasiveness, Dickinson and Celan can only start to comprehend death in the poem and in language. The poem for both of them is not just a means to bring the grave to life, but for the poem to live in “the plenitude of...death” (172), thereby enabling it to begin to approach representing death.

Celan and Dickinson's version of death is one of both sorrow and redemption, the grave and life. As each poet explores redemption in death, they simultaneously represent death by exploring life. While Dickinson's most famous poem on death is probably "Because I could not stop for Death" (Fr 479), hundreds of her poems personify death and claim, as the beginning of this poem does, that "Death sets a thing significant" (Fr 640). Dickinson makes this claim again in her poem "Death is potential to that Man,"

Death is potential to that Man  
 Who dies—and to his friend—  
 Beyond that—unconspicuous  
 To Anyone but God—. (Fr 650)

The word "potential" in the first line of the poem could be read in multiple ways. The potential could be good and lead "that Man" to a positive end, or the potential could be negative, where he becomes nothing. The end of the poem seems to suggest that the former analysis is more correct because although the "Man" is "unconspicuous" after his death, he is able to still be noticeable to God. Yet the poem maintains its ambiguity by revealing the negative cost for God's notice—a loss of the man's friends.

Dickinson's later poem, "A Death-Blow" (Fr 966) focuses more fully on redemption in death than the previous poem.

A Death-Blow is a life-blow to some  
 Who, till they died, did not alive become;  
 Who, had they lived, had died, but when  
 They died vitality begun.

This poem highlights the paradox that “vitality” comes only after death and that “till” a person “died,” they could not be “alive.” This poem has a biblical resonance, reminiscent of John 11:25: “...he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet he shall live.” While this poem does not reference Christianity as the scripture does, it embraces the same paradox that death can allow for life and that life leads to death, a concept Dickinson’s Protestant religion would have acquainted her with. Yet this poem also maintains some form of ambiguity in the first line. The word “blow” signifies that death is negative and painful. Dickinson even uses “blow” to describe life. This word choice seems to be in contradiction with her line that death is “vitality,” thereby giving the poem an ambiguous resonance.

Celan, like Dickinson, wrote many poems on death, finding that the best way to represent death was ambiguously. In contrast to Dickinson, several of Celan’s poems on death were heavily influenced by his experiences in the Holocaust, and in particular, the death of his mother. His most famous poem “Death Fugue” (“Todesfuge”) personifies death and its power in this way.

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts  
 wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland  
 wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken  
 der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau  
 er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland  
 we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink



this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue

he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true (32-33).

In the last stanza of the poem, Celan refers to death as the “Meister” (“master”) and remarks how every person must “trinken” (“drink”) of death. These lines, a clear response to the death of so many in the Holocaust, is one of Celan’s most critically acclaimed and anthologized poems. Yet Celan himself did not like the poem. He thought the poem was too explicit and that his personification of death too clear. In fact, as noted by Michael Hamburger, after the poem was published, Celan began playing with language and how he represented death, coming to a point where he refused to publish “Todesfuge” later in his life (xxiv).

While Celan’s “Todesfuge” makes death out to be a force only of deterioration, where death leads to weakness and pain, his explanation of death in “The Meridian” recognizes the same ambiguity that Dickinson addresses—that while death does lead to disintegration, it can also lead to redemption:

‘Death,’ we read in a work about Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz published in Leipzig in 1909—written by a Moscow lecturer by the name of M. N. Rosanov—‘death as final redeemer was not long in coming. On the night of 23 to 24 May, 1792, Lenz was found lifeless in a Moscow street. A nobleman paid for his burial. His last resting place has remained unknown.’ Thus had he lived *on*...He: the true, the Büchnerian Lenz...he—not the artist, not the one preoccupied with questions about art, he as an I. (6-7)

In his description of the Death of Lenz as accounted for by Rosanov, Celan mentions that “Thus had he lived *on*,” suggesting that Lenz’s death was not the end. Celan continues, stating, “he lived *on*” as “an I.” This passage becomes clearer with Celan’s next line as he discusses the strangeness of language and its relationship to the earlier story on Lenz’s death: “Can we now

perhaps locate the place where strangeness was, the place where the person was able to set himself free as an—estranged—I?” (7). Celan answers this question later in the speech in his discussion of the meridian, thus concluding that “the place where the person was able to set himself free,” is at the meridian between the physical and the “immaterial.” Celan recognizes the “strangeness” that language must embrace in order to set “himself free” and both live and die at the same time.

Celan’s later poem “Denk Dir” (“Think of It”) demonstrates how death can lead to freedom at the same time as it leads to the grave. “Denk Dir” was included in the 1968 *Fadensonnen*, which was published only two years before Celan committed suicide.

Denk dir:  
der Moorsoldat von Massada  
bringt sich Heimat bei, aufs  
unauslöschlichste,  
wider  
allen Dorn im Draht.

Think of it:  
the bog soldier of Massada  
teaches himself home, most  
inextinguishably,  
against  
every barb in the wire.

Denk dir:  
die Augenlosen ohne Gestalt  
führen dich frei durchs Gewühl, du  
erstarkst und  
erstarkst.

Think of it:  
the eyeless with no shape  
lead you free through the tumult, you  
grow stronger and  
stronger

Denk dir: deine  
eigene Hand  
hat dies wieder  
ins Leben empor-  
gelittene  
Stück  
bewohnbarer Erde  
gehalten.

Think of it: your  
own hand  
has held  
this bit of  
habitable  
earth, suffered up  
again  
into life.

Denk dir:  
das kam auf mich zu,  
namenwach, handwach  
für immer,  
vom Unbestattbaren her.

Think of it:  
this came towards me,  
name-awake, hand-awake  
for ever,  
from the unburialable.

The poem begins by referencing a Jewish survivor, the “der Moorsoldat” (“bog soldier”), a reference to the song “Peat Bog Soldiers” that was written by prisoners of Nazi concentration camps (This song continues to be a symbol of resistance against tyranny). The soldier in the poem is also from Masada, a fortress in Israel that is famous for the death and imprisonment of thousands of Jews by the Romans and represents the Jews’ willingness to die for what they believed in. This first image shapes the rest of the poem, reminding the reader of the soldier whose mass death in the battle of Masada and in the camps of the Holocaust also allows him to find redemption. The second stanza of the poem describes “die Augenlosen ohn Gestalt” (“the eyeless with no shape”), an image that seems to already be dead. This eyeless, dead, image leads the speaker through the “Gewül” (“tumult”) and allows the speaker to become stronger. Again in the third stanza the speaker meets death, this time by touching the “Erde” (“earth”), a symbol of the grave. Yet again the speaker does not find destruction upon touching death; he is instead allowed to live again. The final stanza then concludes declaring that life is “unburialable.” Each of the stanzas suggests how a meeting with death can simultaneously lead to life; it is the meeting itself, when the two paths converge, that the poem can start to get at the question of what death is.

### **Translations:**

Paul Celan’s conception of death as a meridian culminates in his translations of Dickinson’s poems “Let down the bars, O Death” and “Because I could not stop for Death.” I will start first with “Let down the bars, O Death” (This version of the translation is taken from Wolosky 1. The English translation of the German is taken from Felstiner, “Paul Celan Translating Others” and is italicized to distinguish it from Dickinson’s original).

Let down the bars, O Death —  
The tired Flocks come in

Fort mit der Schranke, Tod!  
Die Herde kommt, es kommt,

Whose bleating ceases to repeat  
Whose wandering is done —

wer blökte und nun nimmer blökt,  
wer nicht mehr wandert, kommt.

Thine is the stillest night  
Thine the securest Fold  
Too near Thou art for seeking Thee  
Too tender, to be told.

Dein ist die stillste Nacht,  
der sichre Pferch ist dein.  
Zu nah bist du, um noch gesucht,  
zu sanft, genannt zu sein.

*Away with the bar, Death!  
The Herd comes in, they come  
who bleated and now never bleat,  
who no more wander, come.  
Thine is the stillest night,  
the surer fold is thine.  
Too near thou art to yet be sought,  
too tender, to be named.*

In both Dickinson's version and Celan's translation, the poem calls to death in the first line. Felstiner remarks that Celan's removal of Dickinson's "O" in this first line makes his call a command and harsher than Dickinson's ("Paul Celan Translating Others"), but both poets' calls are urgent, begging death to listen. Wolosky analyzes this line by stating that Celan's translation invokes the mystical, making it "unclear whether the stillness the poem seeks is a final fulfillment, or a final annihilation" (2). This first line can be analyzed in two different ways. The speaker in the poem could be begging death to let her in or could be begging Death to "Let down the bars" in order to let her out. The exclamation point at the end of the first line reinforces Celan's call, making the ambiguity of the line more pronounced by insisting more fully that Death open the bars. Celan repeats "kommt" ("come") twice in the second line thereby creating an image of a greater "Herde" ("herd") of people coming through death's door than in Dickinson's line, though the distinction of whether that herd comes of their own free will or against it is unknown.

As the "Flocks come in" past Death's bar, Celan continues to explore the ambiguity of inherent in death.

Whose bleating ceases to repeat	wer blökte und nun nimmer blökt
Whose wandering is done—	wer nicht mehr wandert, kommt.

While Celan's translation of these two lines closely resemble Dickinson's original text, his repetition of the word "bleat" ("blökt") ironically repeats the sound of bleating after the herd no longer can bleat. Consequently, the loss of speech is not just detrimental because the sound continues to the end of the line. Even after the herd ceases to bleat, there is some hope near the fourth line of the poem. The people no longer have to wander; death gives them some form of peace, though there is a cost. Celan reinforces this irony by invoking both peace and loss by adding to the end of this line the word "come" ("kommt") as if inviting people to come and find rest while also losing their voice.

Celan's translation of the second stanza of this poem signals the redemption that comes after death.

Thine is the stillest night	Dein ist die stillste Nacht,
Thine the securest Fold	der sichre Pferch ist dein.

Like many of his translations, Celan inverts the word "Thine" ("dein") in the first two lines of the second stanza by starting the first line with "Thine" and ending the second line with "Thine" in contrast to Dickinson beginning each of these lines with "Thine." By removing Dickinson's parallel structure, Celan gives death more power, placing all that death owns between its name. Both poets in these two lines focus on the "stillness" of death, but Celan changes Dickinson's "securest" to "sichre" ("surer"). This surety implies a guarantee that death will provide and that his "Pferch" ("Fold") offers calmness and stillness.

But as the poem reaches its conclusion, Felstiner remarks that Celan’s choice to end with the word “being” (“sein”) “almost counteracts death” (“Paul Celan Translating Others) and its power.

Too tender, to be told.

zu sanft, genannt zu sein.

While Dickinson’s line remarks how death is “too tender, to be told,” Celan replaces the word “told” with “genannt,” meaning “called” or “named.” Dickinson’s “told” suggests that death cannot be spoken directly. By using the word “named” instead of “told,” Celan further explores the idea that death can only be addressed circuitously. In discussing naming, Benjamin claims that it is through naming that “Man...communicates his own mental being” and that “*It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things*” (64). Celan’s inclusion of the word “name” suggests that death is “too tender” for humans to “communicate.” By not being able to name death, humans are not able to perform their “linguistic” need to “name things.” To name death directly would be impossible because death cannot be signified. The only way for the poet to refer to death is by being implicit and exploring several different lines on the globe because death itself does not have a name that humans know or can use.

Celan’s translation of the poem “Because I could not stop for Death” also explores how the poets explain the phenomenon of death. Before analyzing Celan’s translation, I have included the original poem and the translation in its full form as a reference (this version of the translation is taken from Rosenthal 133. Underneath the poem, I’ve included mine and Ian McArthur’s translation of Celan’s German in italics):

Der Tod, da ich nicht halten konnt,  
hielt an, war gern bereit.  
Im Fuhrwerk saß nun er und ich  
Und die Anserblichkeit.

Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality.

Ihm gings auch langsam schnell genug,

We slowly drove—He knew no haste

und ich hatt fortgetan  
das Fronen und das Müßiggehn,  
so freundlich war der Mann.

Ein Schulhof kam mit kleinem Volk,  
  
das miteinander rang...  
Es had das Korn uns nachgeäugt,  
Wir sahn: die Sonne sank.

Dann hielten wir, da stand ein Haus:  
emporgewelltes Land.  
Das Dach—kaum daß es sichtbar war,  
Das Sims—ein Hügelrand.

Jahrhunderte seither, doch keins  
war länger als der Nu,  
da ich mir sagt: Wir halten ja  
auf Ewigkeiten zu!

*Death, because I could not stop,  
Waited, and was very pleased  
In carriage sat with me  
And immortality.*

*He goes quite slow and fast enough,  
And I had from that moment  
That drudgery and that leisure,  
So friendly was the man.*

*A school yard came with little people,  
That rang amongst each other...  
The corn watched us as we passed,  
And we saw: the sun sink*

*Then we paused, there stood a house  
Overflowing land.  
The roof—little that was visible,  
The cornice—a brim of the hill.*

*Hundreds of years since (centuries later)  
But nothing was longer than the day,  
That I said to myself  
We shut the eternities!*

And I had put away  
My labor and my lesiure too,  
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children  
strove  
At Recess—in the Ring—  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the Setting Sun—

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground—  
The Roof was scarcely visible—  
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses Heads  
Were toward Eternity—





In the third line of the second stanza, Celan removes Dickinson's original "My." Rosenthal acknowledges this change with her argument that "labor" and "leisure" "become...abstract concepts" in Celan's translation (135). In conjunction with Rosenthal's argument, it is important to note that Celan replaces Dickinson's "My" with the word "das" before "Fronen" and "Müßiggehn," thus personifying labor and leisure. By saying "that labor" instead of the labor, Celan suggests that labor is a specific being; it is not merely the concept of labor. Celan's removal of the word "My," also deemphasizes the speaker of the poem. The abstract concept of death, along with labor and leisure, are highlighted as the speaker becomes less apparent. Celan continues this trope of removing the speaker in the third stanza of the poem.

Es hat das Korn uns nachgeäugt,                      We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
Both Dickinson and Celan structure this line so that "Korn" ("Grain") is personified. The "Korn" watches death and the speaker as they pass, which continues to suggest that the "we" is taking a journey that includes the "Grain," "Labor," and "Leisure."

At the end of the poem, Celan does not fully remove the "I" speaker of the poem, but he again focuses on Death more than Dickinson's original.

da ich mir sagt: Wir halten ja                      I first surmised the Horses Heads

Celan starts the line like Dickinson by beginning with "I," but after his initial use of "ich," Celan changes the focus of the line. He completely removes the "Horses Heads" and replaces them with "Wir" ("we"). By adding "Wir" to the line, Celan makes Death as important a figure as the speaker. While Rosenthal argues that Celan's inclusion of we "acknowledges death as a collective phenomenon" (137), it also suggests that part of the goal of the translation was to represent Death. In representing both Death and the speaker, Celan is able to explore two branching perspectives. Celan includes the colon between his address of "mir" and "Wir" to highlight the speaker and Death's journey together to "eternity." Celan connects the beginning of

the poem and his original emphasis on Death with the end of the poem as Death and the speaker come together. The removal of importance on the individual “I” allows for an analysis of Death, “I,” and we, where everyone must eventually join Death even if they do not fully understand it.

The pace of Celan’s translation also differs from Dickinson’s original. He removes almost all of the dashes that Dickinson is so well known for. In contrast to Dickinson’s sixteen dashes, Celan only includes two dashes in his translation and both of them are in the fourth stanza. Rosenthal argues that Celan’s removal of the dashes creates a poem “where things are happening” (136), which corresponds with Celan’s statement in “The Meridian” that “poetry hurries ahead” (6). While the pace of the lines themselves are similar, Celan’s translation moves more quickly from line to line in contrast with Dickinson’s original that encourages a fuller stop at the end of the lines with the dashes. Returning to the first two lines of the poem:

Der Tod, da ich nicht halten konnt,	Because I could not stop for Death—
hielt an, war gern bereit.	He kindly stopped for me—

The dash at the end of the first line creates a pause between the speaker’s action and Death’s action in the second line. Celan does not need to keep this pause in his translation because he does not need to separate the action of two different actors. Instead, Celan begins with Death and finishes the second line with Death, thereby moving quicker between the two lines because all of the action is Death’s.

While the removal of the dashes quickens the pace of the poem, Rosenthal’s response does not fully answer the question of why Celan wanted his translation to have a quicker pace. I believe the answer to this question lies in an analysis by Behnke, who remarks that “In the tradition of literature on the dance of death, Death frequently figures as a travel companion to the dying...In Celan’s translation, however, it is Death who is ready” (416). Although Behnke was

not referring to the pace or the removal of dashes when she made this statement (she was referring to the prepositional phrases of “for Death” and “for me” in the first two lines of translation), her analysis begins to answer why Celan opted for a quicker pace. In Dickinson’s original poem, the speaker is not ready for death. The speaker in Dickinson’s poem cannot “stop for Death,” so Death has to stop for her. The dashes indicate the hesitancy of the speaker by slowing the reading down. Each dash slows the speaker from her inevitable journey to the grave. Celan’s translation of these two lines still maintains punctuation in the form of three commas and a period instead of Dickinson’s two dashes, but his punctuation maintains a similar pace throughout both lines, with no abrupt stops at the end of the lines. The period at the end of the second line is the only full stop. This period stops the movement as Death waits for the speaker to enter the carriage. The stop in Celan’s translation is not the speaker’s stop; it is Death’s stop because he is ready to take the speaker to the grave. The removal of the dashes in these two lines reinforces that Death is the main actor in the poem instead of the speaker in Dickinson’s original, as is explored again at the end of the first stanza.

Im Fuhrwerk saß nun er und ich  
und die Ansterblichkeit.

The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality.

Dickinson includes a dash at the end of “Ourselves” to once again slow down the end of the line and force the speaker to pause before she must face “Immortality.” Celan’s version removes all punctuation except the end period. This period, which matches Dickinson’s, stops the reading at “Immortality,” but the pace up to this point has rushed to immortality quicker than Dickinson’s. Celan continues this pace throughout the poem, allowing Death to march to a quick “Eternity.”

In discussing Celan’s pace and punctuation, it is significant to note that Celan includes colons where Dickinson has none.

Es hat das Korn uns nachgeäugt,  
wir sahn: die Sonne sank.

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the Setting Sun—

According to Rosenthal, this first colon “accentuates the alliteration” (136). While the translation may focus on the alliteration, the colon also creates a stop in the poem, which is uncharacteristic when compared to Celan’s removal of Dickinson’s dashes. This colon forces a stop between “wir sahn” (we saw) and “die Sonne sank” (the sun sank). In Dickinson’s original, there is no stop, not only in punctuation but also in wording. Her version clearly shows more movement than Celan’s since Death and the speaker “passed the Setting Sun—” while Celan’s has no mention of passing, an unexpected move since Celan has generally maintained a quicker pace throughout the beginning of the poem. The slowing of Celan’s translation in this line purposely encourages the reader to focus on “die Sonne sank” without directly telling the reader to pause and meditate on death. Celan highlights this metaphor because it allows the reader to consider death without having to actually name it.

The next colon in the following line, as well as the two dashes that are in the next stanza, begin to slow down the translation from its initial pace. As Death and the speaker come closer and closer to the grave, Celan’s translation slows down, allowing the final moments of the journey to last longer than the first.

Dann hielten wir, da stand ein Haus:  
Emporgewelltes Land.

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground—

Das Dach—kaum daß es sichtbar war,

The Roof was scarcely visible—

Das Sims—ein Hügelrand.

The Cornice—in the Ground—

While Dickinson’s original text includes several stops in this stanza, Celan’s stops center around the grave. He ends the first line in the stanza with “Haus” (house) and a colon, creating a pause

that accentuates the next line, “Emporgewelltes Land.” As in the previous stanza, when Celan emphasizes the setting sun between a colon and a period, he again pauses the poem at a point of reflection on death. The reader is forced to contemplate the “Swelling...Ground” more in the translation than in the original text. The dashes in the following two lines also focus on the grave more than in Dickinson’s original poem. “Das Dach—“ and “Das Sims” not only mirror each other, the addition of the dash in the middle of each line focuses on the “Roof” and the “Cornice,” slowing down the entire stanza. The translation closely mirrors the human journey to death as it moves quickly through childhood, but slows dramatically at old age. As the speaker grows older, death becomes an unwanted reality, and life itself slows down.

After pausing the reader at a contemplation of the grave, the translation speeds up again as the speaker begins her reflection in the last stanza of the poem.

Jahrhunderte seither, doch keins	Since then—‘tis Centuries—and yet
war länger als der Nu,	Feels shorter than the Day
da ich mir sagt: Wir halten ja	I first surmised the Horses Heads
auf Ewigkeiten zu!	Were toward Eternity—

Celan includes only two commas in the first two lines, restoring the quick pace found in the beginning of the poem. It is not until the second to last line of the poem that Celan again uses a colon. Before the colon, the speaker pauses in reflection, “da ich mir sagt:,” which resembles Dickinson’s speaker’s same reflection at the end of the poem. It is after the colon that Celan moves the reflection from that of the speaker to that of a collective, as mentioned earlier. In this moment, Celan again changes Dickinson’s punctuation by adding an exclamation point. In response to this addition, Rosenthal argues that “Celan postulates a command, by changing the hyphen into an exclamation point” (136), but is that command from Death or from the We?

Celan never makes the distinction clear considering that he ends the poem with *we*, suggesting that both Death and the speaker are forming the command. The speaker and Death have finally come to agreement (the two lines have met at the apex of the meridian), and the speaker, with Death, declares that she is ready to meet eternity.

Celan's translation of "Because I could not stop for Death" clearly explores death's role in life's journey more than Dickinson's original text. In her discussion of time in the translation, Behnke argues that "Dickinson views the perspective into the future from the past...while Celan appears to speak in the present" (418). She continues, stating that Celan's reason for placing the poem in the present is because he "marks the time of the translation...the translation—unlike its source text—is also part of the present" (419). In addition to Behnke's analysis, Celan's focus on the present also forces the reader to be more present in the poem's action and to more fully analyze her own relationship with Death and Death's living role in life. If a person is to "live...*on*" and be "set free," then she must bridge the gap between the material world and the soon to be immaterial. Celan's exclamation point at the end of the poem suggests that the moment the speaker goes on to the eternities ("auf Ewigkeiten zu!"), when the two lines cross, is when she can fully realize herself, both physically and spiritually, and finally understand what death means. The experience of reading the poem then becomes a cognitive representation of that bridge.

### **Conclusion:**

Celan's translation of both of these poems suggest that Death is in many ways a meridian that cannot be directly explained because of its physical and spiritual components. Even as language attempts to explain death, it must do so by exploring all of the different lines on the globe. As those lines meet and cross, the poet can start to approach death. The journey the

speaker takes in Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" can start to understand death only as the poet uses the journey to cross two diverging points in the circle: life and birth with the grave. Celan's translations of Dickinson's poems on death adds other lines to the globe, each of which join the "immaterial" with the "terrestrial." By having death and the speaker as two different lines in the translation, he is able to show the process by which the two meet when the speaker accepts the end of her life.

Celan's translations of these two Dickinson poems allow Celan to explore his understanding of death without ever having to name that understanding or make it explicit. As Blanchot remarks as he discusses Rilke's statement that "interior space 'translates things,'" because translation

pass[es] from one language to another... This essential translator is the poet, and this space is the poem's space, where no longer is anything present, where in the midst of absence everything speaks, everything returns into the spiritual accord which is open and not immobile but the center of the eternal movement. (141)

Celan's meridian corresponds with this idea because as language passes across the poles of the meridian, it is able to speak and "return into the spiritual accord." The poem is a transitional space that allows the poet to approach the unapproachable, even death. Consequently language brings death into the known realm of the globe just to have it split and move across the globe again. As Celan attempted to understand the unknown, he recognized that he could not approach it directly, a key element he must have recognized in Dickinson's poetry. As Celan worked to comprehend his own understanding of death and the way that he could write about it, he must have seen in Dickinson an ambiguity in her language that made her poems on death resonate with him. Sixteen years after writing "Todesfuge" and then rejecting its explicit exploration of

death, Celan found in Dickinson a language that could cross the meridian of life and death. It is through an understanding of Celan's translations and global metaphor that we are better able to illuminate how we read Dickinson's poems on death and how her language crosses many different poles at once.



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