

From “Purpurwort” to Forgiveness: A Tawadian Translation of Celan’s “Psalm”

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ABSTRACT: This paper engages with Yoko Tawada’s concept of translation as a signal exchange with Mars, which positions translators from a significant distance, both spatially and temporally, from the original text and its context. It offers a “Tawadian” translation of Paul Celan’s poem “Psalm,” particularly the neologisms in the final stanza, into Chinese characters. Particularly, the translation of “Purpurwort” as “yurusu,” a character that consists of the signs for “purple” and “word” but has the meaning of “forgiveness, amnesty, pardon,” brings forth the idea of “forgiveness” that may appear irrelevant to the original text. Drawing from Derrida’s interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* in “What is a ‘Relevant’ translation?” This paper relates “impossible translation” to “impossible forgiveness,” arguing that an “irrelevant” translation could shed a new light on the concept of forgiveness and offers a dialogical response to Celan’s original text.

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Paul Celan’s works are often declared as “untranslatable,” a claim tied to both the particulars of Celan’s biography and the ambiguity of his language. One of Celan’s English translators, Michael Hamburger, describes Celan’s late works as “virtually untranslatable because his increasingly personal vocabulary tested and dislocated linguistic conventions,”ⁱ while J.M. Coetzee concludes in a review of Celan’s works that translations of Celan’s late poetry must always fail.ⁱⁱ Hans-Georg Gadamer calls Celan’s poems “hermetically coded verses” in which “the syntactical and functional expressions of speech – the prosaic-rhetorical means through which we normally accomplish the logical constitution of unity within speech – are almost completely eliminated.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jacques Derrida’s essays and lectures on Celan also address the limit of translation when it comes to the singularity of language and event. For Derrida, Celan’s poetry resists translation because translation threatens to annihilate the singularity of the poetry, and therefore the possibility of bearing witness.^{iv} In other words, the difficulty to translate Celan is not only due to his frequent mix of multiple languages and technical vocabularies, but also because his poetry are particular to his personal experience. In an essay addressing the impossibility of translating Celan, Kurt Beals argues that the characterization of Celan’s work as untranslatable in fact relies on a mode of translation or paradigm “in which the translation is conceived of as a vehicle for conveying the meanings and effects of the source-language text to the target-language reader.”^v Instead, he proposes a paradigm that sees the original and the translation not as resemblance or equivalence, but as a dialogue. A dialogic model of translation would require the translation to attend to the ambiguities and insinuations of the original text, “exacerbating these tensions rather than resolving them” (Beals, 292).

While the alternative dialogic paradigm that Beals proposes certainly contributes to translation studies as a whole, reasons that lead to the declaration of Celan’s poetry as “untranslatable” appear to be more complicated than the ignorance of alternatives or a choice to remain narrowly faithful to the original text, as Beals suggests. The dialogic paradigm that Beals proposes also requires a significant temporal and spatial distance between the poet and his (unexpected) readers, distance that many of Celan’s translators and critics do not possess: many of them are intimately, perhaps painfully, connected to the poet’s language and experience in one way or another, and they are, if we were to adhere to the dialogic paradigm, not the poet’s target audience. Celan’s ideal interlocutor, if there is one, should be one who receives his message in a bottle, whereas the dialogue between the poet and his

interlocutor should be, to use Osip Mandelstam's metaphor, like a signal exchange with Mars. Yoko Tawada, an Asian reader of the 21st century, could potentially fit this profile. Her readings of Celan's poetry, which may appear absurd or irrelevant to some, are examples of her role as a "translator from Mars" responsible of the task of forming a dialogue with Celan's original text. In this essay, I propose a Tawadian translation of the poem "Psalm," in which I translate a few of Celan's neologisms into Chinese characters. Most significantly, the word "Purpurwort" could be translated as "赦," an ideogram consisting of two characters, "red" and "letter," and represents the meaning of "forgiveness." With the aid of Derrida's essay, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?", I argue that the "irrelevant" translation of the poem shed a new light on the concept of forgiveness and offers a dialogical response to Celan's original text.

1. "Beschneide das Wort!"

"Einem, der vor der Tür stand" is a poem from the collection *Die Niemandrose* that Derrida discusses in his lecture, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," delivered in Seattle in 1984. The lecture opens and closes with an analysis of the same phrase from this poem, "beschneide das Wort." Derrida sees Rabbi Löw, the Maharal of Prague who appears in this poem, as a "circumciser," someone who opens the word like a wound and thereby creates the Golem. The poem, as Derrida reads it, concerns both the circumcision of the word and the circumcision of the Jewish body. Tawada's reading of the same poem in her essay "Rabbi Löw und 27 Punkte: Physiognomie der Interpunktion bei Paul Celan," however, appears purely "literal," in that it focuses on letters, punctuations, and numbers hidden in the poem, rather than lived experiences as expressed in the poem or visceral responses to the affective state of the poet. I argue that, Tawada's neutral, literal reading is the result of a distance, both geographical and temporal, between her identity as a Japanese-speaking reader from 21st century East Asia, and the catastrophic events of 20th century Europe that is slowly receding into the past and beyond living memory. Kim Su Rasmussen refers to the Asian reader like Tawada as the "neutral reader," who is not perpetrator, victim, nor bystander of the crimes and traumatic consequences that Celan witnessed.^{vi} Here, I will compare Derrida's and Tawada's readings of the poem to show what a "neutral" reading could possibly be. First, let us read the poem together:

EINEM, DER VOR DER TÜR STAND, eines
Abends:

ihm
tat ich mein Wort auf --: zum
Kielkropf sah ich ihn trotten, zum
halb-
schürigen, dem
im kotigen Stiefel des Kriegsknechts
geborenen Bruder, dem
mit dem blutigen
Gottes-
gemächt, dem
schilpenden Menschlein

Rabbi, knirschte ich, Rabbi
Löw:

Diesem
beschneide das Wort,
diesem
schreib das lebendige
Nichts ins Gemüt,
diesem
spreize die zwei
Krüppelfinger zum heil-
bringenden Spruch,
Diesem.

.....

wirf auch die Abendtür zu, Rabbi.

.....

Reiß die Morggentür auf, Ra - --^{vii}

Translating “beschneide” as “circumcise,” Derrida suggests that readers may understand the “circumcised word” as an opened word. He uses “circumcision” to designate the surgical act of cutting or the condition of being circumcised, either of which designates a clear bodily event. The word is to be circumcised and opened up, not only like a door to the neighbor and the stranger alike, but also like an open wound on the body. The wound is a particularly Jewish one, for circumcision is an essentially Jewish performance, which addresses the community’s self-definition and its relationship to the Other. Since a baby boy is only given his Jewish name after the ritual of circumcision, the performance is essentially an inscription of the sign of the covenant upon the Jewish boy’s body. A similar inscription or circumcision is performed on the forehead of the Golem, where the words “emeth” [truth] or “meth” [death] dictates the monster’s life and death. It is also performed on Rabbi Löw’s own body, as the poem breaks off in the midst of pronouncing the Rabbi’s name, “Ra-.”

“Circumcising” the word means to cut open the word and close the circle: it contains the Latin origin of “circum,” which means round, circle, about. No matter how “open” the word is, it is still (or, it must be) be a closed circle about the Jewish community, the Jewish experience, and the Jewish difference. As Celan’s contemporary and a fellow Jew, Derrida’s reading of the poem is intimately, painfully close, like a cut on the body. For him, “reiß die Morgenrtür auf” must require one to “wirf auf die Abendtür zu” at the same time, a violent opening comes only with an equally violent closing. The circumcised word, “the wound of partaking,” is a “double edge” that, while opening its doors to the Other, also intervenes, interdicts, and signifies the sentence of exclusion, discrimination, and extermination (Shibboleth, 63). The circumcised word, like the shibboleth, also partakes, excludes, and refuses the other. “it is the circumcised who are proscribed or held at the border, excluded from the community, put to death, or reduced to ashes: the mere sight, in the mere name, at the first reading of a wound” (Shibboleth, 63).

Tawada’s reading of the same phrase, “beschneide das Wort,” is nothing like Derrida’s intimate and painful reading of the word as both an open door and an open wound. As an author, she is known for her frequent wordplays, multilingual puns, and humorous style. Her style has often been called “funny,” “playfully joyous,” and sometimes also “deliciously absurd.”^{viii} Tawada’s reading of Celan retains her playful and humorous writing style, which immediately distances her work from that of many Celan scholars, who could hardly imagine Holocaust poetry being taken so “lightly.” She begins her essay, “Rabbi Löw und 27 Punkte: Physiognomie der Interpunktion bei Paul Celan” by carefreely slicing Celan’s name open, turning it into two words and one punctuation, “Zähl an!” Then, she takes the command, “beschneide das Wort!”, quite *literally* and begins counting both the letters and the number of punctuations in a poem.^{ix} Instead of drawing a line or a circle on the physical body of the poem, she decides to *literally* slice words open into individual letters and dots, and then translate these names into numbers. She believes that, since the life of Golem is dependent on the letters written on its forehead, letters themselves should be thought of as essentially life-bearing bodies. This belief is inspired by her reading of *Sefer Yetzirah* [*Book of Creation*], a proto-kabbalistic work that develops an abstract conceptualization of cosmic unity through the contemplation of the meaning of numbers of letters, describes that the universe was created by the God of Israel through 32 ways of wisdom, including 10 numbers and 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. She comments, “gerade Rabbi Löw, der selbst durch Buchstaben den Golem schuf, muss gespürt haben, dass auch sein eigener Körper sich auflösen und wieder in eine bestimmte Anzahl von Buchstaben verwandeln könnte”

(“Sprachpolizei,” 41). In the magical world in this text, organic life and inorganic name – which consists of letters and numbers – are inter-translatable. So Rabbi Löw, who gives the Golem life by writing the word “emeth” on his forehead, must know that his own body can undergo the same metamorphosis. Tawada spends the last section of the essay translating and putting Rabbi Löw’s name, which was cut in the middle in the poem, back together. She reads the letter “B” in “Rabbi” as the number “13,” and the letter “I” as the number “1.” So, the two line of dots that comes before and after the line “Wirf auch die Abendtür zu, Rabbi,” each consisting 13 and 14 points respectively (at least in her copy of the text), could be translated into “B” and “BI,” which, when combined with the circumcised name “Ra-,” completes the name.

In Tawada’s interpretation, not only the life of the Golem, but also the life of the Rabbi, and even the poet, is dependent on letters and punctuations. Like toy building blocks, letters could be taken apart and put together repeatedly to create different words, languages, and even life. When letters become toys, words could be cut open a thousand times with no blood shed and no pain inflicted. This reading could be understood as accidental, as the number of dots, which vary in different published versions of this poem, appears to be an editorial decision, rather than the author’s intentional choice. But even so, this failed attempt of “zählen” is still a proper response to Celan’s commands for his reader: “beschneide das Wort!”, “zähle die Mandeln!”, and “lies nicht mehr—schau! Schau nicht mehr—geh!” By translating dots into numbers and numbers into letters, Tawada is echoing Celan’s own practice of translating names (Mandelstamm) into countable things (Mandel).^x

If, for Derrida, words only become open once the Jewish body has been cut open, for Tawada, words has always already been open – in her opinion, the connection between individual letters, punctuations, words, and phrases is not necessarily organic and physical as a human body, but accidental and playful like a children’s game. Derrida, the Algerian-born French-Jewish philosopher, can only read Celan, a Romanian-born German-Jewish poet, as a fellow Jew, who writes with his own blood, from his own wounds. Marina Tsvetaeva’s “all the poets are Jews” are cited by both Celan and Derrida alike. Derrida writes,

To say “all poets are Jews” is to state something which marks *and* annuls the mark of circumcision. It is tropic. All those who deal with or inhabit language as poets are Jews – but in a tropic sense. [...] what the trope [...] comes down to, then, is locating the Jew not only *as* a poet but also in every man circumcised by language or led to circumcise a language. Every man, then, is circumcised. Let us translate, according to the same trope: therefore also every woman – even the sister. (“Shibboleth,” 54)

The claim “all poets are Jews” is based on the understanding that “what is proper to the Jew is to have no property or essence” (“Shibboleth,” 35). Being Jewish, in Derrida’s reading, is to have nothing of his own, to be a sheer difference, to be the absolute other. The community is marked by the sign of a circular cut, which is simultaneously a symbol of membership and exclusion. Anyone who sees language as differential and differentiating is circumcised and circumcising, and in that sense, a poet, a Jew.

But Tawada is not a Jew: she was raised in a community where both Christians and Jews were few. She belongs to the majority in her hometown near Tokyo, and the minority in her other hometown in Berlin. Highly educated, fluent in both Japanese and German, and economically independent, her experience of migration reflects Japan’s postwar economic miracle and a new era of social globalization. Tawada symbolizes the “other” whose identity is not defined by who she is not. As a privileged world traveler, she represents an “other” with fluid national, cultural, and gender identity. Although she is a migrant in Germany, her migrating experience is drastically different from perhaps the majority of migrants in Germany. When she first arrived in Hamburg, she already had a college degree, a job, and a home in the suburbs of Tokyo where she could always return to. She was not forced to identify with Germany, or to assimilate with German cultural values. She had the privilege to be the positive “other,” an equal of an average German person, rather than the symbol of sheer difference.^{xi} She is not only welcomed and accepted as an author of the German language in Germany, but also celebrated as a prominent bilingual author in Japan. She is from a unique position where she could not only switch between languages, but also between cultural identities. Furthermore, she is not directly responsible for the crimes committed against the Jews before her birth, and she relieved herself from the impossible task of speaking about the unspeakable. The circular cut between the Jew and the non-Jew that Derrida so painstakingly marks, remarks, and unmarks upon his own Jewish body, is little more than an abstract concept to the Japanese-German writer born after the war. The cut is never on her body, and she does not have to be a Jew to be a poet.

2. Translation as Trading Signals with Mars

For Tawada, Celan’s words have always been openings. “Celans Wörter sind keine Behälter, sondern Öffnungen. Ich gehe durch die Öffnung der Tore, jedesmal wenn ich sie lese. [...] Die faszinierende Übersetzbarkeit der Gedichte Celans kann u.a. an ihrer Wörtlichkeit liegen,” she writes in the essay “Das Tor des Übersetzers oder Celan liest Japanisch.”^{xii} In her commentary of Mitsuo Iiyoshi’s Japanese translation of the cycle

“Sieben Rosen später” from Celan’s *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*, Tawada identifies the ideogram for “gate,” or “門,” which appears exactly seven times in seven different ideograms. They correspond to the seven roses, which could be interpreted temporally either as seven hours, or spatially as seven in-between spaces. These doors exist only in the Japanese translation, not the original German; but in Tawada’s reading, Celan’s poems have always been peering into the Japanese. She comments, “Der Dichter muß den Blick der Übersetzung, der aus der Zukunft auf den Originaltext geworfen wird, gespürt haben. [...] Wenn ich mir ein Gedicht als einen Strahlenempfänger vorstelle, so ist es sinnlos, in einem deutschen Gedicht etwas “typisch Deutsches” zu suchen. Denn es empfängt immer etwas Fremdes und niemals sich selbst” (“Talisman,” 126–127). Tawada believes that Celan’s poetic language corresponds to a constellation of foreign languages, each of which casts its light back on the original. She compares Celan’s words Benjamin’s “arcade”:

Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht, sondern läßt die reine Sprache, wie verstärkt durch ihr eigenes Medium, nur um so voller aufs Original fallen. Das vermag vor allem Wörtlichkeit in der Übertragung der Syntax und gerade sie erweist das Wort, nicht den Satz als das Urelement des Übersetzers. Denn der Satz ist die Mauer vor der Sprache des Originals, Wörtlichkeit die Arkade. (“Talisman,” 131)

Each of Celan’s word comprises a gate, and the poem as a whole resembles an arcade. What Tawada sees in Celan’s poetry – the line of dots that translates into letters or the ideograms for “gate” that open in a poem like roses – exist in translucent translations that do not aim at faithfully communicating the content of the original text, but shedding light upon the original and allowing pure language to shine through. These translations and creative readings are justified, because, as she believes, the original text is open and inviting for a new translation, a new meaning, a new literary body.

Words only appear as constellations from far away, and Tawada’s reading of Celan’s language is only possible for someone who remains a significant distance, both temporal and spatial, from the poet. However, this “distant” reading may precisely be what Celan’s poetry awaits. Osip Mandelstam, the Russian writer to whom Celan dedicates his book of poem, *Die Niemandsrose*, wrote an essay in 1913 entitled “About an Interlocutor,” which Celan had read in German translation.^{xiii} In this essay, Mandelstam argues that poetry should aim at forming a dialogue with a truly unknown interlocutor. Mandelstam’s ideal audience is not someone of his own community, or even of his own generation, but someone unknown and unexpected:

Yes, when I am speaking to someone, I have no idea who it is, and I do not, cannot wish to know him. There is no lyric poetry without dialogue. The only thing that prods us into the interlocutor's embrace is the desire to be surprised by our own words, enchanted by their startling novelty. [...] Trading signals with Mars – there's a task worthy of a lyric poetry that respects the interlocutor and is conscious of its own causeless rightness.^{xiv}

The value of a dialogue with an unknown audience dwells in the freshness and novelty inherent to poetry, and the potentiality of casting a new light on the poet's literary language, rendering them surprising and enchanting. From a reader's perspective, Mandelstam describes reading poetry as receiving a message in a bottle, travelled across the sea and addressed to whoever finds it. In his Bremen speech, Celan adopts this image of poetry as a message bottle, cast out in the belief that somewhere and some time it could wash up on land, on "Herzland" (GW III, 186). Celan's radio play "Die Dichtung Ossip Mandelstamms" repeats his conception of poetry as a dialogue, so much so that the play in its entirety is a conversation between two speakers. However, at the end of the day, Celan's belief of poetry potentially reaching an audience afar is bleaker and more despairing. In his "Meridian" speech, Celan suggests that the poem wants to reach an Other and needs an Other, even though the conversation between the poet and the Other is a desperate one [es wird Gespräch – oft ist es verzweifelt Gespräch] (GW III, 198). Tawada, however, believes that Celan's language is perfectly capable and successful in reaching an audience from afar. In her essay "Die Krone aus Gras — zu Paul Celan's 'Die Niemandrose,'" Tawada paraphrases Mandelstam's idea of translation as a conversation, arguing that poetry should be a signal exchange with Mars, particularly because one would have no idea how a being on Mars thinks, and therefore cannot expect the reader's reactions while writing. "Manchmal habe ich das Gefühl, Celan hätte unter anderem die Übersetzer, die er noch gar nicht kennen konnte, als Gesprächspartner vom Mars angesehen und für sie zahlreiche Signale hinterlassen" ("Sprachpolizei," 81). Tawada believes that Celan's poetry has the capacity to correspond to unknown translators in the future because it already contains a number of languages (botanical, geographical, biblical, French, Hebrew, to name a few) that are "durch einen alchemistischen Prozess so miteinander verbunden, dass das Gedicht in jedem Übersetzungsversuch neue Formen zeigt" ("Sprachpolizei," 81). Furthermore, she positions herself as a translator from Mars, who is assigned the task to translate Celan in ways that the poet himself may have never expected, revealing new forms of the poetry and new potentialities of the language. It is impossible that Tawada shares the intimate, physical experience of poetical "circumcision" with the Jewish poet and his contemporaries, and she

never attempts to do so. Instead, she positions herself as an alien from Mars, who has little background information about these poems and could only interpret each word, letter, and punctuation, quite literally.^{xv}

Tawada's translation, as we have seen in the Rabbi Löw essay, are "literal" to the extent of "*ad absurdum*." What she aims to achieve, however, is not a translation of Celan's poetry faithful to the meaning of each words, but a translation faithful to its inner logic – and, in this case, its absurdity. In the Meridian speech, Celan cites Georg Büchner's *Dantons Tod* and interprets Lucile's cry at the scene of Danton's execution, "es lebe der König," as homage to the majesty of the absurd which bespeaks the presence of human beings" [Gegenwart des Menschlichen zeugenden Majestät des Absurden] (GW III, 190). Lucile is paying homage to absurdity, because she knows that her acclamation, which is the opposite of her own political stance and convictions as a supporter of the French Revolution, will definitely lead to her execution. She does so only to follow her husband into death. Lucile's outcry is a rejection of the prevailing conditions and the contingency of the present time. She finds resort in madness, which liberates herself from the brutality and violence of her time. Celan writes the same about Mandelstam: "So kommt es zum Ausbruch aus der Kontingenz: durch das Lachen. Durch jenes, uns bekannte, 'unsinnige' Lachen des Dichters – durch das Absurde."^{xvi} Mandelstam was caught in the Great Purge in 1937 and died of exhaustion and heart failure in a Siberian camp. Celan himself survived the camp but lost both of his parents. The two poets write in a language that allies them with madness, because madness is an act of freedom and a testimony of the absurdity of their time. Tawada's reading of Celan, by translating the 27 dots into two letters, B and I, faithfully reproduces the sense of absurdity in Celan's text, where "alle Tropen und Metaphern ad absurdum geführt werden wollen" (GW III, 199). Although Tawada's translation of dots into letters and names may appear too playful, too carefree, and indeed irrelevant to some, it is conducted under a guiding principle of translation as a conversation, and, particularly, conversation with a Martian. It aims to carry over not the literal meaning of words and sentences, but something in the inner logic of language that is equally essential. In her translation of "einem, der vor der Tür stand," this "something" that she aims to communicate is its absurdity: the absurdity to stand before a door yet open a word/wound, to slam the evening door shut but throw the morning door open, to stop in the middle of the Rabbi's name, Ra- ---.

3. Psalm: Translating Forgiveness

Here, I will propose a Tawadian translation of “Psalm,” another poem that refers to an essentially Jewish experience. To call this attempt a “translation” may be an overstatement: I am not offering a translation of the poem in its entirety, and I probably cannot do so – it is not easy, or even possible, to find appropriate equivalent in Chinese characters for every word of this poem. It is, at best, a failed translation, a failed attempt of translation, that aims at offering an alternative perspective to look at the original text with fresh eyes. Furthermore, I would not call it a “Japanese” or “Chinese” translation, but a translation into Chinese characters, a script that is shared widely in East and Southeast Asian communities and has a profound impact on their languages. Rather than a translation from German to Japanese, what I propose is a translation from the Latin alphabet to the Chinese writing system, an attempt that intentionally distances ourselves from national identities and position us readers in an imaginative futuristic community, where all languages could potentially “become one.” My translation will focus on the last stanza, where it offers a detailed portrait of the “Niemandrose,” which also serves as the title of the book of poems. The rose is a conventional symbol of the Jewish people, the Biblical rose of Sharon. But in Celan’s text, the symbolism of the rose is inverted, and the rose becomes a witness of the suffering and exile of the Jews. It is the “Ghetto-Rose” in “Hinausgekrönt” and the “Niemandrose” that blooms towards a No-one. The poem reads,

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unseren Staub.
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
Dir zulieb wollen
wir blühen.
Dir
entgegen.

Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandrose.

Mit
dem Griffel seelenhell,
dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,
der Krone rot
vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen

über, o über
dem Dorn. (GW I, 225)

Celan's depiction of the rose consists of its reproductive organs, the pistil and stamen; the corona that envelops the sexual organs; and thorns, which are extensions or modifications of leaves or stems that the function of deterring animals from eating it. Each part of the rose is characterized by a neologism: the pistil is "seelenhell," the stamen is "himmelwüst," and the corona is red from the "purpleword" that "we" sang over the thorn. The stamen, which is the pollen-producing or "male" reproductive part of the flower, is "heavenbleak," indicating that the flower may be sterile. It is also reminiscent of Luther's translation of the second verse from Genesis, "Die Erde war wüst und leer." The rose, unable to reproduce and alone in this world where heaven has been laid to waste, nevertheless blooms. Since heaven is deserted, the only light left comes from the brightness of the human soul that takes the form of a pistil, which could mean both the female reproductive organ of a flower and a stylus, a writing instrument. Celan then moves on to the crown red from the purple word that "we" sang, again a reference of writing and poetry. The organic life of the rose, which consists of words and writing instruments alike, could be interpreted as a symbol of writing itself.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, the Niemandrose is also a reference of the Jewish identity of the poet. George Steiner points out that, Celan's "Psalm" is a fundamentally Jewish response to Auschwitz in the face of a God who will not "bespeak" the dead. "Celan has written a psalm out of Auschwitz which is simultaneously an 'anti-psalm,' exactly as matter postulates and collides with anti-matter."^{xvii} The poem praises and laments the non-speaking of God, yet God's restraint from "bespeaking" man is not enough to allow man to freely create himself, for the only "Purpurwort" that "we" are left with is sung in the past tense.^{xviii} Can "we" still sing, be it a lament or a praise, if God himself is already silent? The "Purpurwort" therefore symbolizes the potentiality to speak (or, to use Adorno's words, to write poetry) after Auschwitz, a potentiality that is clearly diminishing in Celan's past tense. The poem may be considered an "anti-psalm" for its silence: not only is the psalm addressed to a "No one" by a people who are "nothing," but the song itself is not a song or no longer a song, it has become a rose that blooms quietly, nowhere. The ambiguous color of "Purpur," which ranges from violet to crimson, has a myriad of meanings in both Jewish and Christian cultures: it is the red robe of Jesus that he wears alongside with a crown of thorns, or the color "Tola'at shani" (scarlet, crimson) in Jewish culture, which symbolizes blood, and thus frequently typified life. When translated as purple, the color is often associated with royalty, power, and wealth.^{xix}

The problem of both writing poetry and of the Jewish identity comes down to the interpretation of a single word, “Purpurwort.” It is both a Christian and a Jewish reference, both the color of blood and the color of rose, both a word and a warning sign of the impossibility to speak. As we have seen, the “Purpurwort” is among the three neologisms of the last stanza that Celan creates – the other two are “seelenhell” and “himmelswüst.” Michael Hamburger translates the three words as “soul-bright, heaven-ravaged,” and “crimson word,” whereas John Felstiner combines the last phrase into a single word, “Purpleword.” The four common Japanese translations each translates by interpreting: Mitsuo Iiyoshi translates “seelenhell” as “魂のあかるみを帯びた” [carrying the brightness of the soul], and “himmelswüst” as “天の荒蕪さを帯びた” [carrying the desolation of the sky], whereas Hiroaki Sekiguchi translates the two phrases as “魂の明るさを灯す” [lighting the brightness of the soul] and “荒蕪した天の” [of the deserted sky]. Kōkichi Shōno’s and Asako Nakamura’s translations are along the same lines as well. ^{xx} While the English translations choose to hyphenate the two parts of each adjective, the Japanese translations each offers the translator’s interpretation of the relationship between “soul” and “brightness,” “sky” and “desert.” While the translations successfully communicated the content that each of Celan’s coined word carries, they inserted an extra space in each word that separates the two parts of the same word. The space takes on the shape of the hyphen in the two English translations, and the particle “の,” which indicates possession. In English, this problem is easier to solve – all we need to do is to take the hyphen away and put the two words back together, which is what Felstiner chooses to do with “Purpurwort.” But in Japanese, it appears more difficult, since taking away the particle may threaten the grammatical structure of the entire sentence and render the poem illegible. Arguably, the same problem of illegibility would happen to English translations as well.

But what if we translate each half of the word with a Chinese ideogram, and combine the two into a new one? The character for “hell” could be “亮” or “白,” whereas “Seele” could be translated as “魂” or “魄,” both of which indicate a type of spirit or soul in traditional religion. “Seelenhell” could therefore be translated as the character 魄, with its left side indicating “hell” and right side indicting “Seele.” Combined, the word means the animal or vegetative part of the soul that inheres in the body, as opposed to the superior part of the soul that ascends to heaven. Both the original meaning of 魄 and its connotation as a variant of 霸 are directly or indirectly connected with heaven or sky, which leads us to the second

word, “Himmelwüst,” which could be translated as the character “漠.” It contains the character for heaven or sky, “天,” and has the meaning of desert or quicksand. Finally, if we translate “Purpur” as “赤” and “Wort” as “文”, we will have the word “赦”, which means forgiveness, amnesty, pardon.

Could the “Purpurwort” that “we” sang over the thorn be a word of forgiveness? Forgiveness never appears in the original text and is perhaps an irrelevant concept, an irrelevant translation. Who should “we” forgive, the absent God who fails to “bespeak” the dead, or the perpetrators who committed the unspeakable crime? Did they ask for forgiveness? Heidegger, for example, did not offer a public condemnation of Nazi ideology as Celan expected him to do, after their meeting in Heidegger’s cabin near Todtnauerberg. The German did not ask for forgiveness for the unforgivable. How could the narrating “we” in “Psalm” forgive someone who does not ask to be forgiven? To answer this question, I now turn to another lecture by Derrida, entitled “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”, which is largely based on his commentary on Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*, a topic that also served as the basis of a seminar on forgiveness and perjury which he taught in 1998.^{xxi} Before laying out Derrida’s main arguments, about translation and forgiveness respectively, let us quickly remind ourselves of the plot of play *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock the Jew and Antonio the Christian have an agreement that, if Antonio fails to pay back the money he owes Shylock, the lender will cut off a pound of flesh near his borrower’s heart as payment. Although Antonio fails to return the money, Shylock, who interprets the contract *literally*, is trumped by Portia, whose translation of the contract allows more room for interpretation. That allows her to argue that Shylock could only get his pound of meat if not a drop of blood is shed. She repeatedly asks Shylock to show mercy in a famous speech about the quality of mercy, a theme that set the tone of the entire play.

In his reading, Derrida points out that, in the Abrahamic moral tradition, forgiveness must engage two parties, the perpetrator and the victim. Such forgiveness always requires a conversion, a translation, of human relations. Everything in this play, including Portia’s verdict, “then must the Jew be merciful,” can be translated into a code of translation and as a problem of translation, or better, a problem of the “relevant” translation. Derrida’s two arguments could be summarized as the following. First, he argues that a “relevant translation” is necessary yet questionable: a translation that conveys the original with accuracy is necessary, yet it is impossible to translate a pound of physical flesh into a monetary sign, just as it is impossible to forcefully convert the Jew Shylock to Christianity. Second, beyond the

problem of the impossible translation is one of the impossible forgiveness. Derrida introduces a monetary language of indebtedness, in which the exchange values are incommensurable and thus each is untranslatable to the other. He translates forgiveness as a “fore-giving,” “a power above power, a sovereignty above sovereignty” (“Relevant Translation,” 187) Noting Portia’s comments that forgiveness is “a vertical descending movement...given from above to below” (192), Derrida emphasizes the divine or super-human quality of forgiveness. Forgiveness is considered as a kind of transmission or exchange between the giver and a receiver that aims at a transcendence or overcoming. As Ray Chow accurately summarizes, “the lesson of forgiveness is about being able to start afresh, to inaugurate/imagine a new history of human collective life based on the transcendence/overcoming of (ethnic and linguistic) boundaries and conflicts.”^{xxii}

In answering the question, “what is a relevant translation?”, Derrida reminds his readers of a potential French translation of the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*, namely “*rèleve*,” which is etymologically linked to the English word “relevant.” Inspired by Portia’s line, “when mercy seasons justice,” Derrida translates “*rèleve*” as “season,” the action to preserve and enhance (the flavor of) what it denies and destroys. A relevant translation “seasons,” which is to say, it enhances certain aspects of the original text and destroys others. The relevant translation renders the other translations irrelevant: one party’s language or interpretation is upheld as the rationale for the verdict, while the other party’s language is treated as inaccurate and insignificant. The English translator of Derrida’s essay, Lawrence Venuti, reminds us that Judaism favors literal translation that adheres to the letter, whereas Christianity favors a translation that more freely captures the essence of the text. The Jew Shylock insists on the literal translation of the contract, while the Christian Portia insists on a liberal interpretation that not a single drop of Christian blood should be shed in carving out the flesh. Venuti concludes, “It is this unexpected Christian rendering of the letter that compels the Jew to submit to the translation of the hegemonic discourse, Christianity itself” (“Relevant Translation” 172).

When a crime has become, like the Holocaust, inexpiable and beyond all human measure, forgiveness under the narrow definition has lost its meaning, because there could be no punishment that is of the equivalent proportion of the crime, and people are incapable of forgiving what they cannot punish. When one side of the equation expands infinitely, the other side must follow, which, as a result, will render the equation meaningless. If forgiveness is impossible, its translation also becomes irrelevant, at least the translation that sees the original and the translated text as equivalent. But there must exist another

forgiveness that is not confined to the narrow equation of power or monetary exchange, which regulates guilt and punishment. A pure, unconditional forgiveness, Derrida proposes, is one that forgives what is unforgivable, one that grants forgiveness to the guilty as guilty, even to those who do not ask forgiveness. The unconditional forgiveness *does not have a meaning* that determines itself on the ground of salvation, reconciliation, and redemption. Conditional forgiveness, as Portia suggests, is a “vertical descending movement” given from above to below, displaying forgiveness positions one higher on the ladder of moral hierarchy, conveying a sense of empowerment and superiority against the adversary (“Relevant Translation,” 192). “Meaning” in the context of forgiveness indicates precisely that, by forgiving someone’s crime, one could receive something in return. An unconditional forgiveness, however, should exist beyond the competition of power and domination. This forgiveness, if it could ever exist beyond sheer speculation, requires a translation that is always already irrelevant and meaningless, in the sense that it does not aim imposing a hegemonic discourse over another.

By translating “Purpurwort” as “forgiveness” and offering a translation in Chinese ideograms, words saturated in a tradition far away from the Abrahamic tradition and the guilt and redemption of the Holocaust, I aim precisely at rendering my translation “irrelevant,” breaking the equation of conversion and exchange from the inside, and, perhaps, allowing the light of unconditional forgiveness to shine through the text. Celan himself might have never imagined a translation like this, or a forgiveness that forgives the unforgivable. But that does not stop us, as translators from Mars, from discovering a hint from his text.

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ⁱ Michael Hamburger, “Introduction.” in Paul Celan, *Nineteen Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (South Hinksey: Carcanet Press, 1972). pp.12.

ⁱⁱ J. M. Coetzee, “In the Midst of Losses.” *New York Review of Books*, July 5, 2001. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2001/jul/05/in-the-midst-of-losses/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*. Ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 115-116.

^{iv} See Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” in: *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 69.

^v Kurt Beals, “Alternatives to Impossibility: Translation as Dialogue in the Works of Paul Celan,” *Translation Studies* 7:3, pp. 285.

^{vi} Given the interwoven history of the fascisms and genocidal aspects in Japanese warfare, to claim that the generation to which Tawada is “neutral” – that they have nothing to do with what happened in the past – is

definitely risky. Here, I am not claiming that people born in Japan after WWII could automatically take a “neutral” position towards the Holocaust; rather, I am arguing that Tawada is intentionally distancing herself both from both historical events and the mainstream public discourses in her interpretation of Celan’s poetry. For further reading on the “neutral reader,” see Kim Su Rasmussen, “The Inconclusive Text: On Paul Celan’s ‘Blume,’” *Seminar* 51:3 (September 2015), 214.

^{vii} Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in Sieben Bänden* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), Band 1, pp. 239.

Hereafter GW with page numbers.

^{viii} See the *New Direction* blurb for Margaret Mitsutani’s translation of Tawada’s recent novel, *The Emissary* (<https://www.ndbooks.com/book/the-emissary/>, accessed on October 10, 2019), and Megan Milks’ review of *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, translated by Susan Bernofsky (*4 Columns*, <http://www.4columns.org/milks-m/memoirs-of-a-polar-bear>, accessed on October 10, 2019).

^{ix} Tawada Yoko, “Rabbi Löw und 27 Punkte,” in: *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte* (Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke, 2007), pp. 43.

^x See Celan’s 1952 poem, “Zähle die Mandeln,” which implicitly made reference to the poet Osip Mandelstam (GW I, 78). Celan began translating poetry by the Russian author in 1957 and completed the work in 1959. The 1963 book of poetry, *Die Niemandrose*, is dedicated “den Andenken Osip Mandelstams.” By adding an extra “m” to the usual spelling of the author’s name, Celan is alluding to the word “der Stamm,” which could mean both “stem” and “kin.” By “translating” Mandelstam’s name, Celan attaches the name to the image of almond tree, which is a biblical symbol for the Jews (see Christine Ivanović, “Dichtung und Poetik Celans im Kontext seiner russischen Lektüren,” *Celan wiederlesen, Vorbemerkung von Ursula Haeusgen*, München: Lyrik Kabinett, 1998, p.60). The references to Mandelstam-Mandelbaum are found in “Mandorla,” “Nachmittag mit Zirkus und Zitadelle,” “Schwarzerde,” “Eine Gauner- und Ganovenweise,” “in Eins,” and “Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa.” See: Anna Glazova, “Celan’s Mandelstam,” *Speaking in Tongues Guided by Voices*, Speaking in Tongues Publishing, https://vladivostok.com/speaking_in_tongues/glazova35eng.htm (accessed on October 10, 2019)

^{xi} As Leslie Adelson and Sigrid Weigel point out, Tawada’s writing should not be read through the same, often constraining, lenses applied to “Migrantenliteratur,” which is usually associated with statistically or symbolically significant minority groups such as Turks and Muslims. I would argue that Tawada’s writings about travelling and migrating could still be read as “Poetik der Migration,” but her personal experiences and reflections are by no means representative of any collective migrant experience. For discussion regarding Tawada’s singular status in contemporary migrant literature in Germany, see Sigrid Weigel, “Transsibirische Metamorphosen: Laudatio auf Yoko Tawada zur Verleihung des Adalbert-von-Chamisso-Preises 1996,” *Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft* 49 (1996): 5–6; Christine Ivanovic, “Exophonie und Kulturanalyse: Tawadas Transformationen Benjamins,” in *Toko Tawada: Poetik der Transformation: Beiträge zum Gesamtwerk.*, ed. Christine Ivanovic, Stauffenburg Discussion, Vol. 28., eds. Elisabeth Bronfen, et. al. (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2010), 205; and Leslie A. Adelson’s informative footnote regarding this topic in her essay “The Future of Futurity: Alexander Kluge and Yoko Tawada,” p.159.

^{xii} Yoko Tawada, *Talisman* (Konkursbuchverlag Claudia Gehrke, 1996), p.130.

^{xiii} Werner Hamacher and Winfried Menninghaus (ed.), *Paul Celan* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), pp. 201.

^{xiv} Osip Mandelstam, “On the Interlocutor,” trans. Philip Nikolayev, *The Battersea Review*, <http://thebatterseareview.com/critical-prose/154-on-the-interlocutor>.

^{xv} For Leslie Adelson, the idea of “Marswesen” or extraterrestrials is also linked to the concept of futurity. She coined the term “new futurism” in contemporary German literature, which refers to a departure from a longstanding emphasis on the past and a focus on the imagination of a futuristic time. This futuristic turn appears, according to Adelson, in both post-WWII German literature and the transnational migration literature that began to appear in the 1970s. Although Tawada could not easily be categorized as a migrant author, her writings also reflect this interest in the literary imagination of future and time travel. Tawada’s essay “Zukunft ohne Herkunft” suggests that reading and writing could admit access to the future, defined as time after the death of the author. “Literarische Texte, die geschrieben werden, verwandeln sich in der Zukunft” (66), Tawada writes in this text. Tawada’s concept of future therefore refers not only to a temporality, but also the transformed substance of the present. For further reading, see Yoko Tawada, “Zukunft ohne Herkunft,” in *Zukunft! Zukunft?* ed. Jürgen Wertheimer (Tübingen: Konkursbuchverlag Claudia Gehrke, 2000), 55-72, here 66, and Leslie A. Adelson, “Experiment Mars: Contemporary German Literature, Imaginative Ethnoscapes, and the New Futurism,” *Über Gegenwartsliteratur. Interpretationen und Interventionen*, ed. Mark W. Rectanus (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008), 23–49, here 23, and “The Future of Futurity: Alexander Kluge and Yoko Tawada,” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 86:3, 153-184.

^{xvi} Paul Celan, “Die Dichtung Ossip Mandelstams,” In: Ossip Mandelstam. *Im Luftgrab*, hrsg. von Ralph Dutli, op. cit. 1992, s. 81.

^{xvii} George Steiner, “The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah,” *Encounter*, 1987, pp.61.

^{xviii} Jochen Hörisch argues in his 1997 essay “Niemandes Geschenk an uns. Paul Celans ‘Psalm’ und die Poetik des Lobpreisens” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27. Dec. 1997, 0B4) that the poem is an affirmation of a world free of both God and his absence, which liberates him from divine determination and allows for his own self-creation. See also: Vivian Liska, “Paul Celan the Last Psalmist,” in *Psalms In/On Jerusalem*, ed Ilana Pardes and Ophir Münz-Manor (de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 143-152.

^{xix} John Felstiner’s English translation of “Purpurwort” chooses to translate the Purpur as “purple,” perhaps because of the acoustic similarity between the German and the English word. Since the majority of translators, including the four Japanese translators that we will see below choose to translate “Purpur” as a kind of red (either 真紅 or 深紅), I decide to translate “Purpur” as a kind of red as well.

^{xx} For references, see パウル・ツェラン (飯吉光夫訳) 「死のフーガー—パウル・ツェラン詩集」 (思潮社、1972年)、関口裕昭『評伝パウル・ツェラン』 (慶應義塾大学出版会、2007年)、パウル・ツェラン (中村朝子訳) パウル・ツェラン全詩集 第1巻 (青土社、2012年)、生野幸吉「闇の子午線 パウル・ツェラン」 (岩波書店、1990年)。

^{xxi} Lawrence Venuti and Jacques Derrida, “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?,” *Critical Inquiry* 27:2 (Winter 2001), pp. 240.

^{xxii} Rey Chow, “‘I Insist on the Christian Dimension’: On forgiveness...and the Outside of the Human,” *Language, Ideology, and the Human: New Interventions*, ed. Sanja Bahun and Dusan Radunović (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 232.

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