

Edmund de Waal

I.

On 16 May 1960, Paul Celan began a letter to Hermann Kasack, the president of the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, thanking him for the news that he was to receive the Georg Büchner Prize for literature. It is a troubled letter, rushing and halting in its emphases, repeating and circling back to Celan's pleasure at being associated with Büchner, his delight at this 'encounter'. Encounter threads the text: encounters between Celan and the work of Büchner, encounters with a text Celan had already started to write, encounters with Kasack six years before, encounters he hoped would happen in the future. There are ellipses and crossings-out and bracketings and negations and conjunctions. Celan brings words forcefully together, compresses them into neologisms. He 'collides' opposites, testing sentences with clause after clause:

Aren't words, especially in the poem, aren't they—aren't they becoming and—decaying—names?
Aren't poems exactly this: the infinite-saying of mortality and nothingness that remains mindful of
its finitude? (Please excuse the emphasis: it belongs to that dust that sets free and receives us and
our voiceful-voiceless souls.)¹

And then Celan crosses out the words 'and sets free.' And writes it in again. He finds it tricky to write these words.

I look at this extraordinary series of new works by Anselm Kiefer and ask myself what it means to belong to dust? What does Celan mean by dust receiving us?

II.

Dust is a good place to start when thinking of Anselm Kiefer's reading of the poetry of Paul Celan. This reading spans decades. From his first encounter as a teenager with 'Todesfuge' and other early poems of Celan, to this great suite of new paintings, Kiefer has made work: with Celan, for Celan, and despite Celan.

This is a passionate and complex relationship. Kiefer writes fragments of Celan's poems across his paintings, gouges his words into sculpture. Sometimes a work is titled with a word or a line of Celan, as if being in the same linguistic forcefield is enough. Sometimes he materialises an image from a poem, sometimes scatters the material of a poem into a work so that we see dust, ash, flowers, stone. We see broken shards, sheafs of corn, lead. Celan's poetry is full of granular, particular materials, matter. Images are held and handled and discarded. This is what Kiefer calls 'Trümmer der Celan-Sprache,' 'the rubble of Celan's language.'² Kiefer sifts the rubble.

Sometimes Kiefer writes the name *Celan* itself and that is enough.

Dust is what is left behind. It shows that time has happened, reveals absence. It is breathtakingly, breathcatchingly, close to ash.

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¹ Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, ed. Bernhard Böschstein and Heino Schmult, trans. Pierre Joris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 222.

² Anselm Kiefer, *Journal* (unpublished manuscript).

Ash and dust cover and hide but cannot be disregarded, cannot be swept away and destroyed. It is matter that has reached its endpoint. Ash is what is left. It is erosion, 'the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness.'³

Both dust and ash thread their way through Kiefer's work. He uses this 'nothingness'. He has written, recently, that

Ash appears in several of Celan's poems.

Ash is a special substance. It is an end product. I often use it in my pictures. Like a rain of ash that covers things and keeps them secret.

Ash-flowers: the union of two opposites, as is often the case in Celan's poems. The flower, the colourful, the life, the cycle of life and death. When they bloom one day then their transmutation is already visible, their end as a luminous one. For Robert Fludd, flowers, plants in general, are connected to the cosmos: 'There is not any plant or herb which hath not a star in the firmament.' But the ashes, the ashes of the 'ash-flower' are the end, the final product. When you think of Celan, and in general, you immediately think of the incineration ovens.⁴

This image of *Aschenregen*, the shower of ash, is fissile. To cover a landscape with ash from the sky as dust mantles objects and rooms is to still the mutable quickness of the world. The world is shrouded. It becomes an image of itself. Kiefer's landscape, his postwar Germany, is that of a land shrouded by *Aschenregen*. The black earth under your feet is ash. The air is full of ash. You are surrounded by the presence of 'nothingness'.

And this is what snow does too.

This is Celan's 'Angewintertes Windfeld: hier / muß du leben,' the 'Bewintered windfield: here / you must live.'⁵ For Celan, the compulsion to live within the whiteness of snow and the whiteness of the page and the whiteness of his mother's hair, which he would never see, are the places and the conditions that he returns to constantly. The return to the empty page is a return to this loneliness. He attempts to stack *Wortschatten*, 'wordshadows', in 'Schneepart', his late poem of abjection in the icy landscape of the concentration camps.

Celan writes of 'Merkblätter-Schmerz, / beschneit, überschneit', 'Notepaper-pain, / besnowed, oversnowed'. You feel this tremor. For Kiefer the empty white canvas is 'Merkblätter-Schmerz', and in these new works we see Kiefer gripped by this language, taken over by the imagery of snow. Here is *Angewintertes, Winter Schnee in der Ukraine, Weiss—für Paul Celan* and *Winter—für Paul Celan*, and in each work Kiefer locates himself in this 'Angewintertes Windfeld'.

Wintering is also revelation of the essential, of things stripped back.

III.

For Paul Celan the German language was estranged. It was an eroded language. To inhabit it again after the Shoah was to feel the difficult presence of the words in your mouth.

Die nachzustotternde Welt,

³ W. G. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999), 161.

⁴ Anselm Kiefer, *Journal*.

⁵ Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014), 214–15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 308–9.

bei der ich zu Gast
gewesen sein werde, ein Name,
herabgeschwitzt von der Mauer,
an der eine Wunde hochleckt.

The to-be-restuttered world,
whose guest I
will have been, a name,
sweated down the wall,
up which a wound licks.⁷

Stuttering is repetition, return, the impediment to lyricism, flowing speech.

And this is Kiefer's relationship to Celan. These works stutter, they are plural. They aren't finished, they cannot be finished. He returns and begins again, back to the remembered word, to remembered images of ash-flower, golden hair, fields of snow, windowless huts. He returns to reinscribe Celan's name but even names change shape in your mouth. Paul Antschel changes his name to Paul Ancel and becomes Paul Celan. Anselm is a lisped Antschel, is an elided Amsel blackbird and it holds Amtschel, Kafka's original Hebrew name. Names are sweated over, tumbled round in the mouth like pebbles.

Celan writes of the last words of Büchner on his deathbed of the need to go back to

language as involution, the unfolding of meaning in the one, word-estranged syllable—: ~~the~~ it is the 'rootsyllable,' recognisable in the $\lceil$ death-rattled $\rceil$ stuttering, the $\lceil$ language as $\rceil$ what has returned into the germ—the meaning carrier is the {mou} mortal mouth, whose lips won't round themselves.⁸

That painful imperative to try and speak when your lips can't quite round themselves, that hesitancy, is present here in these paintings. Look at Kiefer talking to Celan here and you see an artist held in the hesitant moment, the need to reach the 'one, word-estranged syllable.'

IV.

Paul Celan finally delivered his Büchner speech on 22 October 1960 in Darmstadt. He had gone through agonising months of drafting and redrafting. He ends by talking to himself, to his audience, about 'detours':

Does one take, when thinking of poems, does one take such routes with the poems? Are these routes only re-routings, detours from you to you? But they are also at the same time, among many other routes, routes on which language becomes voice, they are encounters, routes of a voice to a perceiving you, creaturely routes, blueprints for being perhaps, a sending ahead toward oneself, in search of oneself ... A kind of homecoming.⁹

I think that Kiefer is in search of homecoming. It is not a destination but a journey which is never finished, never actualised. It is a return to a place of ash, of snow. It is an endless setting-out, an endless return to the breath before you start to speak.

For Kiefer, who grows up in rubble and the rubble of language, this is made possible by Celan, going on ahead of us.

⁷ Ibid., 334–35.

⁸ Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, 123–24.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

V.

‘Homecoming’

Snowfall, denser and denser,
dove-coloured as yesterday,
snowfall, as if even now you were sleeping.

White, stacked into distance.
Above it, endless,
the sleigh track of the lost.

Below, hidden,
presses up
what so hurts the eyes,
hill upon hill,
invisible.

On each,
fetched home into its today,
and I slipped away into dumbness:
wooden, a post.

There: a feeling,
blown across by the ice wind
attaching its dove- its snow-
coloured cloth as a flag.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Paul Celan, ‘Homecoming’, trans. Michael Hamburger, *Poetry* (December 1971), 134.