

## Notes for Broadsheet Poets

**Caroline Clark** was a chosen young Broadsheet poet in the previous *Lauds* issue of *Agenda*, Vol. 43, Nos. 2-3 and has work forthcoming in *The Reader* and *The Frogmore Papers*. This year she has had several poems shortlisted for the Plough Prize and the Mslexia Poetry Competition. She comes from Lewes in Sussex and now lives in Montreal. She is currently translating essays by the Russian poet, Olga Sedakova. New poems of hers can be seen in Broadsheet 11 [www.agendapoetry.co.uk](http://www.agendapoetry.co.uk)

The following essay by Caroline Clark links to Greg Delanty and his dialogue, to his many voices, his incessant reading of poetry, indeed of any poetry he can lay his hands on. It also links to William Bedford's essay on Geoffrey Hill and Paul Muldoon: 'The Fascination of what is Difficult' in this Greg Delanty 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday issue of *Agenda*, Vol. 43, No. 4 – Vol. 2-3.

### What Lies Ahead

You cry into your hair at night, despairing. You write in your notebook a command, a prayer: 'Give me a mentor, the kind that will rip up my work in disgust knowing I can do better.' It seems to you that mentors are a thing of the past, of literary salons, letter writing. I'm writing here to myself, let's say of six years ago, a twenty-five year old. At that time I was mid-way through spending almost all my twenties in Moscow. I had come back to the UK for a year to do an MA in Modern European Literature. I was soon to write my dissertation on Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam, who were, I see now, to become mentors of a kind. The words of true mentors tend to stick with you, even if you don't want to hear what they are saying or don't know why their words should resonate so deeply. I want to tell you here about some of those words that have stayed with me, that have helped me to understand poetry – how to read it and how to write it. In short, Mandelstam taught me the importance of drafting and Celan taught me the importance of going deeper, the need to step beyond. But 'in short' won't do – it's the getting there that counts. This too I picked up from them.

I was initially drawn to write about them together because of a conception of poetry they both shared. It was one that I found irresistible, perhaps because it formulated so precisely for me the driving force of poetry:

The shipwrecked sailor throws a sealed bottle into the sea at a critical moment, and it has his name in it and what has happened to him. Many years later, walking along the dunes, I find it in the sand, I read the letter, I learn when it happened, the testament of the deceased. I had a right to do this. I did not unseal someone else's letter. The letter sealed in the bottle was addressed

to its finder. I found it. That means, then, that I am its secret addressee.<sup>1</sup>  
A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward.<sup>2</sup>

I'll steal the next few sentences from my dissertation: Mandelstam, a generation older than Celan, had the first of the above passages published in 1913, while Celan delivered the second statement as part of his address on receiving the Bremen literary prize in January 1958. The generation's difference between them is evident even here, with the decidedly more traditional prose style of the elder poet and the more difficult, idiosyncratic style of the younger poet. The case for linking the two poets has a firm, if at first seemingly thin, foundation in this shared metaphor, but we shall see how deeply it concerns their poetic conceptions and how significant it is to their poetry...

You can see how I meant to go on. Part of my task was to adopt an academic tone. Now I'm starting to fill in the non-academic gaps, so to speak. Let me take a word I use there as my starting point: difficult. I was aware that their poetry was considered to be amongst the most 'difficult' of the twentieth century, but perhaps not as aware as I could have been. Thankfully so, I say now, as I would have probably panicked in the headlights and frozen. Poetry is difficult, I'd always told myself. It's the most difficult thing I can occupy myself with; it doesn't come easily (but when it does!). That said, I would advise my former self to take less seriously the idea of difficult poetry, and in its place take more seriously the actual reading of poems, the actual writing of poems.

What stayed with me – well after lines of their poetry, quotes from their essays and speeches, dates and historical facts had faded away – was this idea of the elemental directedness of poems. Their words revealed to me the core dynamic of a poem. I felt this could be summed up with one word: towards. Towards what? Towards the reader, the future, the past, words opening towards each other. Celan goes on to say: 'Toward something open, inhabitable; an approachable you, perhaps an approachable reality.' I already felt, but had not formulated, what the two poets were saying: the poem is sent out to someone, but no one in particular, in the hope of a response. The poem is oriented by hope. I felt the immediacy in this statement and the implications of my picking up and receiving their poem-message. Mandelstam writes: 'There is no lyric without dialogue';<sup>3</sup> Celan, a generation later, says poems are 'essentially dialogue' – I felt I might one day establish my own dialogue with them. A poem to which I often return, which

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<sup>1</sup>O. Mandelstam, 'About an Interlocutor' in *Selected Essays*, trans. S. Monas (University of Texas Press, 1977): 59

<sup>2</sup>P. Celan, 'The Meridian' in *Collected Prose*, trans. R. Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999): 35

<sup>3</sup>O. Mandelstam, 'About an Interlocutor' in *Selected Essays*, trans. S. Monas (University of Texas Press, 1977): 62-63

perhaps above all others of Mandelstam's has remained with me is 'The Horseshoe Finder'. In it I have a strong sense of this movement towards – progression, transformation, a searching out. On first reading it I was particularly struck by the decidedly more modern, more Celanesque sounding final section:

Human lips,  
    which have nothing more to say.  
Retain the shape of the last word spoken  
...  
What I say now, is not said by me,  
but is dug up out of the earth like grains of petrified wheat.  
...  
Time cuts through me like a coin,  
and there is no longer enough of me left for me.

Mandelstam speaks of the 'uncanny shiver of joy' one might experience as a reader when a poem reaches out, 'when one is called unexpectedly by name'.<sup>4</sup> It was with a certain joy that I learnt Celan had felt called upon to translate this poem. He had answered Mandelstam's 'message in a bottle', entered into that so hoped-for dialogue which I saw now could be truly realised: in his translation was the most authentic of poetic encounters.

Of course as someone whose greatest desire was to 'write poetry', the hope offered by this dynamic 'towards' corresponded to my own: to make contact, establish dialogue, find a reader. I knew too it would be difficult. Here's where some advice from an insightful mother of a friend came in: just do it. In his essay 'Conversation about Dante' Mandelstam says that poetic material 'exists only in the execution' (this last word *ispolneniye* translates also as 'performance', 'fulfilment', 'rendering', 'enactment'). In other, more homely, words: poetry exists in the doing – in speaking it, in reading it (and as I also understood, in composing it). It is a phrase I often use to push myself on – to read more aloud, write more. I felt I was woefully lacking in education though. I took Mandelstam's lament over the lack of the 'cultured reader' personally. In his essay 'Attack', he speaks against the incompetent reader who cannot be relied upon to properly understand the text. What is needed is a responsible and responsive reader, one who turns the relationship between reader and writer into a two-way exchange. Celan perhaps calls for such a responsive interlocutor in the opening of a poem:

Sprich auch du,  
sprich als letzter,  
sag deinen Spruch.

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<sup>4</sup> ibid 60

Speak, you too,  
speak last,  
have your say.

Although I felt wildly lacking in education and ‘culture’, I was sure I could at least be responsive and responsible. As for the rest, I’d tell myself: less of the panic and just get reading.

Mandelstam insists that poems cannot be paraphrased or retold. They are what they do. This helped me immensely with that cruellest of questions I was sometimes asked: ‘what do you write your poems about?’ How I hated that ‘about’? I would substitute it for ‘towards’ and risk ending up in semantic knots. It’s simple, as I took Mandelstam to be saying, with poetry there is no ‘about’, it’s all in the doing. Read it and see.

Or with Celan, crack it open and see. I read in awe as Celan would crack words open to reveal new depths, forge new joins. I would study how the words in his poems would not stand alone but would be in constant communication or tension with the others – one word engendering the next. Through him I gained a stronger sense of the potential locked in words; I caught a flash of what happens when grammar is followed to its logical conclusion:

In der Mandel – was steht in der Mandel?  
Das Nichts.

....

Im Nichts – wer steht da? Der König.

In the almond – what is there/stands in the almond?  
the Nothing.

....

In the Nothing – who is/stands there? The king.<sup>5</sup>

Here unfolds a new universe in which the newly substantivized ‘nothing’ (now ‘*the* nothing’) pulls logic in a seemingly paradoxical direction: nothing is made into something, crack it open, what do we find there? Celan is unrelenting in how far he strives to push language, with every word allowed to exert its full pull. In his speech ‘The Meridian’ Celan talks of a ‘step beyond’ which is part of all art, a step away which must lead to ‘that which is most one’s own’. Poetry takes you on a path away from yourself, by doing so there is the promise that you can ‘set yourself free’.

Celan pushes and pulls the word and grammatical logic over astonishing distances; language, the reader surely feels, astonishes him. It is as Mandelstam says in his essay ‘The Morning of Acmeism’: ‘The capacity for astonishment is the

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<sup>5</sup>An attempt at a literal translation. The verb ‘stehen’ literally means ‘to stand’ but is also used in expressions which mean ‘to be’, so we can read the line either as ‘there is nothing’ in the almond or ‘nothing stands’ in the almond.

poet's greatest virtue...Logic is the kingdom of the unexpected. To think logically means to be perpetually astonished.<sup>6</sup> A term Mandelstam uses to describe the Acmeist movement works well for Celan's lyric: organic. His is a word which is alive, ever responding, ever resisting, in motion. As Celan says, the poem is underway. Indeed if the state of being oriented 'towards' is vital, so too is the opposing movement 'against'. In this state the poem (indeed, the poet too) must experience or endure all that it encounters. Celan's reality-bound poems are ever in a state of flux, towards-against. Was I allowed to be influenced by these poets whose fates were so different to mine? Whose struggles were incomparable with mine? One thing was clear: they were showing me how hard a poem needed to be worked at, worked towards. I very much took on Mandelstam's idea that the poet must master the skill of tacking. As the sailor must navigate against the wind and tides, the poet must work through drafts overcoming resistance encountered en route. Taking the 'oblique' approach is how the artist must proceed. I would have to learn not to be so eager to seek out the end of a poem, but learn to work through more drafts, dig deeper.

Nadezhda Mandelstam describes how her husband had once sought to destroy various versions of the same poem, but then later came to value this drafting process, and began to preserve similar poems which had arisen from the same impulse. Again, I return to 'Conversation about Dante':

All nominative cases should be replaced by datives of direction... Everything is turned inside out: the substantive is the goal, not the subject of the sentence.<sup>7</sup>

To anyone unfamiliar with grammatical cases, the meaning here may not be immediately apparent. For me, a student of Russian and German with a desire to write poetry, I felt I had struck gold. Mandelstam here calls for Dante's poetry to be understood in the dative, to be set in motion by the reader rather than be fixed in place. The dative case is that of direction, it is the state of being oriented towards. The nominative case is that of arrival, of stasis, of being equated to the substantive. Mandelstam scorns the tendency to view art as if it came 'ready-made' and he insists on the importance of drafts. Here he ranks the approach, the journey, the draft above the arrival, stasis, completion.

On first reading Mandelstam's words that drafts should never be destroyed, I tried to obey in awe and mild terror. Along with misconception of 'difficult'

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<sup>6</sup> O. Mandelstam, *Selected Essays*, trans. S. Monas (University of Texas Press, 1977): 131 *Acmeism* was a school of poetry whose key members included Anna Akhmatova and Mandelstam. Their major concerns were to depict the concrete world of everyday reality with brevity and clarity, with the precise and logical use of the word. They took a stand against the mysticism, and lack of interest in the concrete and the human, of the earlier generation of Symbolists.

<sup>7</sup> O. Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante' in *Selected Essays*, trans. S. Monas (University of Texas Press, 1977): 44

poetry, I also had a tendency to isolate single sentences as imperatives issued in the sternest of tones. With some poets' statements on poetry this takes on a greatly exaggerated sense of solemnity: that sternness is truly there and also a lack of generosity of spirit. Rather than reading this as a dictum 'never destroy drafts', I see now he was saying that the draft cannot be destroyed, it is integral to the finished poem. Even a single phrase you write – perhaps don't even write down but hear, turn your attention to for a moment and then let go – hasn't given up the ghost for good, it may resurface in a poem when you least expect it. It takes a great deal of willingness to work through, rather than around, those things which initially seem unsayable. Now in my present work I sometimes recognise the kernel of a past poem I tried to crack years ago but abandoned in an early draft. This is most heartening – to feel that something you once found so difficult now seems less so.

Mandelstam's praise of the dative condition helped explain why I so disliked that question 'what do you write *about*': it was demanding that I define something that I was working towards, that I put my work into the nominative case, set it in stone. Of course I could say what 'themes' I was interested in, but I always felt I was betraying myself somehow. I had less trouble playing the 'about' game, once I learnt to play along. You could say I learnt to take myself less seriously, but perhaps I just learnt to take the question less seriously. Indeed if I knew what a particular poem was to be about I wouldn't be writing it, as many have said before. But whether something may have been said many times before is not important. Everything there is to say about poetry has already been said, including this statement itself. But when you are able to say it in your own words, have worked towards a particular discovery through your own experience, you have earned the right to dare to repeat all those gone before. So I would advise my past self not to be afraid of repeating what great discoveries have already been made, but instead go ahead and discover them on my terms:

Everything that has been will repeat itself anew,  
Our sweet joy is all in the moment of recognition.<sup>8</sup>

When I left university it was with the anticipation that something new lay ahead. I have since found it more realistic and fulfilling to return to things newly rather than seek out something brand new and shining. I return to books I read for my studies but now without the secondary literature, to look at them newly, read the work of poets without the ulterior motive of proving a thesis, of setting their words in stone.

I'll end with the same words I used to close my dissertation, a short quote from Emmanuel Lévinas: 'Poetry is ahead of us'. It is a quote from Lévinas commenting on Celan's speech 'The Meridian'. I use it in my dissertation to support my

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<sup>8</sup> From the poem 'Tristia' by Mandelstam.

conviction that the poetic word is dialogic, and that poetry is oriented by hope. I'd like here in this non-academic space to openly turn it to my own purposes, direct it to my past self of a few years ago: Poetry is ahead of you, and it's here with you now. Look around.