

False Sail

HUMANS VALUE economy. Why? Whether we are commending a mathematician for her proof or a draughtsman for his use of line or a poet for furnishing us with nuggets of beauty and truth, economy is a trope of intellectual, aesthetic and moral value. How do we come to take comfort in this notion? It is arguable that the trope does not predate the invention of coinage. And certainly in a civilization so unconditionally committed to greed as ours is, no one questions any more the wisdom of saving money. But money is just a mediator for our greed. What does it mean to save time, or trouble, or face, or breath, or shoe leather? Or words? His biographers recount that when the poet Paul Celan was four years old, he took a notion to make up his own fairy tales. He went about telling these new versions to everyone in the house until his father advised him to cut it out. “If you need stories the Old Testament is full of them.” To make up new stories, Celan’s father thought, is a waste of words.¹ This father’s sentiments are not unusual. My own father was inclined to make skeptical comments when he saw me hunched at the kitchen table covering pages with small print. Perhaps poets are ones who waste what their fathers would save. But the question remains, What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered?

There is a poem of Paul Celan that seems to be concerned with the gathering in of certain poetic goods to a store that he calls “you.” Among these goods are the lyric traditions of the poetry of courtly love, of Christian mysticism, of Mallarmé, of Hölderlin, not to say Celan himself. Celan has chosen to contemplate these

Fragments of Simonides are cited from the editions of Page (1962) = *PMG*; Page (1981) = *FGE*; and West (1971) = *W*. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹ Chalfen (1991), 41.

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traditions through the focusing device of one brilliant and drastic moment from the romance of Tristan and Isolt: the moment of the false sail.²

MATIÈRE DE BRETAGNE

Ginsterlicht, gelb, die Hänge
eiern gen Himmel, der Dorn
wirbt um die Wunde, es läutet
darin, es ist Abend, das Nichts
rollt seine Meere zur Andacht,
das Blutsegel hält auf dich zu.

Trocken, verlandet
das Bett hinter dir, verschliff
seine Stunde, oben,
beim Stern, die milchigen
Priele schwatzen im Schlamm, Steindattel,
unten, gebuscht, klafft ins Gebläu, eine Staude
Vergänglichkeit, schön,
grüßt dein Gedächtnis.

(Kanntet ihr mich,
Hände? Ich ging
den gegabelten Weg, den ihr wiest, mein Mund
spie seinen Schotter, ich ging, meine Zeit,
wandernde Wächte, warf ihren Schatten—kanntet ihr mich?)

Hände, die dorn-
umworbene Wunde, es läutet,
Hände, das Nichts, seine Meere,
Hände, im Ginsterlicht, das
Blutsegel
hält auf dich zu.

Du
du lehrst
du lehrst deine Hände
du lehrst deine Hände du lehrst

² Celan (1983), 1:171.

What is “gorselight”? Yellow broom flowers. To another poet they might be beautiful, for Celan they suppurate. Their phrasing recalls the first verse of Hölderlin’s poem “Hälfte des Lebens” (“Half of Life”): compare the sound of *Ginsterlicht, gelb, die Hänge* and *Mit gelben Birnen hängen*.³ But whereas Hölderlin’s yellow pears are steeped in beauty, Celan’s gorse issues pus. The contrast suggests a mood. The mood continues quietly in Celan’s imagery of thorn and wound, as Christian and courtly conventions of love combine toward “devotion” (*Andacht*). But what sails toward devotion is “the Nothing” (*das Nichts*) and the mood swerves into negative theology. As any reader of Celan knows, he is at home in this mood. Here, however, it may be meant to evoke that other “poet of nothingness” whose verse is full of seas and sailing, Mallarmé.⁴ Remember the tenth double-page of *Un Coup de dés*, which begins with the word *RIEN* high on the left-hand side and is typeset so that the rest of the words roll themselves out across the page in waves to end in “the wave in which all reality dissolves” at the lower right.⁵ Finally, Celan’s sea is also a sea of romance bringing Isolt to Tristan on a ship that flies a “bloodsail.”

All these fluent traditions run aground in the second stanza, which is dry, stuck on land, lodged in rushes, bushed up, jabbering mud and which engenders the third stanza: five verses stalled in a bracket. The poet’s thought stops on itself. His path is forked and his utterance gravel. Celan has crafted these middle verses out of immobility to emphasize the movement of the rest. Seas and phenomena flow again in the fourth stanza and go rolling out the end of the page without a stop. The poem as a whole, recapitulating the first stanza, has the rhythm of a bloodsail, sailing forward in waves from gorselight to gorselight to you.

³ This connection was suggested by Stanley Corngold, whose conversation with me about Celan’s poem made this essay possible.

⁴ The label is Sartre’s, who also cites George Poulet: “From the outset Mallarmé’s poetry is like a mirage . . . in which he recognized himself not by where or how he is but by where he is not and how he is not.” Sartre (1988), 112.

⁵ Mallarmé (1977), 290–191. There are not a few echoes of Mallarmé throughout the poem, especially in the ringing (cf. Mallarmé’s “Le Sonneur”) and the blueness (cf. “L’Azur”), not to say the arranged white space into which all disappears at the end.

Celan's "you" is hard to fix, as his bloodsail is a difficult color. If he means a reference to the Tristan legend, the sail should be either white or black. Tristan had arranged this signal with the helmsman bringing Isolt to him by sea: a white sail for Isolt prospering, a black sail for her catastrophe. When Tristan's jealous wife reports to him that the sail is "blacker than a mulberry," Tristan turns his face to the wall and dies.⁶ There is blood in the old French version but only dreamblood; as Tristan lies dying, Isolt out at sea recalls dreaming that she held in her lap the head of a boar that was staining her all over with its blood and making her robe red.

Blood of course might signify simply fatality. Sail that kills. But let us consider the matter historically. Our oldest literary example of the trope of the false sail comes from the ancient Greek poet Simonides (556–467 B.C.). Simonides mentions the sail and calls it red: φοινίκεον. Indeed he mentions it *in order to call it red*, in defiance of an existing tradition. For the false sail was already an old story by Simonides' time, part of the myth of Theseus, of which other versions existed. Simonides did not scruple to waste a few more words on the subject. The poem he composed is not extant, but we do have two fragmentary citations. From Plutarch we get news of the sail:

Then Theseus cheered his father by boasting that he would defeat the Minotaur. So his father gave the helmsman a second sail, white this time, telling him to hoist the white sail if he were returning with Theseus safe, otherwise to sail with the black and so signify catastrophe. But Simonides says that the sail given by Aigeus was "not white but a red sail (φοινίκεον ἴστίον) dyed with the wet flower of the blooming holm-oak" and that this was to be the sign of their salvation.⁷

And from a scholiast we have the words of the messenger sent by Theseus to his father on the day of his return. For according to

⁶ Does the wife lie or is the ship flying the wrong sail? Throughout the old French *version commune* (which, I assume from the title of his poem, is the one Celan has in mind), this point remains unresolved. Spector (1973), 85.

⁷ Plutarch *Life of Theseus* 17.4; Simonides fr. 550 *PMG*.

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legend, Theseus is sailing into harbor when he realizes that he forgot to hoist the white sail. A messenger is dispatched to bring the true story to the father, but Aigeus has already read the death-sail and accepted its version. He throws himself into the sea. The messenger is addressing the father's corpse when he says:

βιότου κέ σε μάλλον ὄνασα πρότερος ἐλθών.

[I would have given you a profit greater than life if I had come sooner.]⁸

Simonides' messenger states his case as economically as possible. His verb (ὄνασα, from ὀνίνημι "to profit") is drawn from the sphere of commercial gain. More important, his statement takes the form of a contrary-to-fact condition. Why must the economy of the false sail be contrafactual? Because it is an impossible idea conditioned by the negative event that already exists. Two realities for the price of one. No profit in fact changes hands—but the idea of it, added to the account contrafactually, multiplies pathos and learning. Aigeus' salvation is both adduced and canceled in the messenger's spare comment. You could have your sail and falsify it too, if words were true.

White, black, red, telling, lying, lied about, forgotten, fatal, all in all the falsity of the false sail is a rich proposition. How such propositions extend themselves to form the interior of a poem like "Matière de Bretagne" is hard to say. Celan combines the local Bretagne stuff of courtly traditions and ancient sailing with the local Bretagne stuff of gravel, hours, beds and personal pronouns that fold over one another like hands. He transcribes a circle of great lyrical beauty, lit by gorselight, around Nothingness. *Das Nichts* occurs twice but this word does not stop the poem or spoil the light. It is simply part of the poet's *matière*. So too Simonides constructs the truth about the false sail negatively. "Not white but red," he insists and then goes on to matters of local color: "dyed with the wet flower of the blooming holm-oak." The redness of his red sail stains fact deeply with the fixative of coun-

⁸ Scholiast *ad* Sophokles *Ajax* 740; Simonides fr. 551 *PMG*.

terfact. Redder than red, redder than the blood of a boar in a dream, is the φοινίκεον that rests on white nothing.

Negation links the mentalities of Simonides and Celan. Words for “no,” “not,” “never,” “nowhere,” “nobody,” “nothing” dominate their poems and create bottomless places for reading. Not white but red. Was it not Aristotle who said, “A mistake enriches the mere truth once you see it as that.” Both Simonides and Celan are poets who see it as that. And ask us to see it as that. Us in the gorselight.

That is why the whole of Celan’s poem gathers us into a movement—toward you—that sails to the end. But you, by the time we reach you, are just folding yourself away into a place we cannot go: sleep. Blank spaces instead of words fill out the verses around you as if to suggest your gradual recession down and away from our grasp. What could your hands teach us if you had not vanished? To stand at this border with whiteness exhausts our power of listening and makes us aware of a crisis in you. We travel toward your crisis, we arrive, yet we cannot construe it—the terrible thing is, after all (and most economically!) we are the false sail for which you wait.