

“With A Changing Key”: Translatability and Untranslatability in Celan’s Poetic Language: A Wittgensteinian Overview

Dr. Dorit Lemberger

Senior lecturer Hermeneutics and Cultural studies Bar-Ilan University

**Corresponding Author: Dr. Dorit Lemberger*

ABSTRACT:- The scholarly literature considers translating Celan’s poetry to be a great challenge, because of his linguistic coinages as well as his use of words from foreign languages (Hebrew) in transliteration. This article considers the translatability of Celan’s poetry from the philosophical perspective of “the translator’s turn,” based on Wittgenstein’s “linguistic turn.” It examines Celan’s poetry using concepts such as limit, first-person speech, and dialogue, in order to show how it is possible to convey meaning in translation.

Keywords: Limit; first-person (experience, certainty); metaphor; quasi-metaphor; dialogue

I. INTRODUCTION

Celan’s poetry poses the question of translatability in a number of ways, such as whether individual trauma can be represented and translated, whether the Holocaust as a unique historical event can be described in words, and whether Celan’s enigmatic poetic language can be translated. What is common to all these questions is Celan’s ambivalence as a translator and poet for whom a poem is a dialogue addressed to an interlocutor, on the one hand, but also a private text that is difficult to translate.¹ The innovation of the present article is its use of Wittgenstein’s methodology to show that, despite this ambivalence, Celan’s poetry can indeed be translated. My main assertion is that the Wittgensteinian perspective allows us to see that the difficulty in translating Celan’s poetry reflects subjective self-constitution and not untranslatability. Wittgenstein’s conception of translation anticipates a trend that is common in the contemporary literature on translation—“the translator’s turn,” a term coined by Douglas Robinson.²

This trend is based on a hermeneutic, as opposed to an instrumental, conception of translation.³ Lawrence Venuti has suggested a model of “hermeneutic translation” that is particularly relevant to the translation of poetry.⁴ He describes the transition from a conception of translation that is based on seeing a text as having an essential meaning, to one that sees translation as reflecting the translator’s value-laden choices. These choices combine the spirit of the cultural era when the translation is executed with his or her understanding of the original text. The hermeneutic model views the translator’s choices as part of an interpretive process that expands and modifies the source text by integrating cultural knowledge (related to the poet and his or her culture) to a greater extent than is necessary for understanding the poem itself. Wittgenstein adds an important layer to this conception of translation: not only does he argue for the possibility of translation, he also makes it possible to understand a subjective uniqueness that is preserved in translation.

This article proceeds in four stages: The introduction demonstrates the similarity between Wittgenstein’s view of the qualities of language and the function of language in the constitution of the self in Celan’s *ars poetica*. The first section considers the concepts of limit and first-person speech as a dynamic key to understanding Celan’s uses of poetic locutions that would seem to be untranslatable. The second section looks at the concepts of “quasi-metaphor” (inspired by Wittgenstein⁵) and metaphor, according to Wittgenstein, as the basis for maintaining that the Hebrew words frequently interpolated by Celan are translatable. The third section highlights dialogues in Celan’s poetry that are based on real encounters as a key to translation and constitution of the self. Following Wittgenstein’s methodical prescriptions, it will examine how both the passage from the first person to the second person and mutual comprehension are made possible.

Preface: “It is in language that an expectation and its fulfillment make contact”⁶

For a poem is not timeless. Certainly it lays claim to infinity, it seeks to reach through time – through it, not above and beyond it. (Celan)⁷

It is only in a language that I can mean something by something.”⁸ ... An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria.⁹ (Wittgenstein)

In the first of these epigraphs, Celan formulates a paradox: a poem incorporates aspects of time in order to transcend it and create an utterance that is independent of concrete time. The passages from Wittgenstein clarify how such a paradoxical process is possible: language permits the expression of every intention, including the drive for infinity, and every other internal process.

Here we will address the question of translatability with reference to two Wittgensteinian notions that are especially relevant to Celan's poetry. The first of these is "meaning." Wittgenstein saw translation as a language-game that can be played by anyone who knows its rules in order to translate any content.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he claimed, translatability depends on familiarity with the author's form of life.¹¹ Therefore, every word must be understood in the context of the language-game "in which it is at home."¹² This method is especially important for the analysis of Celan's poetry, because he often uses terms related to the Holocaust and Jewish tradition. This tendency has not kept Celan's poetry from being translated into many languages; in fact, scholars have pointed out its many universal aspects.¹³

Wittgenstein lists translation as one of the language-games that accompany a lifestyle and are shaped by it. As with every language game, translation too can change and be reconstituted to suit a new interpretation of the form of life.¹⁴ Translation, then, is a practice; and, like other practices, it has rules that can be learned in order to play the game: "To understand a language means to have mastered a technique."¹⁵ In my analysis of Celan's poems, I will attempt to show how Celan uses quasi-metaphorical terms that seem difficult to translate but that in practice can be understood and translated if one is familiar with the source language-game.¹⁶ These include terms such as "Jerusalem," "Psalms," and "mother Rachel," which are not universal, but which Celan places in a new poetic context that makes them comprehensible and endows them with universal meaning.

The second concept is the use of the subjective first-person. This refers to the gap and tension between private experience and the possibility of expressing it in universal language. Celan's *ars poetica* formulates the poem as a dialogic process in search of an interlocutor.¹⁷ Celan saw poetry as one manifestation of language and highlighted its dialogic nature, which allows it to be understood by the other party. These two features justify the use of Wittgensteinian methodology to study Celan's poetry, inasmuch as Wittgenstein saw poetry as a language-game and employed dialogue both as a method of composition in his principal works and as a pedagogical method.¹⁸

In order to demonstrate this, we will examine poems written in response to actual meetings, which describe the experience in the first person alongside the encounter with the other party. To begin with, we should show the great importance that Celan attributes to language, the constitution of the self through language, and the possibility of dialogue using poetry. This triple starting point highlights the importance of the discussion of Celan's translatability, because he speaks of language as a universal concept:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. In this language I have sought, during those years and the years since then, to write poems.¹⁹

The poem is lonely. [...] Does this very act not place the poem already here, at its inception, in the **encounter**, in the *mystery of encounter*? The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite.²⁰ In these passages, Celan formulates the relationship between language and the world at large, which includes the Holocaust as well as the relationship between language and the narrator's subjective world. Language has passed through the events that included "murderous speech" and was enriched in the sense that it can now address the darkest possibilities of its use. This dialogic conception of language suits the original meaning of the Greek word *dialogos* (διάλογος), composed of *dia* (διά) "through, by means of" and *logos* (λόγος), "speech, idea, language." Thus *dialogos* means "by means of a word, idea, or language." In the passages just quoted, Celan demonstrates how language enables subjective constitution of the self because, on the one hand, it embodies individual as well as general historical knowledge, and on the other hand includes the building blocks that make it possible to "to sketch out reality."

It is only by creating a new dialogue, using the language of poetry, that the speaker can cope with the terror, with the obliteration of his home (both his physical and cultural homes), and with the wounds inflicted by the world. A poem, according to Celan, is by its very nature dialogic and is directed towards an encounter. This idea of an encounter through poetry connects directly to Buber's notion of encounter, with which Celan was familiar. Celan expands Buber's concept of encounter, by applying it to the writing of poetry. The poem, as a work of art, is not only an "intermediate space" for a dialogue between two people; it itself is also the essence of the dialogue, the goal that is sought. The poem can convey truth through poetic and metaphorical, language, as in the following poem:

A RUMBLING: it is Truth itself Walked among men, amidst the metaphor squall.²¹

This poem presents the truth as comprehensible to the people who hear it; poetic language is able to express it by means of metaphor. What distinguishes truth here is that it is personified, walking among people despite "the metaphor squall." Michael Eskin saw this poem as a direct expression of Celan's dialogism, which

includes the translatability of truth.²² Eskin asserts that the poem is part of a poetic dialogue between Celan and the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. After they met in person, Celan withdrew his earlier distinction between poetic creation and poetic translation, inasmuch as both may include a “pattern” that supports understanding and dialogue; and this, more than any precision or nuance, is what makes them important.²³ As a translator, Celan coped with the question of translatability, both between languages and in the second sense mentioned above—translation of a subjective experience into a shared experience. In this poem, his answer is that translation is indeed possible. The next poem, Celan’s second-to-last, also demonstrates Celan’s belief that individual experience can be expressed as shared truth:

CROCUS, spotted from a hospitable table: small sign- sensing exile of a common truth, you need every blade.²⁴

The poem opens with a realistic picture of a crocus, which is then personified and described as hospitable. The speaker proceeds from a third-person description of the crocus to a description of exile, which is small like a crocus, but perceived, like it, by anyone who lives elsewhere than in his or her homeland. Exile is also described in the third person, which stresses that exile is the object of the shared truth (for both the concrete addressee as well as the poem’s readers). The poem concludes in the second person, addressing “you.” There is no first-person speech here, a choice that clearly reflects translatability.

How can one explain the tension between Celan’s position regarding the possibility of self-constitution and dialogue through language, on the one hand, and the failure of dialogue, on the other hand? This question can be demonstrated by one of Celan’s last poems, in which, although “you” appears, it does not seem to be Buber’s “thou,²⁵” but the speaker’s inner “you,” which cannot really be understood:

THE SHOFAR PLACE deep in the glowing text-void, at torch height, in the time hole: hear deep in with your mouth.²⁶

This short poem presents a meaningless use of language: the verse calls out, as it were, like a ram’s horn, but the call is devoid of content and conceals within itself a torch, but also a hole that leads the speaker to the injunction (directed to himself?) to withdraw into himself and listen to his inner self. This inner self is embodied by the mouth, which is used for communication, even though no communication is possible in this poem. What is translatable is the tension between the possibility and the impossibility of verbalization, and thus of translation. What can be verbalized in this poem are the modes of expression—text, torch, and hole; but their content cannot be verbalized. Wittgenstein’s method focuses almost completely on descriptions of modes rather than of content, so is appropriate for the examination of the translatability of Celan’s poetry. Celan’s language includes a number of paradoxical tensions that challenge translation, both in the first aspect of translation—translation between languages—and the second aspect of making individual experience comprehensible to others.²⁷

1. With a changing key: Boundary, meaning and first-person certainty

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.²⁸

How can I even attempt to interpose language between the expression of pain and the pain?²⁹

I could not apply any rules to a private transition from what is seen to words. Here the rules really would hang in the air; for the institution of their application is lacking.³⁰

In Wittgenstein’s thought, as in Celan’s poetry, there is a conscious and built-in tension between what can and what cannot be verbalized. The three aspects of the impossibility of verbalization in the epigraph above are: (1) The correspondence between the limits of language and the limits of the subject’s world make it impossible to refer to what lies outside the limits of the subject’s world. (2) There are sensations, such as pain, that cannot be expressed in language, and one cannot even pretend to do so. (3) There may be a private performance that is incomprehensible because it is not governed by rules. Comprehension and translation depend on the rules of a particular language-game. If one executes a “private transition” for which there is no rule, the expression will be incomprehensible and thus untranslatable.

This tension in Celan’s work, like the tension in Wittgenstein’s thought, stems from the fact that stretching the limit and renouncing the possibility of verbalization do not annihilate the content that exists beyond the limit. Moreover, Wittgenstein wrote to the publisher of the *Tractatus*, Ludwig von Ficker, that the book consisted of two parts, the written part and the unwritten part, which was the more important of the two.³¹ It is important to note that Wittgenstein went on to assert that the unwritten part was also included in the book, thanks to his silence about it. In other words, the impossibility of verbalization does not mean the impossibility of all forms of expression. In this two-layer description, the book’s goal is achieved just as defined in its introduction:

“The aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts. [...] It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.”³²

The tension between the desire for self-constitution in language in general, and in poetry in particular, on the one hand, and the primary importance that the speaker attributes to his personal experience, which cannot be verbalized, on the other hand, appears in Celan’s poetry, too. In the Meridian lecture, for example, Celan refers to the tension between the isolation felt by the individual and the possibility of self-constitution that language enables:

This obscurity, if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter. Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn?³³ In other words, rather than dialogue, sometimes the purpose of poetry is to enable a “turning of breath” for the speaker, specifically because her starting point is distance and alienation and she must travel a somewhat long path until the encounter. Sometimes, as in the next poem, the speaker remains distant and alienated, with no connection to the other, and even *without language*; and this certainly challenges the possibility of translation: TO STAND, in the shadow of a scar in the air. Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing. Unrecognized, for you alone.

With all that has room within it, even without language.³⁴

Can the speaker’s declaration that he is in the world without language, even temporarily, be understood literally? There is a fascinating confluence here between Wittgenstein and Celan, which relates to the concept of border. “History swallowed geography [...]. Borders do not outline itself, it is outlined; It does not signify any end, any difference, any time – only loathings needed by indolence in order to get over itself .”³⁵ Elsewhere Celan emphasizes, “History swallowed geography. Borders are not created from view and singularity – borders are outlined nowadays to indicate hostility.”³⁶

A border, Celan claims, is subjective, and is created by historical conditions rather than geographical considerations. Therefore, standing in the world as described in the poem, with no responsibility for or link to anyone else, can be interpreted as embodied in the disconnection from language as well. In poetry there are two opposing orientations, as indicated in the passage from the Meridian lecture quoted above: poetry is directed at the other, but it also expresses the alienation that the author or speaker feels. When the speaker is trapped in a situation of alienation, his poetic expression of this situation is that he is, as it were, deprived of language. Wittgenstein illuminates the possibility of solipsism in poetry; nevertheless we read the poem, which is written in language; and even if, for various reasons, it proclaims that its content is opaque, this statement is formulated in language. The content of internal experience is indeed inaccessible to us, because sometimes a suffering person does not even want to express his pain in language. Nevertheless, a poem can express first-person certainty even if it does not describe concrete content. A clear example of this is found in the following poem:

WORLD TO BE STUTTERED AFTER

In which I’ll have been a guest, a name sweated down from the wall where a wound licks up high.³⁷ In this poem, the speaker employs two linguistic processes in order to constitute himself in the post-Holocaust world: stuttering and naming. This choice is linked to Wittgenstein’s discussion of the how children begin to learn their mother tongue.³⁸ He criticizes the idea that naming involves some mysterious experience that creates the illusion of providing meaning.³⁹ In this poem, Celan clearly does not refer to the provision of meaning by naming in a naive manner, but to a grasping of an initial act of language use as a source of reference. The sweat and wound described in the poem cannot occur independently, but are attributed to the subject. Celan’s choice of “aname” symbolizes the primacy of language over all other options as a source of self-constitution.

The poem uses the first person, which alludes to the biblical verse “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod. 3:14). In light of history, however, the speaker relies on himself alone and not on the biblical “I AM.” The speaker, the human “I am,” is sentenced to “have been a guest”; that is, he cannot deny his exilic history. Similarly by using the first person, Celan imparts a strong sense of certainty; in (universal) grammar, first-person singular declarative statements are more reliable than those in the second or third person. Wittgenstein asserts that when I am in pain, in the first-person present, the grammar itself expresses a certainty that does not require empirical proof:

In what sense are my sensations *private*? - Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it. - In one way this is false, and in another nonsense. [...] It can’t be said of me at all [...] that I *know* I’m in pain. What is it supposed to mean - except perhaps that I *am* in pain? [...] This much is true: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself.⁴⁰

In this passage, Wittgenstein points out that a speaker can assign a private meaning to a sensation. This meaning is not in doubt to the speaker, although someone else can doubt it. This formulation of first-person certainty, which makes it possible to distinguish the private meaning of a sensation, is expressed even more clearly in the following passage:

The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own specimen, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else. The assumption would thus be possible – though unverifiable – that one section of mankind had one visual impression of red, and another section another.⁴¹

The next poem exemplifies a private sensation that is difficult to translate:

With A Changing Key

With a changing key you unlock the house where the snow of what's silenced drifts.
Just like the blood that bursts from your eye or mouth or ear, so your key changes.

Changing your key changes the word That may drift with the flakes.
Just like the wind that rebuffs you, packed round your word is the snow.⁴²

Although the speaker employs the second person for the addressee, the poem describes a sensation of first-person pain that cannot be verbalized and thus cannot be translated into general language. The metaphor of the key appears three times, emphasizing that only the addressee has access to his own pain. The pain is described in the metaphor of blood bursting from a sensory organ, apparently the result of "the wind that rebuffs you." The wind, too, is a general metaphor that does not make the cause of pain accessible to the reader or explain the situation. What is nevertheless comprehensible and translatable is the relationship between language and the world: both "what's silenced" and the word that turns the key (or is itself the key) function in accordance with what takes place in the addressee's soul: the phrases "Just like the blood that bursts" and "Just like the wind that rebuffs you" harness the verbal to the private sensation of the addressee, which somehow aggregates the wind that rebuffs him with his bursting blood. Here Celan effectively creates an autonomous poetic description that has no identifiable link to the outside world.

Wittgenstein stressed the autonomy of language in the *Tractatus* (referring to "the limits of my language" etc.) and especially in the *Philosophical Grammar*. The statement that "Grammar is not accountable to any reality"⁴³ recurs in that book in various formulations; it means that the rules of grammar create meaning in accordance with their use. Grammatical rules can be used to describe a factual picture (i.e., something concrete), but they can also express a desire (that transcends the limits of the world), which may be aesthetic, ethical, or mystical.⁴⁴ The subjective desire expressed in this poem is the blood that bursts out in the face of the wind that rebuffs the addressee. The thrice-repeated metaphor of the key underscores the lack of a hermeneutical key for understanding the addressee's pain and the nature of the wind that causes it.

The poem has an additional "key," the motif of snow, which appears frequently in Celan's poetry. In this poem (as in others mentioned in the note), the contrast between the redness of the bursting blood and the whiteness of the snow intensifies the isolation and the impotence of general language to illuminate private experience. The essence of the internal sensation is presented as an expression of first-person certainty to which the reader has no access, and is therefore untranslatable.⁴⁵ "Key" and "snow" are normal words from everyday language; so it is curious that their use in the poem creates a sense of private, even idiosyncratic, experience. Celan's poem demonstrates Wittgenstein's statement that there is no need to coin new words and that one should rather try to express experience in everyday language.

Wittgenstein assigned great power to everyday words, including the ability to express and define private psychological states.⁴⁶ When considering words that express inner experience, he suggests, one should not focus on the word itself but instead try to understand what the person who used it chose and what intention this choice represents.⁴⁷ This methodological assumption reflects his approach to translation, which considers the internal content of a sentence and not only its constituent words.⁴⁸ This is why Wittgenstein opposed the creation of metaphors. This opposition inspired the term "quasi-metaphor," a concept that accurately describes many terms that Celan used in his poetry in a fascinating manner.

II. THE ROSE OF NO-ONE: TRANSLATABILITY AND QUASI-METAPHOR

NEAR, IN THE AORTA'S ARCH, in bright blood: the bright word.

Mother Rachel Weeps no more.
Carried across now all of the weeping.

Still, in the coronary arteries, Unbinded: Ziv, that light.⁴⁹

John Felstiner, the leading translator of Celan's poetry, justified transliterating the Hebrew word *ziv*, instead of translating it, asserting that the word must not and cannot be translated.⁵⁰ This claim is self-contradictory: if the word cannot be translated, there is no need to insist that it must not be translated. Later in the article in which he makes this point, Felstiner devotes a broad discussion to the kabbalistic texts needed to understand the sense of the word *ziv* as well as the meaning of the name Rachel. This exemplifies Wittgenstein's assertion that a word can be understood if we are familiar with the language-game that is its homeland. In this

poem, *ziv* and Rachel function as quasi-metaphors and create an illusion of untranslatability though they are in fact translatable.

The concept of quasi-metaphor has two dimensions, the private and the general. An analysis of its use in Celan's poetry can help us understand how Celan's poetry walks the tightrope between the private, at which it sometimes only hints, and the connotative link that makes it easier to translate the expression. Celan's poems are replete with connotations that function as quasi-metaphors, as I will demonstrate below. The concept of quasi-metaphor implies translatability, because it is based on the link between a cultural context and a concrete example that instantiates this context, otherwise remote in time and consciousness, so as to make it current and comprehensible. There is no doubt that a metaphor, too, has qualities that facilitate its understanding, but the innovation of the quasi-metaphor is that it deconstructs and reconstructs a metaphor in order to describe a current and everyday situation. The three scholars I take up below formulated the concept of quasi-metaphor based on Wittgenstein's methodological instruction to avoid metaphors and formulate assertions in everyday language. Later I will consider the connection between this directive and translatability.

In his 1959 article "Aesthetic Concepts," Frank Sibley coined the concept of "quasi-metaphor" to designate a metaphor that seems to have been incorporated into daily language but in practice retains a unique poetic quality.⁵¹ Sibley asserts that they have an added value: they function both literally and metaphorically. Malcolm Budd developed the discussion by locating the quasi-metaphor in an intermediate metaphorical space that is "Partly metaphorical, the meaning of which is uncertain."⁵² Sam Glucksberg adds allusion as another aspect of how a quasi-metaphor functions; and this is especially relevant to Celan's poetry:

Quasi-metaphorical [...] idioms convey meaning via their allusional content. [...] Such metaphors characterize their topics by assigning them to categories that are diagnostic and often evaluative [...] Quasi-metaphorical idioms function precisely the same as nominal metaphors. Via the mechanism of dual reference, they can simultaneously refer to an ideal exemplar of a concept and characterize some event or situation as an instance of that concept.⁵³

Celan's poem "Psalm" uses a quasi-metaphor, in Glucksberg's sense, in its title. The word "psalm" designates the familiar concept of the biblical genre, but here it is the title of a specific lyrical poem:
Psalm

No one kneads us again out of earth and clay, no one incants our dust.
No one.

Blessed art thou, No One.
In thy sight would we bloom.
In thy spite.

A Nothing
we were, are now, and ever shall be, blooming: the Nothing-, the No-One's-Rose.

With our pistil soul-bright, our stamen heaven-waste, our corona red from the purple word we sang over, O over the thorn.⁵⁴

Here we encounter typical expressions from the biblical book of Psalms and other contexts that refer to human-divine relations, such as "dust from the earth" (Gen. 2:7), "May Your Name be great" (Jerusalem Talmud, tractate *Berakhot* 9:2) and "We were". Celan replants the biblical expressions and creates a sense that inverts their original meaning. We must know their biblical sense in order to fathom this inversion that describes the concrete context of the speaker's experience. God is replaced by "No-One," who creates us anew. In the biblical account in Genesis, God creates human beings; here God is replaced by a negation that does not even assume his humanity, and certainly not his divinity. In this manner, "Blessed", meant to praise God, turns into an empty word, lauding the fictional No-Man and No-God.

The rose among the thorns, an image taken from Song of Songs, which in the literal meaning refers to the female beloved and, in the allegorical rabbinic interpretation, to the Jewish people, here stands for something that highlights the emptiness and impotence of No-One; it too incorporates only Nothing and No-One. The rose might seem to be an addressee, but in practice it is empty of meaning, just like the God to whom the psalm is addressed. The sole substance that exists is the word, in its several variations (psalm, prayer, poem, word): the rose is created from "the purpleword we sang." In this way the speaker focuses the central message and makes it more extreme: there is no concrete substance that can be addressed, but only variants of language that verbalize the poetic experience.

The use of the concept of quasi-metaphor connects to Wittgenstein's concept of translation in two ways. First of all, Wittgenstein was opposed to the use of metaphors and set up the exclusive use of everyday language as a methodological goal.⁵⁵ Second, a quasi-metaphor is direct evidence of translatability, because it functions

simultaneously as connotation and as a private instance, thereby demonstrating the possibility of transferring an expression from a poetic context to the speaker’s concrete context.

Nevertheless, at the end of *Tractatus* Wittgenstein demarcates the limits of language, as he promised to do in the book’s introduction. He sets the subject as the limit of the world and advances a solipsistic assertion: The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.⁵⁶

The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world.⁵⁷

In other words, there is a sense in which a person understands only what falls within the limits of his or her language, limits that also delineate the limits of his/her world. How can this solipsism be overcome? The answer is provided in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

There Wittgenstein restricts translatability by drawing a boundary between translation in the imagination and translation in reality: while it is possible to create imaginary criteria for translation, they do not permit a concrete examination and do not produce a result that can be depended upon.⁵⁸ The two dialogue poems analyzed below, create a private space that is not accessible via interpersonal communication. In both poems, the paradox emerges from the apparent presence of an empathetic other (with the dual link of the close bond between the speaker and the addressee and the fact that both experienced the Holocaust) with whom communication is essential, when, nevertheless, the encounter and dialogue do not produce self-constitution. Celan’s poetry is an excellent example of the “two poles” of Wittgenstein’s thought: in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein stated that the limits of private language form the limits of the subjective world, whereas later, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, he shows how meaning is created through the use of public, universal, and everyday language. These two poles are unmistakable in the poems that document Celan’s interchanges with Nelly Sachs and Ilana Shmueli.

III. DIALOGUE AS TRANSLATION AND TRANSITION FROM THE FIRST PERSON TO THE SECOND PERSON

(Where I like you. Where you like me.
Did we not stand under *one* trade wind?
We are strangers.)⁵⁹

Both of the poems that follow were part of the dialogue that went on for years between Celan and another person, the first with the poet Nelly Sachs and the second with his wartime friend Ilana Shmueli. Both poems are strong expressions of the desire for dialogue, comprehensibility, and reconstitution of the self; despite their modicum of optimism, in both poems private experience cannot be verbalized and thus cannot be translated. The difficulty of verbalization is more acute in the poem dedicated to Nelly Sachs than in that written for Shmueli, because the latter finds a poetic “solution” in the form of a quasi-metaphor that provides readers with some of the background needed to understand the poem. By contrast, “Zurich, At the Stork” maintains an ineffable enigma throughout, intended to provide the background for understanding its meaning:

Zurich, At The Stork (for Nelly Sachs)

Our talk was of Too Much, of
Too Little. Of Thou and Yet-Thou, of clouding through brightness, of [“of how clarity troubles”]
Jewishness, of your God. Of that. On the day of ascension, the Minster stood over there; it came with some gold
across the water.

Our talk was of your God, I spoke against him, I let the heart I had hope: for his highest, death-rattled, his
wrangling word—

Your eye looked at me, looked away,
your mouth
spoke toward the eye, I heard:

We
really don’t know, you know,
we
really don’t know
what
counts.⁶⁰

In the most famous poem from Celan and Sachs’s correspondence, the unbridgeable distance between the speaker and the addressee stands out. Celan is ostensibly recounting a conversation, but he does not reproduce it; rather, he provides instead a metaphorical sketch of the two interlocutors, each trapped in his or her

own mind, and their only common denominator is their not knowing. The poem is based on their three-day meeting and conversations in Zurich, at the Stork Inn, after six years of a dialogue in letters.

The basic experience described is one of a missed opportunity. The poem begins with the contrast between "Too Much" and "Too Little," and continues with a renewed focus on the addressee that failed to produce a sense of sharing, empathy, or agreement and instead left the interlocutors in their individual solitude. The emphasis on not knowing at the end of the poem demonstrates in a muted tone, categorical though not dramatic, that "clouding through brightness": even in a world in which Jesus's ascension to heaven is celebrated and people believe in the Jewish God, the speaker remains hopeful, ironically, for "his wrangling word" that will save him, but does not arrive.

Thus, the cathedral on the one hand and the Jewish God, in whom his interlocutor believes, on the other hand, do not form a shared basis of understanding for dialogue between the two. The cathedral symbolizes the Christian believers who were responsible for the Holocaust of the Jewish believers. The speaker paints a very clear picture of the result of the Holocaust: individuals who, when they meet, renew the attempt to understand what occurred, but discover that the past has become the "clouding through brightness": the impossibility of understanding stems precisely from the fact that the event, like its results, is so clear.

The content of this dialogue is indeed concise and coded; but it is easy to translate, as are the poetic means employed. The paradox, the repeated synecdoche of the eye, and the contrast between "Too Much" and "Too Little" all intensify the sense of a conversation that takes place but produces nothing, as well as of the "empty" manner in which language can function.

Celan conducted a slightly different dialogue with Ilana Shmueli, starting during his visit to Israel in 1969. Celan met artists such as Yehuda Amichai and Dan Pagis and intellectuals such as Gershom Scholem. But the most significant record of his visit is of his reunion with his friend of his youth, Ilana Shmueli. Celan wrote poems during their time together and afterwards, which Shmueli translated and interspersed with excerpts from their conversations.

The motif of male speaker and (female) addressee is frequent in Celan's poetry. One interpretation is that this pattern refers to his mother, "to whom he may have written all of his poems."⁶¹ A more general interpretation, I believe, is that Celan was dialoguing with several women, some of whom (such as Shmueli and Sachs) he names explicitly. Celan met both of them more than once. The poems he dedicates to them refer to the tension between the translatability of the subjective position, along with a vast number of quasi-metaphors for contrast. In "The poles," the opposition between the feelings of closeness and distance, experienced simultaneously, is stated with great artistry:

The poles

are within us, insurmountable while we're awake, we sleep across, up to the Gate of Mercy,

I lose you to you, that is my snow-comfort, say, that Jerusalem *is*,

say it, as if I were this your whiteness, as if you were mine,

as if without us we could be we, I leaf you open, forever

You pray, you lay us free.⁶²

There are two prominent quasi-metaphors in the poem: The Gate of Mercy and Jerusalem. Both of them refer to a concrete place, both raise an element of Jewish history and culture, and both express the speaker's longing for an impossible and utopian situation of mercy and spiritual serenity. The paradox reaches its zenith: the first-person speaker and the second-person female addressee are linked in an almost symbiotic connection, separate but also nourishing the other's soul "for ever." All of the concepts discussed above are found here: there is a clear border between "the limits of his [the speaker's] language" and "the limits of her [the female addressee's]," because they live in different countries, are "across" each other, and "lose" each other. Nevertheless, the dialogue and intersubjective connection do create meaning.

Moreover, the speaker places his hope in the possibility that she will be his guarantee "that Jerusalem *is*." The quasi-metaphors of Jerusalem and the Gate of Mercy refer to a real place the two have visited, along with the connotation of belief in God's mercy and His responsiveness to the prayers of the faithful.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the translatability of Celan's poetry based on two concepts advanced by Wittgenstein: first, that translation is a language-game whose rules are based both on grammar and a form of life; second, that translation reflects the gulf between inner attitudes and processes on the one hand and those rules and form of life, on the other hand. Wittgenstein's hermeneutic conception of translation sheds light on the

subjective aspect maintained in Celan’s poetry by unique poetic expressions that reflect the limits of dialogue. Although scholars have viewed these expressions as untranslatable, Celan’s uses them in a way that is subjective but not untranslatable. This is because anything that can be thought can also be expressed and translated. Translation, in Wittgenstein’s sense, is not limited to a word-for-word rendering, but also includes the translation of the author’s subjectivity.

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¹ Celan devoted much effort to translation. Felstiner, his biographer and the principal translator of his work into English, argued that Celan never produced any clear and ordered statement about translation, but saw it as a vocation of equal value to his poetry (Felstiner, “Ziv,” 612). With regard to the difficulty of translating poetry, Felstiner quotes Celan with regard to Rilke and Gide: “This language can’t simply be translated, it must be *translocated*” (ibid., 611; emphasis in original).

² Robinson, *The Translator Turn*, ix; 6-10.

³ Robinson formulates the translator’s turn as a transition from a notion of language as transcendental or arbitrary to a paradigm of meaning as use (ibid., p 8). Accordingly, translation is a dialogue and relationship, in which words are formulate as a dialogue in the public space (ibid., 257).

⁴ Lawrence Venuti is a leading scholar in this field and, inter alia, the editor of *The Translation Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 2000.

⁵ See: Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts”: Glucksberg, *Understanding Figurative Language*; Budd, *Aesthetic Essays*.

⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §445.

⁷ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 396.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., ed. P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and J. Schulte. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, §35.

⁹ Ibid., §580.

¹⁰ The stance that all forms of life can be understood on the basis of learning its rules from the inside is known as “fideism.” For an extended discussion of this idea in Wittgenstein, see Lemberger, 2003.

¹¹ “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §19).

¹² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116).

¹³ See, for example, von Hallberg, “Celan’s Universality.”

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

¹⁵ Ibid., §199.

¹⁶ See the quote in note 16 above.

¹⁷ See below, the quote from Celan’s Meridian lecture.

¹⁸ See Lemberger, “Dialogical Grammar.”

¹⁹ Celan, “Bremen Speech,” 395–96..

²⁰ Celan, “The Meridian,” 49–50.

²¹ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 277.

²² Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue*, 164–165.

²³ Ibid., 165.

²⁴ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 375.

²⁵ Martin Buber. *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937.

²⁶ Ibid., 361.

²⁷ Felstiner noted the problems of translating this poem, given the difficulty of rendering the coinage in the imperative, “hear deep in” (“hör dich ein / mit dem Mund”) and given the difficulty of understanding

what Celan meant by the introspection described in this poem (see Felstiner, "Deep in the Glowing Text-Void," 175).

²⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §5.6.

²⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §245.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §380.

³¹ The letter is quoted by Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, 178.

³² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, Preface.

³³ Celan, "The Meridian."

³⁴ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 237.

³⁵ Quoted in: Franz Wurm, "Memory", p. 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Shmueli 1998p. 40

³⁷ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, p. 337.

³⁸ "An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word; for instance, the word "slab" [...]. I'll call it "ostensive teaching of words" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §6); "we are brought up, trained, to ask "What is that called?" - upon which the name is given" (*ibid.*, §27).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, §38.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §246.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, §272.

⁴² Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 65.

⁴³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, 184.

⁴⁴ In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts that a subjective stance cannot be proven empirically and thus does not exist within the limits of language and the world (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §§6.373, 6.43).

⁴⁵ The connection between experience and sensation for Wittgenstein is described and explained in his article, "Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experience' and 'Sense Data.'"

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. II, §62–63.

⁴⁷ "Concepts lead us to make investigations. They are the expression of our interest and direct our interest" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §570).

⁴⁸ See Wittgenstein, *Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946–1947*, 180.

⁴⁹ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 303.

⁵⁰ Felstiner, "Ziv."

⁵¹ Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," 441. For a broader discussion, see Lemberger, *A Red Rose in the Dark*, pp. 174–178.

⁵² Budd, *Aesthetic Essays*, 143.

⁵³ Glucksberg, *Understanding Figurative Language*, 75.

⁵⁴ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 57.

⁵⁵ For a broader discussion, see Lemberger, "Variations of Metaphors."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, §5.6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, §5.62.

⁵⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §265.

⁵⁹ Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 107.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶¹ This sentence was included in the biographical entry on Celan's in *Hame'orer* 3, 16. The author is not credited, so it was apparently written by the journal's editors, Dvir Intrator and Erez Schweitzer.

⁶² Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 363.