

8a~Joshua Schuster to Ben Hollander.**“the word ‘you’”**

Dear Ben Hollander,

I was thumbing through an issue of *Der Spiegel* this past winter when I came across an ad for “Celanese.” I did a double take. What could this be? The ad exclaimed in large print: “Neue groese in der Chemie.” A gesture to Paul Celan, who pored over texts of alchemy and botany, getting his due as a linguist-chemist? Hardly. It was an announcement that the pharmaceutical company Celanese, which may or may not be aware of the peculiar name it shares, had recently did an Initial Public Offering (IPO), that is, issued shares on one of the world’s markets. Still, if one were to speak, so to speak, of a language of Celan, a sort of Celan-ese, it might not be so strange to find such a concoction spoken among drug companies and world markets and media houses.

However, a bit of memory helps uncover some irony here. Celanese is a spin-off from Hoechst AG, currently one of the largest German pharmaceutical companies. Hoechst is one of the three companies created after the split-up of IG Farben after the war. IG Farben dutifully supplied the Nazi’s concentration camps with Zyklon B and served as one of the main employers at Auschwitz. Hoechst, along with Bayer, are the primary beneficiaries of the sickening biological research and slave manufacturing done in the camp. Now, as of last year, Celanese is born, and you can own one share of this creation if you trade 10 shares of Hoechst.

It made me pick up Celan again, and read him with an eye – an eye that wishes to be surgically altered but for now adjusts to a prosthetic of curved glass – an eye towards chemicals and markets and medias. Now, more than ever, I will take my poetry wherever I can find it. Stock markets, biotechnology, *Der Spiegel*: these are among the objects that speak louder and more convincingly than ever, and they seem to have the heaviest hands in what looks to be the outbuilding of the future. And it’s this sort of future, those of money, media and science, that seem to increasingly be the standards of how we judge the present and the past. What I want to ask you, through your poetry and your ability to understand, well, Celanese, is whether you feel that poetry, the poetry we’ve known, can continue in this future?

The past century from which we are just awakening has been terribly anti-poetic. It has been marked by the hyper acceleration of force, violence and death in the first half and the triumph of money and technology in the second half. Democracy was nearly killed in the first half of the century, only to be found not particularly effective or relevant in the second half. Adorno’s famous statement that “after Auschwitz, it is barbaric to write poetry” is most effective as a commentary on the first half of the century. It’s a phrase that is doubly shocking because, with such an economy of words and elegantly simple structure, it’s quite a poetic sentence. Furthermore, the notion of barbaric poetry is an oxymoron – poetry has no force, conducts no violence. But poetry is not innocent either. I am not convinced that Claude Lévi-Strauss’s famous phrase in *La pensée sauvage* – “The barbarian is the one who believes in barbarism” – has not done enough damage to humanism to set international human rights issues back several decades.

What Adorno’s statement ultimately amounts to is in fact a call for more poetry. A damaged, hardened and critical poetry, to be sure, but one that offers us the means to unlock the events of the century, to describe them in detail and emotion so that they are not forgotten or left in vain. Before Auschwitz, poetry could take its time and meditate on its own position. After, it is tensed, vigilant, paranoid, on the run and running out of time.

Or so one would have hoped. But in the last few decades, in such a short time, the world has changed, perhaps turned in on itself, consuming itself, accelerating at an incredible rate with each turn. Mainly because we are burned out on horror and see much redemption in the three superpowers (money, technology, media), the world seems to be a better place. But society has perhaps grown too used to itself and to its own progression. A hot technology company on the market is news that stays news. Indeed, after

the IPO, it is no longer interesting to write poetry. Poetry, here again, is not innocent. The same call from before for poetry still stands, the same desire to see beyond the systems and progressions, to locate and preserve moments of humanity. Poetry now can serve as a needed distraction, an interruption, a sea of nervousness in an otherwise calm storm. Poetry is vigilance.

I find this vigilance, this nervousness and this interruption, at work in your poetry. In many of your poems, this tension is turned inward, at the poem itself. It becomes a question of who is watching whom, and that if vigilance is all around us, are we able to see what we need to see. Your poem "Levinas and the Police" begins like this: "Listen, Lt.: we live in a house called The Problem of Being / Me-half-seen-on-you-half-seen-on-me." We know, of course, that Levinas is always looking after us. He is always looking towards the Other, towards you, towards us. His concern is not for himself but for you as you. Your poetry is aware that there is this other concern, this other view that is aware of your concern. It's quite tense, your poetry. This question of vigilance makes us wonder who is looking after us and looking into us. In your sense, it would be Levinas *and* the police, and, even still, we ourselves.

Later in the poem you coin the word "egonomy," which is, in my view, caught up with the progress of the three superpowers that intend to make your life better. Indeed, these egonomies have saved a place, just for you, under the sun, their sun or your sun. And, as it is in your poem, the police seem to work according to this law of the sun. As you say, these police are "Never *the first one on the scene* / Yet always to have saved their place in the sun." These authorities, they dwell under the sun as they dwell under the law (remember, they are there to protect the law, not necessarily to protect you). And, forgive me as I rush here, finally the poem finishes with a frozen image that is nonetheless collapsing as it captures a situation in which a young girl is run over by an auto.

I see these in the poem, and I see a reaction in the poem, a twisting of language as an attempt to unbalance these systems and laws of the egonomy. I also see paranoia here. I see fear and confusion along with curiosity and the strain to remember. Never mind that perhaps the most paranoid word in language is the word "you." This paranoia is quite healthy and effective. Indeed, your poetry is perhaps the most paranoid poetry written today. And, suffice it to say, I am paranoid about the lack of paranoia in most poetry.

This concern about the egonomy I share with you, and this paranoia I also share. In many ways I feel that we, at times, speak the same Celanese, if you will. For my own part, I've chosen to direct my energy to deciphering the new superpowers, whether in poetry or in prose it doesn't matter to me. Still, I am wondering where this language may take us, where this paranoia, this concern for concern can develop. Levinas, in an interview, said that "Inertia is certainly the grand law of being; but a human being can surge above that and disturb it. For a long while? For a moment? The human is a scandal in being. . . ." Of course, scandals do not last long, disturbances are marked by their transitoriness. Is this all that humanity has to stake for itself?

Lately I get the feeling of reading the same poems over and over. In that case, there, in that sameness, poetry no longer exists. There is no ideal poem because such a work, in its pure form and infiniteness, would be dead in its tracks against a changing, fluid world. That change itself can be poetry is perhaps our only hope. Scandal, yes, paranoia too, tension, but above all concern, concentration, watching over those who watch over us. We need a vigilance to keep track of the vigilant.

Yours,
Joshua Schuster