

How to Read Poetry in Translation?

(when you don't read the original language)

1. Reading how you read

2. Setting up a "reading space" to
"transread" across multiple translations

With examples from the poetry of Paul Celan

1. My goal today is a little **grandiose**; I want to make us all **better readers**, by examining the following question:

2. How should we read poetry in translation when we don't read the original or source language?

3. While there are obvious **disadvantages** in this case, I'm going to focus instead on some **possible opportunities**:

for one thing, how a translation can provide us with **insight into how we read**

and, how we can read across **multiple translations** of a poem or poems by setting up a **"reading space"** in which to **situate different interpretations**

4. we'll be exploring this question and these opp with **translations of poems** by the great German-language poet, Paul Sail-On

- bear with me as I try to pronounce his name more like he pronounced it himself, SAIL ON, until only recently I'd been pronouncing it Celan, as many Eng-lang readers do



Monsieur
Os
le chien

- and with a little help from this fellow, who's French-speaking Monsieur Os

Thank you for caring...
... about poetry in translation in the US today

Since 2000:

All genres combined: Translations \approx **2%** of all books published annually in the US

Same figure in Italy \approx **23%** (*mostly translations from English*)



CULTURAL EMPIRIALISM

Sources: Lawrence Venuti. *The Translator's Invisibility - A History of Translation*, 2008. *Translation Changes Everything*, 2013.

1. First, though, *I want to thank you* for caring about poetry in translation

- because tr and esp po in tr are marginalized phenomena today in the US.

- The percentage of **translations of all bks published annually** in this country is ***much much lower*** than in Europe--the ballpark figures are 2% vs. 23%--and most of the translations published in Europe, and also worldwide, are ***translated from English***.
 - in this way, translation brings ***cultural imperialism*** into *sharp* focus
 - ◆ Basically, transl from Eng are **reaching readers worldwide**, but there is ver little poetry, for ex,

from other lang and cult that is avail to us in Eng

- ♦ **Because** translation, esp po in tr, is **so limited** in the US today, some of you may be wondering,



like Monsieur Os, and as many have, thru-out history, whether the translation of poetry even possible.

Poetry in Translation

Impossible? Possible?

Robert Frost:

What constitutes poetry is exactly what is lost when poetry is translated.

Ezra Pound:

What constitutes poetry is exactly what survives when poetry is translated.

Impossibly possible?

The answer to this question depends on whom you ask.-[PAUSE]

My belief is that: tr of po is possible; after all, it exists; we've probably **all read at least one poem in translation**, but I'm tempted to say that the translation of po is **IMPOSSIBLY POSSIBLE**

in other words, **all translations of poetry are wrong**, partly because translation is subjective and difficult but also because translations cannot do what it is so often expected of them: they **cannot reproduce the source text**

"A translation can only communicate an **interpretation**,
never the source text itself
or some form or meaning believed to be inherent in it."

"Translation involves **violence**."

(LAWRENCE VENUTI, TRANSLATION CHANGES EVERYTHING)

❖ as translator and translation scholar Lawrence Venuti puts it:

- 1) "A translation can only communicate an **interpretation**, never the source text itself or some form or meaning believed to be inherent in it." (*Translation Changes Everything*)
 - acc Venuti: whatever the translation approach (whether, for ex, it tends to foreignize or domest) tr always involves violence, because it **radically decontextualizes the original work** by separating it from its language and culture.
 - then there is **recontextualization** in recv lang and cult which, acc to V, inevitably slants the translation toward

the new context

- ❖ I've ref to **Venuti's figures and his theories** so we'll bear in mind something that is *simple and yet so often forgotten*:

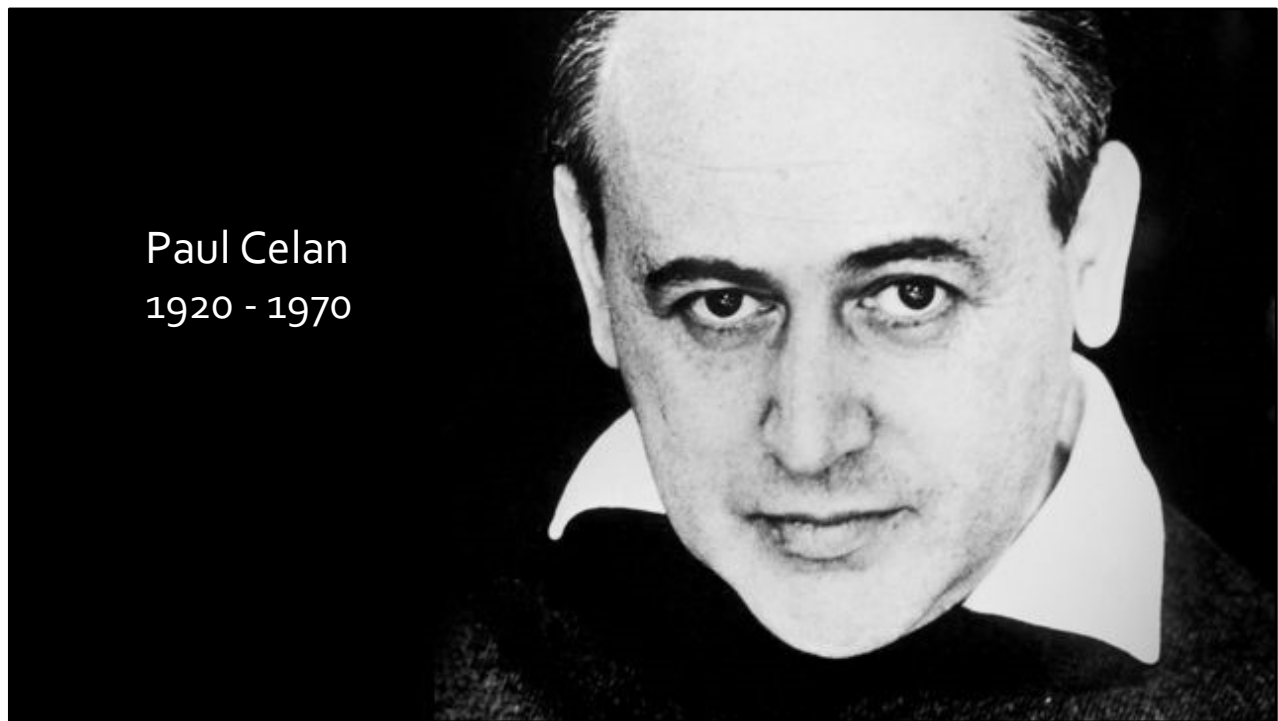
—a Translation is a *Translation*—

A translation may be a poem, but it is
always a translation, and so there is **a translator**,
and so **an interpretation**, and so
access is not assured for every reader

a translation is a translation, not the original

may be a poem, but also translation, which means there is a translator
or translators, which means the translation **is an interpretation** and in
that regard, it **may not be open to every reader**

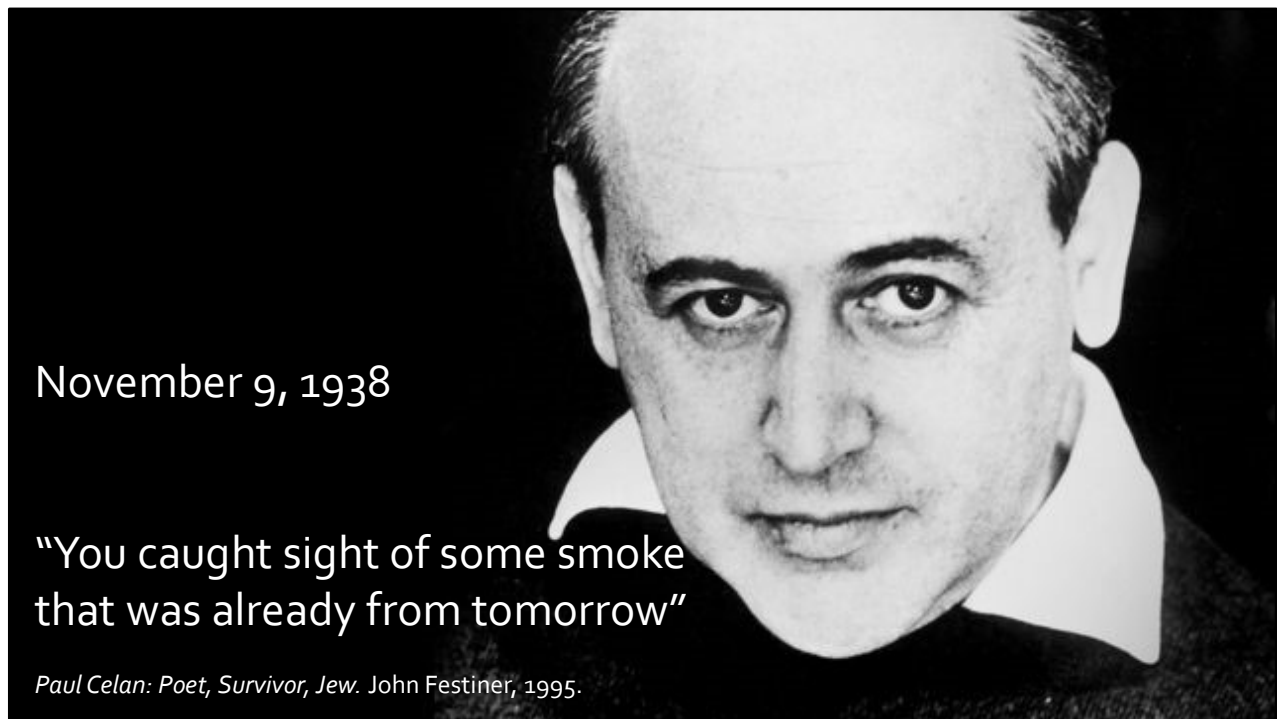
but with poetry, once there is one **translation, one interpretation**, more tend to follow



Paul Celan
1920 - 1970

1. the case w the German-language poetry of **Paul Celan**
I wrote my thesis on **C's poetry in translation** – specif from the **reading perspective** of someone who, like myself, **doesn't read the orig German**
 2. was able to do that because there is an **abundance of transl of C's work in Eng**, as well as in many other lang, at this time
not only is this a tribute to the relevance of Celan's work;
*****it also means that, as a reader, if a poem or even a collection seems to offer you **no way in, there's every reason to keep reading**
to find a translation, an interpretation that does speak to you
 3. C himself compared a poem to a handshake; a poem is thus a personal gesture – that is, what matters is that a **poem matter deeply** to at least one reader
4. now some bkground on C and his work, before we look at a few translations of his poetry
Paul Celan was born Paul Antschel in 1920 in what was **newly** Romania and what had previously been part of the **Hapsburg Empire**. Celan was **Jewish**, and **German** was his mother tongue.
5. In **1938**, at age 18, C left his native Czernowitz for France, **to pursue his education**
*****Specifically, he was on a train passing through Berlin on the night of **November the 9th, 1938**: which was of course the "Night of broken glass" or "Kristallnacht", a pogrom in Berlin and throughout Nazi Germany, involving **mass killings of Jews** --- committed in part by civilians
- as John Felstiner, one of C's tr, wrote: this event marked the beginning of

the end of Jewish life in Europe



1. C would later return to this moment in history in his poetry with these lines, in Felst's transl

**"you caught sight of some smoke
that was already from tomorrow"** [woahh}

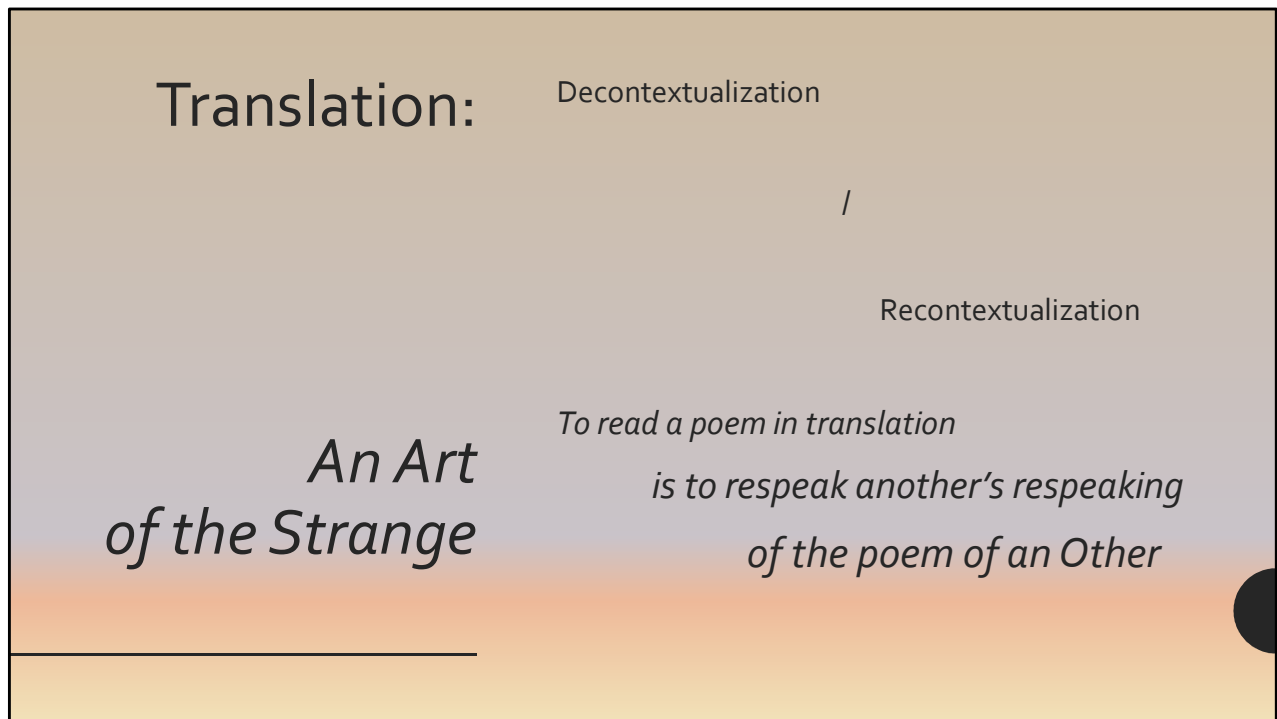
2. so this is 1938, but the **associations** here with smoke quickly bring us to the crematory ovens – Auschwitz-- and the Holocaust,

C himself, though, never referred directly to the Holocaust in his work, or to put it another way, the **density and poYsemy of his poems** is such that they are **never limited** to what he only occasionally referred to as, **quote---** **"what happened"**.

3. Nonetheless, scholars and translators oft use **metaphor of translation** to get at **what C accomplished in his poetry**, that is, translation from standard German,

into *a new German, an reworked German, even a strange German,an estranged German* that bears witness to - “what happened”

4. in add to being a powerful poet of witness , Celan was also a poet of otherness, of the strange



1. this makes him a good poet to **study** in translation because translation is: arguably, an **art** of the strange
 we can once again refer to **decontext/recontext**, or, in less theoretical, perhaps more poetic terms:

2. we can also consider that reading a poem in translation is the possibility to:
 respeak--- another's respeaking--- of the poem- of an other

that is, the possibility of othering happens twice with translation

3. So if we **return now to our q**: "How should we read po in tr when we don't read the original lange"? And also if we return **to those possible opportunities.....**

I propose that we can use the **strangeness inherent in transl, esp transl**

of po, and definitely of Celan's po, in order
to read how we read

4. that is, we can harness the strangeness of
translations to **gain insights as readers**

Which brings me, after this **rather lengthy introduction**—thank you for your
patience--to Part I of this seminar, in which we'll look at:

(everything we've ever read
what we know beforehand
immediate reading context
cultural and social codes and norms
our historical moment of reading)

THE PRISM THROUGH WHICH WE READ

attempting to **become aware of the prism or lens through which we read**

I propose that a poem in translation is at least the opportunity to
become aware of this prism-

of course, this prism is quite **personal** and **depends on many things**,
including what's listed here, and the list **probably differs** for each of us

*The
prism
through
which
we
read:*

what poem can do and what it can't

what a poem is and isn't

what a poem should do and what it
shouldn't

in any case, this prism or lens informs what, for each of us, a poem is and isn't, what it can do and what it can't, what it should do and what it shouldn't do

[PAUSE]

How can we **see** our own reading **lens**? It's admittedly like trying to **think about the way we think**,



... yes, something like this, Monsieur Os...

*The
prism
through
which
we
read:*

what poem can do and what it can't

what a poem is and isn't

what a poem should do and what it
shouldn't

1. but I've nonetheless found by noticing what is **strange to me** in a translated poem, I sometimes learn about **my own expectations of poetry**
now, I'm not referring here to the **foreignness of the source poem**, nor any **of its specific formal features**, but rather to my own sense of **what a poem is-- and-- does**

[PAUSE]

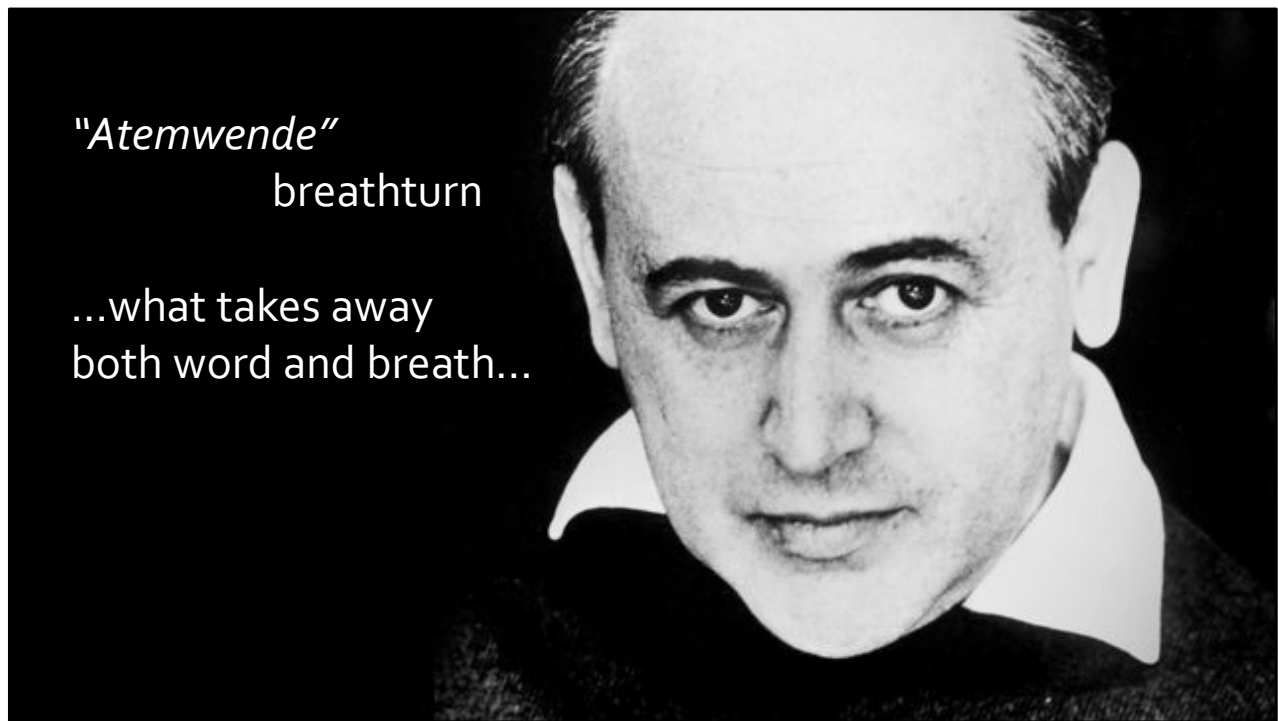
2. by noticing strangeness, we can also **move away from vague value judgments:**

like/dislike, good/bad, better/worse, etc.

instead what we're after is **a movement**, however **modest**, toward openness to **otherness**, to the **strange**

3. strangeness, in this context, may be:

what catches your **attention** simply – or perhaps what “**breaks the spell**” - what you **don't like** and are still willing to explore – uncomfortable - reading difficult



it may even be a case of **"Atemwende"** – a C word that can be translated as breathturn: that is, what leaves us silent, what literally takes away--- both word--- and breath

to experience that sort of strangeness calls for a readiness to see, hear, feel differently –

we might even speak of **"understanding strangeness"**

UNDERSTANDING STRANGENESS:

TO READ STANDING

IN THE MIDST OF OTHERS

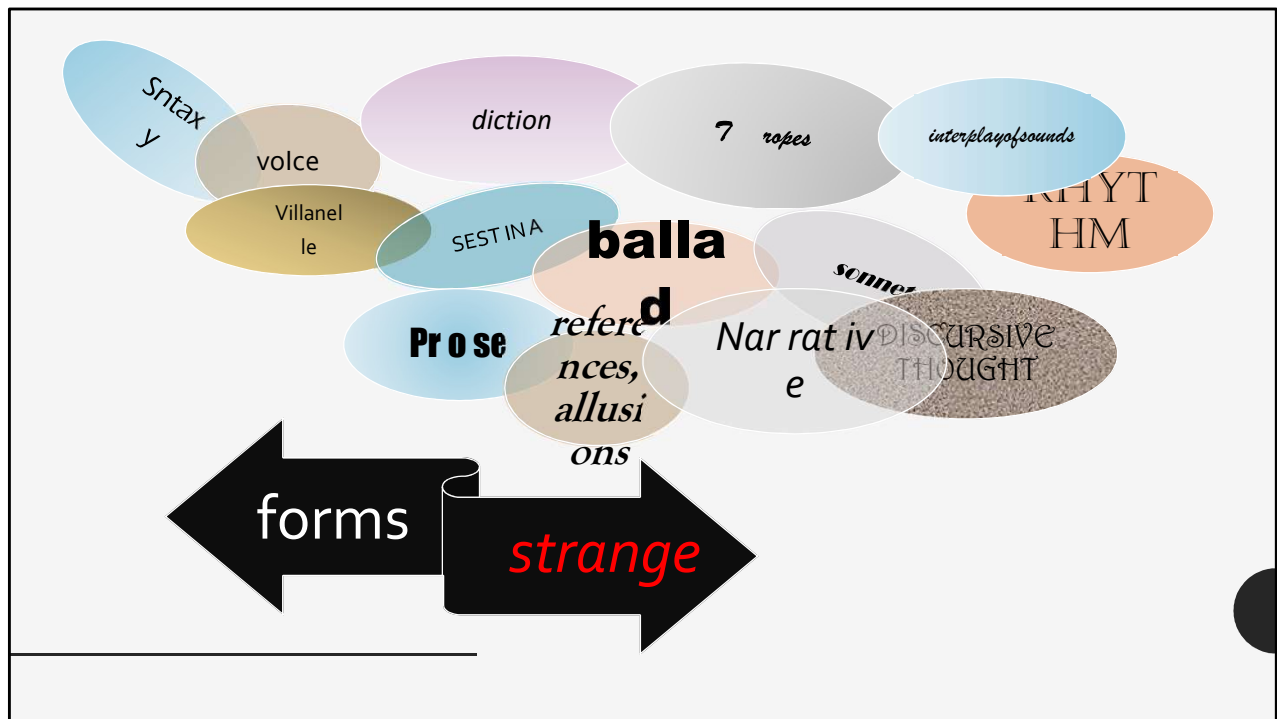
1. in the sense that etymologically, to understand, in addition to meaning “to comprehend, grasp the idea of” - more literally means--- “**to stand in the midst of,**” --- since Old English “under” can mean “between, among”

2. By understanding strangeness, then, I mean, to stand in the midst of others, of the strange so that a **vertical dynamic** is added to **horizontal dynamic** of reading

3. that is, in the **back and forth** of reading, we remain **alert** – it’s a kind of **active waiting** - perhaps a **listening**, even a **listening to silence**.

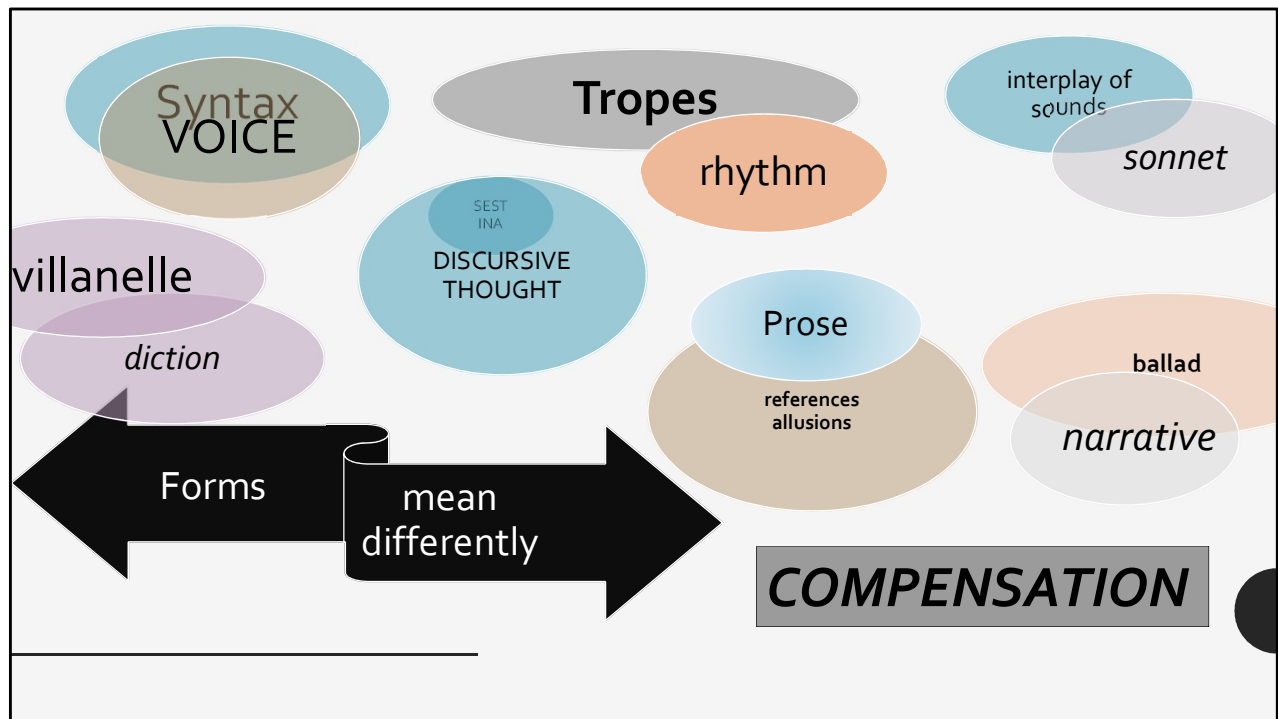
4. This requires us to slow down as readers

-- in addition to rereading, re-re-re-reading
“ Just keep reading,” -- that was
C's simple advice for understanding his dense, difficult poems



Noticing strangeness often involves identifying **specific formal devices** in the text, everything from

syntax, to **tropes**, to **metrical forms** to use of **narrative**, of **discursive thought**, to name just a few...



1. It's important to realize that we **can't assume 1 to 1 corr** btw any of the formal feathres we find strange---- and the formal features of the source poem

2. that's because **what constitutes the strange in formal terms---** is **different in different languages:**

for example, **strange syntax in the English** translation at a given point, does not necessarily indicate that the **original syntax**, is strange at the same point,

3. another way to put this is that: **forms mean differently, as Lyn Hyjinian has written---** *from one language to another*

one result of this is that translators often have to **compensate** for what is happening formally at a given point in the original poem, by **doing**

**something different in formal terms
in the translation, and/or by doing it
elsewhere**



"S'il vous plait...

*GIMME A BONE
TO CHEW ON!"*

yes, Monsieur Os--definitely time for something a little less abstract

1. I'm going close this first part of the seminar with a Personal example of trying to move beyond **understanding** strangeness and **noticing** strangeness, toward **reading strangeness**.

2. As I studied Paul Celan's poems in translation for my thesis, what I kept noticing as **strange, as an obstacle to my reading,** was the **hesitant, groping, almost painful movement** through the lines, as this excerpt gives some indication of

*Reading
strangeness –*

*Poetry in
translation –*

Paul Celan

"ON THE WHITE PHILACTERY

[...]

the heavy-lipped own

head

on the

by my

deadly accurate

hands

living body

[...]"

From Paul Celan's 1967 collection *Atemwende*, translated under the title *Breathturn* by Pierre Joris.

3. I didn't know what to do with **how this sounded** to me.

As I came to realize in part through these readings, I rely a great deal on my ability **to hear** a poem

I took this as an opportunity to spend some time **exploring** how I read: and there are **a few lines** in a Celan poem that helped me

Read-
ing
strange
-ness

Paul Celan
in
translation

"Listen your way in / with your mouth"

from "THE TRUMPET'S PLACE," translated by Pierre Joris,
from the posthumous volume *Zeitgehöft / Timestead*

1. "listen your way in / with your mouth" [*smile*]

as I mentioned earlier, **every reading of poetry in translation** is the possibility of **re-speaking** another's respeaking of another's poem

2. proceeding **from this** and from the mouth in **Celan's lines**: I began experimenting with reading techniques that involved reading aloud

But hearing my own voice was distracting (*you may understand what I mean*). Then I began to zero in on the **threshold between the lowest level of audible speech, the tiniest whisper, and the voice inside my head**

3. at least, that's usually where I place it, without really thinking about it, but as I experimented I began to think **about this inner voice as being** located specifically in my mouth,

A different,
strange,
more
demanding,
more
physical
way to read

"Listen your way in / with your mouth"

The mouth as a primal, complex, vital space

breath – food – speech

Locating reading precisely there

in the place of respeaking the respeaking
of the poem of an Other

1. and as I did so I realized that the
mouth is a primal and complex
place:

a place of **breath, food,**
speech – a vital place

2. it may seem strange but: I worked
on **holding and hearing** the words -
just below the **threshold** of audible
speech - precisely in my **mouth** –
where so much of life happens

3. in this way, I felt I got closer to
respeaking the strangeness of C's
poetry in tr insofar as I'd found a
new and different way to read,
even a **strange way**, definitely a
more demanding, more physical

way

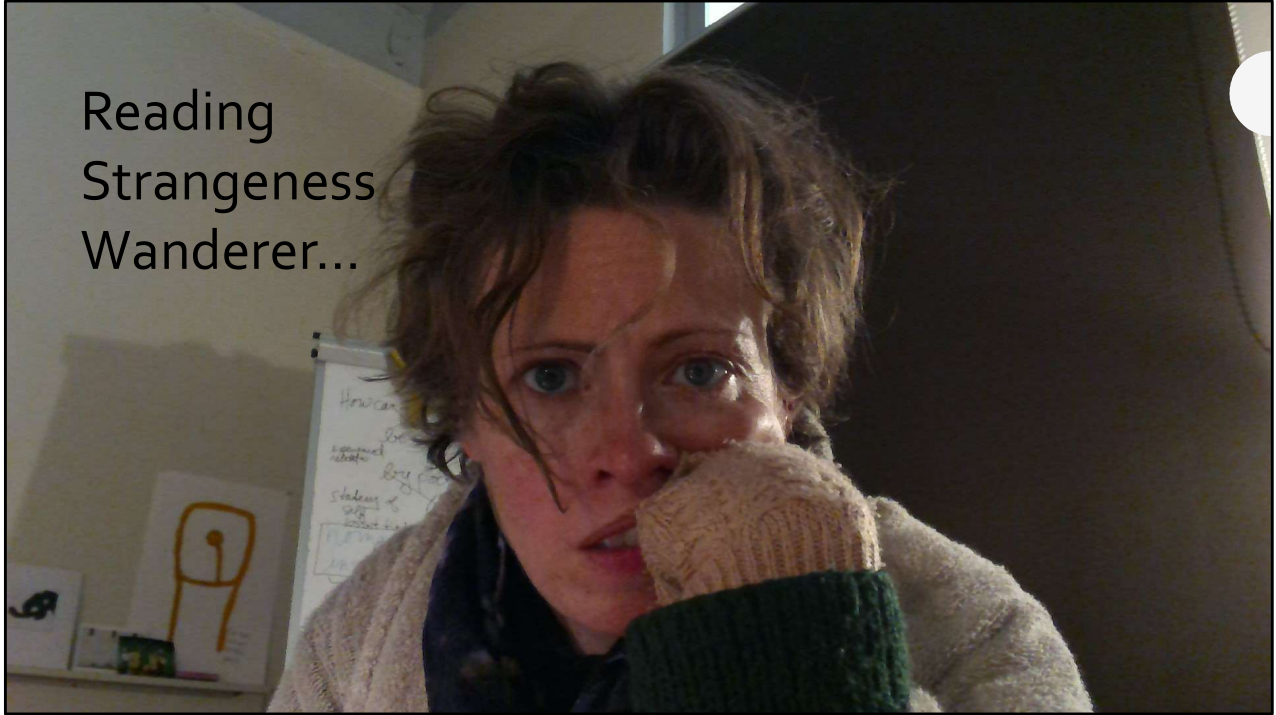
**[warrior/wanderer readers coming
up next]**

Reading
Strangeness
Warrior!



BUT WATCH OUT WITH READING STRANGENESS! YOU MIGHT END UP Like HIM!

Reading
Strangeness
Wanderer...



or like her...

Poetry in Translation

(when you don't read the original language)

1. Reading how you read

2. Setting up a “reading space” to
“transread” across multiple translations

With examples from the poetry of Paul Celan

What was also helpful in reading **C's strange poems** in tr, was the **sheer number of translations** available.

For several poems I was able to read the **work of 5 diff tr.**

And there are at least **12 other Eng lang transl'rs** I didn't have time to read.

But for the translations I did read, I came to call this sort of **reading across mult tr: transreading, which brings us to part II of this seminar**

"Trans-reading"

By way of a "reading space" in which to read across several different translations of the same poem

In Microsoft OneNote:

IN-THE-EYES-OR-IN-ETERNITY? not-too-inter MP

- start with metaphor flurry, could use spatially; ~~all over the page?~~ the raft tossed about by a commotion of ambiguity, I could even capsize, then get a skiff - tack, list

JORIS
Go blind today already:
eternity too is full of eyes--
wherein
drowns, what helped the images
over the path they came,
wherein HAMB
expires, what took you too ~~do~~ blind now, today:
eternity is also full of eyes--
language with a gesture
that you let happen like
the dance of two words of ~~the way they came,~~
autumn and silk and nothingness.

need to have already state ~~do not~~ what took down of language, ~~what helped images down / the way they came~~
absolute poem ~~is weaker but not contradictory~~

- Jo and H, mp later
- first half (add 2nd to rise) ~~place of two words made of autumn and silk and nothingness.~~

- p p
- comm
- further quote - recall image as once only
- Derr => pure poem
- helping the images over the path they came, clear, as at

Go blind at once, today:
eternity too is full of eyes--
what helped the images
overcome their coming
drowns there,
there the fire goes out of
what spirited you away from language
with a gesture you let happen
like the waltz of two words
made of pure fall, silk, and nothing.

- harder to read relative to Celan's own st
and language puzzled? how to represent
offshoots with question? flurry effect
o overcome their coming? stop move
only perception; again and again
toward a place never reached;
explain minimally to say that
pure poem doesn't apply here
rel to the utopia and suppos
not outside time of the abs-
images
how would an image overco
abs poem) - eyes, one physik
image one unique time; or a
encounter, as opposed to th
which all images are carried

1. So, transreading - what do I mean by this term?

simply, setting up a **reading space** in which to read **across several different translations** of the **same poem** and to situate the diff interpretations, by **reading into and around** the translations, **between and through** them

2. First let's look at setting up this kind of "reading space".

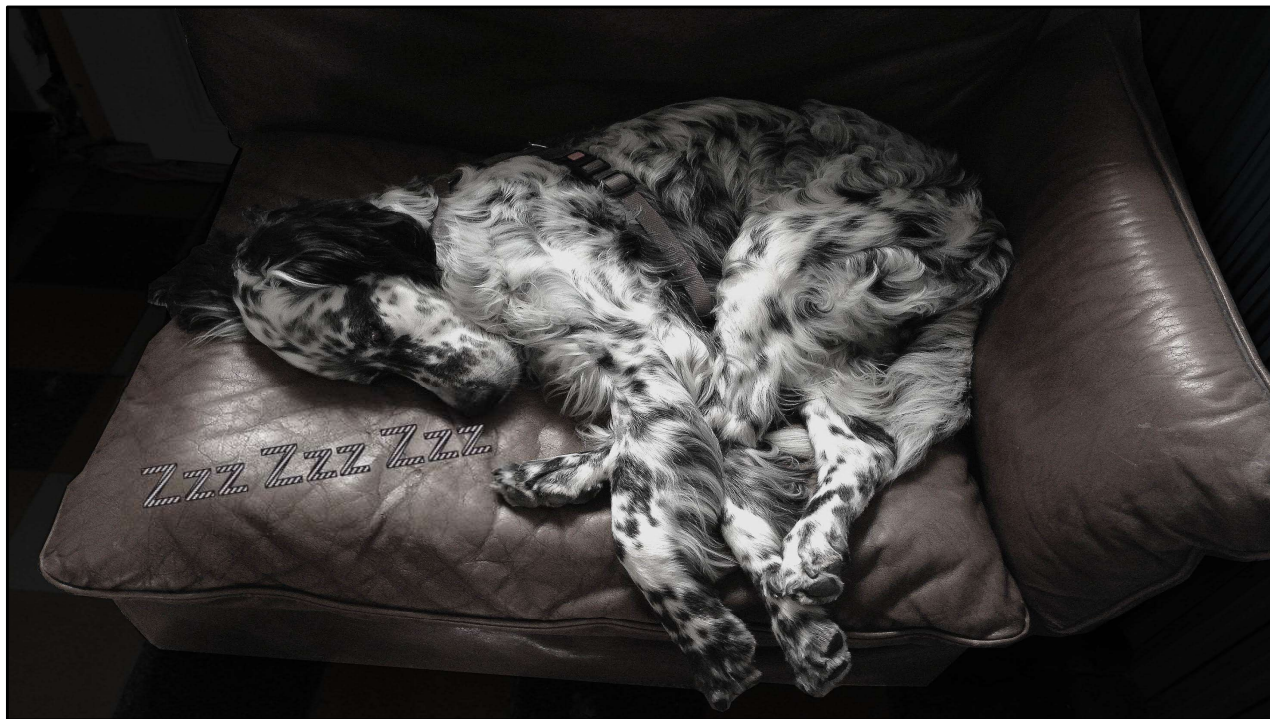
In practical terms: this is simply a space for **reading translations in parallel and for adding notes**

here's one of my "reading spaces" in **OneNote**, which is a note-taking app that lets you

expand **as far out horizontally and vertically** as you need to accommodate **the many translations, your ideas, etc.**

by the way, OneNote and many of the other note-taking apps out there offer a free version

3. the “reading space” is also to help us avoid those **binary value judgments** - we can get fancy with the words – *adore/abhor; fabulous/abysmal, etc etc...* - but binaries like these **always remain one-dimensional**



... and then they're just so boring that Monsieur Os is already asleep!

Trans -reading dynamics

- Points of convergence and divergence
- Complementarity of different translations
- Spatial terms
 - Overlap
 - Adjacency
 - Proximity
 - Distance
 - Outlier

the reading space, on the other hand, is a way to explore the various translations **differentially** and **spatially**

The **best way to transread** is to use the translations of at least **2 translators** across **several poems of the same poet** =>

so that you begin to see **patterns** => by which you can better understand a set of **interpretations** from different translators

"LANDSCAPE"
(LANDSCHAFT)

From Celan's 1967 collection *Atemwende*
(breathturn)

IN THREE
TRANSLATIONS

- Pierre Joris
- John Felstiner
- Michael Hamburger

that said, we only have time for **one Celan poem, in three translations**—those of John Felstiner, whom I mentioned earlier, and also Pierre Joris and Michael Hamburger

1. This poem is from Celan's collection entitled *Atemwende*, which can be translated as *breathturn*, as I mentioned earlier.

In the 3rd, this poem begins with the incipit "**Landscape**".

2. I chose this poem because these translations show some of the overall patterns that emerged as I read across several Celan translations by these 3 translators

3. we'll focus on specific points in the penultimate 4th stanza and the final 5th stanza

you **have three complete** translations in **handout**

4. First I'm going to read Joris's translation, stanza by stanza with commentary up to the fourth stanza.

*I'll start by humbly pointing out that there are **many other possible readings***, and that my reading is **less about each translation as as whole** and more about **looking at the translations differentially**

Joris Celan
[1st of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

1st stanza

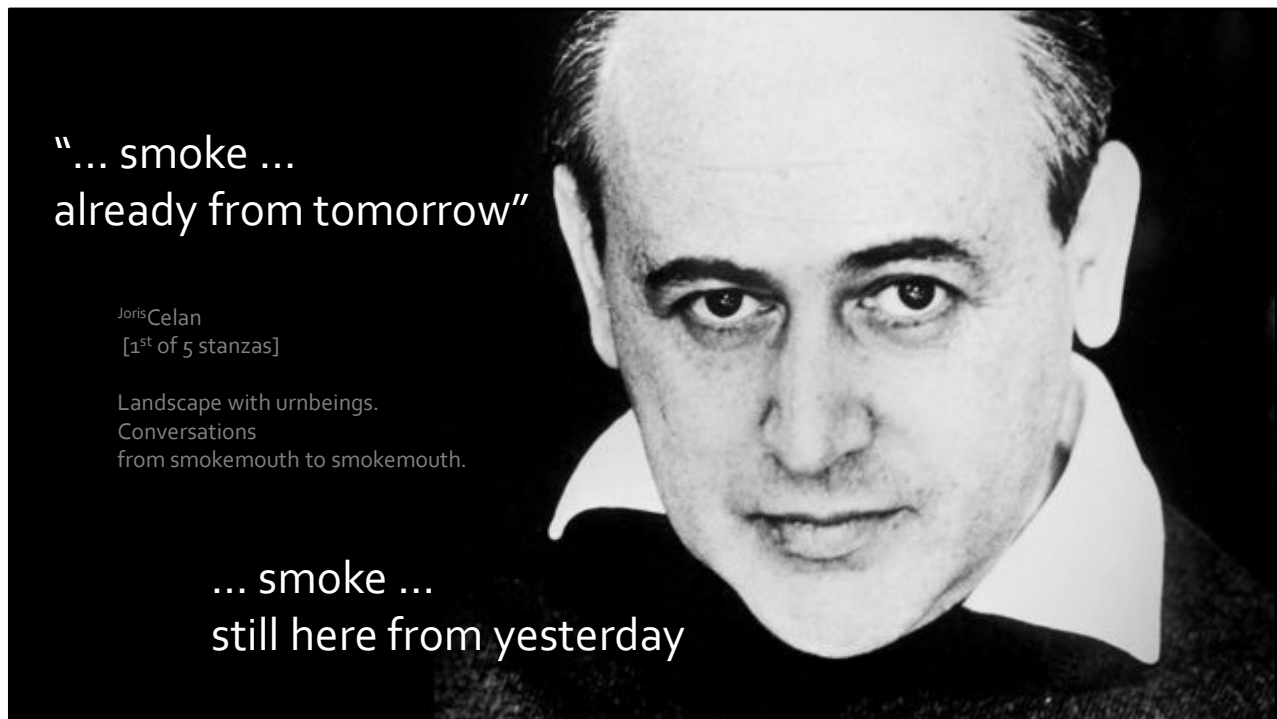
*LANDSCAPE with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.*

the smokemouths here recall **the Celan lines I referred to earlier**, evoking
Kristallnacht:

“you caught sight of some smoke / that was already from tomorrow”.

[distant gaze]

here, with the conversing smokemouths, we seem to **hear something of smoke that
mght still be here - from yesterday;**



that is, If we understand C's line, "that was already from tomorrow," as **pointing forward to the Holocaust**--which etymologically, means the "all-burning"—

[PAUSE AND SLOW DOWN]

then we might read the **ub** and **sm** in this first stanza as **all that remains of the millions of murdered human beings.**

Human beings to whom even their own deaths were denied, that is, a **death that lays the body to rest in the earth**, whereas incineration leaves nothing but **mouths of smoke and bodies in the form of urns**: it leaves nothing but smoke and ash.

[PAUSE]

Joris Celan
[2nd of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth. [read last line as a parallel to unburied po]

1. even though the **ub**, the **sm** seem to be part of a **landscape of the dead**, they are eating in this stanza, and **they are eating poetry**

more specifically the unburied po, **or truffle**, of a bedl
bedl derives from "Bedlam," **one of many names for what was once**
the Bethlehem insane asylum in London, so the **poet implied** here
appears to be a madman.

2. but, notice that his poetry is also **unburied**.

Perhaps this **unburied po of a madman** is a **po for the dead**, perhaps
specifically for those who have been **denied burial**, because the **ub**

and sm find in it “**tongue and tooth,**” -- perhaps the **bodiliness** they no longer possess,

3. and because they are eating this poetry, it may allow them to experience **some semblance of being alive.**

Joris Celan
[3rd of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

A tear rolls back into its eye. [NO NEED TO SCROLL]

1. Here we have what seems to be a **living eye, capable of tears, of emotion**, maybe even of finding **relief**. So this eye stands in **contrast to the beings of ash and smoke**.

The obvious q is: **Whose eye** is this? There are **probably many answers**, as is often the case in Celan, and with poetry in general. But we can still ask: Who might experience **relief** at this point in the poem?

2. if we return to the 2nd sz, we see that there is another **way to read the last three lines**.

the bedlamite's truffle, a piece / of unburied po, / found tongue and
tooth. (as a verb)

3. That is, it may be **the bedlamite's truffle, that has found tongue and tooth**.

Which suggests that this unburied **poetry of a madman has perhaps**

found a means of poetic expression in the tongue or language of the smokemouths.

Or we could say that the **mad poet himself**, perhaps **estranged** from society, **denied a voice**, has **found communion with the dead**. And thus **relief**.

4. And since, in the 3rd stanza, we've moved from **nourishment and the possibility of speech**, that is, from the mouth, tongue and tooth—to **the eye**, there is now the **possibility of witnessing**, which as I mentioned earlier, is one of the **primary enactments of C's poetry**.

5. We've arrived at the **fourth stanza**, and will look in a moment at the transl of **F** and **H** as well.

Joris Celan

[4th of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—
Listening to it illuminates the space:

First let's read 4th sz in its entirety, in J's translation

**The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—
Listening to it illuminates the space:**

Notice there's a complete thought [read],

**The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel**

Listening to it illuminates the space:

and then there's a parenthesis [read];

**—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—**

Next we notice in the parenthesis the use of **2nd person**. “They gave it to **you**, then they bound **you**.”

The beings we’ve identified in this poem are the **beings of smoke and ash and, implicitly, the mad poet**, so perhaps the most obvious reading here is that **these otherworldly beings have given something to the poet**, namely, the pilgrim-mussel

the **pilgrim-muss** (F and H refer to a pilgrim **shell**) calls to mind the **scallop shell that guides pilgrims along St. James’ Way**. So the shell of the beings of smoke and ash might serve to **guide the poet on a pilgrimage or journey**

But this is specifically the **“left, orphaned half”** of the shell; suggesting loss, and perhaps even **lostness**, by contrast to **guidance**.

In J’s translation, the poet is told that they **gave him this strange shell**; and also that **they bound him**, but in what sense?

Was he **morally bound** to the beings of smoke and ash, to **do something** for them, or perhaps **on their behalf**?

Or, we might imagine that the poet is **physically bound**, but if he’s to set out on a pilgrim, as the shell suggests, why would he be constrained in this way?

Joris Celan
[4th of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—
Listening to it illuminates the space:

Felstiner Celan

The orphaned left
half of the pilgrim
shell — they gave you it,
then trussed you up —

To **look further** into this question, here is **F's tr** of the **first 4 lines** of this stanza.

The orphaned left
half of the pilgrim
shell — they **gave you it**,
then trussed you up —

“trussed up” in contrast to **“bound”** **doesn't denote oblig**, duty or responsib
and while it can be use to indicate that someone or something has
been **phy bound or constrained**,
it can also denote the action of **securing, clothing, or
supporting**

so here it seems more likely that the beings of smk and ash are
preparing the poet for a **pilgrimage or journey** of some kind.

Joris Celan
[4th of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—
Listening to it illuminates the space:

Felstiner Celan

The orphaned left
half of the pilgrim
shell — they gave you it,
then trussed you up —

Hamburger Celan

The left-hand, orphaned
half of the pilgrim's
shell — they gave it to you,
then they fettered you—

Let's look at H's transl at this point [read parenthesis

— they gave it to you,
then they fettered you—

H's choice of **"fettered"** where J and F use "bound" and "trussed up" implies a **much greater degree of constraint**, as the primary meaning of **fetter** is to **shackle**, or to confine the legs or arms so as to prevent free motion.

Clearly, the poet didn't have much of a **choice** in what was happening to him, **nor does it seem likely** that he'll be able to undertake **any sort of pilgrimage or journey**.

Joris Celan
[4th of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—
Listening to it illuminates the space:

Felstiner Celan

The orphaned left
half of the pilgrim
shell — they gave you it,
then trussed you up —

Hamburger Celan

The left-hand, orphaned
half of the pilgrim's
shell — they gave it to you,
then they fettered you—
listening, floodlights the scene:

Let's move on to the last line, in the **context of the entire 4th stanza**.

First, if we read H's tr without the parenthesis —

The left-hand, orphaned
half of the pilgrim's
shell
listening, floodlights the scene

it's clear that **the pilgrim shell is listening, perhaps the ubeings** as well
And it seems that this act of **listening** casts an **intense beam of light**.

Specifically, **"floodlights"** and **"scene"**
suggest **suddenness and starkness**.

Joris Celan
[4th of 5 stanzas]

Landscape with urnbeings.
Conversations
from smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:
the bedlamite's truffle, a piece
of unburied poetry,
found tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye.

The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—

Listening to it illuminates the space:

Felstiner Celan

The orphaned left
half of the pilgrim
shell — they gave you it,
then trussed you up —

illumines the space and listens:

Hamburger Celan

The left-hand, orphaned
half of the pilgrim's
shell — they gave it to you,
then they fettered you—

listening, floodlights the scene:

1. When we look at the same line in **J** and **F**, we have the words “**space**,” “**illuminates**,” and “**illumines**,” which don’t suggest suddenness or starkness; they’re **more neutral** and may even suggest **benevolence**.

2. notice also that **J** **diverges from H and F**, in that the pilgrim shell or mussel is *listened to*: “*listening to it [that is, the pilgrim shell] illuminates the space.*”
(~~WRITE ON SLIDE~~)

This implies that **some degree of choice remains** to the poet: that is, whether or not to **listen to the pilgrim shell**, and thus, whether or not **the space will be illuminated**

3. The 5th and final stanza of this poem is **identical** in three translations, as we’ll see in a moment

but it seems to **occur in a space** that is **illuminated or revealed** in **J and F** whereas in **H**, it seems to take place on a **stage, drowned with light**, perhaps as some sort of a **spectacle** made **suddenly, starkly** apparent.

4. Recall that in **the third sz**, we identified the possibility of witnessing; here we might say that **each translation** creates **A DIFF PLACE OF WITNESSING** for what happens at the end of the poem

5. so that even though the **convergence of the 3 tr** in the final stanza suggests that **the same thing is witnessed**, the **way in which the witnessing happens** in each translation is **divergent**. [WRITE ON SLIDE CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE – end of the poem]

That is, each translation suggests **its own interpretation**.

Joris Celan

The left, orphaned
half of the pilgrim-
mussel—they gave it to you,
then they bound you—
Listening to it illuminates the space:

the clinker game against death
can begin.

Hamburger Celan

The left-hand, orphaned
half of the pilgrim's
shell — they gave it to you,
then they fettered you—
listening, floodlights the scene:

the clinker game against death
can begin.

Felstiner Celan

The orphaned left
half of the pilgrim
shell — they gave you it,
then trussed you up —
illuminates the space and listens:

the clinker game against death
can begin.

[final 4th and 5th
stanzas]

"clinker": from the German *Klinkers*, a name for marbles used in games

1. Here, then, are the **final 2 stanzas of the 3 translations**, each ending with the lines:

the clinker game against death / can begin

2. Because this is a **game against death**, it can be understood as **life itself**; just as the **pilgrimage**, from the previous stanza, can be understood as **life's journey**.

3. A pilgrimage may offer some degree of **choice**--remember that J suggests the poet **can decide to** illuminate the space **by listening** to the pilgrim shell, or not--but a pilgrimage often entails **uncertainties and dangers** as well.

4. As for a **game against death**, some **choice** may be involved, but much depends on **chance**, and of course, **death inevitably wins in the end**

[PAUSE]

5. We might say that J's and F's tr are **adjacent, and complementary**. [WRITE ON SLIDE]

J offers the poet some **choice in whether witnessing happens**, and F suggests that the poet is in some way **prepared or outfitted** for life as a

journey or game

in this way, the poet's **relationship with the dead** may expose him to **harsh reality**, but he can still **draw freely on the illumination of the dead**, or count **on their support**

6. H's tr, on the other hand, suggests a **contradistinct interpretation**. [WRITE ON SLIDE, a contra-dist interp, off by itself, opposed in some ways to J and F]

Ham's poet is fettered, even **shackled**, and by the pilgrim shell's listening, and presumably the ubeings's listening: **a scene is drowned in light**:

that is, a scene of the absurd, **life-and-death spectacle** that ends exactly the same way, every single time – something that is both **stark and inescapable**.

How can the p, **fettered as he is** by his relationship with the beings of smoke and ash, possibly get away from witnessing this **merciless game**?

*"A translation can only communicate an **interpretation**,
never the source text itself
or some form or meaning believed to be inherent in it."*

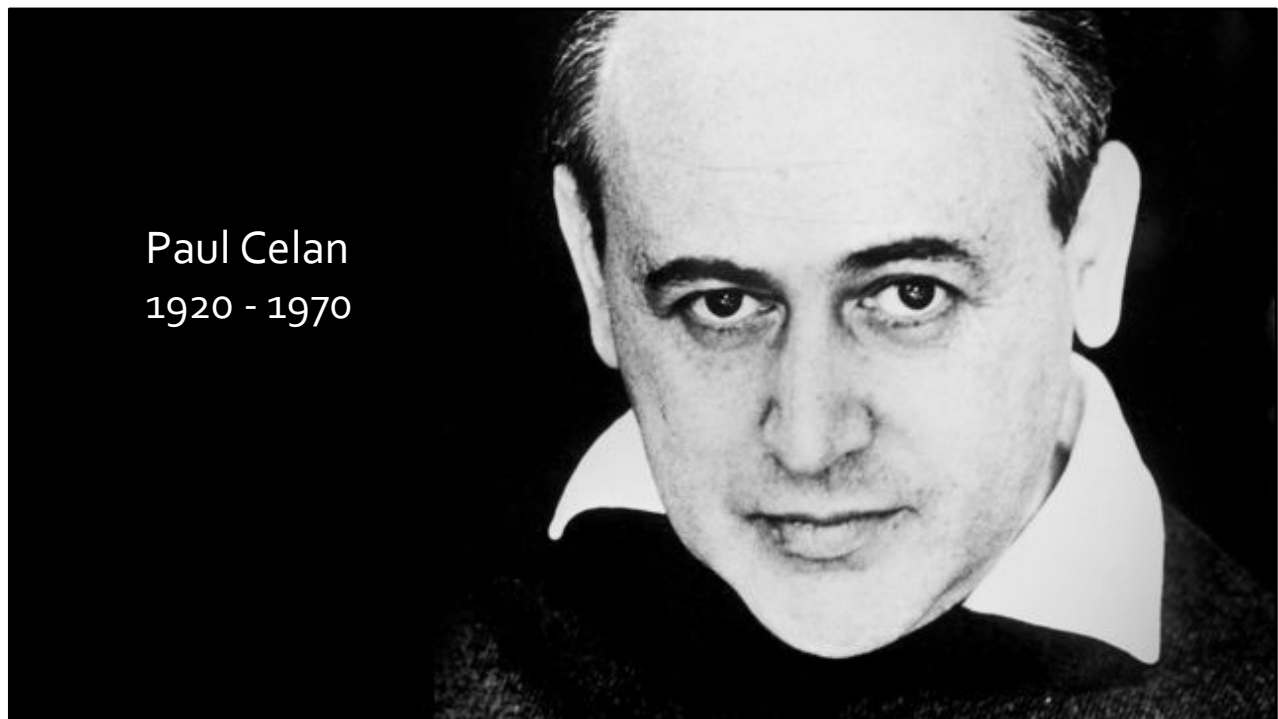
*"Translation involves **violence**."*

(LAWRENCE VENUTI, TRANSLATION CHANGES EVERYTHING)

If we accept **Venuti's argument** that a translation can never convey **the meaning** of the source text, only the translator's **interpretation**, then we can't at this point say anything specific about C's German poem.

Nonetheless the **diversity of the interpretations** that this Celan poem gives rise to suggests it has **great semantic density, complexity, ambiguity, even contradiction**, especially in the **penultimate 4th stanza**.

*This is **knowledge** we gain through **transreading**; we wouldn't have been aware of it **had we read only one** of these translations, one of these interpretations.*



1. I've found that in other Celan poems **evoking madness**, and there are quite a few, H's translations tend to have a **sharper edge of pessimism, danger, and darkness**. H was the **only one** of these 3 and of **most Eng-lang tr**, to have **known C personally**.

As he indicated in his **many essays on translating C's work**,
Hamburger believed that C's *own madness was destructive and drove him to suicide*.

C was in fact **repeatedly hospitalized in psychiatric facilities** toward the end of his life, often for months at a time.
But, not all C translators AND scholars see his madness as **unambiguously destructive**.

2. It's worth noting that the two collections that followed *Atemwende*, *Threadsun* and *Lightduress* in J's title tr, were **composed almost entirely during C's hospitalizations**.

3. I mention this to highlight the fact that **issues as complex as madness**, and also simpler points like **word choice**, make translation a **complex art-- even a strange art**,

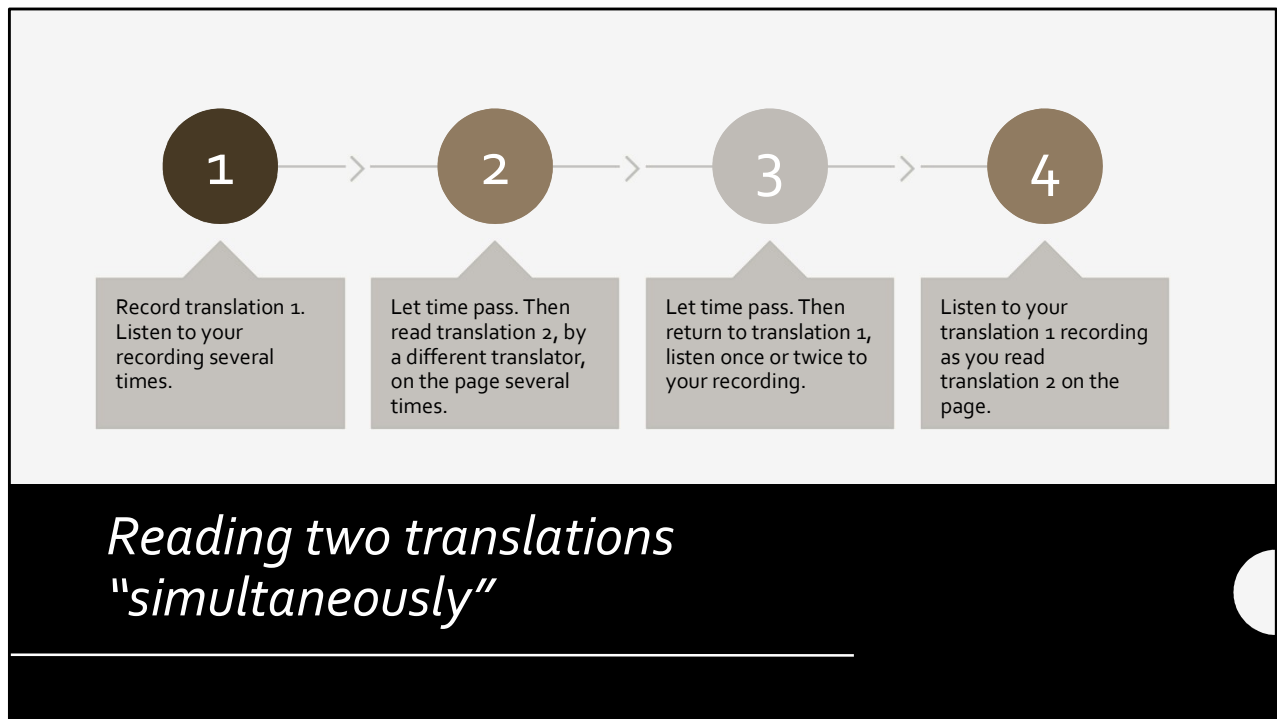
one, in any case, that leads to **interpretations** which **overlap, diverge, converge, and contradict and complement** each other in diverse ways, in instructive ways



The **last thing** I'd like to leave you with:
is a **tech for reading** two diff tr, simult—or almost
you'll find the notes on this in the handout

this technique is based on the **methods** of the translators Richard Pevar and **Larissa Volonkhonsky** -- (who are acclaimed retranslators of Dostoyevsky and other Russ authors)
at the end of their collaborative process, as one reads the **translated English aloud**, the other **silently reads the original Russian on the page**

so this is almost like **reading two texts at once**
for these translators, the original and the translation
for us - two diff transl of same poem –



So, here are the **4 steps for “simultaneously” reading two translations**

Step 1. Record yourself reading translation 1, you might use your cell phone
translation 1 is the translation you’re most familiar with, that you’ve already read several times on the page
once you make your recording, you’ll want to listen to it several times; this will be helpful for the next steps

Step 2. Let time pass: a few hours, a few days – Then read translation 2, by a different translator, on the page several times

Step 3 is a short step. After you’ve let some time pass again, return to translation 1 and listen once or twice to the recording

Step 4. (as I’m sure you’ve already surmised) now you listen to translation 1 as you read translation 2 silently on page

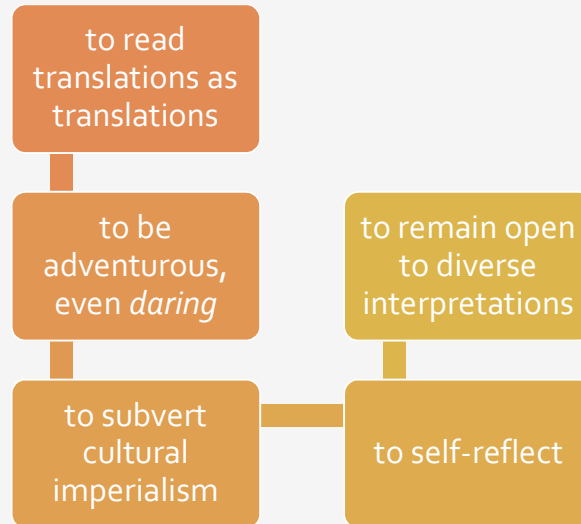
This sort of listening-reading will feel odd at first - that’s why you **familiarize** yourself with the 2 translations, **beforehand and separately**

After getting used to listening-reading – you may **notice**

new things about both translations
and you can, of course, **switch** the texts, recording translation 2 and listening
to it as you read translation 1 silently on the page

In any case, this is a technique that works best with **longer poems**

Why read poetry in translation:



In conclusion,

if we want to be **adventurous** in reading poetry in tr, we won't always know the original language, but being **daring** in this respect is a small, but real way to **take a bite out of cult imperialism**.

I've tried to show you today how **translations on their own** offer a rich reading experience, and may even make you a better reader!

They are at least a **lens for learning about the lens through which we read poetry**

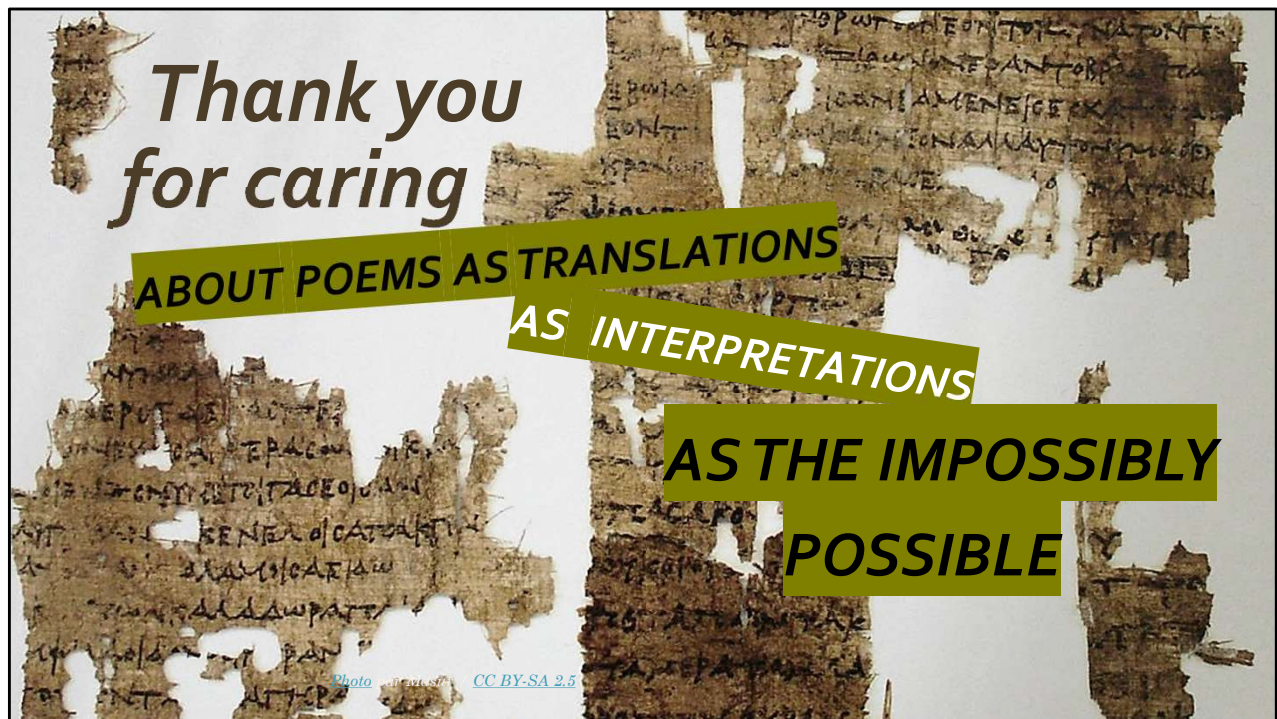
and when multiple translations exist and transreading is possible, we can get a sense of the **density, the multiplicity of meanings** in the original, if **not the meanings themselves**.

Remember: the translated poem is not the original poem; **it is a poem**
and a tr, and should be valued as such.



*Merci
Monsieur
Os!*

A Quick Thank You to Monsieur Os [clap absurdly]



And thank you all for coming and for caring about poetry in translation.

I'll take any questions that you have now.

And I have a few books of C's po in translation here if anyone wants to take a look