

2012 Hohendahl Graduate Essay Prize in Critical Theory

“Weltverlorenheit: Lyrical Ontology, Poetic Translation, and the Passive Voice of Extinction”

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“This paper explores the ethics of translation through the work of Paul Celan, specifically in the poem ‘Große glühende Wölbung.’ Extending and challenging the readings of Celan’s critics as well as his translators, who have tended to reduce Celan’s poetic methodology to gnomic and agonized hermeticism, this paper excavates neglected layers of deep historical and mythic allusion at work in this poem. By way of his excavation, I theorize Celan’s poetics of infralinguistic translation as offering a historically salient alternative to modes of lyric interiority. Through tropes of extinction and apocalypse, Celan’s ethics of translation not only challenge anthropocentric ontologies; they also offer, in their place, a newly apostrophic structure of relation. This post-lyrical apostrophe locates the living as mutually in correspondence with the dead, an encounter occasioned by what I call an ethics of worldlessness immanent in the practice of translation.”