

# Severly Affected

By Subroto Saha

Translated from the German by Bradley Schmidt

‘Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland’.<sup>1</sup> [‘Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland’] Paul Celan’s *Death Fugue* was written in 1945 – which origin does this master have today? What strange silent war are we exposed to today, behind our protective masks? A line from Celan’s poem *Corona* reads: ‘It’s time it came time./It is time.’<sup>2</sup> [‘Es ist Zeit, dass es Zeit wird./ Es ist Zeit.’]. I was occupied with the new translation of these texts when the pandemic broke out. Lines like ‘This is the eye of the times:/it looks out slant/under a seven-colour brow./Its lid is bathed in flames,/its tear is steam.’<sup>3</sup> [‘Dies ist das Auge der Zeit:/es blickt scheel/unter siebenfarbener Braue./Sein Lid wird von Feuern gewaschen,/seine Träne ist Dampf’] or ‘Look around:/see how things all come alive—/By death! Alive!/Speaks true who speaks shadow.’<sup>4</sup> [‘Blicke umher:/sieh, wie’s lebendig wird rings -/Beim Tode! Lebendig!/Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht.’] And the poetic answer ‘The word about going-to-the depths/that we once read./The years, the words since then./We’re still just that.’<sup>5</sup> [‘Das Wort vom ZUR-TIEFE-GEHN,/dass wir gelesen haben./Die Jahre, die Worte seither./Wir sind es noch immer’]. They demand both empathy and distance in equal measure.

At the same time, there are difficulties approaching Thomas Melle’s *The World at Your Back* [Die Welt im Rücken] – a long overdue, repeatedly interrupted translation whose subject matter revolves around the author’s bipolar disorder (‘when the neurons fire out of control’), which strongly affects me as a highly sensitive person. The work means long days in front of a screen, parallel to the lockdown with all its knock-on effects. Images of the exodus of migrant workers, tired to death, traveling the roads and the rails of this country are spread across the world, then the natural catastrophe in May: the second-strongest cyclone since 1833 rages over Kolkata, where Henry Piddington, ‘one of the first Cassandras of climate science’ coined the term *cyclone* in 1848. Translating under these omens only succeeds with psychological distance. Occasionally with escape as well. After the typhoon has passed, I stand amid uprooted trees and demolished bookstalls in the city centre. Then I think of Celan again: ‘Yet,/yet it shoot up, that tree. It,/it too/stands against/the Plague.’<sup>6</sup> [‘Aber,/aber er bäumt sich, der Baum. Er,/auch er/steht gegen/die Pest’]. Are any of the trees here taking a stand against the Corona pandemic?

I am sent recommendations for a translation project that has contemporary drama as its focus, including *Versetzung* by Melle. Again, the same hard material. *The World at My Back* calls out to me: keep your hands off it now! Jelinek’s refugee play *Die Schutzbefohlenen* is also included. The ‘Identitarians’ stormed the stage at its production in Vienna. Here as well, the topics of this play are part of daily reality – but can this linguistic work of art with its complex prose monologues appeal to the local audience? Would people be able to draw a connection between the characters portrayed and ‘real life’ or our Indian present day? What would happen then? Would we have to expect protests like those of the Identitarians, or even consequences from the autocratic government? Plenty of things have been stormed or banned here lately. For example, a performance of *Draupadi* by Mahashweta Devi, books like *One Part Woman*

by the Tamil author Perumal Murugan, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *Walking with the Comrades* by Arundhati Roy. What or who doesn't fit into the national narrative is denounced as 'anti-national' and is supposed to disappear. In his acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Amartya Sen recently spoke of the worldwide 'pandemic of authoritarianism'. We can tell you a thing or two about that in India as well. In the end, my theater selections end up being Schimmelpfennig's *Ewige Maria* and *Die Vier Himmelsrichtungen*.

I recall early *Berührungsängsten* while translating an open letter from Elfriede Jelinek to Taslima Nasrin. The author was threatened with death by religious fundamentalists in her native Bangladesh for her novel *Shame* and her attitudes toward religion and feminism. She had to leave the country in 1994. Wide distribution of Jelinek's translated text was risky at the time, but nothing happened. I had the most to overcome while working on Josef Winkler's 'Julius Meinl oder Leichenschleifen in Benares.' The artistically expansive, exceedingly visual descriptions of the cremation sites on the Ganges tormented me to such an extent that I often had to flee my desk, burdened with worries of how Bengali readers would receive this work by an author from a foreign culture. Winkler writes that death and life merge in this country. I, on the other hand, counter with Nietzsche's proverb on sunrise, for which he translated from the Rigveda: *There are so many sunrises that have not yet dawned*.

## Endnoten

- 1 Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner. New York 2001, 33.
- 2 Ibid., 29.
- 3 Paul Celan, *Paul Celan: Eye of the Times*, trans. Jean Boase-Beier. Todmorden, 2021, 7.
- 4 Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner. New York 2001, 77.
- 5 Ibid., 163.
- 6 Ibid., 137



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