

**Paul Celan & Leicester Kyle:  
The Zone & the Plateau**

**Jack Ross**

**1 – Airlifting Paul Celan**

Perhaps the greatest risk for the reading of Celan in our time is that we have venerated him ... crippling exceptionalism has made his work a symbol of his fate rather than an active matrix for an ongoing poetic practice.

– Charles Bernstein (2004)

Charles Bernstein's remark, above, inspires one to ask precisely *how* Paul Celan's work can be made the "active matrix for an ongoing poetic practice" – by which I presume Bernstein means to imply a practice aware of and responsive to contemporary historical and political events and ideologies?

- One such application of his work might be on the biographical or personal level:

In her launch speech for my book *Celanie: Poems & Drawings after Paul Celan* (2012), New Zealand poet Michele Leggott talked of the idea of "airlifting" material from one cultural matrix into another – in this case, a kind of Berlin airlift of German poems by a Central European writer, attached, with extensive annotations, to the letters he wrote to his Francophone wife, and subsequently transplanted (by me) into Antipodean English.

Leggott justified this procedure in terms of the human identification we can all feel with the tragic love-story of Paul and his wife, artist Gisèle Celan-Lestrange:

Small masterpieces of language hooked up to lives ... this is what I'm hearing in Jack's rendition of the poems in the letters written to Gisèle Celan-Lestrange.  
(Leggott)

This essentially emotional reading of my book of translations from Celan's German (via French) is strengthened by the presence, in *Celanie*, of a series of intensely expressive artworks by another artist, Aucklander Emma Smith, each focussing on a different view of a flayed horse's skull.

- Then, of course, there are the more characteristically technical aspects of Celan's writing: his idiosyncratic neologisms and deliberately broken syntax:

In a recent review of expatriate Māori poet Vaughan Rapatahana, critic Scott Hamilton cited *Celanie* as evidence for his contention that these aspects of Celan's work offer an ideal model for the literary consequences of Rapatahana's own hostility towards the English language, and his anxiety at retaining it as his principal medium of expression, despite its inevitable colonial overtones:

The famous obscurity of Celan's poems comes partly from his mistrust of the language in which they were written. Celan had a fuming desire to write ... At the same time, he feared that by setting down words and lines and stanzas in a contaminated language he was falsifying or dishonouring his experiences, and the experiences of his people. Celan was like a man lost in a desert who came across a pool of filthy water. He had to drink, but feared that the deep, desperate draughts he took might kill him. To read the poems in *Celanie*, with their gnomic images, oxymoronic maxims, strange neologisms, and dizzily sudden line-breaks, is to see Celan both slaking his thirst and sickening himself. (Hamilton)

- While not wishing to dispute (or supplant) either of these interpretations, I'd like in this essay to suggest a third, environmental or eco-poetic approach to using Celan's work as the "active matrix for an ongoing poetic practice."

The key lies in the word "Celanie," which Emma and I chose for our title after discovering it in the introduction to the French edition of Paul and Gisèle's collected correspondence. The editor, Bertrand Badiou, explains the term as follows:

Reading these letters doubled with poems is also to delimit the space where Celan habitually deployed his language, and which he referred to – not entirely seriously – as his "Celanie": the Rue des Ecoles, the Rue de Lota, the Rue de Montevideo, the Rue de Longchamp, the Rue d'Ulm, the Rue Cabanis ..., the Rue Tournefort and Avenue Emile Zola. Around this space exists another one, not much larger, which included the towns of Moisville, Epinay-sur-Seine, Le Vésinet, Suresnes and Epinay-sur-Orge. Celan chose to include almost all of these place-names on the manuscripts of his poems, like guarantees on their first dated and "unalterable" versions, as well as on quite a number of his own annotated books, thus – in a sense – annexing them to the world of his writing. (Badiou & Celan, 2:10)<sup>1</sup>

While I was careful to quote this passage in the introduction to our book, I neglected to unpack many of its implications there beyond saying that we liked "to think of these images, accompanied by English versions from his German-French dual-text poems, as a kind of 'Celanie' – our own take on that particular region of the imagination which can only be accessed through Celan's strange, bleak, wintry words." I concluded by saying that we hoped to inspire others:

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<sup>1</sup> *Lire ces lettres doublées de poèmes, c'est aussi mesurer l'espace où Celan pratique habituellement sa langue et qu'il appelait parfois, non sans humour, sa «Celanie»: la rue des Ecoles, la rue de Lota, la rue de Montevideo, la rue de Longchamp, la rue d'Ulm, la rue Cabanis ..., la rue Tournefort et l'avenue Emile Zola. Autour de cet espace en existe un autre, à peine plus vaste, incluant Moisville, Epinay-sur-Seine, Le Vésinet, Suresnes et Epinay-sur-Orge. Celan a choisi de faire figurer presque tous ces noms de lieu sur les manuscrits de ses poèmes, comme des prolongements de leur premières version datée et «inaltérée», ainsi que sur nombre de ses livres annotés, les annexant de la sorte à son écriture. [Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this essay are by the author].*

to put on record their own “Celianie”: their own individual understandings of the world of one of our age’s most individual and troubling poets. (Ross & Smith, 15)

I’m not sure, now, that that’s an adequate way to characterise Celan’s own usage “*non sans humour*” [not without humour] of the word “Celianie.” For him, it was clearly more of a place of refuge from the cold inhuman landscapes of his imagination, of the history he had himself experienced, than one of the actual provinces of that poetry.

Perhaps it was not even a place of refuge: an eyrie, rather – a place of power, of sustenance, which he could return to after his excursions, short or long, into that inimical world of the death-camp and the bureaucracies of terror.

Take, for example, the very last poem he sent Gisèle (in a letter dated 18 March 1970, a scant month before his death): “*Es wird etwas sein, später*”

There

will be something, later,  
that fills itself with you  
and lifts itself  
to a mouth

From my shattered  
mind  
I stand up  
and watch my hand  
tracing the one  
unique  
circle <sup>2</sup>

Is it wrong to see this traced “*Kreis*” [circle], familiar from magic and necromancy, as somehow related to the “*l’espace*” [the space] of Parisian streets he frequented, the little *quartier* that gave him a base, a place to stand, encircled as it was (in its turn) by the little towns he had visited and stayed in so often with Gisèle and their son Eric?

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<sup>2</sup> *Es wird etwas sein, später,  
das füllt sich mit dir  
und hebt sich  
an einen Mund*

*Aus dem zerscherbten  
Wahn  
steh ich auf  
und seh meiner Hand zu,  
wie sie den einen  
einzigem  
Kreis zieht*

13.XII.69  
Avenue Emile Zola  
(Celan, 363-64).

In a much earlier poem, “*Plage du Toulinguet*”, dated Autumn 1954, Celan wrote:

The Beach at Toulinguet

What we saw is coming now  
to say goodbye to you and me:  
the sea, which tossed our nights on shore  
the sand, which kept them by our sides  
the rust-red heather above  
in which the world happened to us<sup>3</sup>

The equation here between the emotional comfort given by Gisèle (at this early stage in their relationship, at any rate) and an essentially anthropomorphic view of natural phenomena is explicit. Pathetic fallacy or not, Celan’s imagery seemed firmly grounded – at that point – in the romantic sexual iconography of sea and shore.

The tone of these topographical descriptions grows more desperate and frenzied later, culminating in his famous image, in the late sequence “Black Toll” [*Schwarzmaut*], which Gisele illustrated for him, of “the remnants of hearing and sight / in Dormitory 1001,” where:

daily all night  
the bears polka<sup>4</sup>

Is that a better way to think of a “Celianie,” then: as a littoral, a zone, the place where opposites meet? In Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker*, when the Writer, the Professor and their guide, Stalker, finally enter the *Zona* [Zone] which the aliens once visited, then abandoned, leaving behind the remains of their “Roadside Picnic” (the title of the Strugatsky novel the film was based on), the filmstock shifts from black and white to colour.

The emotional truth of the film, one should note, however, lies in the *return* of these three to their real world of responsibilities: to the crippled child of Stalker, above all, who has been waiting patiently with her mother for the idealist’s return.

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<sup>3</sup> *Versammelt ist, was wir sahen,  
zum Abschied von dir und von mir:  
das Meer, das uns Nächte an Land warf,  
der Sand, der sie mit uns durchflogen,  
das rostrote Heidekraut droben,  
darin die Welt uns geschah.*

[*automne 1954*]  
(Celan, 69).

<sup>4</sup> *HÖRRESTE, SEHRESTE im  
Schlafsaal eintausendund eins,*

*tagnächtlich  
die Bären-Polka*

...  
[*Paris, 9. 6. 1967*]  
(Celan, 275).

There's an undoubted excitement, momentousness, in the vertiginous dangers of the Zone. In the end, though, none of the three is prepared to enter the final chamber where wishes can (allegedly) come true: Stalker because he sees the truth of his role solely in acting as a guide to others; the Writer because he is, essentially, an observer rather than an actor; the Professor because he has finally rejected his and his colleagues' plan to destroy this "unscientific" haven of false hopes.

Similarly, for Celan, neither domesticity nor the extremes of memory (not to mention the constant reminders of entrenched Nazism and anti-Semitism in his trips to and fro to his only true "audience" in Germany) could ever finally satisfy him. It was in the alternation between them that he found his semblance of balance, of normality – the balance asserted again and again in the poems he sent back from this "front" in letters to his wife:

The bright

stones go up in the air  
clear, white, light-  
shards

They don't want  
to fall back, touch,  
hit

They go up  
blossoming  
like wild flowers  
then, closing, fall  
on you  
my light  
my truth

I look at you  
you take them from my hands  
you put them back into  
the light, which no-one needs  
to own or name  
(Ross & Smith, 33)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Die hellen  
Steine gehn durch der Luft, die hell-  
weißen, die Licht-  
bringer.*

*Sie wollen  
nicht niedergehen, nicht stürzen,  
nicht treffen. Sie gehen  
auf,  
wie die geringen  
Heckenrosen, so tun sie sich auf,  
sie schweben  
dir zu, du meine Leise,  
du meine Wahre –:*

*ich seh dich, du pflückst sie mit meinen*

Those of us to whom history has had somewhat gentler lessons to impart might still be able to benefit in various ways from this poetic enactment of the *fort-da* game. Perhaps, as Freud conjectured, this childish throwing out and pulling back of a toy does represent an underlying pattern which speaks to other activities: not so much a warding-off as an acknowledgment of our powerlessness before death.

In any case, I think it must be in this sense that we take Celan as our guide into the Zone, avoiding the “crippling exceptionalism” of Holocaust-guilt which renders his experiences in the Second World War and afterwards as literally unimaginable to those of us who come after.

The word *Kreis* which I quoted above, the magic circle Celan hoped in his very last poems to trace around himself and Gisèle, inevitably recalls Bert Brecht – and his various collaborators<sup>6</sup> – *Kaukasische Kreidekreis* [Caucasian chalk circle], In Brecht’s play, however, the chalk circle is a place of judgement, where the true, biological mother proves less devoted to her own child than the servant girl who saved him, and who has raised him as her own. Unconditional love proves stronger than natural maternal instincts, in a direct inversion of the “Judgement of Solomon” motif so familiar from folklore.

## 2 – The Poetics of the Denniston Plateau

In May 2013, Nick Smith, the Minister for Conservation, announced his approval of Australian company Bathurst Resources’ bid to strip-mine a large tract of the Buller Plateaux, on the upper West Coast of New Zealand’s South Island, for coal:

He said the area was not a National Park or a Conservation Park and did not have any particular reserve status.

"It is general stewardship land, which is the lowest legal status of protection of land managed by the Department of Conservation." (Bradley)

A few days later it was revealed that not only had Smith ignored the advice of environmental networks, but also that of the officials in his own Department in making this decision (Lunn). Despite a partially successful appeal to the High Court by environmental group Forest and Bird, the latest news from the Supreme Court (19/9/13) confirms that Smith’s original decision will be upheld.

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*neuen, meinen  
Jedermannshänden, du tust sie  
ins Helle, das niemand  
zu weinen braucht noch zu nennen.*

10.7.1961.  
*Trébabu*  
23 Uhr.  
(Celan, 147).

<sup>6</sup> For further details on the complicated genesis of this play, adapted from Klabund’s 1925 *Der Kreidekreis* in 1941 principally by Margarete Steffin, then worked on again in 1944 by Brecht and Ruth Berlau, see Fuegi, 445-46.

But what has any of that got to do with poetry, or (for that matter) with Paul Celan, the subject of the first section of this essay?

I suppose that my own involvement with the struggle to preserve the unique eco-system of this region of New Zealand comes courtesy of my friendship with another, somewhat gentler poet, Leicester Kyle (1937-2006), some twenty years younger than Paul Celan (1920-1970) – brought up on the Coast, but born in what seemed (until recently) the much stabler flatland landscape of Christchurch.

In a reflection piece on the proposed mining of the Denniston Plateau in *New Zealand Geographic* magazine, Editor-at-large Kennedy Warne remarked:

... for me, standing on the escarpment, it is Kyle who catches the breath of this place and warns of the impending silence – just as he did for Happy Valley, the contentious Solid Energy mining site near Stockton. In his lament for that landscape, he spoke of the birds, writing poignantly: “they have no song for apocalypse”.

He continues:

To what extent, I wonder, did John Hanlon’s song “Damn the Dam”, which topped the singles chart for 1973, help tip the balance against the raising of Lake Manapouri? Did Grahame Sydney’s paintings and Brian Turner’s poems celebrating Central Otago landscapes influence public perception of a wind farm proposal for the Lammermoor Range? [*NZ Geographic* 122 (July-August, 2013): 114].

He speculates, finally: “Isn’t a listing in Schedule 4 – the statutory register of the country’s most valuable conservation land – the highest protection our environment can have? In one sense, yes. But statutes change, reflecting shifts in social priorities. Perhaps a shared cultural esteem offers a more resilient protection than laws ever can.” This is indeed (as he puts it) “an intriguing thought.”

As one of Leicester Kyle’s two literary executors, and the person mainly responsible for making his collected works – protest poetry and more lyrical works alike – available on the Internet, it’s a thought which has had quite an influence on my actions over the past few years.

Beyond Kennedy Warne’s two articles in *NZ Geographic* – the one I’ve just quoted from, and a longer piece, “The Black and the Green” [issue 116 (July-August, 2012): 48-79] – is there any evidence that works such as Leicester’s *The Great Buller Coal Plateaux* (2001) are having any real effect on our attitudes now, seven years after his death from cancer in 2006?

Perhaps that’s the wrong way to consider this issue, though. Perhaps (instead) I should go back a few years and fill in more of the background, explain how Leicester – not yet a familiar name to many poetry readers outside these islands – came to write these works in the first place.

Born in Christchurch in 1937, at the height of the Great Depression, Leicester Kyle grew up in Sumner (among other places), before the family moved into one of the first streets of State Houses built by the Labour government, as he chronicles in his long autobiographical poem *State Houses* (1997). His father, a journalist with some literary ambitions (he worked with Allen Curnow on the *Christchurch Press*) came from a well-established Greymouth family, but

found it difficult to adjust to life in the city. He committed suicide when Leicester was still in his teens. His wife, Leicester's mother, killed herself soon afterwards, an experience recorded in his posthumously published collection *The God Poems* (written c.2005).

Leicester himself started off as an apprentice in the Christchurch Botanical Gardens – as he records in his poem *Anogramma* (2005) – before joining the Anglican church in 1963, at the age of 26. He worked as a vicar in a number of parishes through New Zealand (and even, for a time, in the North of England), and it was during this period that he first made the acquaintance of a group of painters and writers then living on Banks Peninsula (Jeffrey Harris and Joanna Paul among them), as he explains in his prose memoir “Peninsula Days.”

In a CV written in 2000, he remarks that he “remained in this work until retirement at the age of 60, on the illness of my wife”, then goes on to say that “After the death of my wife I moved from Auckland to Buller, the better to continue my interest in botany, and to write.”

During my life I have written a great deal, though always against the demands of my occupation. I have had articles, short stories, and poems published in many places, including *London Magazine*, the *N.Z. Listener*, the *Ch.Ch. Press*, *Poetry NZ.*, *Sport*, *Takahe*, *Printout*, *Pander*, and the journal of experimental poetry – *A Brief Description of the Whole World ...*

I first met Leicester and his wife Miriel Kyle in 1997, at a meeting of the Bookshop poets in Devonport. He became a kind of mentor, in fact, and after Miriel's death in March 1998, we instituted an informal conversation club at the London Bar on Wellesley Street. We continued to correspond after his departure for the West Coast in mid 1998, and I visited him there three times: in 1998, 2000, and 2002.

The town he was living in, Millerton, in the hills above Granity, up the coast from Westport, was very close to the Stockton mine, and so Solid Energy's plans to stripmine the plateau above his home hit him hard.

As he himself put it in the late essay “Orchids in a Ghost Town”:

In part, I came here for the botany, and botany has brought me here since I was fourteen. My father started me on this course when I was old enough to go with him. He was a keen naturalist and a conservator and would take me with him on his rambles. Though born on the West Coast, of gold-rush stock, he then lived on the Port Hills above Christchurch, and that was the first environment I came to know. Laing & Blackwell was my manual, and amongst the very first plants which I identified by myself were two orchids—*Earina autumnalis* and *Thelymitra longifolia*.

To Leicester, the pakihi, the somewhat unspectacular moorland landscape of the Buller Plateau region, was a treasure trove of hidden botanical marvels: a series of valleys and ridges untouched since the last Ice Age, unique in the world. The idea of mining it into extinction therefore spurred him into action:

Respect the plants which grow on these cliffs. They mightn't look much, but they've been attracting scientific attention since the 1890's, when they were noted by Buller's first resident botanist, W. Townson.

There are two plants here which grow nowhere else in the country: a gentian, and a mountain daisy (*celmisia*). ...

These plants have found a carefully-balanced life in adverse conditions which are often extreme, so take the best care you can not to disturb them.

After helping to found MAPPS [The Millerton and Plateau Protection Society] in 2000, Leicester, as president of the organization, had a number of meetings with Don Elder, the CEO of Solid Energy, and negotiated the formation of the Millerton Heritage Park, of which Leicester acted as unofficial curator, in 2003.

His greatest coup during this period, however, was the discovery of the giant Millerton snail, *Powelliphanta millertonii*. Leicester gives a somewhat flippant account of this in his poem "Our New Snail":

Trish found it,  
crossing the road —  
the snail, that is.

She was going for a walk  
to calm herself,  
for there was trouble with the plumbing, again.  
It was early,  
and had been raining.

I had told her:  
'If you see a snail shell  
please bring it to me,'  
for I'm interested,  
so she brought me the creature,  
'At least you'll have the shell,' she said,  
but it was too important to keep.

I could see it was an entity  
so I rang Kath Walker in town.  
'Measure it,' she said,  
'and describe it to me,'  
but how to do that —

it's so old  
it's out of my authority;  
exactness is absurdity  
with a thing like this,  
and words are gauche.  
It antedates statistics by an aeon.  
Chromosomes and categories  
slip off down its trail.

'Look', I said,  
'It's uncomfortable.  
I'll ring you back.'

'Give it a worm,'  
she told me.  
'They suck them in

like spaghetti.’

In a 2004 postscript to his 2003 report to MAPPS on the formation of the Millerton Heritage Park, he strikes a more somber tone. I’d like to quote his words in full:

The discovery in 2003 of the Millerton snail—*Powelliphanta lignaria* ‘*Millertonii*’—is an illustration of a considerable difficulty we face in our environment.

For over a century this snail had lived in a human community and not been noticed sufficiently to come to the attention of science. It’s a quite large solidly made bush snail that lives in several acres of forest and scrub. A road goes through its territory, two rail tracks have done so, and there’s a house on it. Some fifteen years ago a bush fire narrowly missed the land. In the spring the snail gets restless and goes wandering around the house and across the road; at other times it’s not seen.

During the century of co-habitation with humans it could so easily have been eradicated by such things as fire, industry, or property development—part of its land is designated on the town plan for road and housing. Had any such accident happened, we would never have come to know the animal.

You might well ask whether that would matter, and go on to attend to some other issue more important than a vanished snail, but before you do—stop and think: how different our country would be if the moa, tuatara, takahe, huia, eagle—and the many others of our great army of the disappeared—were still around; how much more lively would be the mountains and the bush. And then there is the colour that has gone—the kaka beak that used to brighten the shores of the Bay of Islands, the scarlet mistletoe that used to make such a brilliant display at Christmas in the Lewis Pass.

These things have gone, and left our island world, our inheritance, so very much the poorer, darker, less interesting. There are few now alive who can remember how rich was the bush before the deer and opossums got into it. This process of impoverishment is continuing, and is of course a global calamity, but here it can be lessened.

One of its causes is ignorance. Our attachment to our natural inheritance is too slender. In all other countries there are poems stories songs and legends about their plants and animals, but here, apart from the Maori, there are virtually none. Our attitudes to our plants and animals is more of sentiment than of experience or knowledge.

We are easily dispossessed of what we value lightly.

We might well be like those who dream on in life, and then awake in a time of need to find they have no friends or family.

Leicester Kyle died of cancer in Christchurch hospital on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006, leaving behind him a considerable legacy of poetic work, published and unpublished. On his deathbed, he asked my friend David Howard and me to act as his literary executors.

As a result of this, in 2011 we began the publication of Leicester’s collected works online, an enterprise which is now substantially complete, and has already inspired two posthumous book publications.

There’s a more ominous side to his legacy, though. You recall his words, quoted above, about the fragility of the giant snail’s tenure of its environment? For a while its mere presence in the hills above Millerton was enough to halt Solid Energy’s plans.

Then, after a couple of years of sparring with various government agencies, they offered to collect the snails by hand, individually, and transport them to an equally hospitable environment further south.

And so they did. We were treated to film, on national TV, of anoraked workers crawling on hands and knees through the sparse undergrowth of the plateau, plucking each of these huge, grotesque snails from their native soil. It was hard to know if this was a triumph or a tragedy for ecologists everywhere.

Until, a few years later (in 2011), we heard that a laboratory worker had accidentally neglected to monitor the temperatures in the storeroom the snails had been stored in temporarily, and that almost a thousand of them had died as a result. The Department of Conservation's West Coast manager put an upbeat spin on the disaster: "Fortunately we've already managed to relocate more than 60 per cent of the original population into new habitats and we still have more than 800 unaffected snails in the other cool rooms and environmental chambers" (Westport News, 2011).

As Leicester himself put it: "We are easily dispossessed of what we value lightly. We might well be like those who dream on in life, and then awake in a time of need to find they have no friends or family."

All of which brings me around again to the original question posed by Kennedy Warne in his *NZ Geographic* editorial: Can "a shared cultural esteem" offer a "more resilient protection" than the law?

Leicester's initial successes through negotiation with Don Elder: the formation of the Millerton Heritage Park, the (temporary) halt in proceedings caused by the discovery of that rare snail, have now all been negated by the patience and determination of a large energy corporation.

The poetry he wrote about that struggle, *The Great Buller Coal Plateaux* (2001); not to mention the long sequence "Death of a Landscape" which he published in *brief* 31 (2004); or "Happy Valley: A Lament for a landscape about to be mined" (2003), which I included in an online feature on NZ poetry on the American poetics site *Jacket2* (2011); or his prose notes on the flora and fauna of the Millerton Heritage park (also available online) do, however, continue to exert an influence.

The particular battle he fought may have been lost, but the war to preserve at least a little of our irreplaceable natural heritage goes on. There's an interesting poem about the nature of his communications with the power company in his 2004 book *Living at a Bad Address*. He prefaced it with the following note: "Earlier in the year Solid Energy wanted a publicity photo of me with its C.E.O. Don Elder, and I was asked to meet him after a staff meeting. A delay meant that I had to wait outside with his miners and mine-workers, many of whom regard me as a radical greenery trouble-maker."

Waiting For The C.E.O.

He's been delayed —  
there's trouble down south;  
at Spring Creek there are questions,  
so we wait,

I in my truck,  
the miners at the car park over the road  
where they lounge in their overalls  
against the bonnets of their utes,  
trying to make point to this pointless time,  
talking small to pass it.

They're here for his presentation:  
'Earning Our Right to Mine'.

*'Mining is a temporary use of the land,  
but a permanent use of non-renewable resources'*.  
they're to be told,  
before they excavate.

I'm here to be photographed with him,  
I, who have written to the paper,  
the government,  
protested in the streets,  
who have threatened their jobs,  
they say;  
I'm to be photographed with their boss.

We're both uneasy,  
I at their resentment,  
they at my threat,  
but in this we are one:  
there's the road between us  
and we long to move on,  
each to our work:  
theirs at the mine,  
mine at the inexpressible.

### 3 - Conclusion

A few months before his death in 2006, Leicester Kyle wrote a series of poems about rain. The significance of this sequence at first eluded me when I looked through the boxfiles where he'd stacked all the completed poems he wished to preserve. It wasn't, in fact, until I examined the files stored on his computer hard-disk that I came to understand that they *were* a sequence, rather than just a series of discrete poems. Rain is, after all, perhaps the dominant fact about life on the Coast.

Night rain  
sends a shadow  
into late afternoon

the sun doesn't set

a veil spreads eastwards  
white at the edge  
but darkening  
over a steel sea

lower clouds bank  
at the horizon

there's no wind and  
a few drops of rain fall  
as darkness sets

we bring in the wood  
and pull the blinds  
to make refuge

to pretend  
at security  
["Night Rain"<sup>7</sup>]

"To pretend /at security." On the one hand, these lines certainly seem to hint at the precariousness of his own tenure of the land. In a few more weeks he would be forced to leave the tiny hamlet of Millerton<sup>8</sup>, in the hills above Granity, just north of Westport, to shift into the Christchurch hospital ward where he died.

It is Millerton which we must, I think, regard as Kyle's own version of Celan's "Celanie." He relocated there from Auckland in 1998, shortly after the death of his first wife Miriel from cancer. The house he moved into had been purchased sight unseen, and he devoted the rest of his life to chronicling the old mining village: its landscapes and people.

"To pretend /at security." These lines also gesture back to the role he'd played in the conservation struggle to preserve this region: books such as his *The Great Buller Coal Plateaux*, published by MAPPS [the Millerton and Plateau Protection Society], consciously blending poetry with eco-propaganda:

They took the top off Mt. Frederick for reasons they might not  
understand  
Not just for coal which there's so much of  
The seam is thick for a wide extent  
And it might well be that the reasons for decapitation are as  
profound as the coal  
Such as the cliffs at the west of the hill  
For precipices are a downside to a prospector's on-view

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<sup>7</sup>[http://leicesterkyle1.blogspot.co.nz/2012/01/selected-shorter-poems-7-2004-2006.html#\\_ftn37](http://leicesterkyle1.blogspot.co.nz/2012/01/selected-shorter-poems-7-2004-2006.html#_ftn37).

<sup>8</sup> Google address: <http://maps.google.co.nz/?ll=-41.632663,171.870534&spn=0.001201,0.001832&t=h&z=19&layer=c&cbll=-41.632663,171.870534&panoid=AENfcfOWV62VV2F4uvkULg&cbp=12,218.43,,0.0>.

And might remind the managers of limits to a resource  
[“For My Father (from the Blackburn Track)”<sup>9</sup>]

In these, and many other poems, he was careful to *list* the long, beautiful botanical names of the species of flora and fauna which would be displaced – in some cases, threatened with extinction. Millerton may act at times in his poems as a magic circle, but more often it’s more like the chalk circle in the Brecht play: a place where we are tried and found wanting.

Leicester was dead by the time Stockton was stripmined, so he never heard of this crowning indignity to all his efforts to preserve this unique environment, unchanged – he told me, as we walked across it one morning – since the last ice age, an irreplaceable repository of knowledge and beauty which could never be regained or reconstituted once lost. But the portion of it we crossed that day *has* now been lost. What’s left of the plateaux continues to be eroded by successive mining projects.

Hence, I suppose, my continuing interest in the implications of that last sequence of poems by Leicester – “Flood<sup>10</sup>,” for instance:

A gull is beaten to the road  
where it cowers until  
the hail’s overwhelmed by rain  
a downpour at first  
then a torrent a burst  
still mounting to  
a river on the path  
a flood on the lawn  
to the creek raging  
down the hill to the road  
flooding through the houses  
out to a muddied sea

Hence, too, my belief that the “crippling exceptionalism” which Bernstein detects in previous readings of Celan must now begin to take into account the ways in which his work might speak to the distortions of language used to justify environmental devastation – not just the continuing culture-erasing and ethnic-cleansing policies of repressive governments everywhere.

By reading Leicester Kyle and Paul Celan together, I would contend, we can learn as much about our present crises as about their own historical circumstances, their respective choices of a place to stand. Bernstein goes on, in the quotation I began this essay with, to point out that the consequence of this ongoing “process of removing [Celan] ... from his own time and place” is to take him “also from our own poetic horizon.”

Though it might sound somewhat utilitarian, the enduring value of such poets as Celan and Kyle must be their *example*, not simply the specific experiences they have given such eloquent witness to. Using Paul Celan as the “active matrix for an ongoing poetic practice” (as Bernstein tells us we must) involves setting him to work against the network news, reading him in a

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<sup>9</sup> [http://leicesterkyle1.blogspot.co.nz/2011/02/great-buller-coal-plateaux-2001.html#\\_ftn3](http://leicesterkyle1.blogspot.co.nz/2011/02/great-buller-coal-plateaux-2001.html#_ftn3).

<sup>10</sup> [http://leicesterkyle1.blogspot.co.nz/2012/01/selected-shorter-poems-7-2004-2006.html#\\_ftn35](http://leicesterkyle1.blogspot.co.nz/2012/01/selected-shorter-poems-7-2004-2006.html#_ftn35).

thousand alien contexts, relocating him in the stunted dwarf forests of the Buller pakihi as well as the crowded streets of the metropolis.

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