**Paul Celan**

Paul Celan was born on 23 November 1920 in the northern Romanian region of Bukovina into the German-speaking family of Leo and Fritzi Anschel. Celan’s parents provided him with a typical, middle-class education and upbringing, opting for German to be spoken at home and for Judaism to exert more of an ethical than a religious influence. When in 1938 Celan was ready to attend university, his options did not include, as they had for generations before him, destinations in Germany or Austria where Jews were now banned from enrollment and employment in the universities. Like so many Romanians during this period, Celan decided on the university in Tours, France, and after his first year studying abroad he returned to Romania in 1939 to spend time with friends and family over the summer. Once back in Romania, Celan soon discovered that he would be unable to return to France, and so enrolled in the department of Romance Languages and Literature at the Czernowitz University. With the collapse of the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1941, however, Celan’s life and studies were interrupted by the arrival of the Nazi SS on 6 July 1941. Despite the best efforts of the mayor of Czernowitz to negotiate the suspension of deportation for roughly 3,000 of the city’s Jewish residents, Celan and his family were subsequently sent to concentration camps in the summer of 1942. Celan’s parents were eventually separated from their son and sent to a concentration camp in Ukraine. Celan learned of his father’s death through a letter from his mother in the autumn of 1942. She was killed later that winter. Although Celan survived the camps, he never fully recovered psychologically from the grief and guilt over the death of his parents and of so many millions of Jews. Celan returned to France in 1948 and took up permanent residence in Paris. It was in Paris that Celan would establish his reputation as one of the greatest poets and intellectuals (in any language) of the twentieth-century. On 20 April 1970 he committed suicide by drowning in the Seine River.

Writing amidst a post-war cultural climate wherein, as Theodor Adorno famously (and notoriously) put it, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, Celan infused his work with a steadfast commitment to honoring the ethical and aesthetic strictures imposed by the catastrophic events that he lived through and (barely) survived (34). As Michael Eskin suggests, moreover, it was through Celan’s explicit indebtedness to the Russian-Jewish poet, Osip Mandelstam, who was himself a political casualty of the Soviet purge, that Celan envisioned that his poetry would speak a trans-historical language addressed specifically (and universally) to a “‘more or less distant, unknown interlocutor’” (2). In writing for this trans-historical and anonymous reader, Celan’s poetic sensibility aimed to ceaselessly overcome the mortifying oppressiveness of speech and language in the wake of Auschwitz. Celan demanded of his reader that s/he encounter head-on in the space of poetry the silences and the traumas that Western modernity had so regrettably perpetrated in its complicity with the Nazi-led Holocaust. In his famous acceptance speech for the Literature Prize of the City of Bremen, Celan elaborated on his view that after the Holocaust “only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. […] But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through it and could resurface, ‘enriched’ by it all” (34). If Celan’s literary critics agree on anything, then it is surely on the unsurpassable courage he showed in continuing to write poetry in the same language, German, that had been so bureaucratized and abused as the language of the Nazi-led genocide of the Jews. Celan composed over 800 poems during the years 1938-1970. He translated numerous works by such diverse writers as Charles Baudelaire, Antonin Artaud, Mandelstam, Fernando Pessoa, Robert Frost, and William Shakespeare.



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