Jan Roelans

Celan, Paul (1920—1970)

Paul Celan (pseudonym of Paul Antschel) is one the most distinctive German-language poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Born in 1920 in Czernowitz in the Bukovina (today Ukraine), into a German-speaking Jewish family, he grew up in a multicultural society where besides German, Rumanian, Ukrainian and Yiddish were spoken. In 1941 Czernowitz was occupied by the fascist Rumanian “National Legionnaire” government, which started deportations. Celan’s parents died in 1942 in a Nazi labour camp. After the war Celan moved via Vienna to France, where he married the graphic artist Gisèle de Lestrange and worked as a lecturer in German. His reputation as a poet was established by the poem “Todesfuge”, which recounts the experience of the death camps. His poems would, however, rapidly evolve into a darker, almost reticent style struggling with the possibility of representing the Shoah. Most of his poems are fairly short and are forced to revisit and reshape the German language after its moral destruction by the Nazis. Celan was awarded the most important German literary prize, the Georg Büchner Prize, but never felt comfortable in the German literary scene and was unnerved by neo-fascist activism. He translated a vast amount of poetry and prose from different languages into German and saw this achievement as equal to writing poetry. Seven volumes were published at the time of his death by suicide in Paris in 1970.

In a modernist fashion, Celan rejects sentimentality and *beautiful* poetry, but still views his writings as dialogues with both the readers and his literary predecessors. Although many of his poems are love poems originating in experiences in everyday life, the key challenge for Celan remains to write poems that remember the loss of family and friends and the atrocities of the Shoah without resorting to either an aestheticizing register that would make the experience of evil sound less harrowing or to a register that would remain purely factual and exclude personal aspects. Celan makes repeated use of basic words like “eye”, “stone”, “hand”, or “tear”, yet his poems are replete with allusions to other literary, religious and philosophical texts. This is why some consider them poems for experts. The question in this debate among Celan readers, which has been going on since Celan started publishing, is whether any, and if so, how much extra-textual information is required to understand these poems. Celan seeks his own unique poetic voice, always reflecting on his own existential situation, yet at the same time focusing on the reader, on the *Other*: “The poem wants to head towards some other, it needs this other, it needs an opposite” (The Meridian, p. 9). In the poem “Bei Brancusi, zu zweit” from *Lichtzwang* (*English translation*, year), for example, the lyrical I argues that the opaque statues of Brancusi contain a traumatic core which can be sensed only by attentive viewers and thus challenges them in an ethical way. In *The Meridian*, his Büchner Prize speech, Celan describes poetry as “dunkel” (*dark*)*,* yet in search of a “Begegnung” (*encounter*). The idea behind this is not so much to obfuscate reference or meaning as to communicate it to thoroughly engaged readers. Celan, indeed, realises that language is essentially rhetorical and as such cannot guarantee meaning or reference. His most famous poem “Todesfuge” (translation), was at first often misinterpreted as abstract poetry with “absolute metaphors”, even though it contains explicit phrases like “Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland” (Death is a master from Germany)*.* The fact that Celan’s later poetry becomes more dense can be seen as a reaction to this misreading.  
  
These poems also wish to share with their readers the experience of reading. This leads to a poetic encounter and Celan’s feelings of brotherliness with other authors like Hölderlin, Heine, Kafka, Sachs, Bachmann and many others, including Dante and Shakespeare. Mallarmé has influenced Celan for the importance he attaches to syntax, spacing and intertextuality, and he regarded Mandelstam as a relative who suffered from Stalin’s repression and died in a transit camp. Celan translated many of these authors into German. He had a profound knowledge of Jewish thought and of western philosophy and in his texts, he engaged with many thinkers, even controversial philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, whose predilection for poetry and aversion towards progress-centred scientific communication Celan shared. This did not, of course, clear away the complication that Heidegger refused to comment on his early commitment to fascism. Celan’s poem “Todtnauberg” gives an account of this. Celan’s best-known volumes of poetry are *Sprachgitter* (*Speech-grille*,1959), *Die Niemandsrose* *(The Noonesrose*,1963), *Atemwende* (*Breathturn*, 1967) and *Lightduress*. In *Sprachgitter*,a German-speaking poet tried for the first time to reflect on and articulate the historical rupture of fascism and the lapse into silence this meant for literature by revisiting everyday language in a stylistic mode of destruction and construction. *Die Niemandsrose* equally reflects on the Shoah and tries to see poetry as a “Gegenentwurf” (*counter project*) to the tradition of the psalms in the Old Testament. It is a multi-layered work which interacts with many other texts (Mandelstam, Benn, Jewish mysticism etc.) and contains some of Celan’s most famous poems, like “Psalm”*,* “Es war Erde in ihnen”*,* “In der Luft”*,* “La Contrescarpe”*,* “Es ist alles anders”*.* *Atemwende* was published when Celan’s reputation as a poet had already been established, yet its compact style did not fail to puzzle some critics. As can be expected, some thought the poems were too challenging, others found them stunning and realistic. *Lichtzwang* contains the poem “Todtnauberg” about Celan’s encounter with Heidegger, as well as poems written in the hospital where Celan was treated for depression. With their profound reflection on the human condition and its effect on the use of language, these poems could be compared to the late Beethoven compositions.

List of works  
  
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Paratextual material