

Paul Celan Revisited – Contextualising His Poetry in the 21st Century

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Michael Eskin, Karen Leeder, Marko Pajević, eds., *Paul Celan Today. A Companion*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. (*Companions to Contemporary German Culture*, 10). 376 pages.

Paul Celan (1920–1970) is probably one of the most iconic poets in post-war German literature. He survived the Holocaust, but could not stand the reality of post-war societies and tragically committed suicide. Time and time again his multidimensional and cypher-like poems have prompted researchers to close readings and provided the opportunity for very concise interpretation.

When talking about Celan's scholarship it can be asserted that he is definitely one of the most discussed and explored German-language writers. At the same time the number of his readers and their familiarity with his works is rather modest. He is known as an author whose works are dedicated to the memory of the Shoah, but which also contain an abundance of quotes and intertextual references from philosophy and literary history. Due to this circumstance Celan is a favoured research subject on the one hand, while on the other hand the reading public regard his poetry as difficult, if not incomprehensible. Common knowledge of Celan is often limited to one of his best-known texts, *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue), from his earlier period. Celan's later poetry became progressively more cryptic, fractured and monosyllabic, even closer to music, and for this reason is linguistically fascinating. Probably, this digging into different layers of language was Celan's intention. As he said in his Bremen Prize speech in 1958: "Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language."

As mentioned, Paul Celan's scholarship is voluminous. Therefore, one might ask whether there is any new knowledge on Celan to gain. The volume by Michael Eskin, Karen Leeder and Marko Pajević shows that it is possible to talk about Celan in 2021 in an innovative and multi-faceted way.

The reader of this book will be invited to rediscover Celan, to study his biography and find new and interesting aspects therein (in addition to the well-known facts), or to delve into his different texts with an open mind, for

example, by looking at them as free linguistic associations on a topic or by placing them in a completely new, contemporary context.

On this account, the new volume intends to relate Celan's life by combining his biography and literary history. Furthermore, the volume focuses on different aspects of Celan's scholarship (for example his legacy and his reception today). In this way the volume seeks to answer the question, what makes Celan one of the most significant poets in the 20th century? In addition, existing questions are represented from a new perspective, adding some new documents and presenting unknown facts. The key element is an attempt to analyse Celan as a writer of "multilingual German language".

All contributors to this volume are renowned literary scholars and experts on Celan. Many different topics are covered. Celan's origin, Bukovina, is explored as a multilingual and cultural space where German played an important role due to Habsburgian influence. Celan's activities and his role on the post-war literary field of West Germany and France is investigated (including Celan's complicated relations to Gruppe 47 as well as his connection to Heidegger and the University of Freiburg). Further, Celan as translator and the translation of his poetry is thematised. The volume also offers close readings of some of his poems, but in a slightly broader sense, by moving away from the text itself and reading it from a wider cultural perspective ("going beyond poetry"); thereby, some new and surprising relations are revealed. Celan's correspondence is analysed, showing what kind of "Lebenswelt" unfolds in them, and how these letters reflect his world of thought.

Four illustrations of Celan's poems give this book a multimedia dimension. Literary meditations and a conversation about Celan's life and poetry close the volume.

In sum, this is a rather untraditional choice of contributions. A mixture of different approaches (from scholarly articles to very personal, artistic responses to Celan's work) might sometimes be questionable, but works well in this combination. The reader has not been offered another collection of thick articles, rather it is the diversity of contributions that encourages them to read Celan's poetry with fresh eyes and perhaps to find a completely new approach to his poetry.

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