

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 8
Issue 1 *Special Issue on Paul Celan*

Article 2

9-1-1983

Introduction

James K. Lyon
University of California, San Diego

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Russian Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Lyon, James K. (1983) "Introduction," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 2.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1128>

This Introductory Material is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Introduction

Abstract

Introduction to the special issue on Paul Celan

Keywords

Paul Celan, poetry, Geheimtip, European poetry, German-language poetry

INTRODUCTION

JAMES K. LYON

University of California, San Diego

When George Steiner asserted a few years ago that Paul Celan was “almost certainly the major European poet of the period after 1945,” he revealed one of those half-secrets (which Germans call a *Geheimtip*) known to a number of English-language scholars, critics, and practicing poets, but generally concealed from a broader audience of educated readers. Except for Jerry Glenn’s introductory study in the Twayne World Author Series (1973), to date no other book on Celan exists in the English language. A moderate number of individual poems translated by American poets who discovered Celan in the mid-fifties did turn up in the sixties, but Joachim Neugroschel’s translations, entitled *Speech-Grille and Selected Poems*, in 1971 was the first book to bring Celan to the attention of a wider English-speaking audience. By the time Michael Hamburger’s important book of 120 translated poems appeared in a dual-language edition in 1980, Celan’s work had been translated and published at so many points in the poetic landscape of the seventies that among poets, at least, he was becoming a reasonably well-known figure (see the bibliography at the end of this issue).

In describing Celan as perhaps the foremost “European” poet of the postwar era, Steiner writes with his customary precision, for despite Celan’s brilliant poetry in the German language, it is only with difficulty that one classifies him as a “German” poet, which he never was, although his birth outside of Germany in a family that happened to cultivate German as its primary language certainly made him a German-*language* poet. Born in Rumania of Jewish parents in 1920, Paul Antschel (in 1946 he took the pen name “Celan,” an anagram of his own name) grew up on the geographical periphery of the German language in what, until 1918, had been a corner of the Austro-

Hungarian empire. Forced to learn Hebrew and Rumanian in his youth, he also learned French eagerly, attended the university for one year in Tours (1938-39) before having his studies interrupted by the war, and learned Russian as a matter of survival after the Soviet Union annexed his birthplace, Czernovitz, in 1940 and Soviet troops occupied the region.

When the war began, Celan was put to forced labor by occupying German troops, who also deported and killed most of the Jewish population, including his parents. Celan himself miraculously survived the German occupation, and after nearly two years in Bucharest following the war he fled in 1947 to Vienna, for him the capital of his German-language universe. But Vienna disappointed him, and seven months later he moved to Paris, where he completed an advanced degree in German literature and spent the balance of his life (until his suicide in 1970) as a poet, translator, and teacher of German literature at the École Normale Supérieure.

Never at home in German-speaking countries, Celan's existence just outside the geographical borders of this territory mirrors his relationship to a language he considered his primary linguistic home, a language which, in his own words, had gone through and survived "the thousand darkneses of death-bringing speech." To write in the German of Rilke, whom he admired and from whom he learned much as a young poet, was one thing, but to write in the language of those who had murdered his parents and his people was quite another. Instead of having its well-known therapeutic effect, writing poetry for Celan created an increasingly unbearable tension that made any encounter with language a necessary confrontation with the unspeakable horrors of his own past and the fate of his people. Is it any wonder that critics perceive in his poetry a permanent crisis of and with language, a language balanced precariously on the edge of silence? This agonizing relationship may account for the fact that the German Celan uses is so remote from the language of post-1945 German lyric poetry that one hardly recognizes it as having the same origins. Some attribute this to the archaic speech he acquired involuntarily from the linguistic detritus of the old Austro-Hungarian empire, while others see it as a conscious, cultivated idiolect. Whatever the reason, one feels inclined to agree with Jed Rasula's assertion in this issue that consciously or unconsciously, Celan uses German to "invade" and "execute" that very language. "With Celan," he says, "the German language itself becomes the means of its own disembodiment," a reference to the radically increasing syntactic and semantic disintegration that marks his poetry as it progresses.

Among other things, it is this unusual relationship to German specifically and to language generally that prompts Steiner to call Celan a “European” rather than a “German” poet. While some of his poetry seems to trace its spiritual ancestry to Hölderlin, Trakl, and the hermetic tradition, one might just as easily search for his spiritual forebears among the Dadaists and Surrealists (especially André Breton, whom Celan admired), for much of his poetry resembles what they created. Ultimately, however, it does what every great poet’s works do—it establishes its own tradition. The only German language poet of the century who remotely resembles him is Nelly Sachs, also a Jewish poet who, like Celan, lived and wrote beyond the borders of Germany.

The reference to Sachs raises the question of Celan as a Holocaust poet, a touchstone for some critics and a non-issue for others. Most scholars and critics who specialize in German literature tend to approach his poetry from the vantage point of structure, linguistics, symbolism, philosophy, and occasionally ideology; only a few see his Jewish experience as the center of his vision. By contrast, English-language critics for the most part tend to see the Holocaust as Celan’s *Grunderlebnis*, the experience that informs and shapes every poem he wrote. Clearly cultural, geographical, and socio-historical considerations have determined the focus for these groups, and with a poet so rich and complex as Celan, there is ample evidence to justify both of these approaches. In order to mirror some of the diversity within these two groups, this special issue devoted to Celan contains material representing both general trends. The articles by Howard Stern and Nicholas Meyerhofer, for example, represent a reading of Celan based on structural and theoretical considerations. The essay by Joachim Schulze who, though German, is a professor of Romance literatures, generally follows the second approach by placing Celan in the mystical tradition of both Judaism and Christianity, an equally justifiable reading (it is known, for example, that Celan taught a seminar on Christian mysticism at the École Normale Supérieure in the early sixties, and that he was well-acquainted with the Jewish mystical tradition). And John Felstiner’s essay, which demonstrates (among other things) that anyone who translates Celan must also be a skillful exegete, fits loosely in this grouping, for Celan’s “Jewishness” is at the very heart of the poem “Du sei wie du,” which he translates and interprets. But the strongest statement on the Holocaust as the determinant behind Celan’s works is found in the essays by American poets, published for the first time in this issue.

A word on the somewhat unorthodox practice of including essays

by contemporary American poets in a scholarly journal. The obvious reason is that poets, as we know, do not always read poems in the same way scholars do, and on occasion, scholars have been known to learn from the somewhat different approach poets take to texts. The less obvious reason goes back to a dinner conversation in 1972 with Donald Hall, himself a poet, in which he informed me that Celan was already known to the Black Mountain School and other important American poets in the sixties. As one who first became acquainted with Celan's poetry in 1960, but who knew him only in the original (I did not read translations of Celan, since I considered him to be virtually untranslatable, which may be the reason he attracts so many translators), I set out to discover what drew these poets to him. I am still not sure I know, though Celan's powerful poems on death and the Holocaust are clearly a significant reason, as is his brilliance in destroying language forms and simultaneously creating new ones. Celan, it seems, is a poet's poet *par excellence*, and poets have a sensitive antenna for that.

In my quest for answers, then, I became aware that most poets of any significance knew Celan's works (albeit often only in translation), and that there existed a far greater number of translations of his works and articles about him in English than I had imagined. This made me want to measure somewhat more precisely his current reputation and influence in this country, which led to the solicitation of the statements from contemporary American poets published in this issue. It also prompted a request of Jerry Glenn to compile a bibliography of English-language translations of Celan's works and of essays or articles in English about him. The results, which surprised us both, underscore the value of a bibliographer in assessing the extent of interest in (and impact by?) a writer outside his native language. Hence my special thanks to Professor Glenn for a splendid contribution in that non-spectacular field of bibliography. I also express my gratitude to Paul Auster, Cid Corman, Clayton Eshleman, Jack Hirschman, David Meltzer, Jed Rasula, and Jerome Rothenberg for providing this added dimension on Celan to readers who may find him inaccessible in German. Finally, my thanks to my colleague Catherine Lowe and to Mary Ann Buckles for their assistance in translating the article by Professor Schulze, and to Marilyn Bernstein and Karen Pehla-Giammona for editorial and bibliographical assistance.