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**Paul Celan
A sérült élet poétikája**

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Paul Celan

The Poetics of a Damaged Life

(Theses)

The dissertation aims to provide an introduction to Paul Celan (1920-1970), one of the most significant figures of postwar European literature, and to put forward a comprehensive interpretation of his poetry.

From the very beginning of its canonization, Celan's oeuvre became a "battlefield" for a variety of polemics within the discipline of literary theory. The constant shifts and reconfigurations of the Celan reception, and the various theoretical contexts invoked for the study of his poetry can offer a representative picture that reveals the changing impulses and trends within literary theory in the past decades (for example, take the symbolic debate between Gadamer and Derrida). However, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to present the entire history of the Celan reception. My approach to Celan's poetry is rather hermeneutical in nature – following the method of Gadamer –, aiming to engage in an "immanent critique" of his work. The guiding principle in writing the dissertation was to offer an analysis of the entire oeuvre, and of individual poems in particular, as self-contained units with an autonomous logic. In the same time, it is obvious that poetry, as any other linguistic construction, forms an integral part of diverse linguistic and cultural configurations. For Celan, the possibility of recovering the past represented a central question: his writings start from the premise that, although language itself "was not lost," everything that previously had been said and all that can or will be said, needs to be reevaluated. By taking account of this fundamental positioning, one can understand Celan's intense and continuous dialogue with various philosophical and artistic traditions, from the ancient Greek authors through the philosophers of the Romantic period to the writings of Bertolt Brecht and the metaphysics of Heidegger. The present dissertation is an attempt at combining the multiple perspectives referred to above in analyzing Celan's poetry.

1. The main goal of my study, in terms of its theoretical underpinnings besides the utilization of a hermeneutical approach, was to explore Celan's unique relation to language. Of course, it can

be stated that one of the main characteristics of modernity has been an underlying (philosophical) skepticism towards language as such, an approach that became the trademark of several significant literary projects. Yet, as one of the central statements of his oeuvre shows (“Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss.”), in the case of Paul Celan we are dealing with a distinctive philosophy of language. The kernel of this approach is summed up by another key statement: “All that exists can be articulated, but only through the means of silence.” Naturally, the investigation of this question leads inevitably to the main topic of Celan’s works: the Holocaust, and the problems of its representation and memory/remembrance. Although there is no intention in his poetry of creating a taboo around the “representation” of the Holocaust – as it was proposed following Adorno’s well-known statement (however, even Adorno himself was rather ambiguous regarding this question) – nonetheless, the attempt of “showing” and remembering the event can only be achieved in an indirect way. This perspective in Celan’s poetics can be connected to the tradition of “negative theology” which rests on the following principle: “One can only talk about God through the means of silence.” In the first chapter of the dissertation, I explore the significance of this theme in Celan’s work and in modern poetry in general.

2. In the second chapter I wish to analyze how the “concretization” of Celan’s relation to language and his negative approach to representation is carried out through the dialectic of light and darkness in his poetry. In this context, there is strong correspondence between the themes of light and darkness and the relation between spoken word and silence. In both cases, instead of a dichotomous opposition, we have an original state against which light and the spoken word can be defined, and to which both eventually return. In Celan’s poetry the motif of light does not signify eternal reason or the brightness of the transcendental, but forms an integral part of darkness.

3. Celan’s poetry of remembrance is built around a fundamentally passive “voice.” Within this poetic universe, all occurrences have *already* happened. Yet it does not lead to fatalism or existential paralysis: in Celan’s case passivity can be seen as the endpoint of a process, an

accomplishment and a hard-won position which offers the only possible context for articulation. Accordingly, it was the image of the “last man standing” and the idea of catastrophe which structured Maurice Blanchot’s interpretative essay on Celan, bearing the title: “The Last to Speak.”

The idea of passivity is not only connected to the position of the poetic voice, but also to the experience of intersubjectivity which unfolds in Celan’s poetry. I discuss this dimension of his writings by referring to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, a noted Celan scholar himself.

4. The chapter entitled “Time and Date” is a further elaboration on the theme defined by the idea of “the last one to speak.” In his interpretation, Derrida’s main goal was to reveal that every date (and thus, every utterance) carries an inherent tension within it, since the uniqueness of a given date and its yearly repetition cancel each other out. The essential question laying at the core of these issues – represented by “January 20” in Celan’s poems – refers to the “uniqueness” of Auschwitz.

5. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters focus on elements of Celan’s poetry that are connected to the previously discussed themes and the examination of which is necessary for the fuller understanding of his work. The analysis unpacks what role “standing” acquires within this poetic universe. Through a reference to the poetry of Hölderlin, I look at how Celan uses the concept of the “sign.” Furthermore, I investigate how the problems of closeness and sensuality are dealt with in the texts. Lastly, I also examine more closely Celan’s method of constructing poems which can be regarded as textual “landscapes.”

6. The penultimate chapter is dedicated to a thorough discussion of the question of memory, through the interpretation of the myth of Orpheus, often invoked by Celan in his writings. The claim I formulate regarding this question – and which has become the underlying proposition of the entire dissertation – can be best expressed by pointing out a significant difference: while Orpheus needed memory in order to create his Art (the reason for his descend into the

underworld was to play his music, admired even by Persephone), in the case of Celan we have the exact opposite of this: Art is only needed in order to be able to remember.

The significance of such an artistic disposition is not restricted only to bringing novelty in poetics, but it has authentically radical consequences in our relation to the Holocaust, and culture in general. The past did not cease to exist, yet our access to it has never been more difficult than in our contemporary age. The poetry of Celan can be seen as offering unique and powerful resolutions to dilemmas of this nature. Naturally, it has not been the aim of this dissertation to judge whether they are “successful” or not – yet the attempt of providing a comprehensive interpretation of Celan’s oeuvre is meant to be read as an argument for the overall and unquestionable validity of his vision.