

Celan and France

Pierre Joris

Of course, not everything is unsayable in words,
only the living truth.

Eugene Ionesco

Paul Celan, almost certainly the major European
poet of the period after 1945.

George Steiner

From Hölderlin's hallucinatory walk to the Bordelais and back, to von Horvarth's strange death (a branch severed by lightning killed him on the Champs Elysées), France has always proved a point of focal, not to say fatal, attraction—and certainly often enough, a point of rupture—for poets and writers of the German language: suffice it to mention in this context the names of Heinrich Heine, Rainer Maria Rilke or Walter Benjamin. For most of these, their stays in France were limited, and freely chosen. But often also they were a matter of political and/or intellectual exile. Few of them, however, had as symbiotic and long-term a relationship with France as Paul Celan. This essay will attempt to sketch the contours of that relationship and, hopefully, provide a few pointers as to both Celan's influence on current French writing and the influence of French writing on Celan.

Although the *Sekundär-Literatur* around Celan has reached spectacular proportions over the last twenty years, relatively little has been written about this relationship with his adopted country. As far as I am aware, only one paper treats this relationship directly—though exclusively through the bias of Celan's relation to French literature (Böschenstein). This may be due, in part, to the fact that nearly all Celan criticism—as, indeed, so much contemporary criticism, the old extrinsic methodologies of historical

criticism and literary historiography having to a large extent been discredited, or at least abandoned, for more fashionable approaches—uses an intrinsic, hermeneutical approach, concentrating intensely and unrelentlessly on Celan’s language. An understandable focus, given the *a priori* difficulties his oftentimes seemingly hermetic poems present. There is, however, something slightly disconcerting in the fact that so many German scholars analyse and dissect Celan’s opus in the context of what one could describe as a nearly nationalistic “*Germanistik*” tradition, at best footnoting his relationship to France as a contingent aspect of his life and work. Two of the best-known and standard texts on German poetry after 1945 will serve as examples (Knörrich, Weissenberger). While Klaus Weissenberger, in his essay, mentions at least that Celan lived in France most of his life, Otto Knörrich’s otherwise fine essay does not give the slightest indication of the bio-geographical complexity of Celan’s life. Weissenberger’s compilation has introductory chapters organized according to geographical principles (BRD, DDR, Austria, Switzerland). Joseph Strelka, who wrote the chapter on Austrian poetry, seems to include Celan implicitly, but, again, essentially as an influence on Austrian poetry, and without other bio-geographical references, except for the mention of Celan’s birth-place. Just as limiting, or error-inducing, can be the often used categorical description of Celan as “Exil-Dichter”: in exile indeed, but from where?

The figure that emerges thus is baffling, to say the least: Celan is loudly and laudatorily proclaimed as one of the greatest, if not the major “German poet” of the century (since Rilke, or Trakl, or George, depending on the given author’s preferences), when, in fact, he was a naturalized French citizen of Jewish-Bukovinian descent, who never lived on German soil, though he wrote (nearly) all his life in his mother’s language—which happened to have been German. Had he—who was also a great translator—but bothered to translate his own work into French, or to write a few poems in that language, no doubt the French could and, most likely, would have claimed him as one of their own—as they are doing, for example, with Samuel Beckett. That he did not do this is of course essential, but needs to be analysed and contextualized in relation to those complex relationships he entertained with his mother’s tongue, and to his astounding multilinguism.

I

It is true that, throughout his life, Celan saw himself as part of “German” literature, wanted his *work* to be a visible presence in that country, wanted it to impact on German letters. But this desire, and thus the relationship, is, I believe, more ambiguous than has been suggested so far. The pathos, described by people who were close to him in France, of Celan, day after day, on a bench in Paris going through the German papers to check not only if there was mention of him, but afraid to the point of paranoia that this

mention may be negative, scared to death that someone somewhere was preparing an attack on him, is not the nostalgic pathos of the expatriate happy for any scrap of news in the old language from the old country, but that of a lethally wounded man, hoping that the strategies of his solitary struggle are paying off, and deeply afraid, at the same time, of what may befall him in the hands of those people he was never able not to identify with the murderers of his mother.

His life, mapped out spatially, describes a movement of encirclement of Germany, originating in Czernowitz and moving through Bukarest and Vienna to Paris, with a dozen or two quick, short raids across the borders into that country. I use the military metaphor advisedly, for there seems to me to run through Celan's life a desire for assault on Germany and revenge for the death of his parents (or of his mother rather, as shall become clear), though the Celanian dynamic is not simple-minded or one-directional: it involves a complex double movement—to use the terms of Empedokles—of *philotes* (love) for his mother('s tongue) and *neikos* (strife) against her murderers who are the originators and carriers of that same tongue.

He is caught in this love/strife dynamic, the common base-line or ground (as *Grund* but also, and simultaneously, as *Abgrund*) of which is the German language irrevocably binding together both the murdered and the murderer, a dynamic which structures all of Celan's thinking and writing. Because of this ground and despite the fact of spending all his adult life in France, despite his active and profound multilinguism—there can be little doubt that he could have written successfully in Rumanian (and did so to a minor extent) or in French (vide the just-published correspondence between him and his wife, the artist Gisèle Celan-Lestrange)—Celan never seriously entertained the possibility of becoming a “French” writer in the image of, say, Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, or, more to the point, E.M. Cioran¹ or Gherasim Luca. His harsh, nearly hysterical, strictures against poets attempting to write in a language other than the mother-tongue are to the point here. This total identification with, and adoration of, the mother tongue go back to his youth in multi-lingual Czernowitz.

The one biography of his youth we have, for example, points out his strong dislike of and irritation at Yiddish—“Paul never spoke Yiddish,” writes Israel Chalfen. Except for a small poem by Steinberg, “Rabbi Leiserl, der Kleine,” which he is reported by Ruth Lackner to have enjoyed reciting, he was never heard using Yiddish. According to Chalfen,² he considered Yiddish as “verdorbenes Deutsch”—“rotten/corrupt German”—and held all writing in that language in low esteem, regarding

...the local Yiddish poet, who would later enjoy international fame in America and elsewhere, not as a real poet but rather as a phenomenon of folklore.

The love of the *Muttersprache*, as the mother's tongue, is a literal given and the central vortex of Celan's life: it was the mother who loved the German *Kultursprache*, *Hochdeutsch*, and cultivated that love in her son. Like most women of her day and age, she had only limited formal schooling, but she had always been a great reader,

especially of classical German literature. Writes Chalfen :

She especially enjoyed reading the German classics, and in later years she would compete with her son Paul in quoting their favorite authors from memory.

She was insistent that only High German be spoken in the household and, although the Antschel family was not well off, just as insistent that the young Paul should go to the best Jewish kindergarten—which was the only one that had kept German as its teaching language. Though the father seems to have been more interested in having his son schooled in the Jewish religious traditions, the mother prevailed and that part of his education was put off for later:

(The parents) were also concerned with his Jewish education, especially the father, but in the mother's view there was still time for that. To her, the German language was more important, and all her life she saw to it that correct, formal German was spoken at home—she did not tolerate the colloquial Bukovinian dialect.

That Bukowina dialect or *Umgangssprache*, with its inevitable Yiddish strains, must have been associated by the young Celan with his father, at that time making a living as a broker in firewood—just as he associated Hebrew with his father and the latter's Zionist leanings, thwarted, tragically so, by the mother, as we shall see. As an adolescent, Celan seems to have talked much with Ruth Lackner about the question of multilingualism, and, as Chalfen reports:

Again and again Paul emphasized that, despite his advanced knowledge of several foreign languages and his ability to learn new ones easily, he would never write poems in any but his mother tongue.

This harking on the mother tongue as the only possible tongue in which to write poems is, of course, a near-cliché of romantic poetics, but this is not the place to analyse the presuppositions and philosophical underpinnings of this “truism” in any depth. Celan would come back to this theme several times in his life, the strongest formulation being reported by Ruth Lackner and consigned by Chalfen:

Only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies.

Although we do not know the exact date of this citation, it seems plausible that it came at the one moment of his life when he was investigating the possibility of writing in another language, namely in Rumanian. During the first two years following the war Celan lived in Bucharest and one of his close friends, the Rumanian poet Petre Solomon, convinced him to write in that language. It is clear that the temptation to

decide to write in a language other than German must have been there in some form or other, and the vehemence of Celan's defence of his own decision to write in German, in the face of accusations that he was writing in the language of the murderers, should not simply be taken as a guarantee that the temptation did not exist for him. What is certain at least is that Celan did pose himself the question, made attempts at using another language, even if only half-hearted ones, and went back to writing in German.

He was to stay with his decision throughout his life. In 1961, he formulated the quandary one last time, as an answer to a questionnaire concerning 'The Problem of the Bilingual' from the Flinker Bookshop in Paris (Celan):

I do not believe there is such a thing as bilingual poetry. Double-talk, yes, this you may find among our various contemporary arts and acrobatics of the word, especially those who manage to establish themselves in blissful harmony with each fashion of consumer culture, being as polyglot as they are polychrome.

Poetry is by necessity a unique instance of language. Hence never—forgive the truism, but poetry, like truth, goes all too often to the dogs—hence never what is double.³

Much could be made of that "double," that "Zweimalige," dismissed out of hand as a generative possibility for "true" poetry, and the disappearance of the murdered father, the other of his own genesis, from the "Toten-gedenken" that dominates the work in favour of the mother. Chalfen's nostalgic and idealized narrative of Celan's family romance makes it difficult to get any deep insight into the psychic make-up of young Paul. There are, however, enough veiled allusions to difficulties in his parents' marriage, and to a weak father figure (physically a head smaller than his wife Fritzi), rather unsuccessful in his worldly undertakings, and at home clearly dominated by his wife, who compensated by being extremely authoritarian in relation to his son (being beaten and/or locked up for long periods in a room were a regular feature of Paul's upbringing). Although until now, to my knowledge, no critic has attempted a psychoanalytical approach to Celan's life (either in relation to the early Freudian family romance or in terms of the later mental illness⁴), it is clear from the information one can glean from the various, though scanty, available sources, that a strong oedipal conflict was in all likelihood left unresolved by the time the tragedy of the war destroyed the family—and that Celan's later psychic troubles may have their roots as far back as those pre-Shoa days. Cioran, in his little memoir on Paul Celan, suggests as much when he writes: "Something within him must have been broken very early on, even before the misfortunes which crashed down upon his people and himself."

The Celan opus itself is eloquent on these matters: the dead mother is (doubly) omnipresent—directly, as the remembered addressee, or indirectly, through the mediation of the German language—while the father is conspicuously absent. Celan

had heard of his father's death in a letter from his mother in the autumn of 1942, and a poem written shortly afterwards, entitled "Schwarze Flocken," is the only occurrence in his work that makes specific mention of the father's death:

(...)wenn schneeig stäubt das Gebein
deines Vaters, unter den Hufen zerknirscht
das Lied von der Zeder...(...)

But even on this occasion Celan's mention of his father's death—which, we should not forget, was of the same horrendous nature as the mother's—is put into a double parenthesis. The poem "Schwarze Flocken" is addressed not to the dead father, but to the mother (line 16: "Blutete, Mutter, der Herbst mir hinweg..."), and the mention of the father's death is only given between quotation marks, as part of a letter from the mother to the son, recreated by the poet. Celan's concern, and the complaint of the poem, is for the mother: what stays with him from the letter is the mother's need for a shawl in that cold winter, which, in the last line, the poet says he is weaving for her. The father's death is neither commented on nor mourned; in fact, its mention in the (restructured? faithfully transcribed?—we don't know) letter from the mother is relegated to a subordinate clause: it functions linguistically as a trope which aims at qualifying and intensifying the harshness of the winter weather, and thus the mother's need for a shawl. The second parenthesis excluding the father's death is not textual but contextual: the poem in question was first published in Celan's ill-fated early volume *Der Sand aus den Urnen*. When Celan selected those poems from that volume he wanted to keep for inclusion in the first major book, *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, "Schwarze Wolken" fell by the wayside. Chalfen, noting, in his understated fashion, that "Paul Celan ist mit seinem Vater nie ins reine gekommen," suggests that the only other mention of the father in Celan's work is to be found in the volume *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*, in the poem "Andenken," though the connection seems rather tenuous. The lines Chalfen cites to support his thesis are:

Feigengenährt sei das Herz,
darin sich the Stunde besinnt
auf das Mandelauge des Toten,
Feigengenährt.

Fig-nourished be the heart
in which the hour reflects
on the almond eye of the dead one,
fig-nourished.

Chalfen claims that the "almond-eye of the dead one" (the German *des* grammatically indicating the male gender of the dead one) points to the father via the "almond," which,

in Celan, always stands for Jewishness, and via the “fig-nourished,” which he reads as an allusion to the father’s Zionist leanings. It is a generous interpretation, for one could as well point to the fact that the “des” could also be the neutral form, i.e., that the reference is to “what is dead,” while in the second stanza, a “gescheiterte Stirn,” a “shipwrecked forehead,” picking up the death theme of the first stanza, becomes immediately the “Klippenschwester,” the “cliff-sister,” a feminine form. Clearly, Celan has banned the father from his work. Consulting the Nielsen-Pors *Index zur Lyrik Paul Celans*, we find that the singular “Vater” does not appear once in the opus (the plural “Väter” does occur three times), while the word “Mutter” appears fifteen times as such and another ten times in various word combinations. If we consider Celan’s poetic enterprise as a protracted act of mourning—which in many ways it is indeed—then, besides the relatively rare occasions on which it is clearly the fate of the whole of the Jewish people that is at stake, this mourning addresses exclusively the mother’s death.

If I insist so strongly on this relationship it is because in it can be located the dynamic core of Celan’s work; what, in Benjamin’s terminology, drives Celan’s “Intention auf die Sprache,” namely a vortex in which “Mutter” and “Sprache” are inextricably and actively linked, so that, with his mother dead, the language too is dead: all his life Celan wrote in the dead (mother’s) tongue, a tongue killed and simultaneously kept alive in and through her murderers, with the intention, a magic “Beschwörung,” to raise the dead (mother) via the poetically (relived) language—“alived, after all,” as he puts it in a poem from *Atemwende*. It has often been said that all poets write in a foreign tongue, or that ‘poetry’ as such is a foreign language, but for Celan the language of poetry is even further estranged: it is a dead language he has to write in, so as to keep alive the memory of the mother. His poetry then is not so much a necrology as a necrography. Paul Celan, in that sense, is not a “German” poet, but a poet writing in the (dead) (German) language of his (dead) mother. In a very early poem—dating from 1942 or early 43—“Nähe der Gräber,” this link between the mother and the German language is explicitly stated in the poem’s concluding stanza:

Und duldest du Mutter, wie einst, ach, daheim,
den leisen, den deutschen, den schmerzlichen Reim?⁵

And do you allow, mother, like back then, ah, home,
the quiet, the German, the painful rhyme?

The poet is asking his dead mother for permission to use the language of her murderers in order to recreate the moment and place—*wie einst,...daheim*—of their common life.

II

It is time now to return to Celan's relations with France, the focus of this discussion. France was to become and remain his home (he took French nationality in 1950), and if anything was able to mark or inflect the poet's life and thought after the young man's devastating experience of war and loss. Though this is not at all certain, and would remain to be proved, it had to be the country and culture he chose to spend the rest of his life in.

Celan's relationship to France had begun earlier than his July 1948 move to that country. Before the war, in 1938, he had spent a year in Tours, studying medicine. Again, it had been the mother who had made this journey possible—against Celan's father's desire that the whole family should emigrate, preferably to Israel,⁶ though South America was also considered at one point, given the ever more dangerous situation for Jews in Europe. This emigration plan would have been financially possible only if Paul had put off his studies, something his mother argued vehemently against. So he went to France in November of that year, travelling via the northern train route that took him through Germany. Much later, in a poem set by its title in Paris ("La Contrescarpe"), he alludes to the stopover in Berlin, which fell fatefully on the day following the "Kristallnacht":

Via Krakow
you came, at the Anhalter
railway station
a smoke flowed towards your glance,
it already belonged to tomorrow.⁷

In July 1939, he returned to Czernowitz during the summer holidays. The impending war (the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed that summer) made a return to France impossible, and in the fall he took up his studies at the local university—but switched from medicine to "Romanistik." Clearly, his year in France had given the eighteen year old the time and independence from his family to think about what he wanted to do—and that was to pursue a literary career. The choice of studying Romance rather than German literature was certainly due to the influence of his recent trip to France, during which he had come into contact with the works of a number of contemporary French writers—most importantly, those of the French surrealists. Edith Silberman recalls that back from Tours, Paul "schwärmte...für Aragon und Éluard, Camus und Breton...und plädierte für den Surrealismus, der uns Daheimgebliebenen zunächst nur befremdete" ("had a passion...for Aragon and Eluard, Camus and Breton...and argued for surrealism, a movement that at first felt alien to us who had stayed home").

This connection to surrealism runs like a red thread through the career of the young Celan. During the postwar years in Bukarest it seems that his closest, and most

important, literary associations, besides the already mentioned Petre Solomon and the poet Ion Caraion, were with the surrealist group around Gherasim Luca, who had returned from Paris in 1939, while keeping up the contact with André Breton. By that time Luca was already writing in French, and he too would eventually return to Paris—where he still lived until 1994, when he too committed suicide by jumping off the same bridge (le Pont Mirabeau) Celan had in 1970. Together with a third poet, Celan and Luca planned an escape from Rumania, but this plan did not work out. In December 1947, Celan crossed the Rumanian-Hungarian border alone and made his way to Vienna via Budapest. One could imagine that a poet so caught up in the German language and German culture, and so determined to write only in that language, might have found it possible to settle in post-war Austria. But this was not to be. Despite the fact that Celan published his first book in that city; that he quickly made valuable literary connections with Edgar Jené, Milo Dor, Reinhard Federman and Klaus Demus; that Ludwig von Ficker, Trakl's friend, had celebrated him as "heir to Else Lasker-Schüler"; that he met Ingeborg Bachmann, with whom he remained linked in a complex personal and writerly relationship for years to come,⁸ he seems not to have liked Vienna and after six months he moved to Paris. Chalfen's *Jugend-Biographie* does not explain this quick shift—in fact, Chalfen gives less than a page to this pivotal stage of Celan's life and ends his book with one paragraph stating Celan's arrival in Paris.

III

Paul Celan's twenty-one-and-a-half years of residence in Paris has—so far— not been subjected to a scrutiny sufficiently exhaustive to paint a coherent picture of his relations to France. John Felstiner's 1995 book, *Paul Celan. Poet, Survivor, Jew*, although billed as a critical biography, and despite the fact that the author had access to a wide range of information (manuscripts, letters, etc), remains very uninformative on this subject. Felstiner—a professor of English and Judaica at Stanford—is primarily interested in Celan as a Jewish poet, as the title of his book, and the poems he chooses to scrutinize, make clear. This *parti pris* favors an interpretation of the Paris years as essentially exilic, and Felstiner reads the first Paris poem ("In Egypt") from that angle, linking it to a mythic yearning for the homeland. This is not an incorrect way of reading that specific poem, but given the dearth of analysis of Celan's relation to France in the book, such an initial stance becomes unnecessarily emblematic for the whole stay. Much more research obviously needs to be done in relation to the biography, and to the topic under consideration.

As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, only a few dispersed papers and memoirs try to situate Celan in relationship to his adopted country. As a case in point, it seems worthwhile to mention the tribulations of the one collection of articles originally

dedicated to the theme of “Paul Celan in France”—and which has not managed to clarify that specific issue in any major way. In fact, the Celan issue of *ACTS*, edited by Benjamin Hollander, was at first entitled simply “Paul Celan in France,” and the editor’s aim had been to gather material related exclusively to that theme. It was only when he realized the dearth of specific essays on the proposed theme that the concept of the issue widened to include Celan’s general relationship to translation, and, in the process, the original title was demoted to subtitle while a new title, taken from an essay by Joel Golb, “Translating Tradition,” was added.

The general tenor of the existing attempts at dealing with Celan in France suggests a mood of indifference, if not hostility, on the part of France—or, more accurately, Paris and the Parisian literary community—towards Celan. Thus Bernard Böschenstein, who probably has been the most attentive critic of this theme (the essay reproduced in *ACTS* had appeared in his book *Leuchttürme*, published in 1982), having started his essay with the statement that “up to now, Celan’s relation with French poetry has been virtually unexplored,” goes on to say:

Living in Paris from 1948 to his death, Celan consciously *experienced* his situation’s paradox. Sometimes celebrated in Germany as the most daring of modern poets, he was hardly known in France, until the end.⁹

Though it is true that Celan’s public fame in France has been mainly posthumous, Celan was hardly an unknown or underrated poet in Paris. He certainly was highly esteemed in the very specific milieu that he himself chose to be in contact with: those elder poets he knew about and admired, and whom he chose to contact on his arrival, and, later, those younger French poets and writers of his own generation. Cioran, Jean Daive, André du Bouchet, Edmond Jabès and others bear witness to this.

Joel Golb, in his essay “Translating Tradition: A Reading of Paul Celan’s ‘Huhediblu’,” expresses feelings similar to those of Böschenstein when he writes:

Despite the intense cultural ferment surrounding Celan during the time he spent there, and despite the strong contribution to this ferment of Heidegger and a basically German Romantic heritage, Paris remained, for Celan, a city of irrevocable exile. It possessed a coldness that Celan tried to meet on his own terms, but would not overcome. Certainly, one of the significant factors informing the genius of his translations from English, Russian, Rumanian, Hebrew, and French is an acute awareness of having to confront the cultural values of an alien milieu—as if the translations played out a creative encounter not fully possible in the real, phenomenal world.¹⁰

Here Golb is clearly trying to validate the thesis put forward in an earlier paragraph according to which Celan’s language, laden as it is with all he both loved and hated in German culture, “repetitively flees from its own linguistic matrix, estranging itself...”

and thus reflects “an imaginative process involving the ‘translation’ of the past...into the Parisian present.” For this to happen, the Parisian present has thus also to be alienating, inimical, etc. One would, however, be justified, I believe, in wondering where Celan could possibly not have been in “inexorable exile”—and pointing to his sojourns in places closer to his irretrievably lost home in the North Bukowina, such as Bukarest and Vienna, where he did not stay, or even to the possible Jewish homeland to which he did not even consider emigrating; one could just as well argue that Paris was, conceivably, the least “inexorable exile” of all. One would further be justified in questioning Golb’s contention (advanced without any proof, and probably accepted on the hearsay of other writers on the subject, such as Böschstein, whose previously mentioned essay Golb translated for the Celan *ACTS* issue) that Paris possessed “a coldness that Celan tried to meet on his own terms, but would not overcome.” From what we do know concerning Celan’s characterological make-up, his ever-deepening fear and mistrust of people, even close friends, his extreme pride, and, in Cioran’s words, “his pathological fear of being hurt,” reversing the statement to read “a coldness (in Celan) that Paris tried to meet on its own terms, but would not overcome,” would make just as much sense. There is of course little doubt that life in Paris was not easy for Celan, whose cultural background, that specific mixture of *Mittleuropa* and *Ostjudentum*, did certainly not fit perfectly with Gallic modes of being. In a letter to Edith Silberman, he writes that Paris is “leider, ein sehr, sehr hartes Pflaster.” The French poet Yves Bonnefoy, in his memoir of Celan, relates the following incident:

I can still hear Paul Celan saying to me one afternoon, when we got together to talk about Romanesque architecture and painting, you (meaning French or Western poets) are at home inside your reference points and language. But I’m outside.¹¹

Bonnefoy sees this statement as expressing Celan’s condition as a “Jew *with an unpronounceable name* in wartime Europe (and after), a Germanophone in Paris,” believing that “doubtlessly the most harshly felt form of his exile was that as a Jew, i.e., inhabited by a founding word from the other, moving outward from I to thou, he had to live in the essential impersonality of the Western languages, which only conceive incarnation in terms of paradox and on the basis of a borrowed book.” Celan’s exile is absolute: he is, to use a French phrase, “un mort en sursis.” To blame his chosen place of residence for this fact will not do. To consider France as the least painful place for this man to “live out” that undue supplement he considered his own life to be after the holocaust and his mother’s death, seems closer to the truth. Paris then, for Celan, was a place he could use, similar to those vertical light-sources, the *Lichtkeile* that appear so often in his poems, as an outpost from which to keep one watchful eye (a northeastly meridian) on Germany and one mourning eye (a south-easterly meridian) on the deathscape of his homeland.

That his public fame, once the “Todesfuge” got the acclaim we know, should be

mainly centered in Germany, was only natural. The very difficulty of his poetry made translation of it into any language a slow process; among the European languages this is especially true of French, where morphological and grammatical limitations, as well as syntactical rigidity, make for a medium very resistant to Celan's transformative use of language. It is therefore not surprising that the first good translations—especially Martine Broda's—only began to appear in the late seventies, and this fact cannot be adduced to prove Celan's "neglect" by the French. Celan, upon arrival in Paris, immediately set to work integrating himself into the Gallic landscape and managed to do so to quite an extent. Early on, he met a good number of writers who were to remain important for him. Of special import for that time seems to have been the meeting with the poet Yves Bonnefoy, who shows us a rather more humane, open and socially involved figure than the one usually depicted:

His gestures, above all in the first years after Vienna—at the time of the room in rue des Ecoles, of the cheap university restaurants, of the archaic typewriter with a Greek-temple peristyle, of destitution—had nonchalance, and his head had a graceful movement towards the shoulder: as if to accompany, for a stretch, along the summer streets after a lively night's conversation, the friend being left for a whole day.¹²

It was Bonnefoy who introduced Celan, on the latter's insistence, to Yvan Goll in November 1949. This encounter should much later show its fateful nature: the "Goll-affair"—Claire Goll, the poet's widow, accused Celan falsely of plagiarism—which broke in 1960, does indeed mark a traumatic turning point. From then on Celan's psychic condition started to deteriorate and the hyper-sensitivity and fear of being hurt started their metamorphosis towards those psychotic occasions of paranoia, which, because of their overly dramatic lineaments, make for a much more 'poetic' picture of the personage.

A more objective way of measuring Celan's relationship with France would consist in an analysis and evaluation of his enormous output in translating French poetry. The complete edition of Celan's poetry translations takes up two volumes of the *Collected Works*, and the first one of these, weighing in at over 850 pages, consists exclusively of translations from the French (but does not include various novels and prose translations that were in all likelihood bread-and-butter undertakings). Admittedly, the presentation is bilingual, but that still means that Celan translated over 400 pages of French poetry alone. Looking at this work chronologically, it is clear that the young Celan was still very much under the sway of surrealism. The first poets he translated, probably still in the late forties, judging from the publication dates of these poems around 1950, were André Breton, Aimé Césaire, Henri Pastoureau and Benjamin Péret (Eluard and Desnos would be added to this list in the late fifties).

He translated only a handful of works by these poets, and one gets the feeling that he himself, as he developed his own work beyond the early surrealist motives still present

in the *Der Sand aus den Urnen*, grew quickly beyond what surrealism as such had to offer. (The Rumanian poems already show a marked criticism of, and a distancing from, surrealist techniques, as Amy D. Colin has shown.¹³) Throughout the fifties, Celan's translations point towards a serious, not to say systematic, investigation of French poetry, reaching back to the fathers of modernism; Baudelaire, Nerval, Mallarmé, and especially to Rimbaud, whose *Bateau Ivre* Celan rendered magisterially into German. As Böschenstein notes:

Rimbaud's poem offered him a chance to creatively follow his inclination towards a strange and specialized vocabulary. He took note, with satisfaction, of finds such as *Derweil die Tide tobte* (meanwhile the tide raged) or *sie fahren nicht, die Klipper, die Koggen, die mich suchten* (they don't set sail, the clippers, the cogs that sought me) for *les moniteurs et les voiliers des Hanses* (the monitors and sailboats of the Hanses).¹⁴

These translations, and those of Apollinaire, and, later on, his strong interest in Michaux, are certainly much more central to Celan's own endeavours than are the Valéry and Mallarmé versions. It is as if Celan had to undertake a translation of *The Young Fate* and of at least one Mallarmé poem so as to come to terms—and refuse—a certain direction of French poetics. Given his personal relations during the sixties with a group of younger French poets, known for their néo-Mallarméen leanings, du Bouchet and Jean Daive foremost among them, it has often been suggested that Celan's work should be seen as directly related to Mallarmé's poetico-theoretical concerns—both thematically and formally.

It is this supposed link to Mallarmé which has usually been given as the closest connection of Celan with French literature. That this is not so—and that the connection to Rimbaud, Apollinaire and Michaux is the central link—is in the process of being shown. Except for the intersection of certain rare motifs, such as the seven-pointed star (cf., for example, the poem *Todtnauberg*), or dice that cannot be "entwürfelt," the poetic universes of the two poets point in opposite directions. One cannot agree with Peter Szondi when he suggests, in his otherwise excellent *Celan-Studien*, that "Celan's Sprachverwendung" is directly in line with "die der modernen Lyrik seit Mallarmé," and that Celan has "in der Nachfolge des späten Mallarmé wie als Zeitgenosse und aufmerksamer Beobachter der modernen Linguistik, Sprachphilosophie und Aesthetik die Konsequenz gezogen"—and created a work that "von sich selbst nicht mehr handelt, sondern es ist." Szondi here is caught in a dehistoricization of the Benjaminian idea of the "Intention auf die Sprache," as Winfried Menninghaus points out in the introduction to his book, *Magie Der Form*. For Menninghaus, Celan is much closer to a real understanding of Benjamin's concept: while trying to de-"mystify" Benjamin's theory via semiotics, Szondi forgets that the "mystical experience of language is nearly always "ein Produkt von Krisen" (such as the one the Jews had just lived and died through).

Otto Pöggeler has made related points. For example, when he notes that what Marlies

Janz calls Celan's "aesthetic absolutism" should not be linked to Mallarmé's poetics:

...die Unterschiede zwischen seiner (Celan's) Weise des Dichtens und der Mallarméschen sind aber deutlich: Celan reagiert durchaus in seinen Versen auf das, was unter Menschen geschieht, und er will auch "menschliche" Reaktionen hervorrufen. Obwohl Marlies Janz von einem "ästhetischen Absolutismus" spricht, zeigt sie, daß Celan sich in seinen Versen "schneuzt"—indem er nach ihrer Ansicht...z.B. das sakrale "Gebenedeit" mit der jiddischen Verballhornung "Gebentscht" gestich und hörbar abtut.¹⁵

That the young Celan wanted to learn from the French masters of modernism is only natural, just as is his desire to perfect his translation techniques, something he does, for example, in his version of Valéry's *Jeune Parque*. His relation to the Mallarmé-Valéry line is, however, made clear by a statement in a letter he sent to Pöggeler, and cited by the latter:

Sie haben mich auf unserem Spaziergang in H., gefragt, weshalb ich die junge Parze übersetzt habe; ich weiß es jetzt: um mir das Recht zu erwerben, etwas *gegen* die *Kunst* zu sagen...¹⁶

In the *Meridian* speech, Celan poses the question directly when he says, "should we, to put it concretely, should we think Mallarmé, for instance, through to the end?"¹⁷ Remembering Mallarmé's sense of the absolute poem, the following citation from further on in the *Meridian* should answer the question:

Das absolute Gedicht—nein das gibt es nicht, das kann es nicht geben!
Aber es gibt wohl, mit jedem wirklichem Gedicht, es gibt, mit dem anspruchslosesten Gedicht, diese unabweisbare Frage, diesen unerhörten Anspruch.

Pöggeler sums up that "unabweisbare Frage" that even the most modest poem has to answer today:

Celan weißt darauf hin, daß sein Gedicht "weit draußen" ist, bei einer "offenbleibenden," "zu keinem Ende kommenden, ins Offene und Leere und Freie weisenden Frage" (zugewandt dem Anderen, das zum Du und zum ganz Anderen werden kann).

And that open-ended, outwards-pointing aspect of his poetics is diametrically opposed to Mallarmé's (and *a fortiori* Valéry's) conception of the poem or the book—considered as the final closure, the place where everything comes to rest.

How wrong an assimilation of Celan's poetics to a continuation of Mallarmé's hermetic/symbolist universe is could also be shown through an analysis of *Strette*, the

first compilation of Celan poems translated into French, the combined effort of André du Bouchet, Jean Daive and Jean-Pierre Burgart. The Mallarméan preciousness of the language, the *recherché*, archaic vocabulary, the nominalization of verbal structures, deeply falsify Celan's universe. An extremely pertinent and detailed critique of these translations, and one which gave rise to a major controversy in Paris, is Henri Meschonnic's essay "On appelle cela traduire Celan."

That Celan himself did not voice any objections to these versions—or at least to the early drafts, which he saw and, according to the translators, "approved"—is most likely due to the close friendship that linked him to du Bouchet and Daive. If, during the last ten years of his life, his psychic health deteriorated visibly, leading to ever greater isolation, marked by many break-ups in old friendships, this again should not be blamed on Paris or on its literary scene. The group around *l'Ephémère*, the magazine Celan was co-editor of, and which included the above-mentioned poets, is proof that, as far as his health permitted, Celan was visible on the French literary scene, and, as Roger Laporte's essay suggests,¹⁸ held in high esteem. Indeed, the first issue of *l'Ephémère* opened with work by Celan, the *Meridian* speech, indicating that it was Celan and his poetics that were to be central to the whole undertaking.

Though Celan's suicide, in the spring of 1970, interrupted that project, his work has grown ever more important, even "incontournable," for contemporary French writing. Since the late seventies, good to excellent translations of his work have begun to appear, with increasing speed. Besides Martine Broda's ground-breaking work, such excellent translators as Michel Deguy and Jean Launay have contributed different approaches to the Celan oeuvre. That Maurice Blanchot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jacques Derrida have devoted full books to the poet, is further proof of his importance for French literature and philosophy.

In the context of this brief essay, I have only been able to give a sketchy indication of the complexity and richness of Celan's relations to France and French literature. Until recently, the perceived Mallarmé connection and the scandal-mongering "Goll affair" have overshadowed and tilted that relation in unfruitful directions. Much more work is needed in this area, in literary, historical, and textual areas. As Böschstein's essay has shown, Celan's relations with his living elders could be changing and even stormy (his turn away from René Char and towards Henri Michaux is symptomatic of this, but it is, before all, a clear indication of the evolution of Celan's thinking and writing). There can, however, be no doubt that Paris and French literature proved predominantly nourishing and positive for the exiled poet. Although his multilingualism and keen curiosity made it possible for him to investigate poetry from many different provenances (and the second volume of his collected translations is proof of that), it seems clear that if any national literature was of major import to him, it was that of France. In relation to all other literature his attraction was towards individual writers, and that is true not only of, say, Russian literature, but also of German literature. In the mature Celan, the overall love and admiration for the achievements of German culture as inculcated by his mother waned for obvious historical reasons, and only a few isolated German figures retained

his unchallenged allegiance: Hölderlin, before all, and one or two contemporaries, such as Ingeborg Bachmann. He could not become a “French” writer, as Cioran or Beckett did, for his mission was other, his exile much more absolute. To keep the memory of the mother alive he had to write in German, and he also had to destroy that language he was writing in, as it was the language of her murderers. That destruction—and the possible/impossible reconstruction of an innocent Adamic language that was no longer or not yet German—is central to his “Intention auf die Sprache,” a “Sprach-Magie,” as Menninghaus calls it, constantly incarnated in the “Bow and arrow” images, so determinant in his metapoetic writing. And that “pro- and aggressive” image brings us back to the beginning of this essay, and the military vocabulary I used to describe the geographical figure of Celan’s encircling of the enemy’s camp.

If Celan’s *Meridian* opened the first issue of *l’Ephémère*, it was work by Mandelstam that closed the last issue. This coincidence suggests a further image. Mandelstam, Celan’s poetic brother, his double, situated at the other extreme northern point—somewhere along Russian “rivers north of the future?”—if we extend the arc described by Celan’s travels on the other side of Czernowitz, completes the encirclement of Germany. Celan’s war machine is in place. The “grey squadrons” can take off. No, Celan is not a “German” poet—although he wrote, at least on a surface level, in that language. No, Celan is not a French poet—his exile was much too absolute for any “change coat” solution of that order. No—Celan is not a Russian poet either—despite his jocular reference in that direction in a letter to a friend—for his Russian double is already dead. Maybe he is, as George Steiner suggested, simply the “major European poet of the period after 1945,” and his work, this life-long gift for his mother in her tongue, the first “European Book of Dead,” in analogy with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which was a guide for the souls of the men and women who had passed through the greatest catastrophe that can befall us.

Notes

1. Cioran, Rumanian by origin, was close to Celan throughout the latter’s Paris days. Celan translated Cioran’s first French book, the *Précis de Décomposition*, into German in the early fifties. It is interesting to note that when Cioran was moved to write a homage to Celan, the whole opening paragraph of the 2 1/2 page long piece is devoted to describe his (Cioran’s) decision to change languages. This paragraph seems worth quoting here, as its total difference from Celan’s thinking does however seem to throw some light on the latter’s choices—or lack thereof: “*Précis de Décomposition*, my first book written in French, was published in 1949 by Gallimard. Five works of mine had been published in Roumanian. In 1937, I arrived in Paris on scholarship from the Bucharest Institut français, and I have never left. It was only in 1947, though, that I thought of giving up my native Language. It was a sudden decision. Switching languages at the age of 37 is not an easy undertaking. In truth it is a martyrdom, but a fruitful martyrdom, an adventure that lends meaning to being (for which it has great need!). I recommend to anyone going through a

major depression to take on the conquest of a foreign idiom, to re-energize himself, altogether to renew himself, through the Word. Without my drive to conquer French, I might have committed suicide, A language is a continent, a universe, and the one who makes it his is a conquistador. But let us get to the subject.” E. M. Cioran, “Encounters with Paul Celan,” *ACTS* 8/9 (1988): 151-153.

2. Israel Chalfen, *Paul Celan. Eine Biographie seiner Jugend* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1979) 101.
3. Paul Celan, “Reply to a Questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore, Paris, 1961,” *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemary Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986) 23.
4. There are, however, a few essays and commentaries that cautiously approach this problem. Cf. among others, Marlies Janz, *Vom Engagement absoluter Poesie. Zur Lyrik und Ästhetik Paul Celans* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1976), C. Schwerin, “Bitterer Brunnen des Herzens,” *Der Monat* 2 (1981): 73-81. J.K. Lyon, “Ganz und gar nicht hermetisch”: Zum “richtigen” *Lesen von Paul Celans Lyrik. Psalm und Hawdalah. Zum Werk Paul Celans* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1987).
5. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), v. III 20.
6. Late in life Paul Celan did make a short trip to Israel, and although he is said to have always been extremely concerned with the fate of that country, it does not seem that he ever so much as considered the possibility of emigrating there.
7. Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, v. I 282.
8. Cf. Ingeborg Bachmann und Paul Celan: *Poetische Korrespondenzen*, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Sigrid Weigel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).
9. Bernhard Böschenstein, “Paul Celan and French Poetry,” trans. Joel Golb, *ACTS* 8/9 (1988): 181.
10. Joel Golb, “Translating Tradition: A Reading of Paul Celan’s ‘Huhediblu’,” *ACTS* 8/9 (1988): 173.
11. Yves Bonnefoy, “Paul Celan,” trans. Joel Golb, *ACTS* 8/9 (1988): 11.
12. Bonnefoy, “Paul Celan” 12.
13. Amy D. Colin, *Paul Celan’s Poetics of Destruction. Argumentum e Silentio* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986) 157-183.
14. Böschenstein, “Paul Celan and French Poetry” 182.
15. Otto Pöggeler, *Spur des Wortes* (München: Verlag Larl Alber, 1986) 120.
16. Pöggeler, *Spur des Wortes* 121.
17. Paul Celan, “The Meridian,” *Paul Celan: Collected Prose* 43-44.
18. Cf. Roger Laporte, “Readings of Paul Celan,” *ACTS* 8/9 (1988): 222-227.