



Call for Papers

Celan's Theory of Poetry Today

Conference on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of Paul Celan's Birth
and the 50th Anniversary of his Death

University of Zurich, June 4-6, 2020

Throughout his literary career, Paul Celan (1920-1970) reflected upon his own poetic assumptions and their manifestations in a number of theoretical texts, notes, material collections, and letters. He was interested less in questions of the interpretation and comprehension of individual poems or collections of poems and more in interrogating his own poetic self-understanding and the task of his poetry and of poetry in general: in his own present, after Auschwitz. Celan attempts to make a clear distinction between poetry on the one hand and art on the other. This intention fails repeatedly, and yet we can identify certain theoretical positions in the individual attempts at defining what poetry is or should be, positions which are repeatedly referred to in Celan research – whether reconstructively, critically, or with the intention of expanding and clarifying.

Celan's theory of poetry, the topic of this conference, does not exist in a final or systematic form, being instead composed of individual forays, formulas, and fragments. They are theoretical approaches whose (dialogical and diachronic) incompleteness is part of their principle and thus essential to them. Celan's theoretical writings are also characterized by their diverse intertextuality. They gain important elements of their theoretical impetus from their affirmative or negative response to contemporary and historical works of literature, art, and philosophy. Just as decisive are idiosyncratic coinages like "acute of the present" (*Akut des Heutigen*) or "breath turn" (*Atemwende*) and shifts in meaning in the semantics of existing terms like "message in a bottle," "dialogue," "meridian" – or even "poetry" and "art."

Most of Celan's theoretical writings were composed for specific occasions (e.g. award ceremonies, publication projects, radio broadcasts). They are very clearly shaped by these occasions, where the poet was addressing a specific audience at a specific moment, either verbally or in writing. Celan's theoretical writings thus cannot be understood without reference to their historical context. What they have in common, however, is that they each decouple from their given respective context in order to



enter into dialogue with a counterpart, a “you.” Starting with his engagement with surrealism in Bucharest and Vienna, individual and social commemoration of Shoah is a particular focus of Celan’s, connecting a view of the immediate past with engagement with the present and concern for the future.

This conference on the 100th anniversary of Paul Celan’s birth and the 50th anniversary of his death intends to accept the invitation offered in Celan’s writings. To what extent do Celan’s theoretical positions have a productive and prospective focus? How current is his theory of poetry today? During the conference, the intention is that both the well-known and lesser-known writings, both published and unpublished documents from all phases of his career be questioned for their (potential) contemporary relevance – not only on the level of theory and content but also with respect to their forms. The following questions could help guide inquiry:

- Is Celan’s notion of the “contemporary” still relevant today? And if so, how?
- What role might the demand for memory and dialogue play in contemporary poetry theory?
- How might we characterize Celan’s individual theoretical attempts?
- How convincing is Celan’s critique of metaphor from a contemporary perspective?
- What is the continuing significance of the opposition between hermetic and open poetry? Is “darkness” still a workable poetological category?
- Is Celan’s concern with exile and language as a place of remembrance and orientation still significant for research surrounding contemporary exile literature?
- What role does Shoah remembrance play today for poetic engagement with the German language – or language generally?
- How can the poem and its poet be understood in their radical singularity? And is singularity even a convincing category?
- What meaning can be ascribed to the concepts of truth and beauty?
- Is Celan’s theory of translation still relevant today for scholarly engagement with poetry translation or the praxis of translation?

We are looking for proposed topics in German, French, or English which engage with these questions from a poetological, literary historical, or methodological perspective. We especially welcome comparative contributions as well as those from early-career researchers. Please send an abstract (approx. 500 words) for a 30-minute talk by the end of June 2019 to Dr. Evelyn Dueck (evelyn.dueck@uzh.ch) and Prof. Dr. Sandro Zanetti (sandro.zanetti@uzh.ch). Decisions regarding selected abstracts will be made by the end of July 2019. The conference will also result in a publication which is planned to appear at the end of 2020, only a few months after the conference. That means that the selected contributions must already exist in publication-ready form by the time of the conference. Travel and accommodation costs for contributors will be paid for in the framework of our budget.