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“THE HALO PAUL CELAN”. REVISITING ROMANIAN MANUSCRIPTS OF PAUL CELAN

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore Paul Celan’s writings in the Romanian language which have been preserved as manuscripts, and their significance to his very earliest poetry. Firstly, I will reconstruct the Bucharest episode in his life and work and then discuss the nature of the manuscripts that I examined in 2015. I will then recapitulate existing research on these texts. Discussing one of them, I will propose to update their meaning for this poetic work, especially in the context of Jacques Derrida’s *Shibboleth for Paul Celan*.

KEYWORDS: Paul Celan, Romanian-language literature, Shibboleth, Jacques Derrida, genetic criticism

I will address several questions regarding Romanian writings in Paul Celan’s wider literary work and the nature of the manuscripts I have examined, which reconstruct the literary Romanian-language “project” (Corbea-Hoişie 2015: 5) that Celan, then aged twenty-seven, abandoned after two years.¹ Thanks to this experience, he had a chance to “watch [him]self in profile”, as in [*Partizan al absolutismului erotic*] ([*Partisan of erotic absolutism*]), in other words to reflect on his writing and his poetic identity. For example, in one specific poem from where the title of my paper “The halo Paul Celan” comes (Celan 1987: 200), I will show the significance of these small texts for Celanian poetics and how they could be reintegrated into literary discourse on his work, especially through the study of the manuscripts. The word “halo” could actually serve to examine his Romanian writing. Firstly, it constitutes the first appearance of Paul Pessach Antschel’s pseudonym. Secondly, it appears as a kind of echo to his German poetics, issued in a linguistic and cultural environment other than German. Finally, if we refer to the primary meaning of the halo as an optical phenomenon, it could provide us with clues about the evolution of Celanian subjectivity. For this reason, I will propose to update the meaning of these texts to his poetic work, especially in the context of Jacques Derrida’s *Schibboleth pour Paul Celan* (*Shibboleth for Paul Celan*).

¹ This study draws largely from my earlier observations (2016), also presented at the international conference “Genesis, Genetic Criticism: From Theory to Practice”, organized by Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes de Paris and Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 12 June 2019.

The Bucharest episode in the life and literary work of Paul Pessach Antschel, also known as Paul Celan, has not been considered very prominent by most of Celan's researchers and biographers.² Paul Antschel had abandoned his native Bucovina in May 1945, just before the Soviet-Romanian border was to become impossible to cross. Until then, he had never published a single poem. It was during World War II, especially in 1943–1944 (Chalfen 1991: 149) that he intensified his poetic creation, which was preserved thanks to his many friends amongst Ruth Lackner (Kraft) and published in 1985 and 1989. By the end of May 1945, he arrived in Bucharest to meet Alfred Margul-Sperber, a major figure of Bucovinian pre-war German culture, who encouraged him in pursuing the literary vocation. Moreover, he entered into Bucharest cultural society as a translator for the official communist press (*Scântea* and *Veac nou*) and at the national publishing house *Cartea Rusă* (for which he translated Russian literature under the pseudonyms “Paul Aurel”, “A. Pavel” and “Paul Ancel”). It is not completely improbable that Paul Antschel considered staying in Romania; however, the Sovietization process in Romania surely frightened him, even though he always sympathised with the Left. He then started preparing his escape to Western Europe in May 1947, and succeeded in crossing the Romanian-Hungarian border in December 1947. He did so empty-handed, having left all his manuscripts with his friends in Bucharest (Chalfen 1991: 167). In 1948, he recomposed the German texts and managed to publish them in the volume *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (*The Sand from the Urns*), meanwhile joining the Viennese Surrealists group.

Some of those texts have been preserved by Petre Solomon, a friend of Celan from 1946 and the Romanian translator of the very first publication of *Todesfuge* in May 1947, published under the title *Tangoul Morții* (*Tango of death*). I had the opportunity to consult these documents thanks to Alexandru Solomon, Petre's son, a film director and author of *Duo pentru Paoloncel și Petronom* (*Duo for Paoloncel and Petronom*), which is a documentary dedicated to the friendship between his father and Paul Celan (1994). In this collection, besides four Romanian translations of short stories by Franz Kafka, three poems and a letter draft in German, there are also sixteen Romanian poems and fragments of prose attributed to Paul Celan (written by his hand or copied by Petre Solomon). One of these – [*Jarba ochilor tăi*] (*[The grass of your eyes]*) – counts only three lines and the other, [*S-ar putea crede*] (*[One might think]*), was never completed by the poet. Only six of those poems carry titles whereas the fragments of prose are untitled. Seven texts – [*Orbiți de salturi uriașe*] (*[Blinded by giant leaps]*), [*Din nou am suspendat marile umbrele albe*] (*[Once again I suspended the big white umbrellas]*), *Regăsire* (*Together Again*), [*A doua zi urmând să înceapă deportările*] (*[Rafael came by, the night before the deportations]*), *Reveion* (*New Year's Eve*), [*S-ar putea crede*] (*[One might think]*) and [*A sosit, în sfârșit, clipa*] (*[The moment finally arrived]*) – are also preserved in at least two slightly different versions. These texts were probably meant to be made available for others to read, since the manuscripts carry the author's edits and

² For more details see: Solomon 1970; Wiedemann-Wolf 1985; Corbea-Hoișie 1986; Solomon 1987; Cassian 1988; Vanhese 1988; Chalfen 1991; Colin 1991; Crohmălniceanu 1994; Mincu 1994; Felstiner 1995; Corbea-Hoișie 1997; Semilian & Agalidi 2003; Procopan 2003; Procopan 2004; Corbea-Hoișie 2004; Miglio 2005a; Miglio 2005b; Heymann 2007; Miglio 2008a; Miglio 2008b; Corbea-Hoișie 2010; Patrut 2011; Rotiroți 2011; Vanhese 2011; Manea 2012; Rotiroți 2012; Mysjkin 2014; Cepraga 2015; Corbea-Hoișie 2015; Finkenthal 2015; Țuglea 2015; Ivanovici 2017; Rotiroți 2017; Dimian-Hergheligi 2018.

page layout changes. The first partial editions of the Romanian poems date from 1970 and 1982, and the first complete one dates on 1987, included in Petre Solomon’s book *Paul Celan. Dimensiunea românească (Paul Celan. The Romanian Dimension)*. Since the latter’s publication, the poems have been translated into languages such as Dutch, English, German, French, Italian and Spanish. Barbara Wiedemann-Wolf, a specialist in young Celan’s literary work, also included them in the monographic volume *Antschel Paul, Paul Celan. Studien zum Frühwerk* (1985) and *Das Frühwerk* (1989), which finally closed the debate about the authenticity of these texts. In fact, due to a conflict over Celan’s heritage between Gisèle Lestrangé-Celan and Petre Solomon, even a French publication of Solomon’s book (1990) was forbidden by the courts and the question of legitimacy of these texts dominated the entire discourse about this Romanian legacy until they both died in 1991.

Generally speaking, the Romanian texts have been the subject of research composed of a few poetical analyses. However, the studies around these texts have confirmed their potential for explaining a discrepancy we observe between his juvenile texts and first post-war editions in German (Colin 1991: 54; Țuglea 2007: 9). Indeed, when he entered into German-speaking literature in 1948, his poetry seemed crystallized and mature in comparison to his pre-war neo-romantic writing (Țuglea 2007: 99–102). It was in Bucharest in May 1947 that he published his very first texts (in German – *Das Gastmahl, Ein wasserfarbenes Wild, Das Geheimnis der Farne*, present in the Solomon collection – or translated into Romanian as *Todesfuge*). Nonetheless, the difference is considerable and difficult to explain on the base of his German texts dating from that time (Țuglea 2007: 104).

In the case of most of the Romanian texts, this is mimetically Surrealist writing (Wiedemann-Wolf 1985: 125; Colin 1991: 75; Mincu 2006: 52; Țuglea 2007: 9; Finkenthal 2015; Rotiroți 2017: 158; Dimian-Hergheligi 2018: 101), that cannot be explained merely by Celan’s very short contact with French Surrealism during a semester spent in Tours, France, in 1938 (Felstiner 1995: 70). In fact, Paul Celan maintained direct contact with the second wave of Bucharest Surrealists, including Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Dolfi Trost, Paul Păun and Virgil Teodorescu. Although this group was as heterogeneous and diverse as every Surrealist group (Yaari 2014: 3), its members shared with Celan, among others, a post-war common sense of bankruptcy of any expression, leading them to imagine a weak and fluctuating subjectivity that heads to nowhere. It can be seen, for instance, in *Culoarul somnului (The Corridor of Sleep)* by Gellu Naum, and in Celan’s untitled³ prose poem [*Rafael came by, the night before the deportations*], where, on behalf of other victims, the textual “I” vainly looks for heaven on the top of an enormous golden candlestick (Guțu 1994: 214; Patrut 2005: 196–208; Țuglea 2007: 113–115; Patrut 2011: 151; Ivanovici 2017). In this way, Celan experimented for the first time with Surrealist writing techniques and theoretical positions in his poems in Romanian, which lacked their equivalents in German (Țuglea 2007: 207): while the prose fragments make up half his writings in Romanian, only four short stories were ever written by Celan in German, three of which also in Bucharest between 1945 and 1947. In Celan’s body of work, prose seems to mark a special moment of reflection on the encounter with the other and on language (Felstiner 1995: 141–145), since the only later short story, *Gespräch im*

³ The manuscript version of this poem has actually preserved the title *Cerul (The Sky)*, deleted by the author before being copied by his typist.

Gebirg (*Conversation in the Mountains*, 1959), discussing the “I/Thou” relation and the question of language, came shortly before Celan presented his poetological statement in “The Meridian” speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960.

While some of his Romanian prose poems are a record of Celan’s quest for an adequate poetic technique through Surrealist means, these texts share with *Conversation in the Mountains* a questioning of language and an undoubtedly autotelic character. As one can see in [*Fără balustradă*] (*[Without banister]*), despite an array of images with astronomical and astrological meanings (“rarele mele plimbări între Cancer și Capricorn”, “my rare strolls between Cancer and Capricorn”; “cobor, o roată arzătoare, la marginea extremă a treptelor”, “I descend, a burning wheel, to the extreme edges of the staircase”), it is certain that walking down the stairs amounts to a cognitive process: almost every sentence designates an upward or downward movement on the stairs, which refers to the descent of the “I” to the deepest layers of the psyche (Id) and his re-emergence to reality. Nevertheless, the text does not lead to self-knowledge, but circulates around the artistic process *ad absurdum*: the path into the depths of his own brutality (“unde părul unei femei ucise de mine mă așteaptă pentru a mă strangula”, “where the hair of a woman I killed waits to strangle me”) provides an opportunity for a literary exercise that makes the “I” confront his own psyche, which he refuses to do. This escape from the self becomes a sort of “banister”, a coordinate for others who descend to meet their own Id. Yet, it is for Celan’s equivocal attitude to Surrealism and its visibly ironic character that this text becomes extremely relevant. The entire prose poem even seems to be sardonic. The unconscious as a source of dreams plays a crucial role in Surrealist art, visible in the artistic strategy of “automatic writing”. In this sense, the descent from this text would seem to be a description of the cognitive process described and adopted by the Surrealists, which gives this text a strictly poetic, even autotelic character (Wiedemann-Wolf 1989: 123–124). While Celan mocks this particular approach, he is a part of the critique of Surrealist strategies launched by the Bucharest group, which calls for the abandonment of those originally innovative techniques that become out-dated as soon as they are applied to Surrealist art, which is unique and anti-dogmatic by definition.

However, Celan remains sceptical even towards the Bucharest Surrealist group, as he presents himself in the prose poem [*Partizan of erotic absolutism*], which might be considered as a true “visiting card” (Rotiroti 2017: 174) and a transcription of the “coagulation” of this poetic identity (Țuglea 2007: 110):

11-3-47

Partizan al absolutismului erotic, megaloman reticent chiar și între scafandri, mesager, totodată, al halo-ului Paul Celan, nu evoc petrifiantele fizionomii ale naufragiului aerian decât la intervale de un deceniu (sau mai mult) și nu patinez decât la o oră foarte târzie, pe un lac străjuit de uriașa pădure a membrilor acefali ai Conspirației Poetice Universale. E lesne de înțeles că pe-aici nu pătrunzi cu săgețile focului vizibil. O imensă perdea de ametist disimulează, la liziera dinspre lume, existența acestei vegetații antropomorfe, dincolo de care încerc, selenic, un dans care să mă uimească. Nu am reușit până acum și, cu ochii mutați la tâmple, mă privesc din profil, așteptând primăvara.

P.

11-3-47

Partisan of erotic absolutism, reticent megalomaniac even among the diving frog-men, messenger at the same time of the halo Paul Celan, I don't evoke the petrifying physiognomies of the aerial naufrage, but once, every decade (or more), I don't skate, but only at a very late hour, on a lake guarded by the giant forest of the acephalous members of the Universal Poets' Conspiracy. It's obvious that one can't penetrate there with the arrows of a visible fire. An immense curtain of amethyst dissimulates, at the world's skirt, the existence of this anthropomorphic vegetation, beyond which I try out, selenically, a dance that should amaze myself. So far, I haven't succeeded and, with my eyes shifted to my temples, I watch myself in profile and await the Spring (Celan 1999: 25).

[P.4]

As Țuglea (2007: 109–113) and Rotiroti (2017: 157–186) showed,⁵ this text deals especially with Gherasim Luca's and Dolfi Trost's theoretical positions from the very first lines (cf. “the unlimited eroticisation of the proletariat”, postulated in *Dialectics of the Dialectic*). The Romanian Surrealist “divers” disappoint the “I” because of their “aerial shipwreck”, which is to be in a clear contradiction with their own revolutionary premises (Rotiroti 2017: 177). In view of their failure, subjectivity constitutes itself beyond Surrealist frames and will no more base its own expression on unconsciousness or dreams, but on introspection and on the ashes of its consciousness (Țuglea 2007: 112). This attempt results in a stunning “dance” that might refer to his debut poem *Tango of Death* and its soon-after publication on 2 May 1947 (Rotiroti 2017: 178). However, even if the “I” characterises himself as a “reticent megalomaniac” among the Romanian Surrealists, their approach would later be present in his mature poetics, for example, in *Stretto*, as displayed by Țuglea (2007: 55, 111, 168–184).

In addition to their autotelic nature, what a great majority of Celan's Romanian texts also have in common is surely their autobiographical character: for instance, the poem *Together Again* commemorates his homeland Bucovina, while the only unfinished prose poem [*One might think*] might evoke his escape to Romania in May 1945. His Romanian writings seem to announce some phenomena which led Jacques Derrida (1986) to propose an interpretation of the concepts of date and shibboleth (see also Țuglea 2007: 83–88; Rotiroti 2015: 178; 2017: 174). Even if the term “shibboleth”, a biblical password that marks an irreducible difference, does not appear in the Romanian texts, the double nature of a date is inherent to the entire work of Celan: saying that Celan has dated all his poems, notes Derrida, does not just mean a conventional date, but also a sort of dating that is inscribed in the body of the text (1986: 34). We observe this particularity in the prose poem [*Rafael came by, the night before the deportations*] which is the most influenced by biography and Judaic motifs, which take on intensity at the moment of arrest and death of his parents (Bekker 2008: 211). Writing allows Celan to handle a difficult experience and verbalise his trauma after the imprisonment of his parents (Crohmălniceanu 1994: 116; Heymann 2007: 145).

However, it is the Romanian text [*Partisan of erotic absolutism*] that seems to be the most accurate of all the Romanian writings of Celan to be interpreted from a Derridian perspective. There are at least three reasons for such a rapprochement: firstly, the manu-

⁴ The signature is not present in any edition or translation.

⁵ For other analysis of this poem see: Wiedemann-Wolf 1985; Colin 1991; Ivanovici 2017; Dimian-Hergheligi 2018.

script carries a “conventional” date, 11 March 1947. In fact, it is the only Romanian poem he ever dated: the same date also appears in the first inscription of the *Cărticica de seară a lui Paul Celan* (*Small Evening Book of Paul Celan*), a collection of wordplays composed in Bucharest, belonging to Alexandru Solomon. Secondly, it represents the very first appearance of Paul Pessach Antschel’s new pseudonym, revealing a new artistic identity. Finally, this manuscript is exceptional because of the presence of a signature. This last aspect, present only in the original manuscript, has never been observed nor discussed.

In spring 1947, Paul Antschel started preparing his departure for Vienna, showing his profound disappointment at the political changes in Romania, which would ultimately share the fate of his native region, Bucovina, dominated by the Stalinist regime. The disappointment was even deeper because of the failure of his assimilation project in post-war Romania, something evident in this text: the “I” is incapable of participating in the enthusiastic, bacchantic dance of life, following a traumatic period.

This date somehow marks a moment of suspension in Time – between the horrible memory and amnesic drunkenness of the period after the genocide, in other words – *Poppy and Memory* as his second volume’s title (*Mohn und Gedächtnis*) points out – as well as a moment of suspension in Space. His native region was actually erased from the map of Europe. The spectre of Soviet danger was haunting Bucharest, whereas Vienna, which was his only point of cultural reference, would disappoint him deeply, something that seems announced even by the date itself. The German poem *In Eins* (*In One*) unites many historical, political and other references under one single date of 13 February (Derrida 1986: 20–26), while the Romanian poem also refers to the other events between March 11 and 13. In this case, in Vienna in 1938, when Austrian independence collapsed under Nazi pressure.

The unbearable memory of the Holocaust and “the beautiful season of wordplays” (“cette belle saison des calembours”), as he would name the Bucharest period of his life (Solomon 1987: 210), completely ruined Antschel’s identity, captured between “here” and “now”. That does not however imply the existence of any “yesterday” or “tomorrow”, or even any “there”. The textual “I” obtains the status of a ghost, demonstrating a mourning never digested, and any incarnations as the “partisan of erotic absolutism” or the “reticent megalomaniac” are but temporary and labile. All that persists – but still remains a mere phantom – is “the messenger at the same time of the halo Paul Celan” (“mesager, totodată, al halo-ului Paul Celan”). An intermediary messenger character immediately indicates the situation of this troubled identity. A messenger is he who carries and saves personal experience, an experience which is overwhelming and unspeakable, and untranslatable in writing. As such, the text does not allow the subject to express himself in any direct way. This results in shattered identity, imagined in the text by a phenomenon of dispersed light called a “halo”, where light refracts in miniscule crystals of ice that are suspended in the air; in the case of Celan’s poetry (e.g. *La Contrescarpe*), these could also be crystals of memory (Piszcztowski 2015: 271).

This shattered and anonymous identity takes form thanks only to a name that was inverted, thanks to a pseudonym meant to reassemble all the fragments of memory, even if it is just a simple play on words and the effect of ironic use of language. Moreover, in the same *Little Evening Book by Paul Celan*, we find another example of the search for a new identity: “Paoloncel” (Solomon 1987: 81). Besides this playful motivation, the

new pseudonym “Celan” engaged obviously in a difficult dialogue with memory and personal past. The fact that the pseudonym no longer preserves the second name of Paul Pessach Antschel immediately evokes the negation of any past, and particularly that time in the past that refers to the paternal or religious power that imposes the name.

In parallel, the act of naming, which is a sign of belonging to a certain society, is inseparable from the act of circumcision, a proof of belonging to the Jewish community. Choosing a new name seems to give place to a reconstruction of identity that renounces the injury of memory, the cut of paternal instance. Only a negation of what is lost, denied by History, could lead to a rebirth, or to a *non-birth* in the words of Gherasim Luca (1945: 7), outside of Time, indifferently of personal experience.

But “Pessach” which means “transition, crossing”, a symbol of Judaic and paternal heritage (Felstiner 1995: 30), is still present in this anagrammatic pseudonym. “Antschel, Ancel” transforms itself into “Celan”: the name suffers an inversion, a return to the past as it were. In this way, the newly forged pseudonym remains untranslatable in any transposition, like *shibboleth* or *no pasarán* in the poem *In One*. “Celan”, deprived of any rational sense, resounds and evokes a memory deformed by pronunciation, whatever your language: [ʃɛlan] in Romanian, [tselan] in German, [sɛlã] in French. The pseudonym closes the circle, the “ring” between the past and the “here and now”, if only in the form of a reflection.

In this way, Derrida would say that “Celan” as a pseudonym commemorates his own origins, his own birth, as it came at the occasion of an anniversary that erased and created simultaneously a new date. “Celan” becomes itself a date, since “Celan” is inscribed into the text and appears firstly in the process of writing and reading.

This suggests that the entire writing of Paul Antschel, beginning from 11 March 1947 is bound to this date, marking the foundation of a new poetic identity: with this name, he would sign his very first publications two months later. In fact, “Celan” as a date realises the principal premise of this poetry: bringing about continuous dialogue with memory and allowing those who did not survive to appear once again, at least in text. However, this re-appearance is possible only if the “I” assumes the role of a Holocaust victim: “Celan” becomes a spectre too, a phantom of his own past and of the dead. It is impossible to assimilate such great mourning as one can see in the example of *Poemul pentru umbra Marianeii* (*Poem for Mariana's shadow*) and the German poem *Marianne*: expressed exclusively in the title, only her shadow allows the “I” to confront memory, but only if it takes on the same role. Only an expression *in absentia*, founded on the idea of “rebirth” through writing, could create such an encounter. But this could only be possible in German, his native tongue, and would suffer the same defragmentation and crystallization as the “I” of the Romanian poems does.

Meanwhile, the subject remains in movement and in suspension simultaneously. The signature “P.”, visible under the text, is unique in the body of Celan’s Romanian manuscripts, because only the draft of a letter towards Max Rychner is signed (with the full pseudonym “Paul Celan”). The “P.” is the only reference to an identity reduced to ashes and to one sound undeformable by writing, pronunciation or translation, as it is unpronounceable and suffers no transposition in any language. In this context, we observe that his signature fulfils all the conditions necessary for a shibboleth by Derrida: even if it indicates a certain identity, the “P.” as a shibboleth cannot be shared as such. Even

if readable, it still shelters a secret. Deciphering it will not suffice to activate its differential power. It cannot be translated into any language, not because of any question of equivalency, but because it is a code for a code, a double sign that preserves the irreducible part of identity.

In conclusion, with this very short analysis of the manuscript of a Romanian poem by Paul Celan, I hope to have shown the value of these Romanian texts to be considered as the intermediate phase of his poetic evolution, a phase that is not openly attested in his writing in German. His passage through the Romanian language and the assimilation of the Bucharest Surrealist group's theoretical discourse allowed him to renew his lyrical expression in a state of crisis following the Holocaust, an experience that was even more painful because German, as well as Romanian, were the languages of the executioners of the Jewish people. This shows that his contact with Romanian did not take place beyond historical and political conditioning, and that writing in this language, which is as full of "the slag of centuries of hoary lies" ("die Schlacke der Jahrhunderte alter Lügen", *Edgar Jene und der Traum vom Traume*; in English *Edgar Jené and the Dream of the Dream*) as German, gave him the opportunity to confront the traumas of the Second World War, which were to be taken up again as the main subject of his later German poetry.

The opposition between "poppy" and "memory", which is reflected in the title of the German collection *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952), shows the tension in the poet's writing: on the one hand, the festive character of this period of the writer's life is revealed in his taste for exploiting the humorous resources of everyday language, compromised by Nazi propaganda (Chalfen 1991: 45; Colin 1991: 96). We can observe this tendency in his wordplays in Romanian, being a new linguistic world to be explored. It is not by chance that the "I" in one of his Romanian prose poems calls himself a "new Columbus" ([*Once again I suspended the big white umbrellas*]). However, at the time he knows that his "archipelago will remain undiscovered": this shows the search of the "I" for a new mode of expression, which will nevertheless not be able to name this new "continent". Indeed, the later texts will undergo a deconstruction that leads to a "petrification" of language. Moreover, it is necessary for the auctorial subject to correspond to this reduction to "ashes", as it happens in [*Partisan of erotic absolutism*]. "P.", "that remainder without remainder", "ce reste sans reste" (Derrida 1986: 73), an irreducible attribute, thus becomes the Celanian shibboleth, his password, which allows him to finally cross the river and to move on. He will no longer be refused, as in [*Once again I suspended the big white umbrellas*], and will find "a man with a boat", who will welcome him: the Reader.

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