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► **To cite this version:**

Dirk Weissmann. Paul Celan's (M)Other Tongue(s): On the Self Portrayal of the Artist as a Monolingual Poet. Juliane Prade. (M)Other Tongues: Literary Reflexions on a Difficult Distinction, , 2013, 978-1-4438-4263-1. hal-01634669

**HAL Id: hal-01634669**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01634669>**

Submitted on 14 Nov 2017

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(M)Other Tongues:  
Literary Reflexions on a Difficult Distinction

Edited by

Juliane Prade

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4263-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4263-1

PAUL CELAN'S (M)OTHER TONGUE(S):  
ON THE (SELF-)PORTRAYAL OF THE ARTIST  
AS A MONOLINGUAL POET<sup>1</sup>

DIRK WEISSMANN

Celan's words are not containers but openings.  
—Yoko Tawada (2009)

**Clinging to the German Language**

Many post-war German-Jewish exile writers and intellectuals showed an unwavering and visceral attachment to the German language after having been driven from their homeland and—at least symbolically—excluded from their mother tongue (Ferguson 1997, Utsch 2007). While nationalist and racist ideologists asserted, since the nineteenth century, that Jews were a “foreign body” to the German language community because they were supposed not to comply with the deep and pure “Germanness” of this language (Ahlzweig 1994), these authors remained very closely committed to this language as being their true and only one, and part of their core identity. Many of these authors would have endorsed the idea of German as being a kind of “portable homeland” for them, echoing the words of Heinrich Heine.<sup>2</sup>

Besides writers like Elias Canetti, Oskar Maria Graf, Lion Feuchtwanger, and others, this applies to intellectuals like Theodor W. Adorno or Hannah Arendt. In the case of Arendt, her clinging to German contrasts with her definite settlement in the United State, and with her choice of English as a writing language. Yet in her famous 1964 German TV interview, the internationally acclaimed political theorist insists on the singular role that German plays in her life as a migrant. When the journalist asks her about what remains from her pre-exile European identity, Arendt replies: “What remains? The language remains” (1964, 12), meaning her *German* “mother tongue,” which she says is absolutely unique and irreplaceable in spite of her constant and longtime living, teaching, and writ-

ing in “foreign” languages like English, but also French during her Paris exile in the 1930s.

In his Bremen Prize speech, held in 1958, the German-speaking Jewish poet Paul Celan (1920-1970) seems to express a similar point of view. While evoking the dark journey that led him—through World War II and the Holocaust—from his native Bukovina to Paris, he says about his relation to the German language: “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss.” (Celan 1986, 34)<sup>3</sup> Despite his great mastery and constant practice of other languages, and counter to the atrocious crimes and the genocide that had been committed in and through the German language, Celan always considered himself in an exclusive manner as a German language poet. Therefore, I argue, in Celan there is—even more than in Arendt—a strong tension between his multilingual life, work, and writing on the one hand, and the alleged singularity of his German mother tongue on the other.

Yet the main difference between Arendt’s and Celan’s language conception consists in the fact that Arendt claimed that German passed the Nazi period without great damage, that “it wasn’t the German language that went crazy” (Arendt 1964, 13), whereas for Celan this language was profoundly soiled by history and needed “refection,” as Bollack (2001) would say, even though “the thousand darknesses of murderous speech” have also “enriched” it (Celan 1986, 34). While Arendt regarded the German language as a sort of safe anchorage, Celan, as we will see, faced German rather as a kind of fate he could not (and must not) escape from. Nonetheless, what brings Arendt and Celan together in the first place besides their shared destiny as exiled Holocaust survivors is their stress on the mother tongue as a privileged if not unique site of identity (Djoufak 2010, 332).

### **The Monolingual Paradigm**

When analyzing Arendt’s position, Yasmin Yildiz (2012) argues that the philosopher’s thoughts about language are profoundly indebted to what she calls the “monolingual paradigm”: “According to this paradigm,” she writes, “individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue’, and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation.” (2) In this framework, the mother tongue “stands for a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation” (9).<sup>4</sup>

Being "a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life" (2) today, this paradigm first emerged in the late eighteenth century. Since then, the monolingual paradigm has led to a process of forced monolingualization while obscuring how widespread multilingualism actually is in European history (Braunmüller 2003) and literature (Forster 1970).

Our knowledge of Paul Celan's apparent allegiance to the monolingual paradigm relies mostly on an early statement quoted by his childhood friend Israel Chalfen (who himself took it from Ruth Lackner's youth time conversations with Celan). According to this well-known albeit mediated sentence, Celan asserted that: "Only in the mother tongue one can express his own truth, in foreign languages the poet lies." (Chalfen 1991, 184) This statement may sound strange when we consider that Celan wrote a large amount of prose and poetry in Romanian at the same time (Celan 1989 and 2005). Yet responding to an inquiry of a Parisian bookshop about multilingual writing in 1961, the poet, by now a French citizen, confirmed this early point of view: "I don't believe in bilingualism in poetry ... Poetry—that is the fateful uniqueness of language." (Celan 1986, 23). In fact this answer is not a purely poetic or literary one but also linked to the so-called Goll affair (Wiedemann 2000). Nevertheless, contrary to other Romanian immigrant writers living in Paris like Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, E. M. Cioran, or Gherasim Luca, Celan clearly rejects multilingualism and the change to a different language in these statements and insists on the unique role of the poet's mother tongue.

### **Celan's Multilingualism**

In spite of this apparent rejection of multilingualism it is at the same time obvious that Celan's life, work, and writing singularly embody the multilingual dimension of the European tradition. Yildiz (2012, 18) thus cites Celan as an example for what she calls the "postmonolingual condition," insofar as his work represents the struggle against the monolingual paradigm and a potential break with it. Some biographical circumstances can be seen as the framework of Celan's lifelong multilingual work as a translator and a writer. His multilingual upbringing in an almost Habsburgian context should be mentioned here, along with the fact that he never wrote in a purely monolingual German environment but was always surrounded by other languages. In fact (apart from his short stay in Vienna on his way from Bucharest to Paris in the late 1940s), Celan created his oeuvre completely outside areas where German was the exclusive language, in a permanent linguistic and cultural contact zone. There can be no

doubt that one of the deepest, most formative experiences in Celan's life was the co-existence and the simultaneity of entangling languages and cultures, dating back to the specific setting of his hometown (Olschner 1985, 37). Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s, Chernivtsi (Czernowitz), having become part of the Romanian Kingdom but still rooted in the Habsburg past, was inhabited by Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Romanians, and it was also home of Polish and Hungarian minorities (Chalfen 1991).

When trying to outline Celan's linguistic abilities, one can say that the languages he practiced and mastered to a greater or a lesser extent were (in alphabetical order) English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. Many of them left traces in his poetry in the form of quotations, loan words, and various cross-linguistic influences as hidden translations, multilingual word readings, word plays, etc. (Petuchowski 1978, Broda 1986, Bayerdörfer 1988). This might be best shown by a poem like "Huhediblu" that can reasonably be called a piece of multilingual poetry (Bayerdörfer 1988, 52). These are the final lines of the text written in 1962, combining at least German, English, and French:

...  
 Frugal,  
 kontemporan und gesetzlich  
 geht Schinderhannes zu Werk,  
 sozial und alibi-elbisch, und  
 das Julchen, das Julchen:  
 daseinsfeist rülpst,  
 rülpst es das Fallbeil los,—call it (hott!)  
 love.

Oh quand refleuriront, oh roses, vos septembres?

(Celan 1983, 1:276-277, 55-63)

Celan's upbringing and lifelong existence between many different languages, and, in addition, the acquisition of some further languages at school and in college laid the basis for his comprehensive and impressive work as a translator, with translations from no less than eight different languages (Gellhaus 1997). It also led him to use other writing languages than German, as attested in particular by the above-mentioned early Romanian texts<sup>5</sup> or his translations into Romanian during his stay in Bucharest (61ff.). As I will attempt to show in the following section, this use of other tongues also applies to French to some extent, which was his main language during the second half of his life.

### Celan in France

The devastations of the war and the Soviet occupation of the Northern Bucovina had forced Celan to leave Czernowitz. After staying in Bucharest from June 1945 to December 1947 and in Vienna, where he remained only a few months, Celan went to Paris, which was to become his new hometown from July 1948 until his death in 1970.

Celan's migration to Paris led to swift contact with the Parisian literary scene (Weissmann 2008a). Although Celan did not arrive in France as a known author but as a stateless refugee, he managed to take advantage of contacts previously made in Bucharest and Vienna in order to introduce himself to important French authors, who quickly realized the young poet's talent. Celan's work as a translator of contemporary French poets, such as René Char (Gellhaus 1997, 200ff.), played an important role in forming these contacts. The strong relationships and friendships made in the Parisian literary milieu would lead to Celan's active participation in the French literary establishment in the mid 1960s, as he became, among other things, co-editor of the influential literary magazine *L'Ephémère* (Mascarou 1998). His suicide in 1970 put a sudden end to this collaboration.

Celan was intensely involved in the French environment and the intellectual milieu of Paris. His marriage to Gisèle de Lestrangé (from a noble French family) was followed by his naturalization in 1955 and his employment as lecturer for German at the elite university *Ecole normale supérieure* towards the end of the 1950s. Celan's carefully cultivated self-portrayal as *poète maudit* led to a latent underestimation of Celan's social network—that is his relations with French writers, intellectuals, and the academic milieu—in criticism and scholarship (Weissmann 2003, 47-77). Like Heinrich Heine, another German-Jewish poet exiled in Paris to whom he is often compared, Celan controlled his own promotion in France. He helped construct his own image as a poet through direct contact with critics, scholars, and translators.

### A French Poet Writing in German

In his posthumous tribute to Paul Celan, Claude David, Professor of German literature at the Sorbonne, called Celan a "German-writing French poet" (1970, 239) in order to insist on Celan's belonging to his adopted country, and to mark the distance that separated him from Germany. Yet what distinguishes Celan from other French immigrant writers like the above-mentioned Heinrich Heine is the fact that, although he emerged as a

mediator between German and French literature, Celan did not want to be seen as a French-language writer. Unlike Heine—who aimed to appear as “Henri Heine, écrivain français”—Celan did not try to publish directly in French or to self-translate his works for publication. He never wanted to make himself a name as a genuine French author, but, as we will see, tried to act almost secretly through French while disappearing behind his translators.

To understand this point, one must recall Celan’s statement about the “fateful uniqueness” of the German language quoted above. *Muttersprache—Mördersprache*, “mother language—murder language,” this word pairing illustrates the double bind conflict Celan had to go through (Buck 1993): writing poems of remembrance about his mother in the language of the murderers of his mother, which is also his mother tongue. For Celan, in fact, this “fatefulness” was the moral imperative not to abandon the German language. Firstly, such abandonment would have meant giving up the language his mother loved and taught her son to love by reading poetry. And it would have also meant turning his back on the contemporary German audience to whom Celan primarily addressed his work of remembering and mourning. The definite change into another literary language—a solution suggested by Celan’s immense gift of acquiring foreign languages—is one that Celan did never seem to consider. The fateful link to German forbade him to write in any additional language besides German, even though he did so in private or informal contexts. On the official literary scene, however, Celan definitely could be nothing other than a German language poet.

Thus, when trying to understand Celan’s idea about the poet “lying” in any other language than his mother tongue (Chalfen 1991, 184), I argue, one must link his positioning to this “fatefulness” of German. His statements, made after the murder of his mother by the Nazis, must not be read as an allegiance to the German mother tongue ideology (Ahlzweig 1994) but, rather, as an attachment to *his own mother’s* tongue. Furthermore, the absolute necessity of the German language as a means to “express his own truth” relies on the recent historical and biographical events that took place in this language. This “enriched” language (Celan 1986, 34) was, therefore, the only material with which Celan built his “text graves” (Werner 1998) and could “keep the memory of the dates” (Celan 1983, 3:196; my translation).

### Celan and French Translation

Since the publication of the correspondence with his wife (Celan 2001), and due to other documents from his posthumous papers, we know that Celan possessed an almost perfect hand when writing in French. French commentators have often emphasized the literary quality of his French style. These texts, along with the only French poem Celan ever wrote (Celan 1997, 229), do not, however, belong to his authorized oeuvre. Moreover, the documents which Celan prepared for the private use of his wife—glossaries and verbatim interlinear-translations (Celan 2001)—cannot be considered to be literary texts. No French document can thus be considered part of Celan's authorized work.

Celan's perfect mastery of the French language, however, naturally led to a special relationship to the French translations of his texts. Even though he strictly opposed self-translating his own work for publication in French, he insisted on controlling and correcting every translation before it went to press, sometimes even before signing a contract. The first time this happened was in 1955/56, the occasion was the magazine publication of a selection of texts from his first volume of poetry published in Germany (Celan 1956, Weissmann 2003, 132-148). Yet with each upcoming translation project, Celan encroached on the first French version submitted by such renowned translators as Philippe Jaccottet, Denise Naville, or Jean-Claude Schneider.

Concerning the translation of his poems into French, Celan was extremely pessimistic and demanding. The large number of projects Celan discontinued—whether due to his discontent with the translations or to reservations about the translators themselves—is striking. Although he wanted to benefit from the chance to circulate his works in French, he declined numerous projects for book publication, even those suggested by renowned publishing houses such as the Editions du Seuil or Gallimard, as if he feared his work could suffer under translation (Weissmann 2003, 149-171).

The context of the plagiarism case launched against him by the widow of the poet Yvan Goll (Wiedemann 2000), a case which we cannot discuss fully here, plays a central role in Celan's reservations about publishing and the abandonment of many projects. It is interesting to note that this conflict arose from Celan's German translations of the *bilingual* (or even trilingual) poet Yvan Goll. In fact, Celan's 1961 negative statement on bilingualism as the speech of "liars" is uttered at the height of Celan's struggle against Goll and those siding with her. Thus, his words cannot be separat-

ed from that conflict, for all of Celan's statements of this period more or less refer to this quarrel.

### Disguised Self-Translation

As we have seen, Celan has thwarted or prohibited a large number of translation projects into French. Even when he allowed a project to reach publication, his strong interference illustrates a massive mistrust concerning the very process of another person translating his texts into French. From detailed analysis of Celan's corrections on the translator's manuscripts it can be shown that the poet's interference cannot simply be explained in terms of correction or improvement of the translator's work. Although many of the changes to the translation are justifiable or enriching, others appear to belong to a kind of re-appropriation of the foreign-language text, which is an understandable but not wholly unproblematic process. In many cases, the author adopts the position of the translator, where he himself nearly rewrites his text in French instead of accepting the translator's work. With certain texts, one can speak of a disguised self-translation, as almost nothing of the translator's original version appears in the final product (Weissmann 2003, 132-148). In these cases, and contrary to his own statements, one could almost speak of Celan as a French language writer.

For the official translator, this situation is naturally very difficult and objectionable: having to deal with an author who does not want to translate himself, although he could or even should do so, but who at the same time does not accept the work of the translator as independent. In Celan's papers we can find ample evidence of the difficulties with which his translators and editors had to struggle. One very illuminating comment was made by the Italian poet and translator Mariano Marianelli, who accused Celan of being incapable of giving his work a life of its own and of wanting to protect his work from his readers and translators.<sup>6</sup> However, Marianelli knew probably nothing about the mental distress that Celan brought to such an engagement. The campaign launched against him by Claire Goll not only deepened his mistrust of poetic bilingualism but developed a sort of neurotic identification with his own texts which rendered the latent disappropriation of his poems by the translator insufferable for him.

The disguised participation in the translation process to be seen in Celan's proof reading of his poems translated into French has also been discovered in the work Celan did on translated texts from other authors. In fact, he was actively involved in the French translations of German authors for *L'Ephémère* without, however, wanting to be named as the translator

(Weissmann 2003, 200ff.). Once again, Celan's main concern seems to have been the conservation of his identity as a German language poet in spite of his actual multilingual practice.

### **Monolingual Self-Portrayal and Multilingual Practice**

Celan's struggle with the French translations of his poems, coming close to self-translation, reveals yet again how strong his engagement with foreign languages was. The disseminated presence of "other" languages than his mother tongue in his often heteroglossic poems shows that his characteristic polyglossia does not remain at the edges of his literary work. Celan's official self-portrayal as a monolingual poet, therefore, though it is an essential part of his poetic ethos, clearly stands in sharp contrast to his translanguing writing, his work as a translator, and the translational interaction in his work.

Jacques Derrida points out this fundamental contradiction—Derrida himself would surely have called it an "aporia"—, when defining Celan as the "poet-translator who, while writing in the language of the other and of the Holocaust, and while inscribing Babel in the very body of each poem, expressly claimed, signed, and sealed the poetic monolingualism of his work." (1996, 130; my translation). One may also speak of Celan as a multilingual poet in a rather metaphorical way, referring to the definition of multilingualism by Edouard Glissant (1996) who does not refer to the mastery of foreign languages but to the presence of all world languages in monolingual writing itself.<sup>7</sup> An approach that reinforces Derrida's idea that pure monolingualism is impossible exactly as it assumes that any language is inherently plural (Derrida 1996, 130).<sup>8</sup>

However, beyond this slightly abstract dimension of multilingualism, our purpose was to highlight the constant presence of concrete and living multilingualism in Celan's writing, despite his apparent commitment to the German mono-language. Moreover, this paper could be understood as a call for a reassessment of Celan's statements in the light of his practice instead of drawing firm conclusions from his assertions about his monolingualism. Applying Yasemin Yildiz' theory of the postmonolingual condition, we could say: "Charting the tension between his monolingual assertion and his multilingual contexts and practices may illuminate [Celan's] work in new ways. In his case, voicing adherence to the monolingual paradigm may even be a case of resistance precisely because he is not supposed to fit into it." (Yildiz 2012, 18) Here, being "not supposed to fit into it" would refer to his exclusion from the German language "community" by a racist language conception, as mentioned above.

Yet while Celan claimed to be a poet of German *language*, his personal statements led to misinterpretations of Celan's multi-layered cultural and linguistic identity in the reception of his work, locating (territorializing) him in an almost national manner (e.g. Celan as a German or an Austrian poet). Readers, critics, and scholars are sometimes inclined to understand Celan's statements against multilingualism precisely as an issue about German as a mother tongue, according to the above-mentioned ideological tradition. I argue that Celan's words should not be interpreted as an argument for monolingualization or linguistic homogenization according to ethnic, religious, or national categories. In this manner, Celan would be put into a monolingual and monocultural paradigm that cannot possibly apply to his works. Moreover, as we have seen, Celan's public rejection of multilingualism is also linked to his struggle during the Goll affair, a context that one should not neglect when interpreting his 1961 statement.

After all, Celan's indefectible attachment to German mainly reflects his traumatic post-Holocaust identification with this language and the role he had assigned to himself as a Jewish post-Holocaust poet writing in German. It expresses his individual struggle with (but also defense of) a language which he knew to be the only path back to the dead (that is also, to his beloved mother) and into the heart of mourning and remembering. Other languages such as Romanian, French, Russian, Yiddish, or Hebrew could support this process, as we see in many of his poems which are worked and crossed by other languages. But these languages would never have been able to *replace* Celan's fateful and unique German language.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Naomi Shulman, Matthias Zach, and Melissa Dinsman for their help in writing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1854 *Geständnisse (Confessions)*, Heine calls the Bible (!) a "portatives Vaterland" for the Jews (1982, 43).

<sup>3</sup> The full quote of this crucial passage reads as follows: "Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all." (Celan 1986, 34).

<sup>4</sup> With respect to the mother tongue, Yildiz adds: "The uniqueness of organic nature of language imagined as 'mother tongue' lends its authority to an aesthetics of originality and authenticity. In this view, a writer can become the origin of creative works only with an origin in a mother tongue, itself imagined to originate in a

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mother. The result is a disavowal of the possibility of writing in nonnative languages or in multiple languages at the same time." (2012, 9)

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that Celan's famous *Death fugue* was first published in a Romanian translation under the title *Tangoul mortii* in the review *Contemporaneul* 2.5.1947.

<sup>6</sup> Marianello Marianelli, Letter to Paul Celan, 27.8.1961. Accessed in: Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, D.90.1.1924.

<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Lise Gauvin, Glissant explains: "Je pense que dans l'Europe du XVIII<sup>e</sup> et du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, même quand un écrivain français connaissait la langue anglaise ou la langue italienne ou la langue allemande, il n'en tenait pas compte dans son écriture. Les écritures étaient monolingues. Aujourd'hui, même quand un écrivain ne connaît aucune autre langue, il tient compte, qu'il le sache ou non, de l'existence de ces langues autour de lui dans son processus d'écriture. On ne peut plus écrire une langue de manière monolingue. On est obligé de tenir compte des imaginaires des langues." (Glissant 1996, 111)

<sup>8</sup> This applies particularly to the case of Celan and German, both historically and geographically, since there is a considerable gap between the idiom he uses and the standard language, be it before, during, or after the Nazi period.

