

Esther Cameron. *Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan: Roots and Ramifications of the 'Meridian' Speech.* Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014. xv + 307 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-8412-7.



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The standing of Paul Celan (1920-70) as one of the most significant and controversial German-language poets of the twentieth century has been steadily rolling over into the new millennium. The enduring interest in his work and life among both readers and academics generates a continuing stream of research, publishing, and online presence. It is as if each new generation is compelled to discover “their own” Celan and to deconstruct and reinterpret what has been said before. There is a myriad of classics on Celan’s life, psyche, poetry, and letters. In the span of the last fifty years, standing out amongst them are critical works by authors, translators, and editors such as Michael Hamburger, Pierre Joris, Israel Chalfen, Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert, Aris Fioretos, John Felstiner, Bertrand Badiou, and Barbara Weidemann.

Is there anything left to say, revisit, or reinterpret? The title of Esther Cameron’s book, *Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan, Roots and Ramifications of the ‘Meridian’ Speech*, sounds positively promising. A specialist in German, poet, essayist, and translator,

Cameron has devoted her life to a study of Celan. The results of this compelling journey are at the core of the reviewed book.

As an introduction, Cameron opens the book with “The Landscape of Reading,” which sketches Celan’s life. The surname Celan was a pseudonym of Paul Antschel, who, it becomes clear, was not native to any of the traditional German cultural centers, like Berlin, Vienna, or Bern. Instead, he was born and grew up in Bukovina, more than a thousand kilometers east, to a German-speaking Jewish family. Sharing a border in the north with East Galicia, the area was known for its pre-1938 thriving Hasidic community. The multilingual and multifaceted society inevitably shaped young Celan. An only child, he grew up with the German tongue of his Vienna-born mother—a twist of fate which would haunt him all his later years. Reading German literature was part of his upbringing. Hebrew was the language of his father and Celan also spoke Romanian, Yiddish, and Russian. An exceptional linguist, Celan soon learned French

and English to a fluent level of translating and lecturing later in his life.

Celan's parents perished in Nazi labor camps in Ukraine while he survived eighteen months of incarceration. In 1944, the 24-year-old orphan turned to poetry and wrote one of his first poems, "The Lonely One," in the Romanian language. In 1948 Celan settled in Paris to study German philology and literature. He continued writing poetry in German, becoming more and more successful and controversial. His now legendary *Todesfuge* (Death fugue, published in German in 1948) was a memorial to his parents. In 1958 Celan was awarded the Bremen Prize for German Literature, followed by the prestigious literary Georg Büchner Prize in 1960. It was on the occasion of the latter, in Darmstadt, that Celan delivered "Der Meridian," his famed acceptance speech, which is the main theme of the reviewed book. Throughout his life, the motifs of death, mourning, memory, and destruction as well as his silenced sense of guilt, remained the common denominators of his poetic oeuvre. Paul Celan drowned himself in the Seine in April 1970.

The author Esther Beatrice Cameron (b. 1948) intimates that she began reading Celan in the late 1960s as a student at the University of California, Berkeley. Before long, profoundly touched by meeting the poet in person, Cameron began studies in Israel, eventually converting to Judaism. Deeply affected by Celan's suicide, Cameron admits dedicating her life and work to his writing. Cameron shares this journey on her website, www.pointandcircumference.com. This is also where the author first formulated her dualistic approach to the understanding of poetry: it is as important to study the written text as it is to pay attention to "the text of one's life." [1] This leitmotif recurs through Cameron's first major scholarly publication, the book under review.

Cameron undertakes an ambitious project when she sets out to unravel the uncharted dialogue and interaction between the particular

(Celan's Jewishness) and the universal (Western art). The reader is invited to join her on a long and complex intellectual journey. Relying mostly on her own translations from German, Cameron "takes the 'Meridian' speech as a base from which to explore Celan's work and the intellectual landscape to which it refers, a landscape shaped both by intellectual currents and cataclysmic historical events" (p. x).

Cameron's study is written in a style of narrative commentary. The reader can follow the (assumed) path Celan was taking when preparing his acceptance speech for the audience on the award day of October 22, 1960. The "Meridian" speech is not an easy read. There are fifty-three paragraphs in total—an important detail which will be soon explained—comprising citations and references to many authors admired by Celan. The German dramatist Georg Büchner, the namesake of the award, features most prominently.

Cameron's study is divided into five chapters which progressively, word by word, line by line, and in each paragraph, analyze the original "Meridian" text, pointing to its sources. The "deconstructing" principle of this approach is not entirely new. In 1999, Suhrkamp published the indispensable edition of Celan's work, *Der Meridian: Endfassung—Entwürfe—Materialien*, edited by Bernhard Böschstein and Heino Schmull, later translated and edited by Pierre Joris as *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials* (2011). This Celanian classic not only revealed how much the poet had agonized over each sentence and quotation in his speech. It also definitively established the now widely adopted taxonomy of assigning to each paragraph a number and letter in a sequence from one to fifty-three. This "Meridian" classification system is invaluable for scholars, translators, and readers alike because it provides much faster and more precise orientation in the text. It is in particular useful for bilingual readers of the "Meridian," as it allows for an

immediate reference between the original text and the translation.

However, Cameron went further and created her own additional semantic nomenclature. It is difficult to objectively evaluate the benefit of this decision, as each reader will have their individual needs. Unfortunately, it became puzzling for this reader. It seems that in a good-faith attempt to provide guidance to her reader, Cameron has practically imposed words and conclusive meanings over Celan's intention. It could be argued that Cameron's overly interpretative voice in each chapter's heading and subheading may, in fact, confuse the reader and hinder their quest to understand the poet. On the other hand, those unfamiliar with the complex syntax of Celan might find it of assistance.

The first chapter of the book may illustrate the issue. It contains the first ten paragraphs of the original "Meridian" speech. Cameron interprets the overall meaning of it through giving this chapter the title, "Idolatry, Determinism, and Freedom." The chapter title is followed by a section title. Each chapter has some ten sections or ten subtitles. For instance, section 1 of the first chapter is called "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Puppets." This is then followed by additional six headings which—as becomes obvious later—clearly point to the source of inspiration. The headings here are "Ladies and Gentlemen," "The Pauses. Camille's Speech on 'Art in the Death of Danton,'" "The Issue of Idolatry," and "Hofmannsthal's 'Letter of Lord Chandos.'" Celan's original text in German then follows, together with an English translation.

Then—after negotiating through the maze of headings—we find Cameron at her best. She is not only a natural raconteur, but also a brilliant, widely read scholar. Perhaps most importantly, she loves Celan. Cameron writes her commentary as an intellectual reasoning, widely researched and methodically referenced. She is tracing her path to discovering Celan's sources of literary in-

spiration and personal motivation. Cameron includes events of history as well as Celan's personal tragedies, which profoundly influenced him.

Take, for example, the first chapter's textual analysis of the opening line, "Meine Damen und Herren." Cameron points out that this somewhat banal greeting in Celan's rendition, has a much deeper meaning than we usually associate with this conventional form of opening address. She reveals that in fact this "formula" (of address) will be repeated no less than seventeen times in Celan's speech, with increasing frequency toward the end, so that, discarding its conventional character, it will "testify to a certain awkwardness about the occasion" (p. 1). Cameron elaborates on this notion of discomfort when she further explains that the speaker is a Jew, an orphan-survivor who became a celebrated and prize-winning poet in the German language and now "in accepting the prize ... risks seeming to accept a literary distinction as compensation (*Wiedergutmachung*) for the atrocities that form part of the background of his poetry" (p. 2). Citing Celan's letters and analyzing other authors, Cameron expands on any possible angle of elucidation of the function of this social formality of addressing a distinguished gathering.

After the detailed treatment of the opening line Cameron searches further for the inspiration behind the whole opening paragraph. The reader is guided through passages referring to a speech from "The Death of Danton" by George Büchner, which deeply inspired Celan. In painstaking detail Cameron analyzes, documents, annotates, and references the sources of inspiration and quotations. Moreover, the writings of poets Büchner, Osip Mandelstam, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Martin Buber are set within the historical landscape of their times.

The first chapter sets the tone and methodology for the rest of the book. The remaining four chapter titles are "Lenz, the Exodic Moment, and the Pathway of Art," "The Poem's Quest for the

(Wholly) Other,” “Toward Circumference,” and “Post Meridian.” Cameron competently guides the reader through the complicated terrain of Celan’s work—famous for obscure utterances and complex and idiosyncratic literary language.

Esther Cameron brings a novel and genuine aspect to the exhaustive enumeration of Celan’s legacy and Celanian literature: a deeply human and personal one. While other scholars are able to study Celan from safe distance, Cameron’s writing about Celan seems to be speaking of her own pain and discomfort. Cameron’s own life journey through the Celan’s oeuvre is palpable at every page of the book. Furthermore, she encourages the reader to accompany her on the adventure.

Cameron’s book will be of great guiding value to anyone aspiring to understand Paul Celan’s poetry and an insightful literary lesson to anyone reading the giants of German, and to a degree, American literature of the pre- and post-Celan writings. For those seeking to understand Celan’s Jewish presence, Cameron the poet has endeavored to hear all Celan’s words and explore what they meant to the poet. She herself has taken the route from which Celan came. In this light, she came closer to understanding herself and the complex relationship between Celan’s Jewishness and his poetry. In defining Celan’s Jewish presence, Cameron validated the conviction that Jewishness cannot be compartmentalized. While throughout her study, Cameron analyzes Celan in particular fragments—as an orphan Holocaust survivor, a German-writing Jew, a secular Jew born near the Hasidic community—in the end she offers an insightful synthesis. Cameron concludes that Celan “evidently considered his Judaism to be not an undefined intention, but something ‘intricate (*feinfügig*)’ and corresponding—like the commandments of the Torah—to all the ‘limbs and organs’ of the human being” (p. 229). Here, seeing it in the context of Cameron’s Western art, Celan’s Jewish presence does not in essence differ from Walter Benjamin or Franz Kafka’s Jewishness. For

those already familiar with scholarship on Celan’s Jewish consciousness, Cameron’s book will be a useful complementary reading to previous benchmark studies, such as Alfred Hoelzel’s 1987 article, “Paul Celan: An Authentic Jewish Voice?”

Finally, there is a special group of readers not directly mentioned in the reviewed study who may respond very differently to Esther Cameron’s book: Holocaust survivors, those last few who are still with us. If they know the poems, they may draw comfort from them, because through them Celan—the witness—has commemorated their lives and their dead. Esther Cameron’s book cements the artistic legitimacy of the Holocaust experience. When there is no one left to answer questions, Celan’s poems will fill the feared emptiness with renewed intensity and urgency. For future generations, Cameron’s book will still serve to guide people on their very personal journeys—and to help them find personal redemption.

Note

[1]. Cameron in an interview with Michael R. Burch, *The HyperTexts* website, http://www.thehypertexts.com/Es-says%20Articles%20Reviews%20Prose/Esther_Cameron_Interview.htm.

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