

Petar Bojanić

## PAUL CELAN ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TESTIMONY: “ORT MEINER EIGENEN HERKUNFT”

### ABSTRACT

In his poems, Paul Celan does not use words such as territory, border, border crossing, and only very rarely the word space. I would like to reconstruct the traces of “Heimat” in Celan (in a number of poems from different periods “Heimat” plays an important role), and perhaps try to describe what Heimat might have meant for the young Paul Antschel (his real name). That is to say, I would like to understand whether “Heimat” is synonymous with what Celan speaks about, many years after his name change, in the address given on the occasion of the Georg-Buechner-Preis: “*Ich suche auch, denn ich bin ja wieder da, wo ich begonnen habe, den Ort meiner eigenen Herkunft.*” In the poems written at the time when Antschel is learning Hebrew as well as reading Martin Buber (Israel Chalfen) for the first time, I look for some basic figures Celan ties to his life in Bukovina at the time, in the environment of Czernowitzer Judentums. Aside from the works by Israel Chalfen, Else Keren and Elke Guenzel, I would like to make use of a book published some ten years ago, a detailed listing of Celan’s Paris library. I would like to consult this archive in the coming period, since Celan punctuated the margins of many of those books with evocations of his early creative period.

### KEYWORDS

testimony, *Heimat*,  
home, birth, border

To what does Celan testify? Does he testify at all, and can he at all be a witness? How can we describe his activity and effort to construct a position from which he could potentially testify, that is, be a credible witness?

Allow me to hastily and preliminarily define Paul Celan’s engagement (his poetry, thematization of his poetry in fragments, diaries, published speeches) as an attempt to deconstruct the protocol of testimony and the position of the witness – that is to say, the poet as witness and poem as testimony. Although there are difficulties and often rather unclear testimonies, I would be interested to reveal the epistemological value of Celan’s testimony and perhaps his original contribution to the reconstruction of the concept or practice of testimony. What is it that Celan lets us know? What do we learn when Celan speaks or writes? What makes Celan’s insistence on the reconstruction of the position of witness or testimony different from well-known stereotypes we associate with these protocols? I would like to delve

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Petar Bojanić: Professor, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade; bojanic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs.

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into Celan's position, use various, tentative darting probes, in order to list some of the essential characteristics or forms of testimony. A first option would refer to the narrativity of testimony. A given content is transferred from one place to another and it should be believed or not believed. When I speak of epistemological status of someone's testimony, what I have in mind is that testimony implies the possibility of becoming meaning (provided it is true), that it is grounded performatively, and therefore accepted by others in a social setting or group.<sup>1</sup> Paul Celan often neglects the narrative potential of his expression (as we often do not know what he is speaking of) for the sake of the importance of his own presence or "*un acte présent*" [a present act] or even presence of act without actor (poem without poet, act of poem writing without the poem itself).<sup>2</sup> Second, Celan is never third (*terstis* or *testis*).<sup>3</sup> He is ever on the move, on the road, in motion and retreat, and thus does not occupy the position of one who is present and who sees<sup>4</sup> (one cannot help but think of the Serbian word *očevidac* – literally one who sees directly with one's eyes; nor indeed of the English *eyewitness*, which might be different from simply *witness*). Celan also does not occupy the position of arbiter (*l'arbitre*) who, according to Benveniste, "also fulfills a testimonial function of the idea of seeing without having seen." Even when he is imagining a completely new association of all those exiled from their native countries [*Der Verband der Heimatvertriebenen*] ("An association of global exile still remains to be founded..." [*Der Verband der Weltvertriebenen wäre noch... ins Leben zu rufen*]), Celan does not assume either collective or individual testimony, but paradoxically a new, silent pseudo-homeland: "In their thoughts of who and what they are and how they are exiled – there is their homeland" [*Im Gedanken, dass und was und wie sie vertrieben wurden, ist die eigentliche Heimat*].<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to testify about one's homeland. Third, Celan never testifies about himself nor is his own witness (I am thinking of the paradigmatic

1 I am ignoring the cases of testimony in which the witness is guilty and revealed because he is a witness and because he is a survivor (if he has carried over knowledge, his function is completed).

2 "*L'essence du témoignage ne se réduit pas nécessairement à la narration, c'est-à-dire aux rapports descriptifs, informatifs, au savoir ou au récit; c'est d'abord un acte présent. Le martyr, quand il témoigne, ne raconte pas d'histoire, il s'offre.*" [The essence of testimony does not necessarily reduce to narration, that is to say, to descriptive or informative reporting, to knowledge or to account; it is first of all a present act. The martyr, when he testifies, does not recount a story, he offers himself.] (Derrida 1996: 29). In another, yet similar, context, Emmanuel Levinas speaks of "*le témoignage pur*" [pure testimony], which "*ne thématise pas ce dont il est témoignage*" [does not thematize that to which it witnesses] (Levinas 1993: 220).

3 "*Étymologiquement testis est celui qui assiste en 'tiers' (terstis) à une affaire où deux personnages sont intéressés (...).*" [Etymologically, *testis* and one who assists as 'third' (*terstis*) where there are two concerned parties (...)]. (Benveniste 1980: II, 277)

4 "*Le testis est là au vu et au su des parties.*" [The *testis* is present to sight and knowledge of the parties]. (Benveniste 1980: II, 174) The 1990s wars in the Balkans had examples where a man and husband clandestinely watches the rape of his own wife and mother, vicious murders of one's own children by criminals and later gives testimony regarding this. He sees, but is not seen, thus his testimony should not be considered credible.

5 Bertrand Badiou has pointed out to me (perhaps unconsciously) the slight shifts in versions of this sentence, mentioned several times in Celan's fragments. "*Der Verband der Weltvertriebenen wäre noch... ins Leben zu rufen*" (*Mikrolithen*, 46)." "*Der Verband der Weltvertriebenen wäre wohl noch... ins Leben zu rufen*" (*Meridian*, F 85, 6)." "*Der Verband der*

model found in the Gospel according to John) nor his own guarantor, as ‘his own’ quasi ‘I’, which always appears in the search for its homeland or in the return to the homeland (“Heimkehr”), is always transformed or a plurality of various ‘I’s,<sup>6</sup> or else a lost, imaginary ‘I’.<sup>7</sup> In that sense, paradoxically, the status of one who is not at all able to testify convincingly, fulfills the famous rule of which speaks Pascal.<sup>8</sup>

In the following sentence from Celan’s *Der Meridian*, “*Ort meiner Herkunft*” (The Place of my Origin), which I have used as the title of my paper, a lot is said; yet, I have added a potentially disturbing question by Celan: “*Heimat, und Ich?*”<sup>9</sup> Any conversation or mention of *Herkunft*, ‘being at home’ or ‘at one’s place’ or ‘being home’, any mention of native land or homeland, necessarily poses and brings to surface this question, our own and about ourselves: “*Heimat, und Ich?*” [Homeland, and I? or Homeland, and me?]. The emphasis is certainly on the comma and break after the word *Heimat*. A question or narrative (everything usually begins in narration) of *Heimat* immediately poses the question of ‘I’ or ‘me’, of birth certificate and passport, of memories and time, a distant place, etc. The word ‘identity’ (a complicated and difficult word, often unnecessary and trivial, often in a trivial register), which usually harmonizes all these operations and which usually begins with the pronoun ‘I’ and question ‘I?’, implies two more protocols on which Paul Celan insists.<sup>10</sup> The first refers to feelings and often comes in the form of insecurity,

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*Weltvertriebenen wäre ja wohl erst ins Leben zu rufen*“ (*Mikrolithen*, 30).” “*Der Verband der Weltvertriebenen wäre ja wohl noch ins Leben zu rufen*“ (*Mikrolithen*, 43).”

6 For example, the poet’s homeland, as well as his identity changes from poem to poem.

7 In a 1960 letter to his friend in Bucharest, Celan wonders if it would not have been better to have stayed in his native land.

8 In a passage referring to the history of China, Pascal writes: “*Je ne crois que les histoires dont les témoins se feraient égorger*” [I only believe stories of witnesses whose throats have been slit] (Lafuma 822). There are no witnesses, no narrative, but there is hesitation and detour.

9 On the last, 160<sup>th</sup> page of Jean Améry’s book *Jeinseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (1966) Celan notes “*Heimat, --- Und Ich ? Ich war nicht einmal \ zuhause, als ich daheim \ (zuhause) war*” (in Badiou’s translation: “*Pays natal... Et moi ? Je n’étais même pas a la maison, quand j’étais chez moi (à la maison).*”) (Celan 2004: 451, 459) We have here Celan reading Améry’s essay “*Wieviel Heimat braucht der Mensch?*” in this book, and encounters the sentence “*Ich war kein Ich mehr und lebte nicht in einem Wir.*” Celan’s question could have also been provoked by Améry’s sentence “*Die Heimat ist das Kindheits- und Jugendland.*” Leonard Olschner is one of the rare readers who takes on Celan’s reading of Améry and assumes that the 1968 poem “*Dein Heim*” emerges from this (Olschner 2007: 24–25). “*Dein Heim*” opens with the verse “*in wieviel Häusern?*”. Still, perhaps this indication is already present with the double meaning of *zweihäusig*, which appears a few times in *Die Nimandsrose*.

10 A potential third protocol could be the one mentioned by Améry in the second part of the sentence “*Ich war kein Ich mehr und lebte nicht in einem Wir.*” *Heimat* implies the existence of something more intimate than community as such – the existence of “*Wir*” and the belonging to that “*Wir*.” Such a “*Wir*” is a fictitious first entity that implies a future thematization of *Heimat* or loss of *Heimat*. Namely, *Heimat*, as entirely different for all members of a community, becomes the completely specific integrative factor for all of us, making us closer and more equal as members of the community. We are connected if and only if each belongs to their own, to their own native land, that is to say everyone is at home. For, the condition that we are all together is satisfied if each of us in his own place, in his real place and belongs to their original “*Wir*.” One without a native land,

disquiet or inappropriateness (it is unseemly for someone to ask me or even that I ask myself whether I am and where I am at home, even though I myself am always asking myself that) – Celan’s answer is: “homeland – and I? I was not even at home when I was at home (at that house).” The second refers to the return, returning, the road, dilly-dallying, the way we return and how we travel back. Returning<sup>11</sup> can often be connected to vertigo, nausea, vomiting (in Serbian, the words *vraćanje* [returning] and *po-vraćanje* [vomiting] are a good indication of the discomfort, but also the need for careful and very delicate travel back or around that happens in *Herkunft* or in Identity). It seems to me that Celan’s response about the simultaneous arrival and return, about the road, is quite clear:

The Landscape from which I – by what detours! But are there such things: detours? – the landscape from which I come to you might be unfamiliar to most of you. It is the landscape that was home to a not inconsiderable portion of those Hasidic tales that Martin Buber has retold for us all in German. It was, if I may add to this topographic sketch something that appears before my eyes now from very far away – it was a region in which human beings and books used to live (*Die Landschaft, aus der ich – auf welchen Umwegen! Aber gibt es das denn: Umwege? -, die Landschaft, aus der ich zu Ihnen komme, durfte den meisten von Ihnen unbekant sein. Es ist die Landschaft, in der ein nicht unbeträchtlicher Teil jener chassidischen Geschichte zu Hause war, die Martin Buber uns allen auf deutsch wiedererzählt hat. (...) es war eine Gegend, in der Menschen und Bucher lebten*). (Celan 2001: 395; 1986: III, 185)

Two years later, in a speech that thematizes the road in numerous places, *Nes-selweg*, travel, or *Toposforschung*, Celan supplements the words from Bremen:

Then does one, in thinking of poems, does one walk such paths with poems? Are these paths only by-paths, bypaths from thou to thou? Yet at the same time, among how many other paths, they’re also paths on which language gets a voice, they are encounters, paths of a voice to a perceiving Thou, creaturely paths, sketches of existence perhaps, a sending oneself ahead toward oneself, is search of oneself... A kind of homecoming. (...) I also seek – for I’m back again where I began – the place of my own origin. (*Geht man also, wenn man an Gedichte denkt, geht man mit Gedichten solche Wege? Sind diese Wege nur Um-Wege, Umwege von dir zu dir? Aber es sind ja zugleich auch, unter wie vielen anderen Wegen, Wege, auf denen die Sprache stimmhaft wird, es sind Begegnungen, Wege einer Stimme zu einem wahrnehmenden Du, kreatürliche Wege, Daseinsentwürfe vielleicht, ein Sichvorausschicken zu sich selbst, auf der Suche nach sich selbst... Eine Art Heimkehr. (...) Ich suche auch, denn ich bin ja wieder da, wo ich begonnen habe, den Ort meiner eigenen Herkunft*). (Celan 2001: 412–413, 1986, III: 201–202)<sup>12</sup>

Probably, we ought to very carefully reconstruct these two protocols offered by Paul Celan, as an endlessly poor and laborious answer to the question “*Heimat, und*

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paradoxically, is not part of the community or not part of us all. One without their “*Wir*” – does not exist or will soon cease to exist.

11 The poem “Heimkehr,” written between 1955 and 1956 is translated into Russian, for example, as “Vozvrascenie na Rodinu.” Cf. Celan 2014: 94; Celjan 2013: 79.

12 There is also another translation, by Pierre Joris: “Does one take, when thinking of poems, does one take such routes with the poems? Are these routes only re-routings, detours from you to you?” or “The poem is the detour from you to you; it is the route (*Das Gedicht ist der Umweg von dir zu dir; es ist der Weg*).” (Celan 2011: 11, 40)

*Ich?*” Likely this reconstruction would be successful to the extent that each one of us individually answers this question that affects us all, without blindly following all of Celan’s various associations and obsessions about home and way home, as Celan’s answer connects all too quickly with some other answers in the histories of wandering and discomfort.<sup>13</sup> Celan’s response is above all in resistance (unconscious and certainly intuitive) to nostalgia, that is, to Heidegger and his understanding of the path and the protocol revealed by the word *Umweg*.

Well then, what is nostalgia? In paragraph 4 of his thesis *Nostalgia oder Heimwehe*, defended 22 June 1688 at the Medical School in Basel, Johannes Hofer, describes the difficult injury and agony of a local peasant girl. After a fall from some height, she lay motionless and unconscious in an improvised hospital, slowly coming to only after surgery and various remedies. Awake and seeing unknown women caring for her, she is all of a sudden overcome with nostalgia (*Nostalgia statim correpta*). Hofer tells us she is rejecting all food and answering all questions identically: “*Ich will Heim, Ich will Heim* [I want to go home, I want to go home]. When the parents finally allow her, debilitated, to return to her home (*Tandem ergo a parentibus licet maxime imbecillis domum est delata*) (Hofer 1688: 8),<sup>14</sup> her state improves suddenly and without medication. This case, along with another case presented in the same paragraph, of a young student from a family in good standing, who goes to Basel for his studies and falls gravely ill (his condition improves rapidly when he is ordered home at once), help Hofer construct his argument about the appearance of an entirely new and odd illness, and help explain why there is an epidemic among Swiss soldiers.

For Celan, there is first of all no house where we will be at home (when translating Emily Dickinson, he discovers the vindicating phrase “homeless at home”), primarily because the home is no more or because the home has been abandoned forever.

*Ich war nicht einmal zuhause, als ich daheim (zuhause) war.*

I am not at home even when it seems that I am at home, at mine. In one way or another, I cannot be a witness – one without a house or *Heimat* cannot testify – at the same time, I testify that I am not a witness, that I cannot be a witness, and

13 One of the main reasons I choose to speak about Celan who explicitly mentions Bukovina as *Heimat* or as *Heiland* (and not Bukovina as Ukraine or as snow, or as mother, etc.) – this is the Bukovina where in 1930 there are 93,101 Jews officially counted, while on 20 May 1942 there were 17,033 (Günzel 1995: 24) – refers sometimes to the unsatisfactory readings of Celan by Jacques Derrida (today it seems to me that my doctoral thesis and some texts, such as the ones on C. Schmitt or W. Benjamin, were also to an extent my attempt to correct his oversights). In *Sovereignities in Question. The Poetics of Paul Celan* (a compendium of different texts published in French), Derrida all too quickly and insufficiently justifiably reduces Celan’s engagement to Freud’s “Unheimlich” (Derrida 2005). It beggars belief that in the seminar “Le Bête et le souverain” (2002-2003) where he interprets Heidegger’s “Umweg” in detail along with a philosophy essentially opposed to any “Umweg,” Derrida does not oppose this idea by the “Umweg” in Celan or “Methode als Umweg” in Benjamin. This omission is all the greater when we know that in his last seminars, Derrida often analyzes Celan’s “Meridian.”

14 ; English translation by Carolyn Kiser Anspach, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688,” published in the *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934).

as such I am a witness without testimony. This naked ‘Ich’ is never at home, never with itself, and never feels itself in a space that gives the sense of potential closeness. This is not a hidden nostalgia, nor the possibility of “being at home anywhere,”<sup>15</sup> nor does Celan invent some kind of authentic language of the native land (he speaks of poetry that might help show the way, but not about language; poetry supposes translation and transcends language and plurality of language<sup>16</sup>). In other words, there is no trace in Celan of Humboldt’s idea of inseparability of *Sprache* and *Heimat*. It seems to me that Humboldt’s famous sentence – “*Die wahre Heimath ist eigentlich die Sprache* [The true home is really language] (Humboldt 1848: 322) – from his 1827 letter to Charlotte, with all its various incarnations and repetitions from Hannah Arendt to Derrida or Gadamer, could also be completed well in Heidegger’s speech on the occasion of the seven hundredth anniversary of his native city of Masskirch: “*Unsere Sprache nennt den Zug zur Heimat das Heimweh*”. (Heidegger 2000: 578)

In the second fictional protocol Paul Celan offers as a response to the question of the position of “*Ich*” in relation to “*Heimat*” (“*Heimat, und Ich?*”), we find a collision between the “arrival from somewhere” and “return back.” These two operations conducted simultaneously mean that there can never be ‘direct’ movement, nor on a straight path (*Weg*); rather, that the “*Ich*” is always within the register of “*Um-wege*.” If we remove, or put aside those aspects most interesting to Celan and his readers from his speeches in Bremen and Darmstadt – the idea of *Landschaft* or *Heimat* where books and people live together, as well as the idea that “one travels through poems” back to this magical region where people and books comprise the *Wir* – then we are left with a double perspective that necessarily cancels this ever-wandering or pseudo-wandering “*Ich*” down myriad detours. As if Celan’s “*Ich*” (and not only his, of course) – does not move at all.<sup>17</sup>

In the passage delivered by Celan in Bremen, he informs us that he has arrived from somewhere, that this country is unknown to us and that he has arrived “*auf welchen Umwegen!*”. The question that remains is as follows: “*Aber gibt es das denn: Umwege?*”<sup>18</sup> In the fragment from Darmstadt, the direction or perspective is the opposite: now we are dealing with “*Eine Art Heimkehr*.” The return seems to be performed through poems, but through these detours (*Umweg*). Here too, Celan asks a similar question: “*Sind diese Wege nur Um-Wege, Umwege von dir zu dir?*”<sup>19</sup>

15 “*Die Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, ein Trieb, überall zu Hause zu sein*.” Heidegger analyzes this statement by Novalis in § 2, at the beginning of the winter seminar in 1929 (Heidegger 1983: 7-10). Celan of course did not know of Heidegger’s seminar.

16 In “Meridian,” Celan defines poetry as that which is outside of text (*hors texte*). “*Eh bien, me voici, et il le fallait bien, hors texte*.”

17 Levinas formulates this situation as follows: “*La circularité de ce mouvement sans retour*.” (Levinas 1976: 64)

18 There are several variants of translation into English (“roundabout ways,” “byway,” etc.). One of them, “*by what detours! But are there such things: detours?*” (Celan 2001, 395). Jean Launay translates similarly into the French: “*par quels détours! Mais est-ce que cela existe : des détours?*” (Celan 2002: 55), “*kakimi okolnjimi putjami! susestvujut li vobse okolnie puti?*” (Celjan 2013: 363)

19 John Felstiner’s translation: “*Then does one, in thinking of poems, does one walk such paths with poems? Are these paths only by-paths, bypaths from thou to thou?*” (Celan 2001:

Once again, if we are able to hold at distance Celan's main assumption, of which he speaks in a passage on antibiography towards the end of 1953 (or beginning of 1954), that the *Heimat* of the poet is indeed the poem itself, a poem that always brings together I and Thou,<sup>20</sup> the only thing that remains unchanged in Celan is his uncertainty and dubiousness regarding the existence of these detours.

Even though the Darmstadt speech, alternating between seeking and finding, ends in the discovery of the Meridian, it would appear that Paul Celan's only effort is to sustain and hold this question or these questions about the paths that come from the abyss and lead to the abyss ("The abyss is their *Heimat*, their language is being-on-the-road"), on a course filled with hesitation, always tardy, never arriving.<sup>21</sup> In the sentence that follows, at the moment *Herkunft* is reached, where everything is discovered and where everything is in place, the only remaining thing is to further ask and always seek anew:

*"Ich suche auch, denn ich bin ja wieder da, wo ich begonnen habe, den Ort meiner eigenen Herkunft"*<sup>22</sup>

Translated by Edward Djordjevic

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412) Pierre Joris' translation: "Are these routes only re-routings, detours from you to you?" (Celan 2011: 11). Jean Launay's French translation: "Seraient-ce simplement des allers-retours, des chemins qui font un détour pour aller de toi à toi-même?" (Celan 2002: 82) Only in Russian is the translation unchanged: "okolnjije puti."

20 "Echte Dichtung ist antibiographisch. Die Heimat des Dichters ist sein Gedicht, sie wechselt von einem Gedicht zum anderen." (Celan 2005: 95-96) True poetry is therefore not biographical; that is to say, for it to be poetry, there can be no testifying about oneself in it.

21 *Einer der Wege: andere führen, aus dem Bodenlosen kommend, führen{d} ins Bodenlose zurück; der Abgrund ist ihnen die Heimat; ihre Sprache ist ihnen das Unterwegssein; nicht mehr*" (Meridian, F 40-42).

22 "I also seek – for I'm back again where I began – the place of my own origin." (Celan 2001: 413)

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## Petar Bojanić

### Paul Celan o nemogućnosti svjedočenja: „Ort meiner eigenen Herkunft“

#### Apstrakt

Paul Celan u svojim pjesmama ne upotrebljava reči kao što su teritorija, granica, prelaženje granice, a veoma retko reč prostor. Namera mi je da rekonstruišem tragove „Heimat“ kod Celana (u nekoliko pesama iz različitih perioda „Heimat“ je važna tema) i eventualno pokušam da opišem šta je Heimat mogao da znači za mladoga Paul Antschel (njegovu pravo ime). Odnosno da li je „Heimat“ zaista u sinonimiji sa onim što Celan kaže, puno godina kasnije, u govoru povodom uručjenja Georg-Buechner-Preis: „*Ich suche auch, denn ich bin ja wieder da, wo ich begonnen habe, den Ort meiner eigenen Herkunft*“. Pokušaću da u pjesmama napisanim u vreme kada Antschel uči hebrejski i prvi put čita knjige Martina Bubera (Israel Chalfen), pokazem neke osnovne figure koje Celan vezuje za svoj tadašnji život u Bukowini, a u okruženju Czernowitzer Judentums. U ovom istraživanju ću se koristiti, osim radova Israela Chalfena, Else Keren i Elke Guenzel, i knjigom koja je objavljena pre desetak godina u kojoj je detaljno popisana pariska biblioteka Paul Celana. Namera mi je da konsultujem ovaj arhiv u narednom periodu jer Celan na marginama svojih knjiga na nekoliko mesta evocira svoje prve stvaralačke godine.

Ključne reči: svjedočenje, domovina, kuća, rođenje, granica