

Aesthetic Seduction and Mundane Repulsion

Notes on the Dialogue between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger

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1. Preliminaries

THIS STUDY aims at discussing the difficult relationship between the Romanian-born Jewish poet Paul Celan and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger by taking into account predominantly the former's intentions and actions, because it was precisely these elements that made this relationship so problematic. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the consideration of the dialogue between Celan and Heidegger excludes the way in which Heidegger himself regarded his connection to a poet - he seems to have particularly appreciated - for two main reasons: on the one hand, I consider that analysing this dialogue from Celan's perspective is more relevant since Heidegger exercised an incomparable and overwhelming influence on the Jewish poet that was not reciprocated. On the other, if we were to re-analyse their dialogue through Heidegger's eyes, their relationship would appear utterly non-problematic, since the most that can be said in this respect is that the German philosopher had intellectual doubts concerning Celan, without the possibility for any other complications. Consequently, the figure of the Romanian-born Jewish poet Paul Celan lies at the heart of the present analysis.

Born at Czernowitz (now Chernovtsy) in Bukovina, on November 23, 1920, Paul Celan lived a relatively short, yet tumultuous life. Born Paul Antschel (Celan being an anagram adopted in 1947 when the poet published his first poems in a Romanian periodical), he attended primary and secondary school in Czernowitz, paying his first visit to France in 1938 with the intention of studying

medicine; however, he returned to Czernowitz in 1939 to study Romanian language and literature at a time when the historical destiny of Czernowitz was rapidly changing under the successive domination of Russians and Germans. During the Nazi occupation, his parents were deported to the Mihaelovka camp in Transnistria in 1942, where his father died of typhus and his mother was shot by the Nazis because she was exhausted to be able to work. His cousin, the young poet Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, also died of typhus in Transnistria. Paul Celan escaped deportation and took refuge in a labour camp until he returned to Czernowitz which, at the end of 1943, found itself under Russian occupation. He continued his studies until 1945, when he settled in Bucharest, making a living as a translator. In December 1947, Paul Celan left Romania and moved to Vienna; in July 1948, he settled in Paris, where he remained until his death in 1970. Here, Celan finalised his literature studies and became one of the best-known Germanists of his time. He married Gisele LeStrange in 1952; she was an artist born in a French aristocratic family; his first son died immediately after being born in 1953; his second child, Eric Celan, was born in 1955. Celan committed suicide in April 1970 by drowning himself in the Seine river.¹

I would like to emphasise here two important details: first, Czernowitz continued to linger in the poet's mind as a genuine spiritual and intellectual topos: his archaic German and his elegant mode of expression in this language are rooted in the Germanophile education he received in this city; German was actually his mother tongue. Second, the year 1942 seems to represent a crossroads in his life: according to an official report dated September 7, 1942, 4,094 Jews were deported from Czernowitz to a Transnistria extermination camp at a time when Paul Celan (by accident or not, we do not know) managed to evade this deportation. Both the analysts and the commentators of his work are almost unanimous in observing that his entire life was deeply marked by this event, the poet being incapable of escaping the guilt of having abandoned his family.² According to an overall characterisation of his life, Paul Ancel is an expatriate, alienated and paranoid Romanian-born Jew who had embraced a leftist ideology in his youth without having any political affiliation, a talented speaker of German and a man profoundly marked by the guilt of having survived the Holocaust.

Let us now return to his intellectual activity in order to emphasise some preliminary considerations pertaining to his relationship with the man who was arguably the most important philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger. First of all, Celan's debut as a poet took place within a German intellectual milieu: the poet read his first works during the meetings of Gruppe 47 in the last years of the 1940s. Celan began reading Heidegger's works in 1951. The period 1952-1954 represented probably the most prolific remote dialogue between Paul

Celan and the German philosopher's works: later on, Celan would confess to one of Heidegger's disciples, Otto Pöggeler, about the fact that he felt an irresistible attraction to Heidegger's philosophy from the very beginning; therefore, one could argue, *pace* Celan, that the poet seems to have discovered a profound aesthetic affinity with the German philosopher's works.³ Heidegger's influence proper on Celan largely covers the period between 1951 and 1959; according to Lyon's comprehensive analysis, the dialogue between Celan and Heidegger spans almost two decades, until Celan's death in 1970. These two decades of dialogue are marked by certain tensions and discontinuities that both those who mediated it and the biographers of the two intellectuals figures acknowledge. Their two sons, Eric Celan and Hermann Heidegger, have recently tried to clarify the relationship between their fathers; nevertheless, the most important arbiter of this relationship remained Otto Pöggeler, as we will argue below. The uncertainties of the dialogue between Celan and Heidegger are prolonged by the fact that the direct correspondence between them has been lost or that, for instance, the letters exchanged between Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan and Klaus Demus, respectively, have not yet been made available to the public, as one could assume that Paul Celan possessed more detailed accounts on Heidegger considering the latter's overwhelming influence upon him. I would like to mention that, despite the fact that Heidegger repeatedly sent his works to Celan with his dedication, there are few documents that might reveal more detailed considerations about Heidegger's opinion of Celan, except for the testimonies of those who acted as mediators between the two. I would like to confine my observations on Heidegger to what is relevant in the context of the present study: first of all, the German philosopher's complete lack of acknowledgement concerning the Holocaust is particularly important; moreover, Heidegger was a member of the NSDAP between 1933 and 1945 and the rector of Freiburg University in 1933; upon his confirmation as rector, he gave a famous speech entitled "On the Self-Assertion of German University" where he mentioned some premises borrowed from the Nazi ideological discourse. Generally speaking, after 1945, he avoided making any reference to his past; at best, he attempted only feeble efforts to exculpate himself. Consequently, the tension that characterised the relationship between Celan and Heidegger for almost two decades lies in the contrast opposing their affinity of thought and their different views on politics explained by their radically different backgrounds. My analysis attempts to separate the aesthetic affinity model from the existentialist differences between the two in order to reveal the essence of this tension. Evidently, I will in no way anticipate this essence before proceeding to the outline of the above-mentioned analysis.

2. The dimension of aesthetic seduction in the dialogue between Celan and Heidegger

The aesthetic dimension of the relationship between Celan and Heidegger is a highly complex one; in what follows, I would like to clarify it by pointing out a series of aesthetic elements that exerted a certain seduction on Celan's poetry, considering that his aesthetic theory was deeply influenced by Heidegger's philosophy. The elements of this aesthetic seduction in Celan's poetic theory are: language, the nature and form of the poem, silence and loneliness, truth, death, memory and witnessing. While these elements represent recurrent concepts of Heidegger's thought, in Celan's poetry they alternate with some degree of obscurity and ambiguity. I will end this section focused on Celan's aesthetic theory by some considerations on the role of the translator and a brief discussion on the meaning of his "Meridian" speech (1960) outlining his aesthetic theory.

During his youth, in the period before 1950, Celan was still searching for a poetic identity, his language being influenced both by German expressionism and French surrealism.⁴ His poetry, suffused by an obscurity peculiar to the literary avant-garde, is still rooted in evident biblical and mythological influences visible especially during his Bucharest and Viennese periods.⁵ Even so, Celan was, to some extent, under Heidegger's influence:⁶ his preoccupation was to renew and rehabilitate language, to purge it and remove it from Nazi-inspired ideological use, the object of this renewal being of course the German language. Heidegger's influence from a linguistic point of view was clearly visible in the way in which Celan adopted the philosopher's mode of expression: this includes both the appropriation of some concepts ("the alien death") and the Heideggerian mannerism as far as the written use of language was concerned (i.e., "being-no-longer-in-the-world", "this-not-yet", "the-now-no-longer", "being-in-untruth").⁷ Certainly, both of them were preoccupied with seeking the pure origins of language, and Heidegger's most profound suggestion, according to which the unity of philosophical thought and of poetic language can be postulated, represents a preferred aesthetic orientation in Celan's poetry, at least until 1955.⁸ Celan's perspective on language is essentially Heideggerian: if language is both concealment and revelation, then language in its revelation state becomes illumination (Lichtung), while language as concealment signifies mystery, silence and that which is unspoken. Consequently, language becomes a sort of bridge connecting two realms representing both that which is not yet expressed and that which can be explicitly articulated. If this connection holds, then language avoids a caesura or a fall into the abyss.⁹ Celan makes a

very important reference to language when he speaks about the rehabilitation of German and the Nazis abusive use of language: he is continuously shifting between his belief that language could be recovered from what was lost and a certain amount of scepticism according to which language cannot reveal what was lost.¹⁰ One of the Celan's most eloquent poems dealing with the issue of language is "With a Changing Key" (1953): here, language is approached from the perspective of its placement as "house of being" in the case of Heidegger and the Austrian poet Karl Kraus.¹¹ Revealed language is the expression of the poet's conduct in a state of grace and illumination, expressed as an inspiration that includes nothing mysterious or occult;¹² Celan takes on Heidegger's suggestion according to which language is something more profound than a mere tool used for communication, as the technological age considers it. Celan's humanism is wholly consistent to Heidegger's; in 1960, Celan was already convinced that contemporary man was under the domination of the age of "cybernetic lyrics", which could result in the even more disastrous emergence of an age of "lyric cybernetics".¹³ As such, Celan's overall view on language implies "radical individuation, unique and irreproducible speaking of an individual."¹⁴

Celan's aesthetic relation to Heidegger is also visible in the way in which the Romanian-born Jewish poet examines the poet's mission and the role of poetry. Celan himself seems to have emphasised that his poetry is not hermetic and paradoxical, but it is open to communication and reception; the poem in its most authentic form reveals itself as a form of desperate dialogue.¹⁵ His poetic message follows those of Hölderlin, Rilke or Trakl, and his poetry is filled with metaphors and spiritual content. His late poems becomes "increasingly laconic and densely textured, placing considerable demands on the reader's willingness to respond to semantic clues and the movement of the words."¹⁶ Following Heidegger, Celan brings forth the poet as visionary and establishes the role of poetry as calling: this means that the poem is a gift received from nothingness, something that is granted to the poet and to which the poet must be receptive. Celan refuses the idea of poetry as experience or experiment and establishes the poetic act as *Dichtung* in Heidegger's understanding, namely as something transcendent in relation to which the poet is just a responsive listener.¹⁷ Translations are not mere acts of imitation, but they stem from inspiration and illumination just like the poem does: they are also a kind of dictation or, to use Heidegger's words, "the speaking-to-us of being".¹⁸ The poet's primary mission is that of removing language from its hiding state, still in Heidegger's sense of the term; the poet is freed once he succeeds in translating or converting that which cannot be said into articulate language. One of most moving poems of the 20th century is entitled "Todesfuge" (1952) and it is a profound meditation on the confrontation between poetic act and the brutal historical experiences of

the Holocaust, standing in sharp contrast with Adorno's famous dictum.¹⁹ There is also an ambiguity in the way in which Celan acknowledges the essence of the poem as dialog and conversation on the one hand (in Martin Buber's sense of the term) and, on the other, as "mystery of an encounter",²⁰ in other words the difficulty of achieving the connection between a poem and its historical reference:

Not just a point of view upon a scene is at issue, but the very sitting and sighting of the scene itself. The Celanian poem's ambivalence about its scene, which is sometimes interpreted by critics as hermeticism, would seem at first glance to repudiate the historical nature of its witness. For the reader can barely guess at the events that the poems intend to index. Often, one must turn to biographical details, to notes scribbled in the margins of a manuscript, to insider knowledge, to abstruse references or citations, in order to determine the poem's historical reference points.²¹

Two other essential elements to the understanding of Celan's aesthetic theory are silence and loneliness. Jacques Derrida establishes the relationship between poem, the loneliness of witnessing and silence in Celan's case: the poem speaks to someone while at the same time keeping silent; understanding silence as the essential limit of any poem is the defining feature of any witness. Thus, the poem and the witness represent unique facts indestructibly linked to what is preserved as silence.²² In Celan's case, the meaning of silence derives from the possibility of language in the context of the historical experience of the Holocaust: Shoah makes possible the existence of so-called silent words or "the concealing of speech by not using it";²³ this points to a radical reform of language taking into consideration the experience of silence as well, thus pushing the consideration of language beyond its traditional limits.

Given the experience of silence within Celan's conception of poetry and language as mediator between that which can be expressed and something purely transcendent, truth must be conceived as uncoverness; Celan's view on truth derives from what Heidegger conceives of truth as *aletheia* (i.e., removing something from a state of being forgotten):

Celan repeatedly used the words truth and true. From their context there it is clear that he did not use the term to mean a transcendental or higher value. For him it meant openness, candor, sincerity, genuineness or, in negative terms, the opposite of deceitfulness, falsehood, insincerity, dishonesty, meretriciousness, shallowness... The truth Celan sought, a word that for him characterized the essence of poetic revelation, also meant recognition and a forthright accounting by contemporary Germans of the Nazi past with which they had not come to grips. Besides recogni-

tion, it included admission of culpability and a genuine effort to atone for what the Third Reich had done to the world. His interest in Heidegger's statement about the "certainty" truth brings suggests that absent such acknowledgment, accounting, and atoning, he had reason to remain skeptical of and suspicious toward almost all Germans.²⁴

As far as the concept of death is concerned, Celan speaks about the possibility of a dialogue with those who are no longer present, emphasising the fact that the voices of the dead can be recovered from silence; the meaning of hearing the voices of the dead is equivalent with the attempt to bring the dead to language. Consequently, death should not be regarded as an absolute disappearance of the dead (in this sense, one can speak about the opposition between death of humans and perish of animals), because Celan postulates the possibility of establishing a communion between life and death: as such, there is something beyond death that should be heard, understood and transmitted: "The living and the dead, the tongues of past poets and present sayers, are in constant exchange. Celan is in dialogue with himself and his surroundings, both as a poet and a human, private person."²⁵ However, the dialogue with the dead is not possible outside the active presence of memory: Celan makes good use of Heidegger's suggestion, according to which knowledge is the memory of being; if this is the case, then memory must be articulated through language. Besides stating the role of memory for knowledge, Celan also exhibits what could be termed the aesthetic sense of memory as recollection, remembrance and devotion.²⁶

I would like to end the present section dedicated to discussing Celan's aesthetic theory with some brief considerations on his public speech made in Paris, "The Meridian", where his theory of poetry is articulated. Long before the conception of the speech, Celan had expressed the wish to write his own phenomenology of literature: despite the fact that he was not trained in philosophy, between 1950 and 1960, Celan read extensively on the history of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger, the latter's work making up the largest proportion of these readings. His project of writing this phenomenology of literature in an *opus magnum* failed; however, there are some important clues in "The Meridian" regarding the future unaccomplished structure of his comprehensive aesthetic theory. As far as the present study is concerned, one should point out that, as early as 1960, Celan had broken away from Heidegger's influence in order to claim the autonomy of his own conception. However, "The Meridian" displays both his agreement and his disagreement with Heidegger; for instance, Celan, like Heidegger, thinks that the poetic act is not a fictional one or the product of one's own creative imagination, but an illumination, a gift or the act of bringing to light something that is hidden; by contrast to Heidegger, who often mentioned

the timelessness of poetry, Celan considers that poetry must be placed in time and space. What we can understand from here is that, according to Celan, the poem should reflect what happened, being validated less by atemporality or contextual independence.²⁷ Referring to the comprehensive content of Celan's aesthetic theory, James Lyon writes that:

*His reflections, for example, range from contemporary literary theory and movements, including concrete poetry, to cybernetics and information theory; from the Nibelungenlied to surrealism; and from the nature of metaphors to questions of accent, rhythm, tempus, and timbre in poetry. Furthermore, his notes ask basic questions about the nature of the poem, such as whether it is "composed" or originates in another way; whether it can be described at all; whether it intends to communicate, and if so, what; and what its relationship is to an "Other." They also reflect on whether that "Other" answers when it is addressed and how one is to understand the double relationship of the poem to its own language and to that of the poetic "I." Other topics deal with the matter of obscurity and unintelligibility in the poem, the nature of the poetic voice, and the function of that voice. Yet others center on Celan's interest in the relationship of the poem to the events in the world from which it emerged and to its author, that is, the extent to which the poet himself or the social and political events of the time intrude into, attach themselves to, or are reflected in a poem.*²⁸

Conclusions

FIRST OF ALL, I would like to express a consideration on the value of Celan's aesthetic theory: the superiority of his poetry results from the fact that it moved beyond the avant-garde that reduced poetry to a mere craft by regarding words as tools or objects towards adopting a spiritualist position; certainly – at least in the case of poems written during his mature phase – the mission of poetry is essentially dialogic. This does not mean the banalisation of the poetic act by communication, but rather drawing attention to the possibility of putting the poem to good use as limit between historical contingency and a transcendent reality. In this case, the reference is indestructibly linked to the possibility of establishing a dialogue with those who died in the Holocaust, so that the poetic act is intertwined with the moral commitment.

I could also have chosen to use a dualist approach of Celan's conception that contrasted his aesthetic theory to an anti-aesthetic attitude; nevertheless, in Celan's case, I do not believe one can speak about the manifestation of the anti-

aesthetic. He strongly believes in the force and value of poetic language, in the sense that this is capable of removing *something* which is hidden and of making silence speak. On the other hand, the ambiguity and hermeticism present in his poetry could be regarded as the effects of a meta-aesthetic position: one among such difficulties results from the way in which Celan intentionally distorted the German language, something that naturally caused difficulties in approaching his poetry. However, this aspect should neither be regarded in a surrealist manner, despite his early affinity towards this artistic trend, nor as a mere revolt stemmed from resentment and directed against the language of a nation that enacted one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century. Consequently, I believe that his position should be interpreted beyond the limits of aesthetics and experience. This issue becomes an epistemological (i.e., the question of knowing what is the tolerable limit of language after the experience of the Holocaust) and ontological one (the question of knowing how it is possible to have an encounter with the dead).

I would then like to argue that the so-called discontinuity between Celan's aesthetic affinity to Heidegger and his repulsion concerning the latter's involvement in the events of the time is not so much a discontinuity but rather a difficulty to assimilate them within the same mode of sensibility precisely because of the ontological and epistemological difficulties mentioned above. On the other hand, I believe that the distinction between the aesthetic and the mundane should be carried in a rigorously analytic manner, something that evidently falls outside the scope of the present study. This would only lead to clarifying the ambiguities surrounding one of the most celebrated intellectual encounters of the 20th century. Clarifying the historical truth and what transcends it should take precedence over the explicative simplifications contrasting the spiritual compatibility with the existential incompatibility of the historical dialogue between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger.

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Notes

1. This succinct biography was based on the following sources: Marianne Hirsch, Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010, p. 244 and Michael Hamburger, "Introduction", in Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 10-11.
2. Hirsch, Spitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
3. James K. Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation*,

1951-1970, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, p. 22.

4. Hamburger, *art. cit.* in Celan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
5. Hugo Bekker, *Paul Celan: Studies in His Early Poetry*, New York: Rodopi, 2008, p. 171.
6. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
7. *Ibidem*, pp. 4, 15-17.
8. *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10. Derrida writes about Celan's relationship to language: "To create a work is to give a new body to language, to give language a body so that this truth of language may appear *as such*, may appear and disappear, may appear as an elliptic withdrawal. I believe that Celan, from this point of view, is an exemplary poet." (Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 106).
9. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 38. The author refers here especially to the poem "Your Dream" (1963). The question that both Celan and Heidegger were preoccupied with is: what lies beyond contextual language? Or, what happens in the pure fabric of language? Moreover, in Celan's case, one could derive another question: how can one express that which cannot be expressed? Thus, Celan opposes Adorno's well-known argument that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.
10. "... first that language can never recover what is lost, and second, that language will have had to have recovered from what has been lost." (Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 123). The same author quotes Celan, who argues: "Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all loses: 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 terrifying 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." (p. 137) Reinforcing this idea, Derrida writes: "He wakes up language, and in order to experience the awakening, the return to life of language, truly *in the quick, the living flesh*, he must be very close to its corpse." (*op. cit.*, p. 106)
11. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 154.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 80.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 120.
15. Hamburger, *art. cit.*, in Celan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
16. Kathrin Kohl, "Austrian Poetry, 1918-2000", in Kathrin Kohl, Ritchie Robertson (eds.), *A History of Austrian Literature, 1918-2000*, New York: Camden House, 2006, pp. 144-145.
17. Lyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 32, 52, 77-78, 119. Celan takes many important suggestions from Heidegger's essay "What Are Poets For?" regarding the role and destiny

of poetry; the meaning of poetry can also be understood from a meta-aesthetic perspective as “spiritual shelter and protection in the age of desecralisation.” (p. 45)

18. *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.
19. Andrew Barker, “The Politics of Austrian Literature, 1927-56”, in Kohl, Robertson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 118.
20. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 132
21. James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable*, New York: SUNY Press, 2000, p. 148. The poem is filled with the mystery of this shifting between unspoken and speakable, on the one hand, and between text and its reference, on the other; it becomes a form of crossing itself, an “en route”, an “underway”, in the sense in which Celan speaks about these things in his speech, “The Meridian”. (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. by Andrea Tarnowski, California: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 18).
22. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 96. The author also explains the mystery of Celan’s silence either in terms of the impossibility to fully translate an idiom or by the fact that language cannot be possessed as such in any given situation. (pp. 101-102)
23. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
24. *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
25. George Steiner, “So Much Darkness Dispelled”, in *Times Literary Supplement*, February 10-16, 1989, p. 135.
26. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
27. *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 106. His consideration that every poem has its “January 20th” is connected to the idea of a poem’s temporality; this date is an allusion to the tragic consequences following the Wannsee Conference, where the Final Solution to the Jewish problem was adopted: “Perhaps the novelty of poems that are written today is to be found in precisely this point: that here the attempt is most clearly made to remain mindful of such dates? But are we all not descended from such dates? And to which dates do we attribute ourselves?” (Paul Celan, “The Meridian”, in Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 180).
28. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

Abstract

One of the most famous encounters in the intellectual history of the 20th century is the one between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger. Both the remote dialogue and the three actual meetings between the two intellectuals are ambiguous enough so that the re-examination of their relationship could prove useful: the most surprising aspect of this relationship is the discontinuity and even contradiction between the affinity of their modes of thinking and a certain tension present in the actual, existential relationship they shared. This discontinuity applies to Paul Celan’s case; Heidegger, on the other hand, had an overall positive attitude concerning the Romanian-

born Jewish poet. Celan's ambivalent attitude towards Heidegger is understandable if one takes into account the poet's increasingly fragile mental state towards the end of his life and Heidegger's past; the present study aims at proving that Celan's overall attitude can be easily explained without assuming this caesura between his aesthetic similarity to Heidegger's thought and his reserved attitude towards the German philosopher.

Keywords

Aesthetic theory, poetry, language, Holocaust, antisemitism