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Beyond the American Difficult Poem: Paul Celan's "Du liegst"

Xavier Kalck

- 1 In the 2012 *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, one finds the following statement: "The one feature that all literary experiments share is their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself" (Bray, 1). Quite circuitously, the definition of the thing is that it defines itself. The conclusion follows that "[e]xperiment is one of the engines of literary change and renewal; it is literature's way of reinventing itself" (Bray, 1). But when any attribute is deemed so fundamental or substantial that it partakes of the nature of the thing described, does it still deserve to be called an attribute? The editors later attempt a measure of clarification, observing that the adjective "experimental" may be understood either as another word for "radical" or "avant-garde," with the expected political undertones, but may also mean "innovative" in the epistemological sense of questioning cultural traditions. Still, is there such a remarkable difference? And wouldn't that difference commonly be subsumed under the more general "modernist" heading? In the 2007 *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, the first chapter entitled "Modernist Poetry in History" ends somewhat surprisingly with this conclusion: "We might well regard as modernist any poetry which refuses to accept its place in history" (Davis, 26). In the new *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the entry for "Avant-Garde Poetics" ends with this definitive statement: "Avant-gardism, it seems, appeals to our continuing belief that, in reconstituting the world of poetry and art, 'It must change.'" (Greene, 113). It seems all we are missing here is yet another label, the all-inclusive modifier "revolutionary." "Revolutionary" is *the* modifier; it means change, and has equally been applied to the poets of any given revolution as well as to the poets said to have revolutionized their art. It seems we must then fall back to the old "make it new," that wedge periodically driven into anthologies—what "makes it news" within the academic market for literary scholarship. But what if the self-definition of literature or poetry as a self-determined, self-reinventing practice were but a belated version of the argument for aesthetic autonomy?

- 2 In the previous edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993), the entry dealing with autonomy provides a clear picture of the debates around the evolution of a once Kantian concept into a hybrid notion, somewhere between the rational imperatives of form and the experimental contingency of historic circumstances, before concluding with the following proposition:
- [...] a work's emphasis on its own internal relations becomes its means of taking overt responsibility for the stance on values that it projects. Such work then offers society exemplary modes of forging attitudes which are fundamental to the ideals of moral identity and moral judgment held by the culture. (Preminger, 157)
- 3 How and why is a poem an exemplary mode of taking overt responsibility? We are not told specifically. One more time in a distinctly circular fashion, it seems that what is exemplary about it is precisely that it provides examples. Yet why do the work's own internal relations become anything at all outside itself? How does this internal-external becoming take place, both formally and contextually?
- 4 To begin to address these questions, I propose that we consider the following hypothesis: in overstating the case for the transformative features of literature, both inward and outward, we overstep the limits of our literary knowledge. To keep this debate in Kantian terms, defining literature as change allows for the question "what ought I to do?" to replace the question "what can I know?"—but not until it has been modified into "what ought I to do with words?"
- 5 As readers confronted with poetry are well aware, the question "what can I know?" and "what should I or what must I know" before I can read this poem can prove very pressing issues. In this paper, I will attempt to translate this problem into practical reader experience. For this purpose I have chosen a poem by Paul Celan.
- 6 I have done so for several reasons, but first, to show how discussion of modernism has come to blur national paradigms. For example, after studying Celan's translations of Emily Dickinson, Marjorie Perloff concludes that Celan's "distrust of 'beauty' and 'musicality'" (Perloff, 49) and praise of "precision," from his reply to a questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore in Paris (1958), may well be a Modernist (and also a Romanticist) value: one thinks of Flaubert's *mot juste*, Pound's Imagist precepts: "Direct treatment of the thing, whether subject or object" and "Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (*Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot [Faber, 1954], p. 3) and Stein's insistence that "poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything" ("Poetry and Grammar," *Writings 1932-1946* [Library of America, 1998], p. 329). (Perloff, 49)
- 7 Global critical perspectives such as this one (from Celan to Flaubert, Pound, Eliot and Stein) hide the fact that while on the face of it, one is adopting a transnational standpoint, one is really expressing a point of view that is deeply rooted in the history of American modernism. It should be noted that there is a considerable measure of irony in the habit of dealing with critical terms as franchises: the international critical currency of such a notion as "precision" seems necessarily questionable because when applied so broadly, it does seem less precise. More importantly, in this very text Celan goes on to say, about this language of precision, that "this is never the working of language itself, of language as such, but always of an 'I' who speaks from the particular angle of reflection which is his existence [...]" (Celan, 2003b, 16) thus explicitly rejecting the idea that one might abstract any theoretical standpoint from particular linguistic and historical

circumstances. I do not intend to argue, therefore, that Celan is either a modernist poet or that he can productively be seen in that light, which would mean relying on largely de-historicized notions of poetic modernism and modernity. As the critical work on Celan's translations of Dickinson demonstrates, this is rather a limited endeavour since, in spite of critical efforts in that sense, "all speculations regarding the affinity between the two poets remain largely unconvincing" (Rosenthal, 134). Recent German scholarship on the issue has shown that Celan's writing process should be the focus of choice in such cases, such as in Therese Kaiser's *Found in Translation: Paul Celan im Dialog mit Emily Dickinson: Eine Untersuchung übersetzerischer Arbeitsprozesse* (2012).

- 8 My choice of Celan is therefore based on a need for a counterexample, to address the cliché of difficulty that has become the calling card of contemporary American innovative poetry. Celan seemed a more appropriate choice to underline the experience of a foreignness of meaning, when confronting a poem, which would not immediately be construed as a device pointing to a set of beliefs or values. As such, I trust that Celan's poetry will be more directly illustrative for a methodological exposé than, for instance, the poetry of Louis Zukofsky, certainly a suitably "difficult" poet. For Zukofsky's work too suffers from the confusion addressed by Celan between a focus on language and the role of the speaking subject. As a "difficult" poet, Zukofsky has been praised for re-staging language and challenging his readers by reconstituting possibilities for language use, remaking or expanding possibilities for world-building—in other words "the working of language itself, of language as such" (Celan, 2003b, 16), yet Zukofsky's "A" could so much more accurately be defined by the phrase, "an 'I' who speaks from the particular angle of reflection which is his existence" (Celan, 2003b, 16).
- 9 So, oddly enough, through a detour via Dickinson, does Charles Bernstein introduce Zukofsky's poetry by emphasizing "[t]he experience made possible through the crafting of the poems [which] is 'when the meanings are' (as Emily Dickinson puts it): the meaning is not behind the words but in the words as they unfold, and refold, in the ear" (Zukofsky, xvii). Difficulty, it seems, has become a tool designed to impress upon readers the importance of performance over print. Instead of denying access, difficulty displays accessibility by making the text a form of exhibit. As a result of the combined evolutions of poetry and the arts in Western countries, this phenomenon deserves closer scrutiny than could be provided here.
- 10 What this article intends to do is to call into question the notion of the reader as co-creator of the poetic text, by refusing to play the game of the endless deferral of meaning which the "difficult" poem often requires from its readers, and by engaging methodically with every aspect of the text. By suggesting that since meaning is a relational affair, it can never solidify, critics often find themselves repeating Schleiermacher's hermeneutic commonplace about the inexhaustible meaning of the artwork and the indefinite process of interpretation, such as when the same critic states that, "There is no end to what you might need to know to read a poem and maybe no beginning either" (Bernstein, 2011, 252). It seems that the only way to see beyond the contradictions inherent in the binary characterization of poetry from either a New Historical or a New Critical perspective is to ask what world or worlds are made present for readers to experience, and so to embrace such homilies about poetry as, "It's not a matter of what it says, but of what it is; or, better, it is not a matter of what it is, but of what it does" (Zukofsky, xviii). Yet aesthetic autonomy, even when rebranded as an awareness of context-bound aesthetic processes, remains unchallenged when literary, political, social, historical subtexts merely orbit the

text's composition, and the main focus has become the event of verse itself as it is made new in every reading experience, even more so in the case of a notoriously "difficult" poem.

- 11 Naturally, one may object that Celan is not exactly an obscure choice, in spite of the supposed difficulty of his work. Indeed, and this is my second reason, the poem I have chosen has already been considered as the epitome of the necessarily pre-annotated poem. That poem in particular was chosen by Gadamer to ask the question, "What must the reader know?" in the few remarks added to a revised edition of his essay on Celan, "Who Am I and Who Are You?" (Gadamer, 1997, 149) and it is that poem which I have selected, the second from Celan's last book of poems, the posthumous *Schneepart* or *Snowpart*, written between late 1967 and late 1968.
- 12 In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argued for the "elevation of the historicity of understanding to the status of a hermeneutic principle" (2004, 268). When approaching Celan, Gadamer takes up this task once more. Others since have noted that "Celan studies are either historical or formalist-theoretical," forever "split between theoretized text and exterior worlds" (Wolosky, 656). What I will try to do is present an instance of a reader's abilities, confronted with such a poem as "Du liegst," from *Schneepart*. In doing so, I hope I may not repeat that split between moralizing statements that rely on the poem's historical subtext and proclamations of literary self-determination derived from a misplaced sense of autonomy. The poem reads :

Du liegst im großen Gelausche,
umbuscht, umflockt.

Geh du zur Spree, geh zur Havel,
geh zu den Fleischerhaken,
zu den roten Äppelstaken
aus Schweden —

Es kommt der Tisch mit den Gaben,
er biegt um ein Eden —

Der Mann ward zum Sieb, die Frau
mußte schwimmen, die Sau,
für sich, für keinen, für jeden —

Der Landwehrkanal wird nicht rauschen.
Nichts
stockt. (Celan, 2003, 315-316)

- 13 Here is one of the several English translations available, by Ian Fairley :

You lie in the great auricle,
groved round, snowed round.

Go to the Spree, go to the Havel,
go to the butchers' hooks,
to the red impaled apples
from Sweden —

The table of gifts draws near,
it turns round an Eden —

The man was made sieve, the woman
had to swim, the sow,
for herself, for no one, for everyone —

The Landwehrkanal won't sound.
Nothing's
still. (Celan, 2007, 7)

14 Here is another, by Pierre Joris :

You lie in the great listening
ambushed, snowed in.

Go to the Spree, go to the Havel,
go to the butcher hooks,
to the red apple stakes
from Sweden —

Here comes the table with the presents,
he turns around an Eden —

The man became a sieve, the woman
had to swim, the sow,
for herself, for none, for everyone —

The Landwehrkanal will not roar.
Nothing
stops (Celan 2005, 129)

- 15 Starting with first impressions, thematically speaking one is struck by the mixture of quietness, silence and coldness, then a sudden clamor, being thrust outside, the bloody imagery and the sudden burst of violence. Yet each thread divides into two parallel ones. The signs of rest and peace seem to suggest serenity or protective seclusion as well as the stillness of death. Similarly, the red meat and the candied apples connote both murder and a joyful celebration. Repeating Gadamer, one could speak of an "intensification of contrastive tension" (1997, 141).
- 16 Formally speaking, one may be relatively accustomed to this type of layout on the page, the irregularity in these stanzas of two, then four, then two lines again, then three, followed by the final disjunction with the suspensive line-break. The syntax itself is remarkably straightforward for this poet. The central third stanza sticks out enigmatically, the dashes allow for paratactic jumps, but line boundaries and syntactical units are essentially cogent here. A sense of coherence is even reinforced by the seven rhymes in "-en" in a poem consisting of barely twice as many lines. On a narrative level, the reader cannot escape the feeling of being told something quite specific, though uneasy to reconstruct. The repeated use of proper nouns, combined with an emphasis on motion, counters the apparently static indefiniteness of the protagonists' nameless bodies. Pronominal or nominal obscurity does not appear to hinder the poem's own

process. Again, finding one's bearings among these fragmentary particulars is nothing exceptional in twentieth century poetry—American or German. Still, the text does not yield easily. Should we then jump to the conclusion that this poem must first be telling us something about poetry? But if we did, would we not be pre-empting the poem's own words, even if we did so in the name of language? In other words, what do we want to know about this poem?

- 17 If we want facts in the sense of reference, we may relatively easily find out that "Spree" and "Havel" are rivers and that this fact places the poem in Berlin, Germany. "Fleischerhacken," less obvious, but which could be derived from context, both geographically and historically, points to the nearby Plötzensee in Berlin's Spandau area, on the Havel River at the mouth of the Spree, and to Plötzensee prison, with its infamous meat hooks where nearly three thousand were executed between 1933 and 1945, including most famously those responsible for the attempted coup against Hitler in June 1944. The area reference could also be made to include the Spandau prison itself, which housed renowned Nazi war criminals after the Nuremberg trials. "Äppelstaken" is a relatively transparent cultural item, and a common sight at Christmas markets, which also helps clarify the table with presents in the next stanza. Finally, the words "Eden," then "Landwehrkanal" also make perfect sense when taken together or more precisely, from the first to the second. The Eden Hotel is where Spartacist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were held before they were murdered and their bodies thrown in the Landwehrkanal in January 1919. Is all this information available for any reader to uncover? Should it be uncovered?
- 18 These questions have already been asked and partially answered in Peter Szondi's invaluable essay entitled "Eden." Szondi's essay is remarkable in that it refutes readings of Celan's poems as autotelic, self-sufficient windowless monads, to quote from Adorno's remarks on Celan (Adorno, 322). In "Eden" on the other hand, Szondi is careful to open the poem up to history. Szondi introduces his account of the poem by saying that the "history of the poem's genesis [...] cannot itself constitute interpretation" (85). His highly documented reading—which I have just largely drawn from—is meant to provide access to the poem, and nothing else. But where does access end, and interpretation begin?
- 19 Before it was published posthumously in *Schneepart*, Szondi tells us the poem had appeared under the autobiographical title "Berlin, December 22/23, 1967" and Celan "had kept the title 'Wintergedicht' (Winter poem) when he copied out the poem for friends" (84). Still, as Szondi points out, Celan's habit of not using titles, especially in his late poetry, does not make the now title-less poem particularly opaque compared to other poems of his. Szondi then describes Celan's room where he stayed in Berlin that winter, overlooking the Tiergarten park "planted with bushes," tracing the first two lines back to the view Celan had from his hotel; he mentions Celan's actual visit to Plötzensee, to the Christmas market where "Celan saw an Advent wreath made of red-painted wood that held apples and candles," combining in the second stanza. Szondi then reveals he lent a book to Celan at that time, a historical account of the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, *Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht: Dokumentation eines politischen Verbrechens*, where Celan found the murderer's testimonies he quotes in the penultimate stanza. Szondi showed him the "Eden apartment building, which had been constructed on the site of the old Eden Hotel" where "Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht spent the last hours of their lives" (87). They drove together by the Landwehrkanal, and on another day Celan "followed this canal on his way to visit the ruins of the train station Anhalter

Bahnhof," where so many departed never to return. After having provided such incredible first-hand material, Szondi humbly wonders "whether such information can serve to support any reading at all" (88). Although Szondi has made it impossible to read this poem without his help, he is understandably at a loss when trying to identify the poem's actual determinations, whether from within, or from without, and if for no better reason, because of that very debatable division. Asking whether we can or cannot bridge that gap between the limits of autonomy and the limitations of contingency (Szondi 94-95), Szondi nevertheless does not pursue another form of historicization one could have included, which deals with that literary outside we know as preexisting work. First printed almost ten years before Celan's visit to Berlin, Brecht's second poem about Rosa Luxemburg begins with the lines, "Hier liegt begraben / Rosa Luxemburg" (Owen, 2012, 129), which Celan's address could be said to echo directly. As Ruth J. Owen has shown, the murder of Rosa Luxemburg has been the explicit topic of an impressive array of German poems. Taking that literary presence into account, the Landwehrkanal reference alone would be enough for an educated reader to know that they are dealing with what Owen even calls "Rosa poetry" (Owen, 2012, 127). Going one step further, as Owen does, we may easily invoke the figure of Ophelia as well, which is here "de-eroticized" (Owen, 2007, 785) and newly politicized. When should we stop? How inclusively should we try to trace the poem's determinacy outside itself?

- 20 Looking elsewhere in Celan, in *Atemwende* we find the poem "Coagula," beginning "Auch deine / Wunde, Rosa" (Celan, 2003, 203). As he wrote to his friend Petre Solomon in 1967, these words reminded Celan of Rosa Luxemburg through the prism of Kafka's *A Country Doctor*, where Celan said he found the two words "Rosa" and "Wunde"—which describe the pink colored wound in the young patient's right side, Rosa being also the name of the maid in Kafka's story. Celan wrote of his efforts to make his meanings literally coagulate (Celan, 2003, 741). In fact, it also seems that Celan noted that Kafka's short story was published in 1919, the year of Rosa Luxemburg's death (Gellhaus, 174). Celan's use of such coincidences to generate poems is well known—a recent book of essays focuses exclusively on this process of "qualitative change"—an expression used by the poet to describe the words' journey into his poems (Felstiner, 77). But how is the reader meant to take part? For instance, since some have taken Kafka's story to be an embedded psychoanalytical tale, should one read Celan's condensations in this light—as if the introductory and final silence in "Du Liegst" were the sign of a specific session?
- 21 Now on the other hand, accepting the inside-outside division a moment longer, how far within the text then should we go? Let's start with the table. The German word for table is not the same whether one means an ordinary table (here, "Tisch"), or the tables of the law, which would be *Tafeln* (as in *Tafeln des Gesetzes*). This table is closer to an altar for the Christmas mass. Yet it turns round, possibly suggesting something occult, the spiritualist turning the tables. As far as Christmas goes, the fall of man is traditionally connected to the salvation promised by the birth of Jesus, whereas the celebration evoked with sweet shiny red—with a possible pun on rotting—apples makes it a grotesque scene of feasting upon the bloodied Eucharistic bread impaled on a mock-crown of thorns—as Szondi reminds us, the candied apples he saw with Celan were presented on a wreath, and "red is the color of the flag for which Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht gave their lives" (Szondi 92). These apples, combined with the reference to Eden, make up the text's present of the most bloody tree of knowledge.

- 22 On another level, the turning table is the poet's, whose lines turn round, line-break after line-break. The Eden, in that sense, would refer not to scripture but to the script, keeping chronicles of murders from the first Biblical sins to today's history books. This biblical dimension in the text is underlined by the use of the specific past tense "ward" and the numerous imperatives in the second stanza.
- 23 The mention of a table in winter around Christmas time will also call to mind Georg Trakl's poem *Ein Winterabend* (*A Winter Evening*), and its commentary by Heidegger in *Die Sprache*, in *On the Way to Language*. Celan rephrased some of Heidegger's comments in that essay in his own speech for the Büchner prize, where he contradicts Heidegger's interpretation of language itself speaking (Lyon, 129), in favor of a poetry that remains mindful to its dates and speaks on its own behalf.
- 24 Now the man and the woman. The hooks, the couple's flesh compared to meat, the bodies pierced by bullets, the shooting and drowning, the murderers' misogyny—with the specifically anti-Semitic associations of the word *Sau* in German, noted by Gadamer as they had been by Alfred Döblin (Owen, 2012, 135)—all these words tell of an extreme violence done by men to men but especially to a woman, standing for no one and everyone. The poem offers little mediation, beyond the introductory silent listening and the final negation that there ever was anything to hear. These are in fact headless bodies, as it were, generically identified as the man and the woman. It is as though knowledge of their identities should not hide their indeterminate universality, as humanity's first couple fallen from Eden into that canal.
- 25 At the center of the poem lies the word "Eden." Strikingly enough, when the word occurs elsewhere in Celan, it is in a similar context, twice in *Niemandsrose*: in "Eis, Eden," where one dies frozen in a lost land, while for the other occurrence, in the poem "Hüttenfenster," the line reads "geht zu Ghetto und Eden" (Celan, 2003, 158), the garden now become ghetto.
- 26 As Szondi acknowledges, Eden is "embedded in the rhyme sequence Schweden-Eden-jeden" (93). Repeated at the end of two lines in full ("Schweden," "jeden"), it is also partially echoed three times in the middle of the poem, with "Fleischerhaken," "Äppelstaken," "Gaben." The first echo, "jeden," brings to the ear and the mind its phonological proximity with the word *Juden*, for Jew. According to the letter of the text, the decomposition of the word along the rhyme in *j-eden* confirms that reading as the rhyme disjoins the initial as though literally casting out the Jewish people from Eden. This separation and this connection are everywhere apparent in the use of dashes after every occurrence of words ending in *-eden*.
- 27 The reference to Sweden has received various interpretations. It may be read at the trace of a fact, Celan walking by the Berlin Christmas market that winter and seeing products from Sweden there, ultimately transformed with the rhyme into a handy structural tool. It could also be decomposed, based on the logic of the rhyme, into Schw-eden. Then that apparently incomprehensible prefix to the rhyme, schw-, would read as the phonetic sign "schwa"—the neutral vowel sound spelled with an inverted e—not so surprising in a poem that opens and shuts on the subject of silence, outlined by the internal rhyme between "Gelausche" and "rauschen"—which frames the central—monstrous—rhyme in "Frau" / "Sau."
- 28 Those who would wish to read this poem as putting forth a vision of indifference, if not apathy, conveyed by the final lines, should bear in mind that silence is very concretely

written into the poem and that this silence implies the presence of the now silent dead, far more than their absence.

- 29 As for the last two lines, if nothing stops, is the poem meant to be endlessly prolonged, or rather brought down to size, suggesting that poetry makes nothing stop? The answer may be, some critics have said, in the penultimate scene from Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*, where Lucile Desmoulins expresses her astonishment at seeing life go on in spite of the tragedy that is occurring. She would want it all to stop—"daß [...] alles stockt" (Janz 195, Bollack, 213). In his *Meridian* address, Celan quotes from Büchner's Lucile's final words—she calls out "Long live the king!" so as to quickly bring death upon herself (Celan, 2011, 3)—and compares this statement to her position earlier on in the play, when she would not take part in her husband's discussion about art. Considering her last words the supreme form of freedom, he calls her words "the counterword" that sets her apart from "the bystanders [...] of history" (Celan, 2012, 3). In comparison, Celan does not seek to duplicate that ultimate speech act, nor does he claim any special prerogatives from writing in its tracks. Celan's rewriting of the line as a negative modulates it. The Landwehrkanal may be silent, people may be murdered into nothingness, yet the rhythmic variation from the previous negative particle "nicht" to the capitalized pronoun "Nichts" reveals the contradictions in that incremental negation: the more it silences, the more it resonates, to the point of euphemism—asking us to listen to the loud silence that does not stop echoing. In fact, *stocken* does not only mean to stop or come to a halt. When translating Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death," Celan chooses the verb "halten" (Rosenthal). *Stocken* may imply a different form of stopping, for it is also used in expressions such as to catch one's breath, to break off, to stop short, or when someone's voice falters, as may be the case here. Another sense of *stocken* is to clot or curdle, as if Celan were implying that his coagulation of meanings prevented the blood spilled from coagulating and kept it running.
- 30 Gadamer comes to the conclusion that instead of asking what must we know to be able to read the poem, we must begin with the poem's own demands upon its readers and specifically its desire to impart knowledge. "The poem [...]," Gadamer writes, "wants us to know" (142), as if the knowledge we needed were the knowledge the poem was there to provide. Like the canal's icy surface, which hid the bodies for months through that winter, the poem's surface begs for thawing. In other words, the poem's momentary autonomy is designed to be undercut and finally breached by heteronomous and contextual forces, which the reader and the text are a part of. What surfaces holds no redemptive qualities, either morally or aesthetically, beyond what Celan calls "the majesty of the absurd as witness for the presence of the human" (Celan, 2012, 3). After Celan's Lucile, whom he describes as "one who is blind to art, [. . .] for whom language is something person-like and tangible" (Celan, 2012, 3), that sense of the absurd, of our vanity, seems meant to come across as fundamentally inartistic, no matter how much the reader knows.
- 31 By not choosing an American poet, this paper hopes to have allowed the reader to assess the difficulty of a text without the comforts of national strategies of distinction and legitimation. This was done precisely to call into question the habit of collapsing the distinction between the supposedly innovative character of a text and its so-called difficulty. Celan's poem does not manufacture a veil of difficulty to impress upon the reader a sense of hyperbolic and promising self-determination, contrary to the specific paradigm of the new, in American poetry, which relies on a deliberately ambiguous

definition of renewal as self-renewal, and of self-renewal as self-rule. Rather, Celan's poem dramatizes its own occurrence as a case of tragically unsatisfactory reading and rewriting of historical and literary materials, to delineate the limits of what constitutes literary knowledge and possibly its limitations as well. Meanwhile, to say what is to become of that knowledge, what is to be made of it, or what measure of renewal may be derived from it, in terms of poetic technique, literary history, as well as historical consciousness, certainly remains, for lack of a better word, quite difficult.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper presents a close reading of a late poem by German poet Paul Celan, with a view to call into question several critical assumptions relating to modernist-derived "difficulty." By looking in detail at what makes a poem "difficult" for the reader, a fact highlighted by a comparative approach, it becomes possible to move beyond such qualities as innovative, radical or avant-garde, and to consider what truly makes up our literary knowledge.

Cet article propose une lecture détaillée d'un poème tardif de Paul Celan, de façon à remettre en question plusieurs présupposés critiques hérités du modernisme en matière de « difficulté ». En observant dans le détail ce qui rend un poème « difficile » pour le lecteur (phénomène que souligne l'approche comparatiste), il est plus aisé de se défaire d'une terminologie qui repose sur les notions d'innovation, de radicalité ou d'avant-garde, afin de comprendre où commence réellement notre savoir littéraire.

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Keywords: Paul Celan, modernism, avant-garde, poetics, Gadamer, Rosa Luxemburg

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