

Ein Gegenwort: The Poetics of Paul Celan and Avot Yeshurun.
A Comparative Study

In recent years there has been a growing tendency to discuss the poetry of Paul Celan in relation to the work of modern Hebrew and Israeli poets whose work relates clearly to German language and culture, and who often share a similar biography to that of the Holocaust survivor poet. Each in its own way, these studies examine the affinities, differences and interactions between Celan's poetics and that of the other poets, in order to observe them from a different, wider perspective and to place these oeuvres within a larger context – that of German-Jewish poetry, which, in some cases, is also post-holocaust poetry. Given the expansion of this tendency in current research, the absence of a comparative study between the poetics of Paul Celan and Avot Yeshurun is of considerable importance, especially since Yeshurun's poetry most closely resembles Celan's in modern Hebrew poetry. Both the works of Celan and Yeshurun deal extensively with the experience of loss and trauma caused by the holocaust: the death of the family and the struggle of the surviving son, haunted by memories and guilt, to create a new life for himself, an alternative reality, despite "*das, was geschah*". Both bodies of work reflect the cry of the uprooted who are chained to their past and therefore unable to strike roots on new ground, condemned to a life of detachment and solitude, and torn between what was obliterated and the desperate search for what can be recovered as a substitution. This pendulum between what was lost and what is yet to be reached, between the inclination to withdraw into one's innermost self, to the verge of silent disappearance, and the burning urge to commemorate the dead and testify, generates the poetic restlessness typical of these two poets, and creates what I will define, using Celan's words, as "counter-poetics": poetics whose fundamental stand is a standing-against – against the hegemonic order, against the dominant social and cultural

narrative, against the forgetfulness of the past and its victims in favor of the present and the hope for a better future, and above all – against the way in which language continued to be used.

For language has become in Celan's and Yeshurun's poetics a drained reservoir and in order to reclaim and revitalize it, one must find a way to go beyond its current limits and limitations. Each of the two poets sensed the great crisis of language and felt the necessity to address it and express it from within language itself. To accomplish this, both Celan and Yeshurun took extreme measures to disassemble and reassemble poetic language, from the largest syntactical units (verses and phrases) to the smallest ones – words themselves: their works are infused with neologisms, syntactical inversions (including "imported" syntactical structures from other languages), words from foreign languages and esoteric scientific jargon, and combinations of different historical layers of language. I will show that this radical defamiliarization of poetic language, as well as its openness to other languages (an openness which is an explicit political act), generates poetics that, on the one hand, wish to carry language beyond its own limits, and on the other, maintain a certain ability to communicate, and not just express, the experience of loss and trauma.