Fragments of Multilingualism and Anti-Realism. Paul Celan and Isidore Isou as Proponents of Romanian Jewish Experimental Literature

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> Aus diesem barocken Sprachmilieu, aus dieser mythisch-mystischen Sphäre sind deutsche und jüdische Dichter und Schriftsteller hervorgegangen [...] (Rose Ausländer, *Grüne Mutter Bukowina*)

Key-words: *multilingualism (literature), experimental literature, Jewish literature (Romania), Yiddish-influenced literature, Paul Celan, Isidore Isou*

Rose Ausländer's reminiscence of the early twentieth-century cultural milieu of her birthplace Czernowitz (currently Chernivtsi, situated in the Ukraine) reveals a multilingual and multicultural lieu from which numerous German-Jewish poets stemmed[1]. This multilingual environment is illustrated by Ausländer's renowned neologism 'fourlanguagesongs' (*Viersprachenlieder*) that relates to the coexistence of Yiddish, German, Romanian and Ukrainian (Ruthenian), as well as the respective cultural circles of the speakers of these languages (Ausländer 2004: 83)[2]. In addition to this coexistence, Ausländer's notion reveals the lively cultural exchange in her hometown, which enabled multilingualism.

Multilingualism has been consistently topical in Europe during the twentieth century due to economic, political and cultural interaction. The sense in which the term is applied in this essay highlights multilingualism as a lack of a strong (mono)lingual identity and suggests that multilingualism functioned as a kind of 'cultural passport' between different groups of people (see Bruera 2011: 29–35). To illustrate this, the essay draws attention to the changing literary constellations in East-Central Europe. Multilingualism, as a literary phenomenon, is a departure from hegemonic national literatures, such as French and German. On a textual level,

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[1] Multilingualism denotes the capability to understand and utilise several languages. As a general term it covers plurilingualism (learning to speak several languages simultaneously) and polyglottism (learning other languages after one acquires one's mother tongue). The terms are often used interchangeably, which erases their slightly different foci. In this essay multilingualism is used as a generic term because it is unnecessary to differentiate between the two.

[2] All translations by the author unless otherwise stated.

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multilingualism may facilitate poetic experimentation: the mix of languages (glossolalia), the fragmenting of individual languages, and even the use of imaginary ones[3]. These techniques tend to result in ambiguity and culminate in invented 'art languages' – consider, for instance, word pastiches. Such pastiches have a twofold effect: firstly, they resist interpretation regardless of their reminiscence of conventional languages. This is to say that in art languages multilingualism gives way to anti-realist modes of representation, which seek to annul mimesis[4]. Secondly, when the communicative aspect of language is undermined, its material and visual aspects are highlighted. This is particularly apparent if a text is illegible: in that case it is rather 'seen' than read.

These traits are studied in the context of interwar and post-World War II Romania, in the areas of Bukovina and Northern Moldavia. Numerous poets spurred from the region and this essay focuses on two contemporary and multilingual but rather distinct experimental authors, namely Paul Celan (Paul Antschel, 1920–1970) and Isidore Isou (Ion-Isidor Goldstein, 1925–2007), who would befriend in Paris in the late 1940s[5]. Both were of Jewish origin, but the extent of Judaism and the Jewish textual tradition as a contributing factor to their poetry has been debated[6].

The reciprocity of Celan and Isou, and their relations to Judaism, emerge in their experimental poetry insofar they apply multilingualistic and anti-realist effects. Both of these themes seem to derive, at least partly, from their Yiddish background. Hence, the aim of this essay is twofold: firstly, to regard the status of Yiddish and, secondly, study how the language may have encouraged experimentation with multilingualism and art languages (a mode of anti-realism) in the works of the two authors. At the textual level, Yiddish is mainly a negative element in their poetry: Celan seldom and Isou never used solely Yiddish as the language of their poetry, but Yiddish is latently present in numerous works as textual 'reminiscence'. By virtue of this, their multilingualism is revealing in relation to Kafka's – a key author overarching Celan and Isou – ideas concerning Yiddish (Liska 2009: 174–178)[7]. In his 'Rede über die jiddische Sprache' (Speech on Yiddish Language, 1912), Kafka

[3] Relating to experimental poetry, multilingualism may expedite an individual to grasp parts of a previously 'unknown' language by tapping into the vocabulary and grammar of languages she already knows. For a further discussion on multilingualism in the avant-garde, see Collani 2011: 65–78.

[4] Accounting for the varieties of anti-realism in literature, Michael Boyd (1983: 19) notes that what anti-realist modes of representation have in common, is their rejection of the basic tenets of mimesis in art. Anti-realism is concerned with attacking and questioning a literary tradition, but this undermining only ties it together with that tradition.

[5] Celan was familiar with at least nine languages (German, Romanian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Ukrainian, French, English, Latin) and Isou French, Romanian, Yiddish and at least some Hebrew, German and perhaps Russian. However, as Celan's school reports uncover, competence and fluency was not distributed equally between languages. See Gellhaus 2000: 26–33.

[6] Even though defining the 'Jewishness' of Celan and Isou entails problems , in terms of 'historical conditions, biological facts, and cultural realities, they were Jewish writers as well' (Wolitz 2004: 327). According to Boutcher (2004: 142), Celan never felt disconnected from his Jewishness and even though his poems may be nonreligious, they are nevertheless spiritual. Isou identified explicitly as a Jew in his early works and this theme spreads through his œuvre as an appropriation of Jewish messianism and Kabbalah, cf. Sjöberg 2012.

[7] Isou wrote a version of Kafka's *The Castle* ('Das Schloß', 1926), entitled *The Heir of the Castle* ('L'héritier du château', 1976).

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summarises that within 'Yiddish all this German, Hebrew, French, English, Slav, Dutch, Romanian and even Latin is marked by curiosity and frivolity'[8]. He depicts Yiddish as a kind of intrapolyglot language containing characteristics of numerous other languages. Arguably, such language lacks a strong independent linguistic identity. Moreover, Kafka draws parallels between Yiddish and German: 'everyone who knows the German language is also capable of understanding Yiddish'[9].

Reflecting on the German influence, George Steiner notes that Jews had a pronounced role in launching critical speculation about language, including the 'failure of the word' (Steiner 2001: 232–233). Indeed, multilingualism and 'intrapolyglottism' seem to have played a notable role in modern Jewish experimental literature, which tests the limits of representation and alternative methods of constructing semiosis. What follows is somewhat a paradox: multilingualism and the intrapolyglot character of Yiddish, together with modern literary aesthetics, appear to have driven Celan and Isou to eventually question the whole idea of semiosis and experiment with anti-realist representation. In Isou's works such representation is based on word pastiches and the detachment of letters from their conventional meaning. Equally, Celan experimented with anti-realism by composing neologisms that relate to but do not iterate conventional language[10].

This nexus is further exemplified by Celan's neologistic verse '*das hundert-zünzige Meingedicht, das Genicht*' [hundredtongued mypoem, nopoem][11] where the author parallels glossolalia with poetical negativity and non-representation (nopoem) (Celan 1982: 27). As instances of the latter, Celan used blanks and margins frequently in his poetry and Isou produced a blank book (Celan 1982: 35; Isou 1963). These experiments were not cases of nihilistic poetic annihilation of meaning but investigations into the limits of cognition, which were topical at the turn of the century[12]. Indeed, the poetries of Celan and Isou seem to embody the basic problematic encountered by language-oriented philosophers and poets, which eventually led both poets to adopt anti-realism.

Celan and Isou as Polyglot Jews in Interwar Romania

The cultural environs of Celan and Isou had an indisputable impact on their poetic works. This is noticeable especially in the case of Yiddish, which provides a link to the region and the cultural sphere where they spent their formative years and,

[8] Quoted in Liska 2009: 27.

[9] Quoted in Liska 2009: 28. Both languages derive from High German. Germanophone theories and ideological currents spread rather effortlessly in East-Central European Yiddish-speaking communities due to the similarity of Yiddish and German, at least among the intelligentsia. There exists interplay between German thought and Yiddish culture, which is manifested in Central European literature, philology and language philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

[10] Occasionally, there is also a fluctuation between visual and linguistic realms, for instance in his poem 'Keine Sandkunst mehr' (No More Sand Art, 1972, see fourth chapter).

[11] Quote translated by Antti Salminen.

[12] These themes had been the concern of medieval mysticisms that fuelled the early twentieth-century *Sprachskepsis.* The so-called crisis of language is explicit in Hugo von Hofmannstahl's Lord Chandos letter (*Ein Brief*, 1902). In addition to German Romanticism, the language criticism of the Austrian philosopher Fritz Mauthner is topical. Its primary argument is that language is unrelated to and does not correlate with the real world.

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on the textual level, it can be regarded a symbol for Jewishness. As an intrapolyglot language, it reflects the multilingualism of the Jewish communities where both writers grew up in.

Celan was born in the Bukovinian capital, then called Cernăuţi, whereas Isou originated from Moldavian Botoşani, situated roughly a hundred kilometres southeast of Celan's birthplace. Regardless of such minor geographical distance, the cultural separation between the towns was significant. Until 1918, Celan's hometown had been the Austro-Hungarian Czernowitz with German being the primary language of education and public life. During the Austro-Hungarian rule Czernowitz was intentionally Germanised and the bulk of Bukovinian Jews spoke German and Yiddish. Romanian was imposed as the official language of education and administration after Bukovina became Romanian in 1918 (Colin, Rychlo 2004: 58–77). Botoşani, on the other hand, had been a northern municipality in the Kingdom of Romania since 1881. Romania had opted for schooling in accordance with the French model[13]. Thus, until the early 1920s, the elite of Cernăuţi was mainly influenced by the German language and culture whereas the impact of Romanian and Franco-Romanian culture was apparent in Botoşani. The intelligentsia of Cernăuţi spoke mainly German, whereas the Romanian elite, albeit located mainly in the capital Bucharest, was French-speaking[14]. Moreover, both Yiddish and Romanian lacked the mature and influential tradition of high literature and philosophy that German and French had (cf. Schachter 2012).

The Jewish people of Botoşani spoke mainly Romanian and Yiddish. The inhabitants of Czernowitz conversed with each other in *Bukowiner deutsch*, a variant of Austrian German with Yiddish and Slavic influence. However, Celan never spoke this dialect as his mother insisted on High German being used at home (Braun 2005: 92; Felstiner 2001: 6). Regardless of the relatively dominant Western cultural influence, which was promoted by assimilated Jews such as Celan's family, the Jews were not solely dependant on the Occidental cultural 'imports'. The Jews of Botoşani and Cernăuţi were a major part of the population and had their own cultural life (such as newspapers, theatre, music, art) centred on Yiddish and Hebrew[15]. However, neither Celan nor Isou opted for Yiddish as the language of their poetry, which is noteworthy especially in Isou's case as he was involved in a Yiddish zionist movement (Eram 2010: 116)[16]. Celan, for one, first learned Yiddish properly at a labour camp during the early 1940s (Boutcher 2004: 140).

Isou's biography has not been studied as profoundly as Celan's and the degree of his family's assimilation remains unknown. The Goldsteins were a petit-

[13] Georgescu (1997: 15) mentions the 'German sphere' covering Bukovina and Transylvania and the 'French sphere', which covers Moldavia and Wallachia.

[14] Even though such characterisations are vague and usually rather fruitless, it serves the purpose here to note that Bucharest was dubbed 'little Paris' (*petit Paris*) and Czernowitz 'little Vienna of the East' (*Klein-Wien des Ostens*).

[15] According to the 1930 census, the Jewish population of the towns was 35, 3% and 37, 9% respectively (Hundert 2008: 220–221, 287). The Jewish culture in towns was rather bourgeois-oriented whereas in the countryside *shtetlekh* (small Jewish towns) religious orthodoxy, traditional storytelling and nineteenth-century mysticism (Hasidism) were prevailing.

[16] Isou's adolescence was marked by the Jewish zionist ideologue A.L. Zissu.

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bourgeoisie Ashkenazi family and Isou was at least of the second generation of Romanian-speaking Goldsteins (Sjöberg 2010: 132–149; Hussey 2000: 132–142). Presumably his family was trilingual, speaking Romanian and Yiddish as well as the amount of Hebrew required by the religious services. Isou attended the yeshiva (rabbinic school) so he was familiar with Biblical Hebrew (ibid.). At school he studied French (and perhaps German), which he chose over Yiddish and Romanian as the language of his literary production. The reason for this was straightforward bearing in mind the numerous Romanian emigrant artists. Like them, Isou entertained the idea of '*partir pour la Russie, … aller à Berlin ou être un écrivain Yiddish. Puis lorsque j'ai découvert que la France représentait l'avant-garde, j'ai abandonné toutes ces idées*' [leaving for Russia, going to Berlin or becominga Yiddish writer. When I found out that France represented the avant-garde, I abandoned allthese ideas] (Devaux 1992, 45). It is noteworthy that Isou contemplated on choosing Yiddish as the language of his poetry, even though the Shoah had almost completely erased the Yiddish-speaking audience. Furthermore, Yiddish is the only *language* he mentions while contemplating his options, which underscores both its transnationalism and a lack of a Jewish nation – the latter having been envisioned at the Czernowitz conference on Yiddish in 1908 (cf. Weiser & Fogel 2010).

Isou's early texts include the Jewish backdrop together with theories of language formulated in the multilingual Moldavian milieu, drawing from kabbalism and messianism. All of these Jewish influences followed him to Paris. Once there, Isou met Celan via their compatriot and mutual friend Serge Moscovici (Bowd 2007: 133)[17]. They decided not to speak Romanian – the language of their oppressors – but spoke French, German and Yiddish instead (ibid.: 137)[18]. The choice was obviously personal and political, as was the use of multiple languages in poetry. The mere gesture of opting out Romanian reflects the denunciation of nationalism promoting the congruity of language and nation, and indeed anything that could be called 'Romanianness'. Both writers cherished their multilingualistic individual identities and the transnationalism of the diasporic Jewry.

Subtractive and Supplementary Amalgamation

The idea of applying more than one language in order to mediate an intended content is peculiar unless the imaginary audience of the author consists of equal polyglots. The Bukovinian multilingualistic background, where parts of the population were considerable and not mere linguistic minorities, would support this but the case is not equally straightforward in West European countries. In the Western milieu, the use of multilingualism in poetry may have had an exclusive effect. Yet, the partial unreadability and unintelligibility for some readers can be the

[17] Isou had established an avant-garde journal called *DA* with Moscovici in 1944, but Romanian authorities immediately censored the journal.

[18] Both Germans and far right Romanians were responsible for the bloody pogroms in Romania during the WWII. Celan certainly struggled with the *Mutter- und Mördersprache* problematics whereas Isou simply rejected Romanian. Celan wrote some poetry in Romanian after the World War II in Bucharest (cf. Celan 2003).

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very effect pursued by the poet. In such case, the poem manifests the multiplicity of the languages it conveys.

Celan and Isou utilise multilingualistic effects in two primary ways. The techniques can be termed *subtractive* and *supplementary amalgamation*. Concisely put, the first assimilates languages into one whereas the latter expands a given language by means of other languages. Subtractive amalgamation is post-Babelian[19] in the respect that it seeks to 'coalesce' languages into an existing language by expanding and forcing this language to the limits of conventional signification. In this sense it is reminiscent of Kafka's view of Yiddish as an intrapolyglot language containing other languages. However, for instance, Celan's poetry is distinctly German: even though he often uses neologisms and ellipsis, the words and verses are syntactically and grammatically correct. Yet, from the aspect of subtractive amalgamation, his fluency in various languages and the ambiguity of his poetry suggest that each word carries traces of other words – and thus also other languages – with it. Celan's 'word traces' may be allusions, ellipsis or etymological connections, especially between German and Yiddish, which derive from a common root.

The critic John E. Jackson accounts for Celan's will to include Yiddish in his poetry so as to attest that potent poetic texts could be written in a parlance the anti-Semites had regarded as degenerated German (Jackson 1987: 141)[20]. For instance, Yiddish has a decisive role in Celan's poem 'Benedicta' (*Die Niemandsrose*, 1963). The final verse draws a crucial parallel between German and Yiddish:

Ge-/ segnet./ Ge-/ *bentscht.*

Celan uses the German word *gesegnet* (blessed) and repeats the verb in Yiddish (*gebentscht*)[21]. The words seem to denote two distinct linguistic worlds, but by separating the prefix 'ge-' from the rest of the word, Celan evokes a link between the languages. In fact, no unambiguous and decisive threshold between languages can be pinpointed. The prefix is *both* German and Yiddish: here languages are amalgamated into one while they relinquish any distinctive identity. Thus, Celan manages to incorporate multilingualism and a distinct Jewish dimension into the poem. As Jackson notes, the Yiddish blessing provides the setting: the scene of the poem is taking place in a Jewish household during Shabbat (Jackson 1987: 220). A multilingual household, one should add.

The ability to connect languages applies to both modes, subtractive and supplementary amalgamation. What is characteristic of supplementary amalgamation is a 'language composite' or a collage where different languages co-exist as fragments and form a single 'cohesive' signifying space (a poem, a page) while retaining their

[19] Post-Babelian world is a world with many languages that includes polyglot speakers. Pre-Babelian refers to a world where everyone speaks a single (universal) language and Babelian to a world with many languages, but everyone is monolingual (Eoyang 2003: 59).

[20] For instance, the Romanian anti-Semite Octavian Goga wrote about Yiddish as 'pseudo-German jargon' (see Sjöberg 2010: 141).

[21] The poem's epigraph is a fragment of an untranslated Yiddish ditty, appearing in different magnitudes in different draft versions of the poem. For a further discussion on this poem, see Jackson 1987.

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identity as distinct languages. Celan applied this technique, for instance, in his poem 'In Eins' (1963), which combines multiple languages (Celan 1996). The ultimate version of supplementary amalgamation includes invented languages and writing systems, as in Isou's case. He regarded any single language insufficient and, therefore, his poetry is based on the free combination of languages, writing systems and invented signs (and thus also potential 'languages'). In other words, the idea of multilingualism is contained in his poetics[22].

The Romanian Jewish milieu is present in his poem *Cris pour le 5.000.000 de juifs égorgés* ('Cries for the five million butchered Jews', 1947). The piece is an instance of supplementary amalgamation exemplifying tendencies to allude languages (German and Yiddish). The poem treats a Jewish theme with vanguard poetic expression. The words of the poem are deliberately misspelt, which, together with onomatopoetic lines, reveal that the poem is meant to be performed[23]. Moreover, the mélange of languages enables the poem to be interpreted as a polylogue of multiple voices or actors:

> IOUDN IOUDN schmisn moudn meinin/[...]/ charf GOTT JAFF/ MENTCH WARF SCHRTRAFF/ OI WEI OI [...] Adonoi! ADONOI/ GUERINGUE! himler, guimlère, meringue/ jimlère, jèringue./ HASS!/ lebanne – letrain; le train lebanne/ le vanne – leganne – lemains lélan/ tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i/ tfff-i tfffii tfff-i tfff-i/ Auschwitz – schwitz – schwitz/ Auschwitz – schwitz – schwitz/ Buchenwald!/ Bouhnwald!/ ADONOOOI! ADONOI!/ Belsen – Bergen/ BELSEN – BERGEN!/ MATHAUSEN!/ mathaousenne/ MOGHILOW!/ MOGHILOOW! (Isou 1947: 326–327)

In addition to German and French words, and names of concentration camps to which Romanian Jews were exported (especially the Transnistrian Mogilev-Podolski)[24], the repugnant mood is explicit in the German and Yiddish *Hass* (hatred). Even though the languages are as ambiguous as in Celan's 'Benedicta', the interpretation is not equally unenclosed. The subject of hatred is marked by the Romanian-like word 'Ioudn' in the first line, which connotes German *Juden* (Jews), and amplified by the following word denoting schism. Yet, Isou draws parallels between German and Yiddish. For instance, the pseudo-German line 'Mentch warf schrtraff' can be read as a Yiddish-reminiscent and stylised version of the actual German form '*Mensch warf Strafe*' ('man threw punishment'). This statement in telegraphic style does not make sense, but the poem is not based on tropes: the effect and connotations it creates are more straightforward. The piece seeks to present a real experience of violence instead of a mere description.

The religious underlining of the poem is apparent in the line containing the word *Gott* (God), which has a double sense as a German-Yiddish word in the poem. Arguably, it is not only an exclamation of exasperation but also an address to God due to the benedictions in the latter part of the poem (see below). Additionally,

[22] Antoine Chareyere (2011: 43–64) has identified this as Isou's longing back to his Romanian origins. To be more accurate, Isou's idealistic pursuit for a mode of expression that would be at once individualistic and universal (pre-Babelian) might have originated from the multilingual milieu.

[23] The original text includes markings for performance, which are omitted here. However, the markings do not indicate more than one voice.

[24] Celan's parents perished in one of these camps in Transnistria (Boutcher 2004: 140).

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words in the fourth line are stylised from Semitic languages: ‘oi wei’ denotes Yiddish *oy vey* (oh woe) and ‘Adonoi’ the Hebrew *Adonai* (God). The ethnicity-based violence and references to Judaism culminate in the last verses of the poem:

> OI! CHHEMA ISRAELLE !/ élohénou lad!/ élohénou/ EHAD!// chema israélle barouh adonai/ israelle Kidischanou/ israelle barouh mitzwotai/ wetziwanou…wetziwanou…wetziwanou…(Isou 1947: 327)

The poem can be read as a description of the violent fascist intrusion into the languageof the multilingual Jewish world of Moldavia and Bukovina. Isou incorporates both Yiddish and Hebrew in a way that relates to the everyday life of the Jews. In the first line he takes up ‘Chhema Israelle’ (correct Hebrew ‘Shema Yisrael’), one of the fundamental Jewish prayers. The Shema is usually the first prayer the Jew learns as well as his last words. Therefore Isou posits the Shema in the last verse together with a reference to a benediction that opens with the words *Baruch Atah Adonai Elohenu* (‘Praised be Thou, Our God’). The imaginary ‘Kidischanou’ connotes Kiddish, a Shabbat blessing, and thus correlates with the scene in Celan’s ‘Benedicta’. ‘Mitzwotai’ refers to the 613 commandments in the Torah. The end of the poem is a word collage, based on the Kiddish verse *asher kidshanu b’mitzvohtav vetzi vonu l’chad leek ner* [who has sanctified us by his commandments and has commanded us to be a light to nations], which fades away with the repetition of an unfinished blessing.

As Isou’s poem shows, the use of multiple languages can result in an effect of conflict and mediate a sense of extreme violence without describing the events realistically. Here the historical background of the Shoah is essential for the interpretation of the poem. Even though German is burdened as the language of the Nazis (*Mördersprache*), the latent connections to German as the mother tongue of assimilated Jews, and the root the language shares with Yiddish, are distressingly present.

The way in which Isou applies languages by obscuring their variation can be described as anti-realism. His multilingual poetry draws various ambiguous interrelations, which question the identity of his poetic language. Furthermore, the stylised words in his poem are poetic pastiches of actual words. They can be deciphered only by interpreting the interplay of languages according to the constraints set by an actual existing language that is predominantly absent from the poem. Hence, Isou’s poetry is readily anti-realist as it provides only a reminiscence of languages (German, Yiddish, Hebrew).

Anti-Realist Pursuits

The material aspect of language is highlighted when conventional linguistic signification cannot be established. Language, and writing as its material manifestation, is no longer regarded as a primarily communicative – at least not in any conventional sense – and transparent medium: language no longer names nor objectifies, neither does it separate or mediate. Simultaneously, the poets experimented with anti-realist representation.

Celan’s and Isou’s Jewish background is likely to have contributed to their use of anti-realism as well. According to Steiner (1976: 65, 297, 474), literary

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motifs, such as silence, blankness and abstraction, are inherent to Jewish thought. Celan and Isou frequently experimented both with anti-realist and material aspects of language. The general preconception of finding meaning in the material interface of language and writing (book) enabled their anti-realist ventures. For instance, often absence cannot be (realistically) represented. Therefore, absence involves a material requirement, a framework that makes the absence manifest. A poem lacking contents, partially or completely, is such a case, because absence is detectable only if there is a *place* that is empty. The frame functions on the interplay between presence and absence: in this case writing at once both denotes the hiddenness of the experiential information (there is no explicit referent) as well as reveals the very hiddenness itself (the emphasised materiality of writing).

Where Isou's anti-realism called for blanks, Celan rejects the 'soothing appearances' offered by language and fashions language, and hence reality, anew. Celan's poetic language consists of 'halting, stuttering, cryptic, and elliptical half-words', which show the impossibility of any 'stable' and unambiguous language through signification that ranges from ambiguity to non-representation (Liska 2009: 177). Hence Celan's poetry, which merges different languages, technical terms and neologisms, can be regarded as anti-realist.

The poem 'Keine Sandkunst mehr' illustrates Celan's use of materiality as a way to highlight the page as a signifying space that is not limited to linguistic signification.

Tiefimschnee,
Iefimnee,
I - I - e.

Deepinsnow
Eepinnow
E - i - o[25].

The last three lines of the poem are gradually diminishing linguistic signification. However, the disappearance is compensated by visual signification. In this visible contraction towards the end of the poem, 'Celan's language is buried in the snow whiteness of the blank page. In this threestep melting of language, words are etched away' (Salminen 2010: 172). The semantic absence, the blank, is intertwined with language as it appears only when linguistic signification is effaced. In this sense it is reminiscent of Edmond Jabès' verse '*Il neige sur la parole/Il neige pour la parole/Il neige dans la parole*' [It snows on speech/It snows for speech/It snows within speech] (Jabès 1973: 90). The snow covering language (*sur*) inflicts a simultaneous blurring of language (*dans*).

The poem has been interpreted also from the aspect of multilingualism. John Felstiner (2001: 220) has noted that the last line of the poem is silent if it is translated into Hebrew[26]. In fact, this applies to Yiddish as well as it utilises the Hebrew alphabet. Yet, Celan is ambiguous regarding the materiality and

[25] Translated by John Felstiner.
[26] Felstiner's translation misses what I propose regarding multilinguality.

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multilingualism of the poem. The final line consists of alternating vertical and horizontal lines, more reminiscent of typewriter versions of Piet Mondrian's paintings than language[27]. The subtle change of case conveys these letters anti-realist. In this way anti-realism actualises the Jabèsian *dans* of language as the lines renounce linguistic signification. This evocative association is preserved until the very last letter 'e', which restores linguistic signification. The 'e' revises the interpretation of the preceding vertical markings. The letter 'I' in the second line, which is not omitted but regains new identity through capitalisation, highlights the change[28]. The significance of the 'I' disappearing in the snow may connote a commonplace in post-Shoah literature and art: the disappearing traces of Jews – both physically in the camps and culturally in Eastern Europe. In Celan's case, the poet who longed for his childhood Bukovina all his life, such lamentation over the irreversible disappearance of the East European Jewish milieu was not unprecedented.

In Isou's case, the Romanian Jewish background is manifest through the Jewish textual tradition, namely kabbalistic and messianic influence. The link between letters and anti-realism is recurring in his poetics. Accordingly, '*lettres* abstractisées *sont devenues des valeurs quantitative, perdant le concept premier auquel on les attachait*' [the *abstracticised* letters have becomequantitative values, losing the concept first attached to them] (Isou 2000: 24). In this sense materialism and visuality serve a purpose by highlighting the medium and disconnecting it from conventional signification. Writing, if it can be called 'writing', that is severed from representation underscores the unattainability of the object of signification – at least by means of language. This is similar to multilingualism: word pastiches render language anti-realist, because they facilitate the loss of signification. The loss of the object renders such form of writing autonomous from representation, but the material aspect of language does not replace the loss.

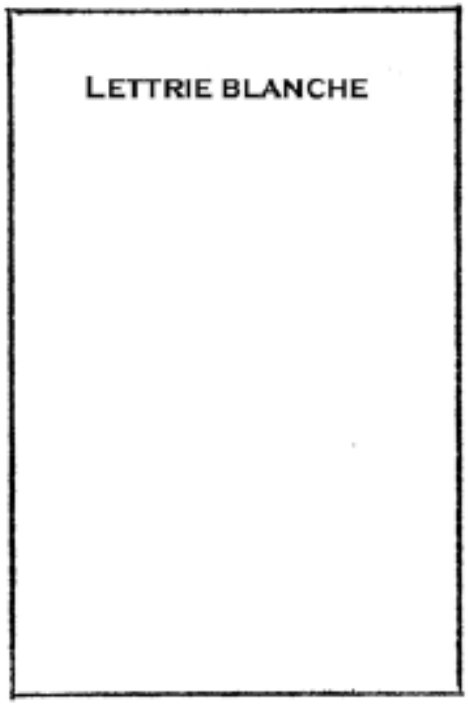
In Isou's poetics, the loss is compensated by materiality that, paradoxically, exceeds sheer materiality as it overcomes conventional signification: *La chose se transformerait en* lettre, *c'est-à-dire en élément abstrait ayant une valeur* fantomatique *envisagée sur un plan étranger à sa réalité concrète* [The thing would turn into a *letter*, that is to say, into an abstract element with a phantasmal value considered on an unfamiliar level of its concrete reality] (Isou 1998: 43). Isou does not only highlight the medium and the visual and material surface but also a promise of meaning behind the immediacy (phantasmality) of the letter. He posits himself against pure visuality by pertaining to the materiality of writing: because he adopts the letter instead of pure visuality, he retains a relationship with language.

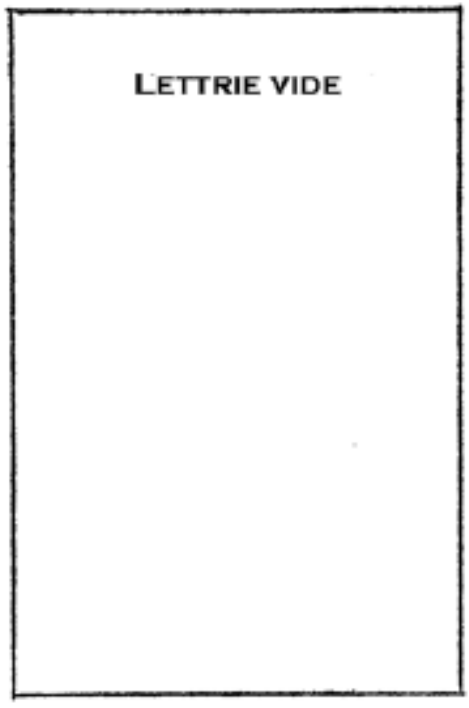
Isou seems to suggest that all poetic use of language is always already anti-realist – be it word pastiches, letter permutations, supplementary amalgamation, the mélange of writing systems or invented signs. However, his use of blank spaces in poetry is occasionally so elementary and instructive that it seems to conventionalise or even parody poetics based on anti-realism and non-representation.

[27] Consider Mondrian's Composition No.10 (Pier and Ocean) (*Compositie nr.10 (Pier en oceaan)*), 1914.

[28] The idea of a coherent 'I' was criticised during the interwar period in philosophy, art, and the newfound Freudian psychoanalysis in a reaction to romanticism and rational philosophy.

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The poems (a 'lettrie' is a lettrist poem) above exemplify the necessary requirements of applying blanks as signifying spaces. Firstly, the rectangles frame a space that is discerned from the purely blank page. Secondly, both poems suggest that non-conventional means of signification occur within these limited spaces. The 'Lettrie blanche' (White lettrie) suggests that a poem is written in white on a white background, rendering it invisible – the poem is covered in the snow whiteness of the page[29]. The contents of such poem have the potential to be whatever, even multilingual word pastiches, and the poem calls upon the interpreter to 'fill in' the blank. In other words, the piece plays with the possibilities of (non-) representation. Yet, it preserves a link to language due to its designation as a poem and the potentiality of 'white writing'. Identical, except for the title, 'Lettrie vide' (Empty lettrie) opts for another kind of potential. The title suggests that the poem may be empty of conceptual contents. Emptiness rules out the kind of potential at work in the preceding poem. Yet, both are linked to a messianic framework and possess potential: the blank can become readable in the future. Isou bases such potentiality on the adoption of Jewish messianism. It suggests that even though the potentiality is a lack in the present, the meaning is yet to come. The messianic framework is based

[29] The idea of such 'white writing' is derived from Jewish mysticism. According to this conception, the Torah is formed not only by visible letters but also by additional writing of the white space. However, these spaces were not regarded as mere margins on the page, but were believed to include unreadable white letters, or, at least letters that could not be read like the black ones (see Idel 2006: 170, 185).

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on the promise of meaning. Hence, the rectangle frames emptiness and works as a placeholder for that what cannot yet (or no longer) be expressed by means of language.

For Isou, absence does not signify nihilistic destruction, but a placeholder for something to come. This is to say that the framework of this manifestation must be able to stand in for what is not there, in other words, to represent. Language has such a capability, and even though the blank poems contain no language, at least in the conventional sense, they are a limited setting that may be representative – if only by playing with the familiarity of the interface. Hence, conventional language is an essential backdrop of radically experimental poetry such as that of Isou.

Coda

The ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous region where Celan and Isou reached adulthood seems to be reflected in the multilingualism of their poetry. By composing poetry while adopting ideologies and traditions derived from Judaism, the Jewish community from which these spurred is indirectly present. Yiddish, in particular, is a viable source for experimentation, which is facilitated by the fact that Yiddish had amalgamated other languages into its grammatical corpus.

In Celan's and Isou's works, Yiddish also connotes the presence of Jewish communities in and through language. Their role is emphasised because the Shoah erased the majority of the Yiddish-speaking readership and, hence, the poets' occasional use Yiddish was not, first and foremost, meant to attract a native Yiddish-speaking audience but rather to function as a mode of recollection. The ways in which Celan and Isou employ Yiddish or Yiddish-reminiscent words embody a sense of Jewish particularity. In this sense, both poets acknowledge that language is the place where this particularity manifests. The particularity is evocative in the allusions between German and Yiddish, which point out their common genealogy and enable a counter-movement between languages. German does not overshadow Yiddish, but the language stands independently for the Jewish particularity. Moreover, the strict divide between the two languages, culminating in the events of the Second World War, is undone on the level of language. Celan's work expresses a belonging-together of the two languages while Isou contents himself with pointing out the possibility of such a connection in his 'Cries'.

The mélange of languages in their poems engenders anti-realism. The experiments of both writers were motivated by their contemporary philosophy. The amalgamation of languages in Celan's and Isou's poetry renders unambiguous interpretations impossible. Apparently, this somewhat anti-philosophical stance was intentional for both. By experimenting with multilingualism and anti-realism, Celan and Isou relied on anti-rationality, a counterforce to what they regarded as fundamentally problematic traits in Western philosophy. Experimental literature has the ability to point out what remains beyond the reach of rationality, regardless of the language in which propositions about the world are made.

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Abstract

The essay addresses the themes of multilingualism and anti-realism and their reciprocal interrelation, in the works of two Romanian Jewish authors, namely Paul Celan and Isidore Isou. Celan is often considered in the tradition of German and Isou in the frame of French literature by virtue of the respective languages of their poetry, yet both writers emerged from Northern Romanian Jewish communities and this background overshadows their works. The present essay focuses on such fragmentary instances of their poetry where a sense of Jewish particularity is present. This particularity manifests through language, especially by the scarce employment of Yiddish, evoking multilingualism and anti-realism. Additionally, both themes are applied on a textual level in the poetic experimentation of Celan and Isou.

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