

## **The Second World War and the Shoah in German Hermetic Poetry after 1945**

Jana Hrdličková

So far, the notion of hermetic poetry has evoked rather negative emotions, often connected with prejudice or even disdain. It is said to be dark, impermeable, self-centered and highly monologic, whereby "its bleakness stems from the isolation from the external world" (as it is stated in the best seller "Structure of Modern Poetry" by Hugo Friedrich of 1956, which to date still belongs to German literature specialists' basics).

In contrast, my habilitation thesis is based on the premise that especially the last stage of German hermetic poetry, since 1945, responds comprehensively to the era that built it, mostly World War II and Holocaust, and that it is entirely dialogical. This poetry's goal is not only self-reflection, but very often and predominantly the endeavor to "touch that horror" (Nelly Sachs), to express "what happened [to Jews and other victims]" (Paul Celan). Its function does not have to be primarily aesthetical (in contrast to the statement of Reinhard Baumgart, saying that Celan's "Fugue of Death" ["Todesfuge"] mediates "too much artistic enjoyment" ["zuviel Genuß an Kunst"] through its "effective musical score" ["effektbewußte Partitur"], but cognitive.

Findings of cognitive linguistics allow us to suppose that literature in general and poetry in particular may – through their metaphors – often grasp what in our world at first is difficult to tackle or to understand, and that it is presented in a condensed form. Therefore, especially poets would be pioneers of our cognition – called out by this task but also stigmatized by it.

In concrete terms, my work is focused on Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann as a famous and biographically linked trio. It also takes into account the "hermeticist of Hagen" Ernst Meister and Erich Arendt from the GDR. Through this representative selection it strives to encompass different autobiographical, geographical, religious and ideological perspectives and to show that they are despite all differences linked by one common feature: Whenever they try to give complex answers to contemporary problems through their poetry, they are accused of being hermetic and dark. But doesn't their alleged darkness refer to the 'darkest' chapter of German history, the so called Third Reich? This is one of the assumptions of the thesis presented. Its dual interpretations of selected poems by different authors using the method of 'close reading' shall prove their dialogical character and reveal their intention and goal, which are often hidden behind the aesthetic of incomprehensibility. Another important parameter of my thesis is the consideration of the social and historical context.

As the notion of hermetic poetry is terminologically rather vague, the five chapters of interpretation are preceded by a brief account of its definition and development. And as biographical settings of authors often correspond with historical aspects, in addition short biographical profiles of individual authors in the order of their birthdates are provided.

Detailed interpretations of ten poems clearly show that monological character, impermeability and self-centeredness are by no means traits of the works analyzed, quite the opposite. They try to communicate and give evidence of the post-war reality. Therefore the final part of my thesis is dedicated to efforts not only at elucidation of this 'dark' poetry and its instrumentalization by literary criticism and literary studies. It also tries to find a relevant place of this poetry in the lyrical development of German literature after 1945 by appreciating its real contribution to it.