

## *The Semantics of the Absurd: On German ‘Hermetic’ Poetry and Political Commitment after 1945*

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**Abstract.** German culture experienced an enormous rupture after 1945. Not only was the country in ruins and an outcast of the international community because of the recent regime and its devastating effects, its entire cultural tradition was under suspicion: had German culture always been steering towards this catastrophe? Was everything within it corrupt? While the frenetic economic activity of the ‘Wirtschaftswunder’ side-stepped a mainstream confrontation with the horrors of the recent past, intellectuals and artists radically interrogated the reasons for the disaster. As always, language and the meaning-making procedures in language prepare the mind to open up and to prepare for action. Language is at the root of action and this insight fuelled reflections on language, for instance by philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger. But it was particularly in lyric poetry that a lucid and politically aware examination of the recent past took place and an expression of such considerations could be found.

This paper demonstrates how poets made a unique and highly significant contribution to the development of a new political awareness in German-language culture. By integrating silence and the absurd (that is, the unheard-of and the unspeakable) into literary language, this so-called hermetic poetry did not entail a withdrawal from society but, on the contrary, devoted itself to a particular form of political commitment. This procedure represents a rupture with what Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno called the ‘culture industry’ (1947), opposing conventional and habituated approaches to art in terms of its production and reception and advocating instead a stringent and critical concept of arresting aesthetic form that was to distinguish the work of art from products of that culture industry. Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann, Ilse Aichinger, Günter Eich and Nelly Sachs are the household names associated with this poetics. While it was never necessarily mainstream, it was arguably the most innovative poetic strand of its time and in the long run a key factor in shaping a modern German culture that could come to terms with its past and overcome authoritarian structures.

**Keywords:** post-war German ‘hermetic’ poetry, Paul Celan, Ilse Aichinger, the absurd, silence, literature and politics

The twentieth century was rich in historical ruptures, with Germany just one of a great number of nations and peoples who had to reinvent themselves several times. After the rupture of 1945, not only was Germany an outcast from the international community as the country lay in ruins with as much as ninety per cent of most cities destroyed, the entire cultural tradition seemed corrupted in light of the horrors of the country's crimes and their devastating worldwide effects. If a culture as highly developed as that of Germany could give way to barbarism, maybe there was a flaw more fundamental and deeply rooted, German people wondered. Had German culture always been on course for this catastrophe? Was Romanticism just the most obvious cultural movement to show this tendency? No document or monument of German culture remained untouched, it seemed to many, and the pillars of German cultural pride appeared porous and tainted with evil.

Of course, the German economic miracle was swiftly kick-started, but that was only the other side of the coin: the people kept busy, rebuilding the country from scratch in the so-called 'zero hour', seemingly part of an unconscious effort not to confront the past and instead look ahead to a brighter future. As the Mitscherlichs famously claimed in 1967, however, in an analysis that mapped the psychology of the individual onto that of the collective, this diversion of focus represented the Germans' inability to admit to their loss. This *inability to mourn* could be understood in a collective psychological way, as, initially, a healthy reaction to a shocking realisation: to avoid a complete mental breakdown, the realisation was not confronted directly but instead first of all repressed. In the long run, however, this resulted in destructive mental and behavioural patterns since, rather than coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*), they had instead swept it aside. The path towards tackling this enormous task of facing the past was certainly prepared by those German intellectuals and artists who radically interrogated the reasons for the disaster.

Language plays a major role in such processes, and the German post-war situation was no exception. Language represents the root of the way we think and therefore act; it is in language that a culture develops and prepares its ideas. Indeed, it is impossible to differentiate between the conscious mind and language: as Wilhelm von Humboldt clearly formulated, human consciousness is not only inseparable from language (Humboldt IV: 15), language and mind can never be thought of as identical enough ("nie identisch genug", Humboldt VII: 42). It is in language that human meaning-making processes take place.

The so-called 'linguistic turn' in the humanities and social sciences in the twentieth century designates a movement of thought that began in the first decades of the century and is most often associated with Ferdinand de Saussure

yet was coined only in 1953 by Gustav Bergmann and then popularised in 1967 by Richard Rorty. It places language at the centre of our understanding of the world and became prevalent in the mid-century. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Interrogations*, developed from 1936 to 1947 and published in 1953, insisted on language in its common usage and the openness of language to 'language games', that is, language within its specific situation of usage. This book paved the way for the history of philosophy to be opened up to the fact that all philosophising is done in language, and to the consequences of this fact, although Wittgenstein himself did not embrace this as something positive but rather regretted what he regarded as the decisive role of a culturally grown language. Contrary to the Humboldtian tradition, analytical philosophy to this day sees the ambivalences of language as a flaw instead of its wealth. Heidegger, for his part, also focused on language in his later thinking, particularly with *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, a series of essays written in the 1950s, but he granted language a mystical dimension, a being independent of its speakers, denying its groundedness in the historical situation of its utterances. These are the two poles of language thinking, both of which fuelled reflection on language, and present language as shaping the human world.

Very quickly after National Socialism, this key role of language has been applied to German in this particular historical situation. A number of highly significant works interrogated the effects of the NS-use and abuse of German language. In his 1945 preface to *Aus dem Wörterbuch eines Unmenschen* (From the Dictionary of an Anti-human) Dolf Sternberger stresses the role of language:

Soviel und welche Sprache einer spricht, soviel und solche Sache, Welt oder Natur ist ihm erschlossen. Und jedes Wort, das er redet, wandelt die Welt, worin er sich bewegt, wandelt ihn selbst und seinen Ort in dieser Welt. Darum ist nichts gleichgültig an der Sprache, und nichts so wesentlich wie die *façon de parler*. Der Verderb der Sprache ist der Verderb des Menschen. (Sternberger, 7)

(The extent to which somebody speaks a language and which language he speaks decide how much and which things, world and nature are accessible to him. And each word he speaks transforms the world he moves in, transforms himself and his place in this world. That is why nothing in language is inconsequential, and nothing is more important than the *façon de parler*. The corruption of language is the corruption of the human being.)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All translations are by the author, MP, if not otherwise stated.

Sternberger, a political scientist, is aware that the human world, that is, the way humans perceive their world, is made in language. His *Dictionary* analyses the particular use National Socialists made of certain words, manipulating their meaning and the minds of German speakers, the way they see the world, their *worldview*, to use Humboldt's term. Sternberger points to the "Bilde-Kraft" (Sternberger 1968: 334), the forming power of language. The other famous example of such early efforts to understand the language procedures that led to the German catastrophe is Victor Klemperer's *LTI* from 1946, that is, *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the language of the Third Reich. Klemperer also analyses the transformations of German through National Socialism. He comments that language directs not only our thinking but also our feelings and our entire being, and the less conscious we are of it, the more it does so (Klemperer 1980: 21). This German *Sprachkritik*, criticism of language, has been very influential and Klemperer demanded explicitly that German needs to be purified of these deformations caused by the Nazis (Klemperer 1980: 22).<sup>2</sup>

Such works show that language awareness was an area of intensive focus regarding the immediate past, and after World War II it became yet more prevalent in philosophy and the humanities generally. I contend, however, that it was particularly in lyric poetry that a lucid and politically aware examination of the recent past took place and an expression of such considerations was found. This paper will demonstrate how poets contributed greatly to the development of a new political awareness in German-language culture. By integrating silence and the absurd (that is, the unheard-of and the unspeakable) into literary language, this so-called *hermetic poetry* did not involve a withdrawal from society but, on the contrary, devoted itself to a particular political commitment to aesthetic authenticity and renewal. It represented at the time a rupture with what Horkheimer and Adorno called in 1947 the 'culture industry', opposing conventional and habituated approaches to art in terms of its production and reception and advocating instead a stringent and critical concept of arresting aesthetic form that was to distinguish the work of art from products of that culture industry. Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann, Ilse Aichinger, Günter Eich and Nelly Sachs are the household names associated with this poetics. While it was never necessarily mainstream, it was arguably the most innovative poetic strand of its time and in the long run a key factor in shaping a modern German

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<sup>2</sup> For a slightly more detailed discussion of this topic of *Sprachkritik*, cf. Pajević 2014. The fact that Klemperer's own use of notions such as purification and deformation are key aspects of Nazi phantasmagoria, only strengthens the point. He was himself influenced by his era.

culture that could come to terms with its past and overcome authoritarian structures.

One of the most referenced poems in relation to the National Socialist catastrophe dates from 1939. On the verge of World War II and in view of the National Socialist threat, Bertolt Brecht wrote in “An die Nachgeborenen” (Brecht 1967, vol 9: 723):

Was sind das für Zeiten, wo  
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist,  
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten mit einschließt!

(What times are these, when  
A conversation about trees is almost a crime,  
Since it contains a silence about so many atrocities!)

Alongside the regrets for the lost innocence, Brecht also implies an obligation to take a stance: in politically crucial times one needs to be committed and engage with political issues, he urges. Language, shaping the discourse in Foucault’s sense of the term, becomes a necessity and remaining silent a crime. And indeed, many German authors in exile during the Nazi regime felt the same, already before the main atrocities took place, they wrote literature that, to a certain degree, sacrificed complexity to this fight against a clearly defined enemy. Often, it took the form of a black and white choice between fascism and communism, the latter seen as the only hope to overcome the National Socialist terror. This idealistic choice remained the conviction of many authors in East Germany and later the GDR, and some, amongst them some of the best-known such as Christa Wolf and Hermann Kant, justified their support of the GDR regime with this necessity of a choice even after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In West Germany, the situation was different. Here, after the war, the prevalent position amongst young writers was that of non-conformism. Every political system was deemed problematic, the role of the poet was to undermine the smooth running of politics and thus conventional behaviour and lack of interrogation. Günter Eich demanded of his compatriots: “Seid unbequem, seid Sand, nicht das Öl im Getriebe der Welt.” (Be difficult, be sand, not the oil in the machine of the world.)<sup>3</sup> Choosing not to run with the masses, not to conform to the ways of the world, was perceived as a moral and ethical imperative after the experience of National Socialism and its common ‘Mitläufertum’ (followership). In post-war Germany, literature developed new forms to make

<sup>3</sup> The last sentence of his radio-play *Träume* (Dreams), Suhrkamp 1953 (first broadcast 1951).

people stop in their tracks and think. And that was precisely not by formulating a simple and clear position, by trumpeting a political taking of sides. Later, in the sixties, Eich published a series of prose miniatures he called ‘Maulwürfe’ (‘moles’), animals that are active under the surface and leave signs of their activity on the surface. It is, however, also literally something thrown with the mouth, *Maul-wurf*, that is, a speech act, a piece of language launched into the world. The word was used in this double sense by him and his wife, Ilse Aichinger, whose poetics will be discussed later on.

Eich, incidentally, later wrote a response to Brecht’s poem, as did several other poets (Eich 2006: 302 [1966]):

Zwischenbescheid für bedauernswerte Bäume

Akazien sind ohne Zeitbezug.  
Akazien sind soziologisch unerheblich.  
Akazien sind keine Akazien.

(Intermediate Notice for Unfortunate Trees

Acacias are without reference to the times.  
Acacias are sociologically irrelevant.  
Acacias are no acacias.)

Eich thus defends poetry against instrumentalization within political or sociological debates, insisting on the world and the word being considered as they are, without any agenda.

Paul Celan is the post-war poet who, in his poetics, most famously and explicitly carried out what the above-mentioned criticism of language demanded: its purification. In his *Bremen Speech* from 1958, he stated that the German language passed through “die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede” (the thousand darknesses of fatal speech), and reappeared “angereichert” (enriched) by all of this, that is, by the “tausendjährige Reich” – Celan himself put “angereichert” in quotation marks (Celan 1986, 3: 186). In 1968, he wrote a poem in reaction to Brecht’s statement about the obligation to talk politics, explicitly taking up Brecht’s metaphor but turning it around (Celan 1986, 2: 385):

EIN BLATT, baumlos,  
für Bertolt Brecht:

Was sind das für Zeiten,  
wo ein Gespräch  
beinah ein Verbrechen ist,  
weil es soviel Gesagtes  
mit einschließt?

A LEAF, treeless,  
for Bertolt Brecht:  
What times are these  
when a conversation  
is nearly a crime,  
because it includes  
so much being spoken.

Translated by Pierre Joris

So now it was not only language about nature that had lost its innocence, as Brecht had it, but all language had become corrupted. The National Socialists' abuse of German tainted the use of German, and, after what happened, anyone who speaks it transports the horror. 'Muttersprache – Mördersprache'<sup>4</sup> – the mother tongue has become the language of the murderers, and literally so for Celan, whose mother had taught him the love of German literature and language and was killed by the Nazis. Words themselves had become criminal. They shaped the minds of the German people and prepared them to commit or at least accept atrocities. That left the Germans with the dilemma that the young Celan formulated in this question: "Wie sollte nun das Neue also auch Reine entstehen?" (Celan 1986, 3: 157) (How should the new and thus pure emerge now?) The medium itself was corrupt – how can one cleanse language in language?

This is why 'the unspeakable' became such a decisive topic and feature in German poetry. It is not so much a question of being unable to describe the horrors, it is about the language to describe the horrors perpetuating them. So Celan tried to find a way to work around this, and the solution does not lie in the *what* of writing but in the *how*. This implies an 'obscurity' for his poetics,

<sup>4</sup> Theo Buck made of this the title of a book on Celan: *Muttersprache – Mördersprache. Celan-Studien I*. Rimbaud Verlag, Aachen 1993.

one which he claimed openly.<sup>5</sup> He managed to write poetry after Auschwitz, something which, according to Adorno's infamous phrase, is barbaric (Adorno 1955: 30). Adorno himself acknowledged that Celan refuted his thesis and that one can write poems after Auschwitz as long as such writing responds to Auschwitz (Adorno 1973, vol 6: 353). Celan, along with other poets, made use of silence in his poetry to find a form for things that cannot be described directly.

In the context of the unspeakable, the so-called Wittgenstein silence is often evoked. The young Wittgenstein held that everything that can be said can be said clearly, and it would be better not to speak about things that cannot be expressed clearly. However, he acknowledged that the unspeakable exists: he calls it the mystical. He also added that by speaking only about the clearly expressible things, one does not even touch on the problems of life (Wittgenstein 1984: 9–10; 85). This drastically reduces the utility of a language that follows purely analytical philosophy guidelines and at any rate deliberately excludes the arts which deal exactly with such problems of life. Wittgenstein, however, never intended this to be taken as simply keeping quiet about such things beyond the realm of what can be said in analytical language. That is already indicated in his choice of words, using 'darüber schweigen' instead of 'davon schweigen' for 'being silent about', thus implying a more active form of silence. His point is that non-analytical phenomena are unspeakable, yet they exist. In his later language games theory, he refuses any possibility of unequivocal utterances (Wittgenstein 2001).

Celan developed strategies to make the silence heard, his poems speak by their silence. Evidently, silence, in order to be perceived, cannot exist on its own, it has to find a manifestation. Celan speaks of "*Ihr gebet-, ihr lästerungs-, ihr / gebetscharfen Messer / meines / Schweigens*" (... RAUSCHT DER BRUNNEN, Celan 1986, 1: 237) (You prayer-, you blasphemous-, you prayer-sharp knives of

<sup>5</sup> Referring to Pascal in his Meridian-Speech, "Ne nous reprochez pas le manque de clarté puisque nous en faisons profession!" – "Das ist, glaube ich, wenn nicht die kongenitale, so doch wohl die der Dichtung um einer Begegnung willen aus einer – vielleicht selbstentworfenen – Ferne oder Fremde zugeordnete Dunkelheit." (Celan 1986, 3: 195) (Do not reproach us the lack of clarity, since we make it our profession! – This is, I believe, if not the congenital, most probably the obscurity attached to poetry, for the sake of an encounter, coming from a – possibly self-designed – distance or strangeness.), and "auch das offenste Gedicht [...] hat seine Dunkelheit, hat sie als Gedicht, weil es das Gedicht ist, dunkel. Eine kongenitale, konstitutive Dunkelheit also", Paul Celan 1999: 72 (also the most open poem has its obscurity, has it as a poem, because it is the poem, obscure. Consequently a congenital, constitutive obscurity). See for the obscurity in Celan's poetics also Caradonna 2020.

my silence): his silence cuts like a knife. Silence is used as an active tool, a mode of language. Celan does this for instance by making moments perceivable when language fails, for instance like this (*Du liegst*, Celan 1986, 2: 334):

Nichts  
stockt.

This means ‘nothing / halts’, the verb in German often being used in connection with breath ‘der Atem stockt’, meaning one remains speechless, one’s breath catches. The verb ‘stocken’, however, also means ‘coagulate/curdle’, something becomes manifest precisely in and through this moment of silence – the flow is interrupted and the smooth functioning is hindered. The unspeakable has found its form, a form which is corroborated by the shift in the poem’s layout. Poetic silence is not simply absence of words, it speaks by its context, its situation, and is thus ‘the art of citing silence’.<sup>6</sup> Celan stresses that this journey towards the unspeakable needs words: “in Wortgestalt – in welcher sonst? – offen nach allen Seiten hin, begeben wir uns, und das ist manchmal unangenehm, ins Wort- und Antwortlose.” (Celan 1999: 66) (In the form of words – how else? – open towards all sides, we enter, and that is at times unpleasant, a realm without words and answers.)

Celan also makes particular and peculiar use of enjambments. Instead of taking the reader smoothly into the next line with the break at a conventional unit of meaning, Celan breaks the flow of language thus obliging his poems to be read hesitantly, ‘stockend’, with halts and coagulation, thus no longer flowing smoothly, sometimes cutting a word in the middle. One poem ends with an incomplete word: *Ra—* (*EINEM, DER VOR DER TÜR STAND*, Celan 1986, 1: 242). He breaks up units of meaning, isolates words in a line, uses hyphens, very irregular ‘stanzas’, spaces left blank, lines consisting only of points. These graphic elements are telling, they speak silently. Likewise, unanswered questions in his poems refer the reader to something unsaid, his collection *Die Niemandrose* even ending on a question mark. Celan’s own way of reading his poetry aloud accentuated such hesitations and the openness of his words. He stresses something, “das, ebenso lautlos wie vernehmlich, mitspricht” (in Hamacher/ Menninghaus 1988: 11) (that, equally soundlessly and perceptibly, speaks as well). His words are “hörbar-unhörbar” (*WEISSGERÄUSCHE* 2/146) (audible-inaudible). The unspeakable is transported in language, using words such as those described in this poem: “Dies ist ein Wort, das neben den

<sup>6</sup> I use here Christoph Perels’s formulation “die Kunst, das Schweigen zu zitieren”, in Perels 1970: 210–213.

Worten einherging, / ein Wort nach dem Bilde des Schweigens" (1/92) (This is a word that accompanied the words, / a word in the image of silence), and he speaks of "Einfriedungen um das grenzenlos Wortlose"<sup>7</sup> (enclosures around the limitlessly wordless).

He wanted to create an awareness of spheres that lie beyond the merely empirical.<sup>8</sup> And for this to happen, there must be gaps, gaps the other in an encounter of text and reader can fill so that something new emerges. This idea becomes evident in the following note: "Das Gedicht als das keineswegs lückenlos Gefügte, als das Lückenhafte, Besetzbare, Poröse: ('à toi de passer, vie!')" (Celan 1999: 103) (The poem as something not at all gaplessly joined, as something with gaps, something to be occupied, something porous: ('à toi de passer, vie!')). Life is taking place in these gaps, in the silence of the text that leaves space for the other to inscribe her- or himself and dynamizes the text.

The problem consists less in wanting to communicate something unspeakable than in the unheard-of character of what poetry has to say. We always hear only what we can – or want to – perceive. In speech there is never complete congruency, as Wilhelm von Humboldt had already said, in every comprehension there is also a part of non-comprehension, since language is different in every individual (Humboldt VII: 64–5).

This is, however, nothing to be regretted. The obscurity is necessary for the emergence of something new, and this is the nature of poetry according to Celan: "Mit jedem Gedicht stehen wir, 'gedichtlang', im Geheimnis. Von diesem Aufenthalt kommt das Dunkel" (Celan 1999: 90). (With each poem, we stand, 'poemlong', in the secret. From this sojourn comes the dark.) As opposed to the young Wittgenstein who simply wanted to give up in the face of saying the unspeakable, Celan claims exactly this effort as the heart of poetry. Poetry for him awakens the awareness that there are things that are empirically not tangible, that there is poetry. Communication of concrete historical events is part of his poetry, too, unheard-of events, but this does not yet constitute the unspeakable of his poetics – that goes beyond the empirical.

The decisive moment of the poetic, for Celan, is the intense moment when something takes one's breath away, and, consequently, one's words: "*den Atem und das Wort verschlagen*" (Celan 1986, 3: 195). In his Meridian speech from 1960, the acceptance speech for the award of the most prestigious German literary prize, the Büchner Prize, he evokes this form of silence as an "Atemwende"

<sup>7</sup> This formulation of Celan was reported by Christoph Schwerin, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Robert Foot, 'It was, after all, his main goal to create an awareness of completely new areas of reality whose existence lay on the other side of the merely empirical.' in 1982: 286.

(Celan 1986, 3: 195), a breath-turn, a key term of his poetics which also becomes the title of one of his collections. A breath-turn is a moment when things are on hold, came to a halt, a brief instant of nothingness, but a change of direction is implied, and, moreover, the permanent change of direction of respiration is a matter of life and death. This little nothing is a place where crucial things are decided.

This is the mystical *hic et nunc*, the here and now. Poetry is a form of this, it incarnates, as Celan formulates, the “Majestät des Absurden” (Celan 1986, 3: 190) (majesty of the absurd). The absurd, ab-surdus, etymologically, is what comes from the unheard-of – it is key for poetry. A poem, for Celan, does not consist of an elaborate way of saying things that could also be communicated differently, it is a place, “wo alle Tropen und Metaphern ad absurdum geführt werden wollen” (Celan 1986, 3: 199) (where all tropes and metaphors want to be pushed to absurdity). This absurdity, this unspeakable, is not directly perceptible, with the result that poetry is not accepted in the normal order of things: “Was man nicht wahrhaben will, ist – letzten Endes – die Dichtung. Aber es gibt sie, quia absurdum ...”<sup>9</sup> (What people do not want to accept as truth, is – in the final instance – poetry. But poetry exists, quia absurdum ...).

The silence that counts in Celan’s poetry is thus the unspeakable that is related to the unheard-of. Its problem is that people do not hear it and Celan tried to make them listen to the silence transporting it.<sup>10</sup> Silence is not devoid of meaning. There is a semantics of the absurd, that which comes from the unheard-of takes on meaning itself by questioning the matter-of-course, by bringing things to a halt and thus compelling the readers to think either side of the well-trodden path.

Celan’s poetics has often been labelled ‘hermetic’, implying a lack of accessibility, a sealing off from the outer circumstances of life. This idea completely fails to grasp the stakes of such poetry. Not only is it precisely about a real encounter with the other, very explicitly addressing a You, it also very much deals with concrete historical events. Moreover, what the inherent silence and ‘absurdity’ of this poetry tries to break up is what Horkheimer and Adorno criticized as the ‘Kulturindustrie’ (culture industry) or ‘verdinglichtes Bewusstsein’ (reified consciousness) in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectics of Enlightenment* 1991). The latter term be understood as an unthinking subsumption of others and oneself under preconceived categories.

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Jürgen Wallmann, 25.01.1961, in: Wallmann 1971: 82.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the role of silence and the unspeakable in Celan, cf. Pajević 2005.

Ilse Aichinger, another representative of post-war ‘hermetic’ poetry, is an ardent critic of this lack of reflection. One of the main concepts of her poetics is ‘mistrust’, but not at all in the sense of mistrusting the other, rather as an interrogation of oneself. Her *Aufruf zum Mißtrauen* (*Appeal to Mistrust*) ends with the sentence: “Werden wir mißtrauisch gegenüber uns selbst, um vertrauenswürdiger zu sein!” (Aichinger in Moser 1990: 16–17) (Let’s become more mistrustful of ourselves in order to be more trustworthy!) The Austrians and Germans under National Socialism fully trusted their own worth and the legitimacy of their actions and were so terribly mistaken. Now, in 1946, Aichinger aims to ‘vaccinate’ the people against what happened by asking them to mistrust themselves, to be sceptical, to call themselves into question.

This self-critical approach is at the same time an accusatory stance against the post-war years, when Austrians and Germans wanted to forget about their recent past. Aichinger’s demand was that everybody must interrogate themselves, their own role during the National Socialist era. And Aichinger also knew that such interrogation is inseparable from language awareness and language criticism. Mistrust is therefore also mistrust of the presumed clarity of communication. Her writing becomes more and more elliptical, as does Celan’s, it is a writing against the automatisms, against the unconscious in them and thus against the lack of conscious reality since reality for Aichinger can only be an aware life in the encounter with the world.

By undermining the mechanisms of language, Aichinger undermines the mechanisms of power of the ‘administered world’ and of ‘instrumentalised reason’, terms developed by Adorno and Horkheimer to explain the phenomenon of National Socialism (Horkheimer/ Adorno 1991). Only through the poetic, Aichinger shows, by being aware of the processes of meaning-making in language, can a kind of reason emerge that does not reduce life.

The self-interrogation Aichinger demands with her notion of ‘mistrust’ finds poetic form in her texts. They call into question the status of the socially accepted factual reality and undermine it with the dimensions of dreams and possibilities, which, in her view, have a more precise claim to reality since they are *lived* by the individual instead of being simply *consumed*. These dimensions therefore counter the limited facticity.

Aichinger’s mistrust is directed at the clear communicability of reality. It is thus also mistrust of language, but in language. The nuances and possibilities, that which happens in-between the words is central to her poetics. That explains the positive charge of key terms such as ‘shadows’ and ‘dreams’. In an interview, Aichinger refers to the “exactness of dreams, their precision” and confirms the formulation of the interviewer Hermann Vinke: “That would be a piece of reality in the lack of reality.” She develops this idea in her response (Aichinger in Moser 1990: 32):

Ja, ein Stück viel größerer Wirklichkeit, als die Wirklichkeit damals und heute zu geben imstande ist. Die Wirklichkeit ist nicht imstande, ohne Gegenleistungen zu geben. Sie kommt nur hervor, wenn man sie kontert, wenn man sie nicht anerkennt, wenn man sich nicht anpaßt.

(Yes, a piece of a much larger reality than what reality was then and is now capable of giving. Reality is not capable of giving without receiving a service in return. It only emerges when one counters it, when one does not recognise it, when one does not adapt.)

Dreams are thus not an alternative world to escape reality, they are a more precise reality, while the common idea of reality is unreal. Aichinger's reality is, then, a more intense form of being than the one social life normally allows for. What is at stake here is a form of authenticity that can be reached only as a countering. In writing counter to the language of everyday life or of academia, she resists any systematicity which, for her, equates to automatization, hence to unconsciousness and, with that, to lack of reality.

Countering is therefore another key term and feature in her poetics, as she explains in an interview with Heinz F. Schafroth (in Moser 1990: 25):

Sprache ist, wo sie da ist, für mich das Engagement selbst, weil sie kontern muß, die bestehende Sprache kontern muß, die etablierte Sprache, weil sie fort muß aus dem Rezept der Wahrheit in die Wahrheit, weil sie das Gegenteil von Etabliertheit sein muß, aus sich selbst.

(Language is, where it is present, commitment itself, because it has to counter, to counter the existing language, the established language, since it has to go forth from the recipe of truth into truth, since it has to be the opposite of establishedness, in itself.)

The countering of supposedly clear certainties becomes manifest in precisely the lack of a clear linear meaning in her texts. Her poems are situated in this in-between, where shadows and nuances linger, but her prose and audio plays likewise refuse any unequivocal statement. In her case as well, this difficulty the interpreter has in isolating a clearly marked statement has given rise to the critical label 'hermetic writing'. Aichinger herself, however, turns that into a positively understood notion of 'privacy' (in Moser 1990: 29). Privacy, she insists, means exactly the opposite of what her critics want to insinuate: it is precisely through this privacy that she is committed. 'Private' according to dictionary definitions, signifies 'concerning the individual', and reality can only ever be perceived individually (in Moser 1990: 25). Aichinger, then, conceives

of language as individualised language, thus following Wilhelm von Humboldt, who called the language of the dictionary and grammar a “todtes Gerippe” (Humboldt VI.1: 147) (dead skeleton), as long as it is not actualised or vivified in the context of the particular moment of speech. “Sprache ist privat”, language is private, states Aichinger (in Moser 1990: 29).

Poetry in this sense is therefore the most appropriate means of breaking up automatized functioning in general. Particularly in the historical situation of the Austrian and German post-war years, it meant resistance to social rigidity. This partly explains the apogee of poetry in the fifties. Aichinger’s private poetry is consequently far from being withdrawn from society, it represents, instead, a stark alternative: the chance to resist the ‘culture industry’. As such, it is a genuine commitment to counter the pitfalls of the time.

This commitment is more *radical* than what people usually see as commitment, since Aichinger with her approach via language tackles the *root* of the state of affairs, that is, language, that is, thinking. The core of her approach is to escape “recipes” (in Moser 1990: 29), something commitment often does not manage to do. To break up a recipe, a systemic way of functioning, one has to break up thinking itself, in its form. This also explains the key role of silence in her poetics: silence is part of speech, not its absence. She says: “Es [das Schreiben] bedeutet für mich den Versuch, zu schweigen, vielleicht schreibe ich deshalb, weil ich keine bessere Möglichkeit zu schweigen sehe.” (in Moser 1990: 26) (Writing, to me, means an attempt to be silent, maybe I write because I do not see any better way of being silent.)

Thus, Aichinger undercuts the simplistic prevailing view of language purely as communication and places the focus on language as process, on cognition in its activity, much in line with Humboldt again, who famously advanced a theory of language as *energeia* (activity) instead of as *ergon* (product) (Humboldt VII,1: 45–46).<sup>11</sup>

This short exploration of some aspects of Celan’s and Aichinger’s poetics demonstrates to what extent poetry is socially relevant in its form, outside of its possible thematization of important topics: poetry shapes our thinking and hence the structures of our relations, including our relation with ourselves. And what else is politics but managing human relations. Aichinger’s work is in this sense highly political and contributed considerably to an awareness of such processes. Precisely by countering the pragmatic conception of language as communication, the so-called hermetic poetry of the German post-war period represents a historic rupture and brings things to a halt. Refusing simple

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Aichinger’s poetics, cf. Pajević 2009.

consumption (see Aichinger above), it imposes a moment of reflection and thus gives form to the unheard-of events and to the poetic.

Evidently, poetry is not an isolated phenomenon in society, these ideas have to be considered together with other debates taking place in the post-war situation. The era's criticism of technology as pure functionality is one such important aspect, formulated by Martin Heidegger (1994 [1945]), Günther Anders (2002 [1956]) and Herbert Marcuse (2002 [1964]) amongst others. Their reflection on rationality and functionality at the expense of the human, after the experience of technological mass killings by the Nazis and the destructive potential of the atomic bomb, shapes the ideas of the time. We have already alluded to the role of language theory. The parallels to the theory of the Frankfurt School and particularly the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* are also key. Aichinger's mistrust of the established culture is close to Adorno's. Aichinger sees the only escape from barbarism in withdrawing from a system of categorisations and administrative thinking. There is also a relation to Adorno's concept of the essay with its tentative character of defining (Adorno 1974). Aichinger considers private, non-linear and non-defining language a way of countering the dilemma of the 'culture industry'. By breaking up the pragmatic use of language in a mistrust of clear communicability, Aichinger's language subversively breaks up the rigidity of society and pushes her readers to think on their own. That is why this mistrust, far from being a withdrawal from society, is a commitment coming from the fringe. The non-conformist literature of post-war Germany, particularly its poetry, contributed greatly to overcoming the inhumane functionality of the National Socialist mindset.

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