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Estranging Memory in Ilse Aichinger¹

In Vienna during the Second World War, Ilse Aichinger was identified by the National Socialists as a “first degree half-breed,” having a non-Jewish father and a mother who was classified as Jewish. Aichinger, born in 1921, avoided being deported, as did her mother, who was protected as Aichinger’s guardian. Her grandmother and her mother’s younger siblings did not survive. Her 1948 novel *Die größere Hoffnung* is one of the first novels to present the National Socialist persecution and murder of European Jewry, and an early version of one of that work’s chapters, published on September 1, 1945, in the *Wiener Kurier*, is the first Austrian literary publication to speak about the concentration camps. So it is no exaggeration for the literary critic Richard Reichensperger to claim, “Ilse Aichinger is the beginning of post-war Austrian literature.” Besides this historical position, Aichinger stands out because of how she presents and reflects on memory in a wide range of genres in her relatively small body of writing published over a span of sixty years, from her only novel to her slim volume of poetry, from texts in poetics to short stories, radio plays, aphorisms, and her multiple series of articles that have appeared in the Viennese daily *Der Standard*. The determination of the place and function of memory in Aichinger’s works is essential, because her experience as a survivor of persecution has been important for her critical reception and, more importantly, remains an essential aspect of her understanding of the very act of writing.

In a 1954 essay, Aichinger describes as one of the results of recent history a “new” perspective, which she calls “die Sicht der Entfremdung” and which has uncanny effects on those who understand its import: “Fast alle von uns haben diesen Preis in den vergangenen Jahren bezahlt, aber nur die wenigsten haben begriffen, wofür, haben sich selbst als Schatten gegen die Sterne begriffen, als etwas ungeheuer Fremdes, das Nächste als das Fernste und die Heimat als die Fremde, die sie zugleich ist” (*Kurzschlüsse* 60). This transformation of the self into something “ungeheuer Fremdes” shows her distance from recent theories that equate memory with identity, a link that this article aims to call into question.

Memory estranges. It creates an alienating discontinuity, and it is in this sense that one must read Aichinger’s remarks in an interview on the necessity of memory: “[U]nsere Erinnerung genügt nicht; die Toten müssen sich an uns

erinnern, darauf kommt es an. Wir erinnern uns natürlich an die Toten, aber es muß ein Gegenspiel sein" (Esser 56). In memory, the living maintain a relation with the dead that, for Aichinger, is also a relation of the dead to us, made possible by their experience, while alive, of the moment as split and thus always also containing a relation to the future. If a moment can be remembered, it must have a relation to memory already as it is experienced, as Aichinger implies in an aphorism about the consequences of this relation's absence: "Von der Erinnerung an den gegenwärtigen Augenblick abgeschnitten damit auch von der Möglichkeit der Erinnerung an andere Augenblicke" (Kleist 84). This necessary opening of experience to memory means that the moment is not identical to itself and thus also opened up to "hope," an important term in many of Aichinger's texts: "Die Erinnerung an den Augenblick ist der Hoffnung des Augenblicks gleichzusetzen," Aichinger writes in another aphorism, because hope and memory depend on the moment's noncoincidence with itself (Kleist 84). But the existence of hope and memory is not guaranteed, which is why Aichinger writes in "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" that hope can only be had "sometimes" and that memory cannot fully "grasp itself" (18). Hope is a task, she implies in her 2001 book *Film und Verhängnis*: "[W]er schenkt solche Hoffnungen, und vor allem: Wer begründet sie täglich neu?" (45)

In an interview, she is asked what happens if the "Gegenspiel" of memory does not take place: "Da muß man den Mut haben, sich ins unbetretene Gebiet zu begeben" (Esser 56). In the daily task of renewing memory and hope, Aichinger is forced into unknown territory, in which memory is something different from the mere reconstitution of an experience, even in her texts that seem to be most autobiographical. Autobiography is something like a current that runs through all of her writing without ever appearing in pure form or ever being entirely excluded from any text (cf. Lorenz 131). *Die größere Hoffnung*, for example, draws on her adolescence in wartime Vienna, but its fantastic qualities separate it from autobiography, and *Film und Verhängnis* tells the story of her life by means of commentaries on films and photographs. There are, however, texts in which autobiography is more prominent and in which it is an object of reflection. A good example of such a text is "Kleist, Moos, Fasane," which was first published in a 1959 volume of the West German literary journal *Akzente* and which focuses on a number of childhood memories.² In 1987, it was republished as the first text in a collection, also titled *Kleist, Moos, Fasane*, which is divided into three parts: explicitly autobiographical texts, aphorisms, and writings in poetics. "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" is a key Aichinger text, because it is the entryway into her autobiography and provides the title for a collection of texts that is not only autobiographical; it also continues to be a point of reference for her thinking about memory, as her explications of passages from it in *Film und Verhängnis* show (70, 105–07). It can thus serve as an emblem for the autobiographical aspect of her texts and for the genre's intimate relation to other kinds of writing. The following pages

will offer a reading of passages from "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" that are useful for showing memory's estranging effects and for discussing shortcomings in theories that insist that memory finds identities.

In the second of the three sections that make up "Kleist, Moos, Fasane," Aichinger recalls how, as a child, she returns to school in the afternoon for classes. Everything has changed since the morning, and the difference is so significant that it was "als wären dreißig Jahre vergangen, gesprungen, verloren, liebebedürftig, die Lehrer ziviler, hilfloser, und selbst, wenn sie die Stimmen erhoben, ihrer Konturen nicht mehr so sicher, die Klosterfrauen verlassener, kühner, den Vögeln ähnlicher als am Vormittag" (*Kleist* 13). Memory's estranging force is visible here in the loss of contours and the emergence of a similarity that joins nuns and birds. Aichinger goes on to specify the difference between afternoon and morning classes: "Am Vormittag war es leicht gewesen, ein Kind zu bleiben. Aber ein Kind zu werden, wie die Bibel es wollte, das war Sache des Nachmittags" (14). If children can become children, then childhood is not a period that one traverses and then outgrows and must recall, but a becoming that can still occur.³ Children are not children in the afternoon. In "Kleist, Moos, Fasane," not even pastries are themselves in the afternoon: "Drüben, in der Auslage des Bäckerladens schienen die Mohnbeugel um ein wenig mehr als Mohnbeugel, um eine entscheidende Spur sich selbst voraus" (15). Aichinger undoes every romanticization of childhood as a lost condition as well as every account of her texts that claim that they capture childhood as it "really is." "Being a child" disappears in favor of "becoming a child" in accordance with her general tendency to make things, people, and places into movements, forces, and forms of becoming.

Aichinger's memories are made up of noncoincidences, moments in which things and places are not themselves, but this does not seem to be the case, at first, for her memory of morning classes, which she presents in the final paragraph of this section as a time of absolute stability: "Am nächsten Morgen war alles wie sonst, das Feuer knisterte im Kanonenofen und verband sich mit den aufgeschlagenen Texten, mit Cäsar und Tacitus zu einer Macht, der nicht zu widersprechen und in die nicht einzudringen war" (15). But the afternoon nevertheless disturbs this unity, as the next sentence is quick to remark: "Nur daneben blieb schwerer zu entziffern, zweifels- und geheimnisvoller, ein Folgestern und dennoch nicht wegzudenken, der Nachmittag bestehen" (15). The morning is not opposed to but supplemented by the continued existence of the afternoon and its insecure contours. The afternoon, as a time of becoming and indetermination, cannot be contained, and Aichinger's memory here is of this simultaneity of the unified power of the morning and the riddles of the afternoon.

Aichinger concludes this section of "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" with the sentence: "Vielleicht hat [der Nachmittag] zuletzt die Sprünge im Bild der Erinnerung geschaffen, die es uns süß machen" (15). The afternoon, despite

its images of fireplaces and nun-birds, matters here only insofar as it might also be the cause of “cracks” in an image. These cracks exist, this sentence tells us, and in question is only their source. “Maybe” the mysterious afternoon lessons bring them about, and their distortions seem to make them a good candidate for this role. Each of the written memories in “Kleist, Moos, Fasane” is an attempt to find such fractures — these noncoincidences and losses of contours in an image that otherwise would have been closed up and resistant to contradiction.

In a recent book, Barbara Thums takes account of this aspect of Aichinger’s writing, which she describes as a “subversive Strategie gegen eine Logik der Identität, die auf der Ausgrenzung und Auslöschung des jeweils Anderen der Ordnung besteht” (236–37). In her discussion of this strategy, Thums refers to the notion of the “image of memory” in Walter Benjamin’s essay “Zum Bilde Prousts” without discussing this notion in any depth. A comparison of Aichinger and Benjamin is useful, though, because of their shared attention to memory’s estranging effects. For Benjamin, the remembered moment is “schrackenlos,” and it can be neither self-identical nor completely distinct from other moments, just as Aichinger’s image in “Kleist, Moos, Fasane” is fractured and the morning inseparable from the afternoon. In the place of identity and difference, another relation emerges—a specific form of similarity that Benjamin, at first, defines negatively:

Nicht da, wo [Proust] [die Ähnlichkeit] in den Werken, Physiognomien oder Redeweisen, immer bestürzend, unvermutet aufdeckt, läßt sie die wahren Zeichen ihrer Herrschaft erkennen. Die Ähnlichkeit des Einen mit dem Andern, mit der wir rechnen, die im Wachen uns beschäftigt, umspielt nur die tiefere der Traumwelt, in der was vorgeht, nie identisch, sondern ähnlich: sich selber undurchschaubar ähnlich, auftaucht. (313–14)⁴

To clarify what he means by this “deeper” similarity of the dream world, Benjamin discusses one “Wahrzeichen dieser Welt” that children know: the “Strumpf, der die Struktur der Traumwelt hat, wenn er im Wäschekasten, eingerollt, ‘Tasche’ und ‘Mitgebrachtes’ zugleich ist” (314). The sock is at once container and contents before being transformed, in a children’s game, into something else. Benjamin describes “wie sie selbst sich nicht ersättigen können, dies beides: Tasche und was darin liegt, mit *einem* Griff in etwas Drittes zu verwandeln: in den Strumpf” (314). Children cannot get enough of this movement not because it reveals something essential—that this is a *sock*—but because it indicates a transformability that allows for the game to be repeated and because it reveals how each of the sock’s three aspects is run through with a relation to its own disappearance in this game that reveals the sock to be similar to, but not identical with itself.⁵ It is always potentially “bag,” “present,” and “stocking” and never just a sock and its illusory appearances. The sock game appears in Benjamin’s text as the vehicle in a simile whose tenor is as follows:

... so war Proust unersättlich, die Attrappe, das Ich, mit einem Griff zu entleeren, um immer wieder jenes Dritte: das Bild, das seine Neugier, nein, sein Heimweh stillte, einzubringen. Zerfetzt von Heimweh lag er auf dem Bett, Heimweh nach der im Stand der Ähnlichkeit entstellten Welt, in der das wahre surrealistische Gesicht des Daseins zum Durchbruch kommt. Ihr gehört an, was bei Proust geschieht, und wie behutsam und vornehm es auftaucht. Nämlich nie isoliert pathetisch und visionär, sondern angekündigt und vielfach gestützt eine gebrechliche kostbare Wirklichkeit tragend: das Bild. (314)

Just as children cannot stop transforming the bag and its contents into a sock, so too Proust was insatiable in his emptying of the self that allows the image to emerge. This process is initiated by Proust but taken over by something else, and this surrender belongs to the general movement toward the dream world, in which everything is "opaquely similar to itself" and in which the self plays a role without having a final say.

Benjamin's account of Proust's image is useful for understanding Aichinger's emphasis on the fragmented images of childhood memories. Another good example of this is the memory of the kitchen in the first section of "Kleist, Moos, Fasane": "Ich erinnere mich der Küche meiner Großmutter. Sie war schmal und hell und lief quer auf die Bahnlinie zu. An ihren guten Tagen setzte sie sich auch darüber hinaus fort, in den stillen östlichen Himmel hinein. An ihren schlechten Tagen zog sie sich in sich selbst zurück" (11). The text opens with these sentences that seem to describe the kitchen as a place but then soon turn to presenting it as "continuing" beyond itself and "withdrawing into itself." Even the second sentence, which seems closer to description, only sketches out one of the possible directions of the kitchen's extension. That it is "narrow" seems, in this context, to have more to do with a lengthening that follows the kitchen's dissolution into movements than with an attribute that would determine the kitchen's dimensions. This opening paragraph signals that the text that will follow will not primarily be concerned with representing a place, because the kitchen already appears here as a series of movements whose directions and effects "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" will attempt to determine. The next sentences shift emphasis to the kitchen's power:

Sie war überhaupt eine unverheiratete Küche, etwas wie eine wunderbare Jungfer, der die Seligpreisungen der Bibel galten. Abgeblättert und still, aber nicht zu schlagen. (11)

In these final sentences of the first paragraph, the kitchen is modified by the metaphorical attribute "unmarried" and by the simile "like a miraculous spinster."⁶ The tertium comparationis that permits this insistent, almost pleonastic personification is the ability to expand and retract that nothing restricts: the kitchen is free just as a spinster has a certain freedom. The paratactic final phrases of this paragraph emphasize the kitchen's ability:

“Barren and silent, but unbeatable,” we read, and this can apply equally to the kitchen and the spinster. The kitchen, in the first paragraph of “Kleist, Moos, Fasane,” is modest, motile, and powerful. The continuation of the text reinforces the kitchen’s extension beyond itself: “Die Küche kam allen Plänen entgegen, ihr Licht schmeichelte ihnen und ließ sie wachsen” (11). It “accommodates” all kinds of plans, it literally “comes to meet them,” moving once again. Memory focuses here not on what the kitchen was, but on what it allowed to grow, and this potentialization appears in terms of movement. The nearby railroad, too, was a source of movement in the kitchen: a passing train’s smoke penetrates inside and “fills one’s eyes,” and the train’s force “moved everything,” including everything in the apartment. Childhood plans and the railroad are so tightly intertwined because of their common relation to spaces beyond the kitchen, and, later in the paragraph, the topographical proximity of the kitchen to the railroad is expanded to include other kinds of intimacy:

Auf ähnliche Weise wie die Küche war [die Bahn] mächtig und armselig, und wenn man an manchen Tagen die Teller und Gläser in den Schränken schüttern und klirren hörte, so hätte man meinen können, ein altes Liebespaar unterhielt sich gelassen miteinander. (12)

The similarity that joins the kitchen and the railroad is based on their shared power and wretchedness, a pair of attributes that intensifies the earlier “barren and silent, but unbeatable.” The comparison with the train emphasizes the kitchen’s tie to movement as well as how the kitchen is simultaneously impoverished and powerful, reduced as a place but making possible plans and movement beyond itself.

The last paragraph of the section dealing with the kitchen presents the view from the kitchen windows. If “one” looked to the left, one saw this: “Dort war alles grün und rund, die Rätsel hell dazwischen, erleuchtete Fenster am frühen Abend.” To the right, “one” saw two women walking on the “Kleiststeg über die Bahnlinie”: “. . . die Frau, die langsam seine Treppen hinaufstieg, wenn die Besuchstunde im Krankenhaus zu Ende war, kam aus den Geheimnissen und ging in sie zurück wie die Kinderschwester mit dem kleinen weißen Wagen, die jenseits der Kreuzung auftauchte, sich umsah und wieder im Westen verschwand” (12–13). These two women appear only to disappear, and the centrality of disappearing and of “mysteries” forecloses the possibility of a reading that would pay attention only to what appears. The kitchen itself is threatened with dissolution that only children are able to fend off: “Die Kräfte der Kindheit hielten die Welt zusammen. Und die Küche meiner Großmutter lag mitten darinnen” (13).

Forces act on other forces and not on things or places, and the forces of childhood, as reactivated here, aim to present the specific nature of the apartment’s power and its movements. “Kleist, Moos, Fasane” recalls the kitchen of

Aichinger's grandmother, but also how that kitchen extended beyond itself into the surrounding cityscape, how it was woven into plans, into the railroad, and into the appearances and disappearances that it made visible. This is why the final sentence of this section of "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" should come as no surprise: "Wie man sich des Lichts der Träume auch am Tage noch erinnert, erinnere ich mich ihres Lichts heute, wenn es mir als ein Streifen Sonne auf einem fremden Meer erscheint" (13). The kitchen's projection into other spaces exceeds the remembered time into "today," and its recollection throughout the text as extended beyond itself receives a logical conclusion here in the distance that separates the kitchen and the sea and in the power of memory that brings them together. The image of the kitchen is interwoven into the city and lives that surround it and that pass through it, and, like Benjamin's description of the image of memory, it appears in Aichinger's text because of its status as the point of intersection of these intimate relations among movements and forces. The kitchen surfaces in Aichinger's memory "bearing a fragile reality."

For Benjamin, the appearance of the image is also the appearance of the moment's "limitlessness" and thus of something that cannot be captured in an image. In writing, moments of memory appear in a certain way: they emerge "nicht mehr einzeln, als Bilder, sondern bildlos und ungeformt, unbestimmt und gewichtig von einem Ganzen so uns Kunde geben wie dem Fischer die Schwere des Netzes von seinem Fang" (323). The image always appears with what is imageless, which brings "tidings" of "the world distorted in the state of resemblance." Imagelessness appears in Aichinger's texts in her broken images that mark the non-coincidences that necessarily cannot be given an image (cf. Kastberger 75).

There are more signs in Aichinger's text of memory's estranging force. The terms "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" are coordinates in three dimensions by which memory plots out a region and locates its object. Readers of Aichinger report that these are the names of streets in the third district of Vienna, where Aichinger's grandmother lived, and, in fact, the streets are all named in the text, which seems to situate "Kleist, Moos, Fasane" solidly in Vienna and her lived experience of this neighborhood and her grandmother's apartment. This grounding in the cityscape leads even Aichinger's most careful critics to treat her text as pure autobiography and to call it "wohl der persönlichste Text Aichingers" (Lorenz 128–29). However, we have seen how the text is attentive to those aspects of experience that escape the self: disappearances, transformations, untimelinesses, and mysteries whose strangeness the narrator attempts to maintain and not dispel. The very title registers the distance from autobiography: one of the three coordinates, the Moosgasse, does not exist, at least not anywhere near Aichinger's grandmother's apartment. The neighborhood does, however, have a Mohsgasse: "In meinen Erinnerungen 'Kleist, Moos, Fasane' ist die Mohsgasse wie das Moos im Wald geschrieben," Aichinger writes in a 2003 newspaper article. Forty-four years after the first

publication of “Kleist, Moos, Fasane,” Aichinger points out the obvious difference between the common noun “Moos” and the proper name “Mohs.” A modest, purely graphemic shift dislocates the scene and registers the text’s distance from autobiography, just as the use of the passive voice in Aichinger’s 2003 text marks the author’s distance from the writing “I”: “Mohsgasse *is written* like the moss in the forest.”

In the opening sentences of the three main sections of “Kleist, Moos, Fasane” and throughout the text, Aichinger uses a relatively uncommon construction in which “ich erinnere mich” is followed by the genitive, which Eleonore Frey comments on:

Der Genetiv ... stellt das Erinnernte nicht als ein Abgeschlossenes dem sich erinnernden Ich gegenüber, sondern er eröffnet fast unmerklich dem Ich den Zugang zu dem, was es, sich selber entgrenzend, erinnert.” (39)

Her grandmother’s kitchen, the other remembered sites, and the remembering “I” are “de-limited,” opened up to each other’s movement as well as to the “one” that often takes the place of the “I,” and this process affects memories and those who remember by effecting a general loss of contour and definition, which helps to explain Aichinger’s topographical aphorism from 1954: “Indem ich mich ganz hineinbegebe in Ort und Stunde, werde ich herausgehoben, werde ich als Kreuzungspunkt ich selbst” (*Kleist* 63).⁷ By becoming a “point of intersection,” she is fulfilling the task that she envisions in her essay on “die Sicht der Entfremdung,” in which she writes “daß der Columbus von heute nicht die fremde Welt bekannt machen muß, sondern die allzu bekannte fremd” (*Kurzschlüsse* 54). In her essay on Aichinger, Frey recognizes this particular force of memory in the Austrian writer’s texts, in which it is “[a]ls ob man nicht zurück, sondern vorwärts gehe, in ein Unbekanntes” (40).

This presentation of memory as estranging and as creating a relation to the unknown in Aichinger’s texts contrasts sharply with some aspects of recent theories that present memory in terms of identification. In the large body of work on memory, Marianne Hirsch’s work stands out because of its resistance to this trend, and yet often she too can fall under the sway of such identitarian theories of memory. She remarks on the importance of thinking about difference and distance when writing about memory and specifically in the encounter with photographs: “The break between then and now, between the one who lived it and the one who did not, remains insurmountable” (“Projected” 9, cf. “Surviving” 11). But in interpretations of specific texts, her readings insist on bridging the “break” by means of identification.⁸ This is how she discusses the encounter with photographs of children, which she characterizes in terms of a fusional identification: “We ourselves, as spectators looking at the child victim, become witnesses, child witnesses, in our own right.... The adult viewer sees the child through the eyes of his or her own child self” (“Projected” 14–15). “Holocaust photographs,” she writes, “certainly have the capacity to

retain their radical otherness," but the next sentence strips this capacity away: "In an image like 'Past Lives,' however, so dependent on projection, these distances seem to disappear" ("Projected" 10). Hirsch's recent work has emphasized the ways in which memory is not a synonym for identity. In the foreword to a special issue of *Signs* on gender and memory, Hirsch and Valerie Smith insist on the ways in which "what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender," and they remind us that "feminist studies and memory studies both presuppose that the present is defined by a past that is constructed and contested" (6, 12). The gap separating Hirsch's theoretical statements and some of her individual readings reveals how easily memory's breaks and the signs of its contested nature can be smoothed over and how calls for the recognition of difference can be reconciled with total identification, but Hirsch's own work reminds us how crucial it is to emphasize the contested nature of memory and the ways in which it calls identity and identification into question.

This reminder is especially important when considering a recent theory of memory that has been very influential, especially in German Studies: Aleida and Jan Assmann's "cultural memory," which they define as a "kollektiv geteiltes Wissen, dessen Träger immer das einzelne Bewußtsein ist" ("Schrift" 27). The wide range of the Assmanns' texts and their use by other critics reveal the fruitfulness of their theories, but there have been few critical engagements with the main concepts of their work. A notable exception is Friederike Eigler's 2005 book *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationsromanen seit der Wende*, which examines the Assmanns' notion of cultural memory and identifies some problems in "der zugrunde liegende Begriff einer pluralistischen, aber letztlich homogenen Gesellschaft" (42).⁹ For Eigler, the Assmanns do not take sufficient account of problems in the transmission of memories: "Der Verlauf der deutschen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts hat ... zu Mechanismen geführt, die die Weitergabe von Erinnerungen blockieren, behindern oder verformen," she writes, and texts such as Aichinger's bear witness to such blockages (42). Of course, the Assmanns do not imagine that cultural memory is free of difference: they recognize the importance of exclusion in the formation of cultural memory (Jan Assmann, "Collective" 130); they propose a multiplicity of overlapping "Gruppenidentitäten und Gruppengedächtnisse" ("Schrift" 28) and a polyvocality in every cultural memory (Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume* 46); and Aleida Assmann insists in the conclusion to a 2006 article, "We should not think of [social memory] as static or homogenous" (199). But as Eigler points out, these aspects of their work seem to be secondary with respect to the role played in their theory by a common body of knowledge and a "horizon of understanding" that is shared and whose establishment is not sufficiently problematized (47).

Aleida Assmann writes in her 1999 book *Erinnerungsräume* that cultural

memory cannot be accounted for in a “unified theory,” but their large body of work on cultural memory does have a few constant traits (16). One of them is the link between cultural memory and identity, which is spelled out in one of their definitions of cultural memory that opens with an analogy of animal species and human culture:

Während das Tierreich sich in eine unendliche Fülle wohlunterschiedener Arten gliedert, sind die Menschen in biologischer Hinsicht alle gleich. Hier sind es kulturelle Formen, die zu einer “Pseudo-Speziation,” zur Differenzierung von “Arten” auf einer anderen Ebene führen. Jeder Mensch ist geprägt durch seine Zugehörigkeit zu einer solchen kulturell determinierten Pseudo-Spezies, nämlich einer Kultur. Diese Prägung ist aber nicht biologisch vererbbar. Während im Tierreich genetische Programme die Arterhaltung sichern, müssen die Menschen, mit Nietzsche zu reden, eigens auf ein “Mittel” sinnen, um “gleichartige dauernde Wesen durch lange Geschlechter zu erzielen.” Denn um “Arterhaltung” geht es auch hier. (“Schrift” 28)

At first, the Assmanns use “species preservation” only as an analogy, but in the definition’s continuation it becomes a crucial element:

Jeder menschliche Verband, der ein Bewußtsein seiner Zusammengehörigkeit entwickelt und dieses Bewußtsein in den spezifischen symbolischen Formen seiner Kultur zugleich zum Ausdruck bringt und stabilisiert, strebt nach Reproduktion dieser gemeinsamen Eigenart bzw. soziokulturellen Identität. Die Identität der Gruppe, ihre Herkunft und Geschichte, ihre Stellung im Kosmos, ihre Rechte und Pflichten, bildet das Thema ihrer heiligsten Überlieferungen und diese wiederum ihren heiligsten Besitz, auf den sie ihr Bewußtsein von Einheit und Eigenart stützt und durch dessen Pflege und Weitergabe sie sich im Sinne kultureller Arterhaltung reproduziert. Für dieses Selbstbild-bezogene Wissen, das im spezifischen Interaktionsrahmen einer Gesellschaft Handeln und Erleben steuert und von Generation zu Generation zur erneuten Aneignung, Einübung und Einweisung ansteht, schlagen wir den Begriff des kulturellen Gedächtnisses vor. (28)¹⁰

Their definition relies on the notion of species preservation, which was discredited, first by its use in National Socialism and then by work in genetics in the 1970s. According to current scientific consensus, the individual organism strives to preserve itself, and a species does not.¹¹ The use of “species preservation” after 1945 can be attributed at least in part to the work of Konrad Lorenz, who worked on the concept in the 1930s and throughout the National Socialist era (see Föger and Taschwer). Ute Deichmann shows how it belonged to his politicized work that called for, in Lorenz’s words, “a deliberate, scientifically underpinned race policy” that would allow for the “elimination” of members of a people “who have become asocial because of defects” and of “elements who have fallen out of their relationship to the whole” (193). “In this context, he used the terms ‘species,’ ‘race,’ and ‘Volk’ as synonymous,” Deichmann writes (187–88). Despite the function of the concept of species preservation in

National Socialist “racial” policies and despite its scientific obsolescence, the concept lived on. In 1992, Deichmann could still write this of Lorenz’s work:

His thesis of the ‘species-preserving purposefulness’ (*arterhaltende Zweckmäßigkeit*) of instinctive actions, which is not tenable according to newer insights of behavioral biology, is also still found in many German schoolbooks and textbooks on biology ...

and, one can add, in a German theory of cultural memory that, in a grotesque form of irony, has served as a major theoretical model for how many in German Studies think about the murder of European Jewry (182). The Assmanns’ metaphorical use of a discredited notion that played an important role in National Socialist “race” politics is especially surprising because of Jan Assmann’s expressed belief that their model of cultural memory has its roots in Warburg’s and Halbwachs’ “decisive dismissal of numerous turn-of-the-century attempts to conceive collective memory in biological terms as an inheritable or ‘racial memory’” (“Collective” 125).¹² Their reliance on the metaphor of species preservation calls for a reevaluation of the notion of identity at the heart of their definition of cultural memory, and it shows how easily calls for the recognition of difference can coexist with troubling notions of identity.

The Assmanns’ use of species preservation is not an individual shortcoming but belongs to a general tendency in academic discourse to link memory and identity; “the two words are typically yoked together, to mention the one is to mention the other” (Klein 143–44). Philip Gleason has shown how the current usage of “identity” emerged in American academic parlance from the work of Erik Erikson and others on “national characters” (Gleason 925–26). Just as “Identität” is a synonym for “Eigenart” in the Assmanns’ work, “identity” was “used alternatively for ‘character’ in an era when national-character studies were extremely popular,” and the term went on to exceed that usage and to outlive that branch of inquiry in the social sciences (Gleason 926). Theories linking memory and identity rarely reflect on this history of their second term, perhaps “because memory studies presuppose a rarely acknowledged but not particularly surprising desire for cultural homogeneity, consistency, and predictability,” and the apparent self-evidence of identity fulfills this desire well (Kansteiner 133).

I would like to return briefly to the Assmanns’ definition of cultural memory and discuss their use of Nietzsche as a support for their linkage of memory and species preservation. This use is surprising, because forty years of Nietzsche scholarship have worked to show how his philosophy cannot be reduced to a support for theories of national, cultural, or racial identity. Nietzsche continues to play an important role in the Assmanns’ equation of memory and identity—to the point that Aleida Assmann calls him the “Patron identitätsstiftender Erinnerung” (*Erinnerungsräume* 29, see also 133). The Assmanns’

definition implies that Nietzsche writes that “humans must find means that ensure ‘gleichartige dauernde Wesen durch lange Geschlechter.’” This is the full phrase in Nietzsche: “Die ehemaligen Mittel, *gleichartige* dauernde Wesen durch lange Geschlechter zu erzielen: unveräußerlicher Grundbesitz, Verehrung der Älteren (Ursprung des Götter- und *Heroenglaubens* als der Ahnherren)” (68, Nietzsche’s emphasis).¹³ Contrary to the Assmanns’ citation, the passage does not describe the necessity of preservation; instead, Nietzsche writes, there once *were* means to do this. Nietzsche’s fragment continues: “Jetzt gehört die *Zersplitterung des Grundbesitzes* in die entgegengesetzte Tendenz: eine *Zeitung* (an Stelle der täglichen *Gebete*) Eisenbahn Telegraph. Centralisation einer ungeheuren Menge verschiedener Interessen in Einer Seele: die *dazu* sehr stark und verwandlungsfähig sein muß” (69, Nietzsche’s emphasis). The earlier tendency towards “Gleichartigkeit” has been replaced by a “Zersplitterung” and multiplicity of interests in a single, transformable “soul.” In addition to the Assmanns’ rephrasing of Nietzsche’s words as an imperative, the historical dimension (“the *former* means... *Now*...”) and the emphasis on multiplicity are missing from their discussion of the citation.

The Assmanns ignore the immediate context of the fragment from which they cite, and they choose not to take account of the larger context of the collection of fragments and the contemporaneous Nietzsche text that the fragments are closest to. Indeed, “Erhaltung” (although, in this collection of fragments, never “Arterhaltung”) does play an important role in these larger Nietzschean contexts, but mostly as a problem, as a tendency to be overcome. The Nietzsche fragment comes from a collection of notes written between spring and fall of 1884, a period that marked a break between the composition of the third and fourth books of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Nietzsche criticizes humanity’s attempt to preserve itself and presents the possibility and desirability of humanity’s transformation (Colli 713). His philosophy emphasizes this potential for transformation and differentiation, and isolated citations about “Erhaltung” obscure the insistence on overcoming that characterizes his work.

But Nietzsche’s texts are rarely univocal, as the beginning of the fragment that follows the one cited by the Assmanns shows: “Es bedarf einer Lehre, stark genug, um züchtend zu wirken: stärkend für die Starken, lähmend und zerbrechend für die Weltmüden. Die Vernichtung der verfallenden Rassen. Verfall Europa’s. Die Vernichtung der Sclavenhaften Werthschätzungen” (69). Nietzsche’s texts often express a desire to overcome identity, and they also contain passages like this that allowed his philosophy to be used for the elaboration of National Socialist thought. Drawing on Nietzsche to discuss race or species requires an engagement with his texts’ “double or triple registers” (Ronell 214), but in the Assmanns’ writings that cite their “patron saint,” they analyze neither Nietzsche’s critique of the tendency to maintain identity nor his affinities with racialized theories of identity.

If memory is only a support for identity, then its “creative, often subver-

sive, potential will no longer be recognized as a phenomenon, and as a concept memory may become almost indistinguishable from either identity or culture," the cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian writes in an implicit critique of Jan Assmann, and it is clear how the Assmanns' notion of cultural memory would not be able to take account of the potential of texts on memory by Aichinger and others (51).¹⁴ But not all recent concepts of memory depend so much on notions of identity and identification. Taking her cue from Walter Benjamin and Ingeborg Bachmann, Sigrid Weigel writes about the deforming and destructive potential of a "different language" of the body and the unconscious, and this concept of cultural memory allows her to interpret memory's political aspects in new ways (*Bilder* 14). This dedication to the elaboration of forms of difference can be found in many of Weigel's recent readings of postwar literature but also in her earlier work, including a 1987 essay on Ilse Aichinger, in which she argues that Aichinger's texts reveal "the contradictions and ambivalences inherent in every event" (35). Weigel's theoretical texts are helpful for thinking about how Aichinger's texts work to dislocate concepts of memory that insist on identity and that would argue that Aichinger's writing captures the past, reconstructs historical events, or allows for the reliving of the past in a pure present.¹⁵ There could be no more inaccurate reading of Aichinger, especially when one considers that, among the memories that Aichinger treats, there is the sight of her grandmother being loaded onto a truck, before a content group of Viennese onlookers, to be sent to her death near Minsk ("Wissen" 23; *Film* 59; and *Esser* 49). This memory remains a point of orientation for Aichinger, but it would be wrong to say that Aichinger writes to relive or memorialize this moment. A more accurate account would show how the insistent power of this moment and others like it forces Aichinger to write, and her texts can be read as the articulation of an understanding of temporality that could account for memory's persistence.

A reading of Aichinger's texts shows how memories do not always form identities, and a comparison with some theories of memory reveals that they do not sufficiently reflect on its alienating and productive force or on the provenance and implications of their concepts of identity. Instead of linking memory and identity, we have seen how memory appears in Aichinger's texts as an alienating relation to the unknown. Entering into the unknown, for her, means entering into what is most known, the quotidian experience of walking in 1959 (and in 2006) through the city in which she grew up as a "half-breed." She writes in an aphorism that it is "nicht verständlich, daß die Orte, an denen man von der Angst gepackt war, für andere überhaupt noch passierbar sind," but there can be no other way to understand Aichinger's life than as the constant incomprehensible confrontation with sites where she was seized with fear (*Kleist* 84, cf. *Film* 55). Her memory and her terror persist, as Elfriede Jelinek remarks in a short text written on the occasion of Aichinger's seventy-fifth birthday:

Ilse hat ihren Blick, ihre Blickübung heute, wie jeden Tag, also ausgeführt, auf die Brücke über den Donaukanal, die sie im Traum gesehen hat. Ihre Großmutter auf der Ladefläche eines Lastwagens, der jeden Tag aufs neue erscheint und durch Ilse hindurchfährt. . . . Mutlosigkeit kennt Ilse nicht, aber das Entsetzen vor dieser sichtbaren Oberfläche, die einmal da ist und jetzt fehlt, aber in diesem Fehlen immer noch da ist und jede Nacht erneut auf sie zukommt. Das ist ja überhaupt der Schrecken hier: Daß der Schrecken jetzt eben fehlt, aber trotzdem immer noch da ist, nur: wer sieht ihn noch? Ilse.

The unknown regions of memory coincide with the most familiar territory, and the surface that lacks the earlier terror continues to contain it nonetheless. Aichinger's texts return again and again to this coincidence and its concomitant understanding of time. The juxtaposition of the unthinkable with the everyday appears in Aichinger's texts as a given and as a constantly renewed task, as the activity of "Versuchen, in diesen tödlichen Augenblicken zu Hause zu sein" (Kleist 81). The indeterminacy of "these fatal moments" is instructive; the attempt to be at home in all deadly moments is also the attempt to be at home in every moment as deadly.

This relation to fatal moments and her remarks cited earlier on the relation to the dead can be understood as the motivation behind Aichinger's statements about her "Sucht, einfach wegzubleiben" and her wish that she had never been born (Kleist 46). These remarks are not the cryptic utterances of a reclusive writer but belong to the larger context of Aichinger's writings about memory. (And Aichinger has been anything but reclusive.) Her responses to a questionnaire in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* are the most laconic indications of this attitude: "Was ist für Sie das größte Unglück? Die Genesis. . . . Wer oder was hätten Sie sein mögen? Niemand und nichts" ("Fragebogen" 25). These terse declarations of allegiance to nonexistence correspond to her texts' focus on the cracks in the image of memory. Among the consequences of this focus is a conception of memory as estranging, as containing a relation to those events and forces that, as Eigler writes, "blockieren, behindern oder verformen" memories and that prevent memory from being conceived of in terms of identity alone.

Notes

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² Its publication in a West German periodical points to the non-reception in Austria of Austrian literature dealing with the National Socialist era (Zeyringer 99, 115).

³ See Frey's similar remarks on childhood in Aichinger (36–37, 42–43).

⁴ On Benjamin's notion of similarity, see also Benjamin 204–13; and Hamacher 147–75; Jacobs 39–58; and Nägele 31–50.

⁵ On this "goal-less desire to repeat the game," see Jacobs 44.

⁶ As Schafroth notes, personification, even of words and language itself, is common in all genres of Aichinger's writing.

⁷ On the notion of borders and their loss in Aichinger, see Fliedl.

⁸ As a reader of Hirsch writes, "theories of postmemory can lose sight of the specificity of acts of post-Holocaust remembrance and of the identities formed through these acts" (Crownshaw 215).

⁹ Another exception is Jureit.

¹⁰ Similar terms appear in a 2000 text: "Das kulturelle Gedächtnis verbreitet und reproduziert unter den Mitgliedern einer Gruppe zugleich mit einer bestimmten Weltansicht ein Bewußtsein von Einheit, Eigenart und Zusammengehörigkeit" (Jan Assmann, *Religion* 53).

¹¹ I would like to thank Marc Bekoff for his confirmation of this.

¹² For an opposing viewpoint on Halbwachs, see Klein (135).

¹³ The passages are identical in the Schlechta edition that the Assmanns cite.

¹⁴ Fabian extends his critique of Assmann as "seek[ing] to give coherence to practices of memory by taking recourse to an anthropological concept of culture" (51).

¹⁵ Rüdiger Görner claims that memory's unattainable goal for Aichinger is the "vollständige Rekonstruktion des Vergangenen" (225).

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