
Winter Answers in the Poetry of Ilse Aichinger

Amanda Ritchie

A fine distinction between silence and muteness has occupied the interest of Ilse Aichinger scholars since she began publishing in 1948. The reception of Aichinger's first work, a novel entitled *Die größere Hoffnung*, already included the observation that her language was sparse and even abstruse. Much of the response to Aichinger's first novel did not address its themes, but centered rather on the poet's use of language, especially her ability to accomplish so much with so few words. Discussions about silence and muteness continued with the subsequent publication of other prose works, especially Aichinger's dialogues, since almost all of them display the peculiar paucity of verbiage that is an identifying characteristic of her work. But even though most of the critical observations about silence and muteness have been confined to the prose works, the difference between the two probably is more important in the poet's lyric work, since one can tell just by looking at the page exactly how few words actually appear. Seldom in even the longest of poems does the number of words exceed 100. And occasionally, an extraordinarily powerful effect is achieved with as few as 25 words, as in the case of "Mein Vater," one of the best known of the poems that appear in the collection called *Verschenkter Rat* (1978, 1991). It could be argued that the appearance of just a few words in short lines on the page is the only way to tell Aichinger's poetry from her prose, since in none of the poems do traditional hallmarks of poetry, such as rhyme or meter, play a part. Neither are other poetic devices, such as alliteration, refrain, onomatopoeia, and assonance to be observed in any large measure, further blurring the distinction between that which is traditionally called poetry and very short prose. Aichinger has underscored the fuzziness of the line between poetry and prose by naming some of the short stories in the 1976 *Schlechte Wörter* collection "prose poems" (Prosagedichte).

The brevity of Aichinger's poems not only carries a strong visual effect on the printed page, but also calls attention to the fact that every word has more than one purpose, and that it is the task of the individual reader to sort out and come to terms with each image on more than one level of meaning. To make that job more strenuous, many of the recurring images in the poems seem hard to decode, a particular problem with Aichinger's poetry that will be discussed in detail below. Finally, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that Aichinger's work does not fall into any of the categories most common in the post-war literature of German-speaking authors. There is neither reference to personal guilt about the war, so evident in the works of Günter Grass, among others, nor is there much evidence of the guilt expressed by German and Austrian intellectuals that they survived the horror while so many others did not. It could be argued that the guilt felt by German-speaking survivors of the war is apparent in the poems by way of reference to the grandmother figure, since Aichinger's grandmother perished in the Holocaust, but these references occur only a few times in the poems which appear in *Verschenkter Rat*. There is neither evidence of themes that reflect the desire to return home (Heimkehr) in Aichinger's poems, nor is there a sense of a zero point theory (Nullpunkttheorie). She does not appear to favor any particular political system, and she has little or nothing to offer about the politics of the day in Austria, Germany, or elsewhere. The poems do not seem to espouse any particular world view or even to hold any particular advice for the reader. In fact, the only characteristic of Aichinger's poetry that clearly *does* identify it as post-war writing is the sparseness and starkness of her language. Like many post-war authors, she seems to avoid saying much for fear that saying anything at all could trivialize the enormity of the horror of World War II.

The tendency toward silence was already evident in Austrian and German literature before the turn of the century. Many critics, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, attributed the silence to misgivings about the future in *fin de siècle* Europe and the increasing power of machines and automation in German-speaking society. Gadamer wrote: "In unserer zunehmend von anonymen Apparaturen beherrschten Gesellschaft, in der das Wort nicht mehr unmittelbare Kommunikation stiftet, erhebt sich die Frage, welche Macht und welche Möglichkeiten noch die Kunst des Wortes, die Dichtung, haben kann" (123). The

situation became much more extreme in post-war Germany, mostly because of the difficulty of trying to come to grips with the horror of National Socialism and Germany's crimes against humanity. To make matters even worse, it was unclear whom to trust, or whether to trust anyone at all, even oneself. Gadamer wrote that it was and still is this situation which makes it seem as though German-speaking writers have become mute: "[Die Dichter] sind notwendig leise geworden. Wie diskrete Mitteilungen leise gesagt werden, damit kein Unberufener sie hört, so ist auch das Sprechen des Dichters geworden. Er teilt dem etwas mit, der dafür das Ohr hat und sich ihm zuneigt. Er flüstert ihm gleichsam etwas ins Ohr, und der Leser, der ganz Ohr ist, nickt schlieÙlich. Er hat verstanden" (135).

Aichinger is one of the best examples of the poet who whispers to us in near-silence. The poet herself has on more than one occasion expressed an opinion on the important difference between silence and muteness in her work. In a conversation with Luzia Stettler in 1984, for example, she said, "Es gibt die Stummheit, und es gibt das Schweigen. Und die Stummheit immer wieder in das Schweigen zu übersetzen, das ist die Aufgabe des Schreibens" (Moser 36). Clearly, Aichinger sees a purpose to writing in such a way as to infuse silence with meaning and to differentiate it from muteness. She expressed herself even more exactly on the topic in a discussion with Manuel Esser in 1986: "Das Schweigen gehört für mich zum Wichtigsten auf der Welt, weil es nicht etwas Leeres, sondern etwas Erfülltes ist. Es hängt eng mit dem Tod zusammen, mit einem erfüllten Tod. Es hat auch mit dem Schreiben sehr viel zu tun. Jeder Satz, den man schreibt, muß durch ungeheuer viel ungeschriebene Sätze gedeckt sein, weil er sonst gar nicht dasteht" (Moser 50). Silence is fulfilling and an end in itself, like a peaceful death. And when the poet writes, it is with the knowledge that most of what is to be said must remain unwritten in order to lead the reader away from muteness and toward meaningful silence. In short, Aichinger's silence is the silence of thoughtful contemplation, not the muteness of despair.

In light of this important feature of her work, it seems wisest to accept most of Aichinger's poems as meditations and to ascribe their brevity to silence and solitude, two readily recognizable hallmarks of a contemplative individual. Here, it is vital to recognize that the term meditation carries none of the religious or mystical connotations found

in the popular press or in discussions of New Age philosophy. In this context, meditation means to muse over, contemplate, or reflect upon; to consider, study, or ponder. Aichinger's poems are meant to be meditations for individual study and perhaps also for individual edification. They generally are not to be understood as a call to action or as descriptions of what is or what should be, but rather are challenges to the individual reader to ponder the facts and come to terms within him- or herself with what has happened in this century and what is possible when whole societies act without the restraint that is called forth by the act of contemplative meditation. They are expressions of the silence that accompanies thoughtfulness, not a retreat into the silence of muteness. The poems are best understood as the impulse to meditate; they are meant as a focal point from which to begin.

Certain critics, such as Dagmar C. G. Lorenz, have suggested that Aichinger's silence and the difficulty of her imagery make it imperative that the reader be well acquainted with the history of National Socialism, either personally or professionally. Lorenz wrote that Aichinger's own horrifying experience during the war can be seen as the impulse (Anstoß) for her particular world view, and she added that it would be extremely difficult to approach her poems without a thorough understanding of life in Austria during the German occupation (44). The reader must indeed have some idea of what happened during the war in order to approach Aichinger's poetry fruitfully, as Lorenz has suggested. The poet's recurring themes of the role of the other, the danger of mass action without individual contemplation, the fear of persecution, and a general mistrust of society obviously are in response to World War II and especially to the Holocaust. It also is useful to have some understanding of Aichinger's personal history, especially that her mother was Jewish and her father was not, a situation that allowed Aichinger as a half-Jew to save her mother during the transportation of the Jews to death camps, but did not allow her to save her grandmother, who was deported in 1942.

In addition to her comments about the importance of historical context, Lorenz also suggested that some of the rhetorical figures in Aichinger's work are so dark that they become surrealistic and perhaps even hallucinatory (44). She cited the work of H. H. Price, who in his work *Apparitions* suggested that "hallucinations do occur, not only in mental diseases, or under the influence of drugs, but also occa-

sionally in normal people. . . . We know from other evidence that it is possible to see or hear 'something' that is not really there" (8). Lorenz incorporated the possibility of hallucination in her interesting interpretation of "Winter, gemalt" (47), one of the most difficult poems in *Verschenkter Rat*:

Winter, gemalt

- Und in den weißen Röcken
im Schnee die Österreicher.
Laß uns aufschauen
und ihre Spuren
5 im Finkenschlag finden,
in den Gebirgsspitzen.
Grün dämmt schon
die Ölbergfarbe
von den Wänden,
10 die wispernden Scheunendächer.
So leicht wie heute
wechseln die Schatten nie mehr.

Lorenz understood this poem to be an example of the "Übergang aus der einen in die andere Realität. . . . Zunächst blickt der Sprecher auf eine Schneelandschaft, der sich während der Kontemplation eine andere Szene überlagert" (46). This observation, though fascinating in itself, actually is more descriptive of Aichinger's prose than her poetry and might be a good way to sum up and come to terms with the frequent comparisons that are made between her prose work and Kafka's, because it provides a real insight into the dreamlike, surrealistic landscape and otherworldliness that are so obvious in the works of both authors. In the poetry, however, and especially in "Winter, gemalt," the crossing over into another reality described by Lorenz does not take into account the central role of winter, as will be discussed in some detail below. Lorenz' assertion that the images may represent the transition to another type of reality is a real step toward the recognition that Aichinger's more common metaphors are not always opaque, but it does not go far enough. In Aichinger's poetry, at least, the most common rhetorical images, such as winter, are not representative of other realities. In fact, it can be argued that many of the images that occur again and again in Aichinger's poetry are clearly

understandable and able to be decoded in virtually every context.

As early as 1969, J. C. Alldridge had identified three main groups of metaphors in Aichinger's work. He called them images and delineated them as follows: (1) the color green, (2) the frequent use of lakes, water, ships or boats, and students of marine engineering, and (3) the frequent appearance of fairy tale figures such as dwarfs, milkmaids, and shepherds (26). These are the images that recur frequently in the short prose works and dialogues by Aichinger, but a similar list of metaphors could be written for the poems in *Verschenkter Rat*. That list would include grass, woods, water, mountains, wild animals, especially birds and small mammals, and, most important, winter. All of these groups of metaphors can unlock meaning in the poetry, and all are used time and again to call forth the same or similar reactions in the reader. And even though it cannot be argued that the images always mean exactly the same thing—Aichinger's poetry is too profound to make such a statement—I believe that a general understanding of them would make the poetry accessible to a much wider audience than has been thought.

The most easily understandable of the recurring metaphors observed in *Verschenkter Rat* is winter and its physical manifestations, snow and ice. A reference to winter can be found in 21 of the 92 poems in the 1991 expanded edition of *Verschenkter Rat*. That is an extraordinarily large frequency, especially given that almost all of the 92 poems contain fewer than 100 words. It seems obvious that winter must have some sort of special significance for the poet. In what follows, I will try to establish a common thread of meaning for images of winter in four of the poems in: "Winter, gemalt," "Winterantwort," "Spaziergang," and "Baumzeichnen." In each of these poems and in many others in the collection, winter is a natural period for contemplation, and it stands as a metaphor for the silence of individual human meditation. It is not a peaceful silence, for it often is accompanied by death, but neither is it the silence of resignation or hopelessness. For even during the coldest days of winter, when ice and snow cover everything and life seemingly has been extinguished, nature is preparing itself for the rebirth and activity that spring brings. That may seem scant comfort during the cold misery of winter, "eine Hilfe, aber keine Hilfe," as Aichinger wrote in "Baumzeichnen," but it is at least something to sustain oneself.

At first sight it is tempting to equate winter, together with snow and ice, with suffering, alienation or death, since these are the traditional associations the word calls forth. In fact, winter generally has been used as a metaphor for suffering in German poetry at least since the Middle Ages. In Aichinger's poetry, however, the meaning of winter is not always so readily available to the reader. In "Winter, gemalt," the short poem cited by Lorenz as an example of the poet's description of or hallucination about two realities, winter cannot be seen as an expression of suffering. The general tone of the poem is sober, but it is much more contemplative than anxious, frightened, or sorrowful. The Austrians (die Österreicher), who are the object of the poet's musings, are to be found in white skirts, in the snow (line 1). Let us find traces of them, the poet writes, in the twittering of the finches (line 5) and in the mountain peaks (line 6). The greenish color of the Mount of Olives, which the speaker evokes during her thoughts, also contains traces of the Austrians (line 8), and the roofs of the barns echo their whispers (line 10). The speaker seems to be reminding herself of the necessity of meditation as thoughtful, silent contemplation when she notes that these shadows will never change so readily again (line 12). Individuals, in the guise of the narrator of the poem, need to reflect on their societies in solitude and silence; they need to grasp the moment to think about the Austrians while that moment is still available. Winter itself allows the speaker to make observations. Winter snow makes the Austrians visible in the mountains and heard on the roofs of barns; its silence alone is what allows the speaker to meditate. In fact, it is possible to conclude that winter represents the act of thoughtful meditation in this poem, since all observations are made under its auspices.

As Lorenz pointed out, the self is alienated from the object of contemplation (the Austrians) in "Winter, gemalt," but it is simply observing, not suffering, and certainly is not judging, as Lorenz suggested (231). Rarely in Aichinger's poetry is the speaker herself exempt from suspicion; the poet does not allow her readers to become smug or self-assured in their thoughtfulness. There seldom exists a privileged position for the one who meditates—the one who thinks—in Aichinger's poems, and it is that fact that sometimes generates discomfort in those who read them. This feature of Aichinger's poetry is most obvious in "Schneeleute" (82), where the speaker clearly is guilty of preconceived notions about others whom she does not understand:

Schneeleute

Ich mische mich nicht leicht
 unter die Fremden aus Schnee
 mit Kohlen, Rüben, Hölzern,
 ich rühre sie nicht an,
 5 solang sie heiter prangen,
 manche mit mehr Gesichtern
 als mit einem.
 Wenn dann die Kohlen
 und die Rüben fallen,
 10 Knöpfe, Knopfleisten,
 die roten Lippenbänder,
 seh ich es steif mit an
 und ohne Laut,
 ich eile nicht zu Hilfe.
 15 Vielleicht sprechen sie
 das Mailändische
 schöner als ich,
 es soll nicht ans Licht kommen.
 Und darum Stille,
 20 bis dieses Licht sie leicht
 genommen hat
 mit allem, was sich da
 zwischen mailändisch
 und mailändisch verbirgt,
 25 dann auch mit mir.

Here the narrator is committing an error, a common and serious one. She will have nothing to do with the others because she does not understand them; she will not associate herself with them because an association might reveal their superiority in some unimportant way. This is the alienation among and between peoples that so easily leads to tragedy, a fact illustrated in the last few lines of the poem. The light that consumes the people of snow also consumes that which stands between them and the speaker, and finally consumes the speaker herself.

That the others are made of snow in this poem could mean they represent those who have learned the value of thoughtful meditation, and this could be the reason the speaker is afraid of them. They display the peace and serenity that sometimes are apparent in introspec-

tive, contented people, and the speaker, who does not share their security, does not trust them. In this case, however, it is more likely that snow is used to call attention to outward differences among people, such as skin color or other physical features. Snow here probably does not mean meditation as contemplation, but is rather a symbol for the obvious physical differences that can divide humanity. In any case, it is obvious that the speaker here is the one who is in error.

In only a few poems in *Verschenkter Rat* does the narrator obviously exempt herself from scrutiny. One of the most striking examples is "Meiner Großmutter" (63), a poem referring to the events leading to the arrest of people suspected of being Jewish or of foreign blood:

Meiner Großmutter

Die Doppeltüren,
 in den Modenapark,
 die Frage
 nach dem Ursprung,
 5 nach den Religionen,
 die Salesiandergasse,
 die Frau Major Schultz,
 die Excellenz Zwitkowitzsch,
 das Erschrecken,
 10 die Demut,
 die Abhängigkeit,
 das Fräulein Belmont,
 die Zuflucht,
 der fremde Flur,
 15 das Tor,
 das aufspringt,
 der tolle Hund,
 erschrick nicht,
 er ist weiß,
 20 noch klein
 und läuft vorbei.

In "Meiner Großmutter," the agents of the state are compared to a mad dog, who at this stage of the persecution of the Jews is white, still small, and runs on past. The mad dog is not a direct threat to the speaker in this poem yet, because it runs on by her, but it certainly is

recognized as a threat from the outside. There is no indication that danger or mistrust exists within the speaker herself.

Usually, however, Aichinger trusts no one, not even herself, and her work is full of reminders that the individual must take care and resist the temptation to exempt him- or herself from criticism. The advice to trust no one, not even yourself, is made explicit in Aichinger's 1946 speech entitled "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen," where she said, "Sie sollen Ihrem Bruder mißtrauen, nicht Amerika, nicht Rußland, und nicht Gott. *Sich selbst müssen Sie mißtrauen!* Ja? Haben Sie richtig verstanden? Uns selbst müssen wir mißtrauen" (Moser 16). In "Winter, gemalt," the speaker is separated from the Austrians, either by the winter (meditation as contemplation) or by the fact that they are only reflected in the landscape, but she is no more mistrustful of them than she is of herself. The best and perhaps only answer to this lack of trust in oneself and the outside world seems to be the practice of meditation as contemplation. Thought for Aichinger is the best and perhaps the only bulwark against error.

"Winterantwort" (14), perhaps the best-known of Aichinger's poems, also is the clearest example in *Verschenkter Rat* of the poet's belief in the need for meditation as individual contemplation:

Winterantwort

Die Welt ist aus dem Stoff,
 der Betrachtung verlangt:
 keine Augen mehr,
 um die weißen Wiesen zu sehen,
 5 keine Ohren, um im Geäst
 das Schwirren der Vögel zu hören.
 Großmutter, wo sind deine Lippen hin,
 um die Gräser zu schmecken,
 und wer riecht uns den Himmel zu Ende,
 10 wessen Wangen reiben sich heute
 noch wund an den Mauern im Dorf?
 Ist es nicht ein finsterer Wald,
 in den wir gerieten?
 Nein, Großmutter, er ist nicht finster,
 15 ich weiß es, ich wohnte lang
 bei den Kindern am Rande,
 und es ist auch kein Wald.

The title of this poem in effect says all that needs to be said about the role of winter here, since "winter" and "answer" are presented as a compound noun, almost as though they were synonyms, or at the very least as though they were complementary. In case any doubt remains, however, the first two lines should dispel it, since the poet says the world is composed of a substance that calls for consideration. Contemplation, which takes place during the winter, can unlock meaning from events which seem inexplicable, but it is at best a weak resource, as the rest of the poem makes clear.

In "Winterantwort," there are no eyes to observe the white meadows (lines 3 and 4), and there are no ears to appreciate the fluttering of the birds in the branches (lines 5 and 6). There is no one left whose senses we can trust, and it could even be said that the senses are not to be trusted at all, for they can mislead. Aichinger continues the reference to the senses and shows how easily they can deceive in the next three lines, where only the lost grandmother can taste the grasses, and heaven becomes an image that can be smelled rather than seen. Taste is not a sense that usually is associated with grass, at least not where human beings are concerned, so this image already hints that we should beware of that which is apprehended by way of our senses. The mistrust becomes complete in the last image, where synesthesia, or mixing of the senses, is used to describe the heavens. The introduction of synesthesia, a poetic technique that heralds back to the Romantics, is a clear sign that the speaker does not trust her senses to provide her with a realistic assessment of what exists. Those who could have given the answer to these inquiries, such as the grandmother (line 7) and those whose cheeks could have been rubbed raw on the village walls today (lines 10 and 11) are gone.

The speaker in "Winterantwort" does provide some hope at the end of the poem, since she recognizes it is not a gloomy forest (line 12) that we have happened upon; in fact, she recognizes that it is not even a forest at all (line 17). She is able to appreciate these things because she has lived a long time with the children at the fringes (line 16). This could be a reference to Aichinger's belief that a person should never adapt to any circumstance but should always remain on the outside. It is in this regard that Aichinger is most radical, for she always has maintained that it is a mistake to be on the inside at any level of society. In a 1980 discussion with Hermann Vinke, Aichinger ex-

pressed herself clearly on this point when she said: "[Die Jugend soll] sich nicht anpassen lassen. Die kleinen Träume vergessen, damit die großen nicht vergessen werden. Sich noch weniger denn je anpassen lassen an diese Welt, die sie immer deutlicher zur Verzweiflung treibt, gerade die Jugend" (Moser 35). In order to identify better with the other, one must remain outside the mainstream, and the best way to remain on the outside is to accept the answer offered by winter and learn to ponder or to meditate. In "Winterantwort," those who were on the outside have disappeared, and those of us who remain are faced with the onerous task of putting ourselves in their place. It is an extreme action, and one that requires an enormous amount of courage.

"Spaziergang" (33), another of the poems in the *Versenkter Rat* collection that illustrates the importance of meditation as contemplation, is difficult to understand on the surface:

Spaziergang

Da die Welt aus Entfernungen entsteht,
Treppenhäuser und Moore,
und das Erträgliche sich verdächtig macht,
so laßt es nicht zu,
5 daß hinter euren Ställen die Elstern
kurz auffliegen und glänzend
in die glänzenden Weiher stürzen,
daß euer Rauch noch steigt
vor den Wäldern,
10 lieber wollen wir warten,
bis uns die goldenen Füchse
im Schnee erscheinen.

Unlike "Winterantwort," the key to understanding this poem does not lie in the title, but is found rather in the last two lines. Here again, winter is a solution to the inexplicable, but this time the best that can be hoped for is really only a myth. Winter, again understood to be meditation as contemplation, is the backdrop for the appearance of the golden foxes (line 11), those elusive, unattainable keys to understanding, or salvation, or whatever worthy goal the reader cares to insert.

In "Spaziergang," the world originates from alienation (line 1),

and that which is bearable makes itself worthy of suspicion (line 3). Here again is the warning that we should not trust anything or anyone, not even ourselves. Since we must come to grips with that sad state of affairs, the narrator suggests in effect that we do not allow it to overcome us, that we develop a sort of "keep on in spite of" attitude about our plight, and even suggests that we do not admit it. What follows this advice ("so laßt es nicht zu" line 4) are two of the most difficult images in all of Aichinger's poetry. In the first image, she paints a word picture of magpies taking off behind the stalls, flying only briefly, and then falling into the glittering ponds (lines 5-7). Two of Aichinger's recurring images, birds and water, are included in the description, which makes them somewhat more familiar to the reader who has read much of her poetry, but does little in the way of establishing exactly what they mean. This scene is presented as one of the facts to which we should not admit, and it is best understood as a warning not to allow those in power to know we are aware of tragedy, even so small a tragedy as the one described here. Or, it could mean that we, the readers, have made attempts to right that which is terribly wrong with our society, like the members of the White Rose in Munich in 1943, but that those efforts were met with defeat almost before they got off the ground. The second image which follows the speaker's advice to admit nothing is even more puzzling. Here, we are warned not to let on that our smoke still rises in front of the woods (lines 8 and 9). Perhaps this is a call to disappear from society completely, to become invisible to those who have the power to do harm.

The difficulty of these two images notwithstanding, the core message of "Spaziergang" still seems to be the hope that things can be set at least partially right through individual meditation. The poem actually is less frightening than "Winterantwort," because it does not indicate that the only ones who were capable of meditation as contemplation are lost. It does demand that the reader display courage, but it is not the same extreme courage that is called for by "Winterantwort." Though the images are stark and somber, the overall message is hopeful. In the words of Elisabeth Endres, "So verschränkt sich das poetische Bild denn doch zur Hoffnung, der Hoffnung auf das irrealer Glück: goldenen Füchse" (Moser 96).

"Baumzeichnen" (32) also includes the advice to stay strong and self-aware in the face of unspeakable difficulty:

Baumzeichnen

*für Eva, Pia, Florian, Julian
und Manuel Aicher*

Hier, jetzt
nehmt diese Zweige
und gebt ihnen recht,
bemalt sie, laßt sie hängen,
5 spannt sie aus,
laßt auch Mäuse daran
und was euch noch zukommt:
ruhige und zittrige Hände,
Dachse und Sprossen
10 und die Bitten für die Schwermütigen
eurer Brüder und Schwestern,
weiße und rote Nadeln,
alles so wie es ist
und so wie es nicht ist,
15 Schnee und Schlemmkreide,
eine Hilfe, aber keine Hilfe,
kein Trost, aber ein Trost.

This poem is dedicated to the children of Inge Aicher-Scholl, sister of Hans and Sophie Scholl. Hans and Sophie Scholl were members of the White Rose student resistance movement in Munich who were sentenced to death by the Hitler regime in 1943. Members of the White Rose, and especially Hans and Sophie Scholl, had a tremendous influence on Aichinger. In the 1980 discussion with Hermann Vinke, the same one in which she warned young people not to allow themselves to fit into society, Aichinger recalled the day she read of the death sentence for the members of the White Rose:

Dort las ich zum ersten mal die Namen der Weißen Rose.
Ich kannte keinen dieser Namen. Aber ich weiß, daß von
ihnen eine unüberbietbare Hoffnung auf mich übersprang.
Diese Hoffnung hatte, obwohl sie es uns möglich machte,
in dieser Zeit weiterzuleben, doch nichts mit der Hoffnung
auf Überleben zu tun. (Moser 30)

Aichinger was herself a member of a student underground group at that time, and she described the news of the death sentence of the

White Rose membership as a validation of her action, even though she was quite sure she would be arrested and sentenced to death also. Somehow, it allowed her to continue to live with the horror around her.

The decision to continue living is really the theme of "Baumzeichnen." And again the goal is best accomplished by way of meditation as contemplation (line 15), presented as winter snow. Even so, there are significant differences between the way winter is presented in this poem and the way it is presented in "Winter, gemalt," "Winterantwort," and "Spaziergang." "Baumzeichnen" represents the speaker at her most distressed, and most determined, because snow, the relative peace that comes with the silence of meditation as contemplation, is paired with and hence becomes no more than a whitening agent (line 15). It has become something which colors over and removes that which we do not want to observe. Clearly, snow does not bring the comfort that is present in the other three poems. Aichinger is warning her readers not to withdraw too far into a contemplative state, for fear that it could deaden the desire to change what is horribly wrong. In this way, it directly honors the actions of the members of the White Rose, whose fruitless striving to change the situation in Germany cost them their lives. The last two lines present snow as that which is "eine Hilfe, aber keine Hilfe, / kein Trost, aber ein Trost." Because it ends up being a comfort (ein Trost), the call to meditation wins out after all, but it is by the narrowest of margins.

Many difficult metaphors are contained in "Baumzeichnen," which with 71 words already is one of the longer poems in *Verschenkter Rat*. The speaker tells the survivors of the Scholls and all others who read the poem to take these twigs, validate them, hang them up, paint them, and spread them out so that mice, badgers, sprouts and other things, such as peaceful and trembling hands, may approach. This could be a call to every reader to provide shelter for those who are in danger, especially since the next two lines (10 and 11) contain a plea for those who are melancholy, your (read "our") brothers and sisters. Line 12 contains the most difficult image. It presents white and red needles, but it is unclear whether these needles are to be understood as our brothers and sisters, or whether they have a relationship to the next two lines, which say that everything is as it is, and everything is as it is not (lines 13 and 14). The clearest reading would appear to be that the white needles (perhaps the members of the White Rose) are our brothers and sisters who show everything as it is, while the red needles, our

brothers and sisters who fail to make even a fruitless gesture against injustice, show everything as it is not.

"Baumzeichen" is in any event only a lukewarm recommendation to find solace in the stillness of thoughtful meditation, and it comes closest to saying that any action against injustice, even one that is sure to result in the loss of one's own life, is preferable to no action at all. The meaning of winter snow, while still hopeful, has moved closer to its traditional allusions to alienation, death, and suffering.

There are some poems in *Verschenkter Rat* where winter cannot be seen as a call to meditation as contemplation at all. In "Schneeleute," as we have seen, winter snow is used to illustrate physical differences among races or nationalities. Another example is "Mein Vater" (25):

Mein Vater

Er saß auf der Bank,
als ich kam.
Der Schnee stieg vom Weg auf.
Er fragte mich nach Laudons Grab,
aber ich wußte es nicht.

Snow in this poem must mean alienation between the speaker and the father; there is no reason to believe it has anything to do with meditation as contemplation. In fact, all the images in this poem underscore the total lack of communication between father and child and the realization that the emotional distance between them cannot be bridged. The father is responsible for the alienation between them, perhaps because the poem is written from the point of view of the child, and he is sitting on a bench, out of emotional reach of the child. The snow flies away from the path as the child approaches him, perhaps a representation of their mutual desire to flee from one another rather than to attempt a conversation. And finally the father, in his discomfort and confusion, can think of nothing better to say than to ask the child a meaningless question about the whereabouts of the grave of a long-dead Austrian nobleman.

In "Mein Vater," silence and snow in any event have nothing to do with thoughtful meditation. Aichinger probably would say that this is not the silence of muteness, either, but is rather the quiet which falls between two people who simply can find no common ground

upon which to begin communicating. It is a sad image, one that cannot be made more bearable by contemplation or meditation. "Mein Vater" was written in 1959, the same year that Aichinger wrote "Winter, gemalt," the poem in *Verschenkter Rat* that seems to come the closest to saying that meditation as individual contemplation can bridge any difference or overcome any difficulty. The poet may have been unaware that she was using winter, snow, and ice in both traditional and non-traditional ways at almost the same time. Winter as alienation is the sadness of being silent, while winter as thoughtful meditation is the hope that silence can offer. As with all good writing, an image can have many meanings, and it is the assignment of the reader to differentiate from among the possibilities. The task is difficult in Aichinger's work because of her silence, the silence of few words, which translates into a lack of context. It should not be argued that her images cannot be decoded, however. It is Aichinger's stillness that makes her work hard to fathom, not the difficulty of her imagery.

University of Arizona

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