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## The “Po-ethical Turn” in Post-War Austrian Literature Through Ilse Aichinger’s Texts

### Abstract

The publications of the short story “Das vierte Tor” (“The Fourth Gate”, 1945) and the novel *Die größere Hoffnung* (*The Greater Hope*, 1948) by Ilse Aichinger mark the beginning of post-war Austrian literature. Like several of her contemporaries, including Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann and Milo Dor, Aichinger was part of a generation of survivors of the atrocities of war and National Socialism. After 1945, the “old guard” of poets incited the young generation to find a new voice within post-war German-speaking literature and set new standards in the literary field. The reading of Ilse Aichinger’s texts, which were first published in the immediate post-war period, is thus not merely a literary matter. Rather, it is a way to reach the core of post-war culture within the German-speaking world, especially in the Austrian context, where the tradition of language skepticism and Sprachkritik has always been linked to political and ethical issues. To reflect upon literature and cultural production in the context of Austria’s problematic denazification means to focus not on a “message,” but instead on a “poethics” as a new form of commitment. This was not only an individual effort by authors, but the expression of a collective act of will in which individual instances and political strategies (not all controlled by the authors themselves) played a role in the cultural field(s) during Cold War years. The paper also discusses the fundamental role played by literary magazines as an important instrument of cultural renewal, as well as by their actors, gate-keepers, and financial and political influencers in the post-war context.

*Keywords:* Ilse Aichinger, ethical turn, poethics, postwar German literature, literary politics, denazification

### Ethics as a relationship with the other and response to history

Research articles, blogs, conferences, seminars, monographs, and even master’s degrees:<sup>1</sup> the philosophical debate over the intersections of ethics and aesthetics—especially of ethics and literature—

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<sup>1</sup> See the master’s degree in “Ethik der Textkulturen” at the University of Erlangen, Germany: <https://www.uni-augsburg.de/de/fakultaet/philhist/professuren/germanistik/neuere-deutsche-literaturwissenschaft-ethik/ethik-der-textkulturen-ma/>

takes place within a wide range of public contexts.<sup>2</sup> The origins of this new paradigm can be traced back to the 1980s and coincide with the rise of the school of ethical criticism. Martha C. Nussbaum, Hillis Miller and Wayne C. Booth were among the first to highlight the presence of an inherent ethical tension in literary texts.<sup>3</sup> Since the mid-1990s, the wealth of contributions to the debate has given rise to a real ‘ethical turn’<sup>4</sup> in literary criticism, so much so that today these two speculative fields can no longer be considered distinct and independent entities.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, at a terminological level, the discussion regarding the relationship between ethics and literature has generated a series of effective concepts, such as “poethics” (Michael Eskin), “Ästhet/hik” (Wolfgang Welsch) or “Ethopoetik” (Kurt Hahn).<sup>6</sup> From a theoretical and critical point of view, it is plausible to suggest that the success of ethical criticism is linked to the simultaneous emergence and development of several discourses in the field of cultural and cross-cultural studies: gender, post-colonialism, queer theory, translation theory, cultural memory, and imagology. In fact, what links all of these fields of study is a clear political and ethical background, as they all share the element of the relationship between the self and the other,<sup>7</sup> which is the foundation for building knowledge and identity. The differential and problematic realm of the encounter with the other allows to ‘measure’ the ethical quality of an artistic, cinematographic, or literary work.<sup>8</sup> Based on this thought, we can pinpoint an important (if not the most important) ethical moment of a literary text in the experience of reading. In fact, only through the reception of a text—that is, through the encounter between the author and the reader—is it possible to reflect on the meanings of a work and sometimes extend its boundaries. Reading thus triggers a dynamic process of exchange, essential to any discussion on the ethics of the text.<sup>9</sup> The notion of ethics should therefore not be confused with that of morality. As a matter of fact, the ethical implications of an artistic product do not respond to pedagogical intentions (as in the ‘moral of the fable’), nor do they refer to a system of behavioral prescriptions or express a value judgment based on such rules and codes (right/wrong, good/evil).

This paper draws attention to the ethical value of literature and writing as moments of dialogue with the reader and, therefore, with society. Consequently, the focus will shift from pure aspects of content to the linguistic, communicative and performative aspects of the text, as well as to its extra-literary

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- 2 A reflection on the relationship between ethics and literature is already rooted in the Greek ideal of *καλοκαγαθία*.
  - 3 See Nussbaum (1987) and Miller (1987). See also Richard A. Posner’s objections to Martha Nussbaum’s defense of ethical criticism in Posner (1997).
  - 4 See Davis/Womack (2001), Baker (1995), Zimmermann/Salheiser (2006) and Mayer (2010). It has been observed that the ethical turn of the 1990s has caused a shift in focus from the moral aspects to the ethical implications of literary texts. See Öhlschläger (2009: 9).
  - 5 As scholar Stephanie Waldow (2013: 19) points out: “Die für die Moderne und Postmoderne vorgenommene Trennung von Ethik und Ästhetik kann [...] nicht mehr aufrechterhalten werden. Insofern findet in der gegenwärtigen Literatur eine erneute Zusammenführung von Ethik und Ästhetik statt.”
  - 6 Eskin (2000), Welsch (1994), Hahn (2008). The term “poethics” is also used by Law and Literature scholar Richard H. Weisberg (1992) in reference to the jurists’ use of literary sources and narrative techniques and strategies of persuasion.
  - 7 Ricœur (1994). “The so-called ‘ethical turn’ in contemporary literature means that literary texts are more inclined than ever to engage in ethical dialogue concerning questions of how we act toward one another” (Jeremiah/Matthes 2013: 85).
  - 8 Kurt Hahn (2008: 221) points out, not surprisingly with a reference to Ricœur, that the problem of otherness emerges as an “autonomous instance” of the ethical turn.
  - 9 In ‘philological’ terms, too, reading is an important moment for aesthetics, as the latter is a manifestation based on *aisthesis*, i.e. sensory perception. See Welsch (1993: 818).

dimension (historical, political and social contexts). We will consider the case of cultural and literary renewal in post-war Austria in light of the first texts published by writer Ilse Aichinger (1921–2016). The paper will highlight the confluence between ethical reflection and the debate over ‘new’ Austrian literature at the dawn of the deepest “rupture in civilization” (*Zivilisationsbruch*) of the last century.<sup>10</sup> The ethical message conveyed by Aichinger’s texts stems directly from the experience of persecution, fear and deportation. Her debut is chronologically set after Auschwitz. However, her whole oeuvre, which stretches over seventy years, is an attempt to *think with* Auschwitz.<sup>11</sup> Her writing can be read as a response to the famous (and long misunderstood) Adorno’s ‘dictum’ of “no poetry after Auschwitz.”<sup>12</sup> As obvious as it may seem, it is worth remembering that post-war German-speaking literature is constantly confronted with the difficulty of coming to terms with the past.<sup>13</sup> Even today, the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* represents a “Prüfstein literarischer Ethik” (Platen: 66) for different generations.<sup>14</sup> Following Edgar Platen’s opinion, we could define ‘po-ethical writing’ as that in which “einen Zeitraum von Geschichte, in dem eine ‘Stunde Null’ und ein Vergessen unmöglich, Verantwortung und Erfahrung dagegen ermöglicht werden” (Platen: 89).<sup>15</sup> In the process of German and Austrian denazification, cultural renewal could not take place without an ethical and existential renewal. Again, we cross one of the key thoughts of Adorno’s philosophy, which is an ethical and existential question to art and humanity: how does one inhabit the world after the Holocaust? How does one think life after it has been damaged (*beschädigt*) by Auschwitz?<sup>16</sup> As Adorno explains with great lucidity, all philosophical and literary questions and responses to the Holocaust are grafted in the living and ‘reactive’ interval delimited by the opposition between silence and word, oblivion and memory: “Die philosophische Reflexion besteht eigentlich genau in dem Zwischenraum oder, Kantisch gesprochen: in der Vibration zwischen diesen beiden sonst so kahl einander entgegengesetzten Möglichkeiten.”<sup>17</sup>

### The cemetery as a playground

Ilse Aichinger’s first publication dates back to September 1, 1945. This is a historically emblematic date, as it marks the official surrender of Japan and coincided with the beginning of the war in 1939. September 1, 1941 was also the day when Jews from the age of six years were ordered to wear the yellow badge. This

10 Diner (1998).

11 “Nach Auschwitz ist kein Gedicht mehr möglich, es sei denn auf Grund von Auschwitz” (Szondi 2011: 384). Within the extensive bibliography about the implications between ethics and aesthetics in German-speaking literature, see especially Platen (2001), Glowacka (2012) and Jeremiah/Matthes (2013). See also Latini/Storace (2018).

12 The terms of the debate are summarized in Kiedaisch (1995). For direct references to Adorno’s sentence, see Adorno (1970: 11–30).

13 See Adorno (1997: 31–47).

14 See Hirsch (2012).

15 Platen’s essay focuses on the tension between memory and creation in the literature of the GDR.

16 *Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* is the subtitle of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*. The word *beschädigt* poses a problem of semantic ambiguity: on the one hand the verb *beschädigen* refers to the moral damage of the offense, on the other hand it also has the strong material meaning of ‘ruin,’ ‘damage,’ ‘harm.’

17 Adorno (1998: 172).

text is entitled *Das vierte Tor* (*The Fourth Gate*) and was published in the newspaper *Wiener Kurier* (still existing today under the name of *Kurier*), founded a few days earlier by the American occupation forces. The title of this short story is an explicit reference to the Jewish cemetery in Vienna, which is still accessible today through the fourth gate of the city's central cemetery. The cemetery is also the place where the story mainly occurs. The narrator addresses an unknown person, a *Sie* which could well be identified as the audience of the story, or perhaps a reader of the newspaper. The stranger asks a group of children where they are headed. The children answer that they are going to play in the cemetery, as they are not allowed to play in the Stadtpark: "In den Stadtpark dürfen wir nicht hinein" (Aichinger 1991: 272). The interlocutor, most likely an adult, wants to carry on the conversation with the children and know what happens if they go to the Stadtpark instead. Without any hesitation, one of the children answers, "Konzentrationslager!" (Aichinger 1991: 272). *Das vierte Tor* is therefore remembered as the first text in German-speaking literature to have mentioned, and to have impressed in the collective imaginary, the painfully concrete word "concentration camp." Similarly, Ilse Aichinger is remembered as the writer who inaugurated Austrian literature, as her promoter Hans Weigel noted in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> However, this short story is not (only) an account of a common situation in the lives of Jewish children in Nazi Vienna. In the afterword to Ilse Aichinger's novel *Die größere Hoffnung* (1948),<sup>19</sup> the Viennese writer Ruth Klüger—she herself a Holocaust survivor who recently passed away—recalls that such a situation was not uncommon, and that the novel's fascination lies in the "ambiguity of the language" ("Doppeldeutigkeit der Sprache"), which is a direct consequence of the simultaneous presence of terror and fantasy, or reality and dream. The language of the novel's protagonist, Ellen, responds to a terrifying reality through allegories, symbols and lyrical images. The book describes scenes of war, death and persecution, but there is also room for freedom, hope and self-assertion of the children towards a world of adults that rejects them because they have "the wrong grandparents."

The same can be said of *Das vierte Tor*, a preparatory sketch for *Die größere Hoffnung* which reveals an unprecedented union of the direct account (*Bericht*) and a 'lyrical' narrative, nourished by a strong imaginative discourse. In the text, historical references need no explanations. Proper and common nouns speak a deeply wounded language, as well as the obvious allusions to the collective tragedy of the Holocaust: "Konzentrationslager," "Buchenwald," "Trauer, die in alle Winde verweht wurde," "Verschleppte," "Getötete," "Emigranten," and "zerstörte Zeremonienhallen." And yet, in a place of mystery, silence and contemplation like the cemetery, the nature prospers: the jasmine blooms, white butterflies and insects populate the site. Fields can be seen on the horizon and the sun still warms the destroyed marble of the ceremonial hall.<sup>20</sup> The final paragraphs of the text leap forward to three years later, on a night in April 1945. The abundance of positively connoted nouns is remarkable: "Sehnsucht," "Liebe," "Glanz," and "Hoffnung." The wind which carried the ashes of the dead, now brings a message of love ("unsichtbare Wellen brennender Liebe") to the dead in the cemetery. The burning subject is love, not the crematoria. Throughout the text, the cemetery has a double value; it is the place where the dead lie, but it is also a place for the living ("Insel der Lebendigen"). It is the place where the dead are 'present'

18 Weigel (1966). According to Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler (2012: 20), Ilse Aichinger represents with her novel *Die größere Hoffnung*, together with Fritz Hochwälder and his drama *Das heilige Experiment*, the first phase of a process of cultural renewal (1945–1948), the second phase being 1948–1955 and the third one 1955–1966.

19 Klüger (2000).

20 The ceremonial hall of the Jewish cemetery had been destroyed during the Night of broken glass.

through the living trace of their memory. Aichinger's Jewish cemetery is both a *bet kevarot* (house of the graves) and a *bet hayyim* (house of life, house of the living).<sup>21</sup> In Aichinger's story, the gate to the cemetery no longer marks the border of the only area where Jews were allowed to take walks. More so, it is a threshold to freedom.

Dort, wo die Welt seit langem unsichtbar und tröstend zugegen ist, dort, wo der Jasmin sehnsüchtig blühte und sehnsüchtige Kinder den Traum vom Frieden träumten, dort, wo die Tramway nicht einmal eine kleine, einfache Endstation machen wollte, dort ist die erste Station der Freiheit. (Aichinger 1991: 275)

The setting of the short story and the dialogue between the Jewish children and the adult, who is also the addressee of the narrator, triggers ethical reflection. At the same time, the cemetery is the place of otherness, of collective and historical memory, but also of marginalization. Moreover, and perhaps the aspect with the greatest ethical significance, is that the cemetery preserves the living trace of the recent horrors: the broken marble, the too short lives of those who perished "beyond the cemetery,"<sup>22</sup> the yellow star attached to the naked skin, the urns of Buchenwald.

As Foucault explains, the cemetery is one of the best examples of heterotopias. It is, in fact, a place of separation and conjunction between present and past, or a realm of the living and a realm of the dead. The Jewish cemetery of this story, however, is a sort of 'exclave,' a marginalized and alien place that does not and cannot communicate with its surroundings, with the urban and social context. Its surface is estranged from the rest of the city and its inhabitants: the streetcar (an essential public means of transportation and interaction) passes by the fourth gate without stopping. At the beginning of Aichinger's story, the intrigued glances of the passengers, who have almost forgotten that there is a fourth gate, betray the collective knowledge of the presence of the outcasts.

Die Tramway fährt so schnell daran vorbei, als hätte sie ein schlechtes Gewissen, und verschwindet rot und glänzend im Dunst der Ebene. So bleibt denjenigen, die es suchen, keine andere Wahl, als beim dritten Tor schon auszusteigen und mit schnellen Schritten die kleine Mauer entlang zu gehen, verfolgt von den neugierigen Blicken der Menschen, die vergessen haben, daß es ein viertes gibt. Nur wenige suchen es! Wohin führt das vierte Tor? (Aichinger 1991: 272)

### Fractures and continuity in the periodical *Plan*

"Wende dich, Freiheit, denn der Krieg ist zu Ende": these verses by the American poet Walt Whitman<sup>23</sup>—here in the German translation of the anarchist philosopher Gustav Landauer—opened the first issue of the Austrian periodical *Plan* in 1945. The periodical, founded by Otto Basil before the outbreak of

21 See *Cemetery* in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971). In Hebrew, the word "cemetery" is also termed as *bet olam* (house of eternity). The "house of the living" also suggests a euphemistical sense, as in "the place appointed for all living" (Job 30:23). Although little is known about Aichinger's knowledge of Hebrew, we do know that she was a profound connoisseur of the Bible.

22 "Weit draußen, wo schon die Felder beginnen, ruhen die Toten der letzten Jahre und beweisen in ihren Geburts- und Sterbedaten, die fast niemals ein ganzes Leben zwischen sich lassen, daß das Sterben an gebrochenem Herzen ebensowenig ein Märchen ist wie die Sage von den Urnen aus Buchenwald" (Aichinger 1991: 273).

23 In original: "Turn O Libertad, for the war is over."

war in 1938, was confiscated by the Gestapo when copies of the third issue (March 1938, the month of the *Anschluss*) were still in print. *Plan* reappeared in October 1945. Fifty-two aerial bombardments had devastated many parts of the city of Vienna, and after the Red Army entered the Austrian capital in April 1945 the urban infrastructures (bridges, canals, water and gas pipelines) were completely destroyed. Industrial production had declined to worrying levels. In Austria, the number of displaced persons, resettlers and refugees had reached 1,650,000 people.<sup>24</sup> In this context of extreme precariousness and instability, the preface of *Plan*, signed by the editorial staff of the periodical, assumes an important political significance. The title of the text is programmatic: *Zum Wiederbeginn*,<sup>25</sup> a ‘new beginning’ which signals both the resumption of the periodical’s activity and a real program of political, social, cultural and ethical rebirth in post-war Austria. After several years of *Gleichschaltung*, the proliferation of new periodicals marks the need for the diversity of opinions. Basil’s text, characterized by an encouraging and extremely positive tone, sends a clear message to its readers: *Plan* wants to be a “Kristallisationspunkt” of new ideas and voices that recognize themselves in the values of democracy and contribute, at the same time, to shaping a European and cosmopolitan sentiment (which, we might add, was already known in pre-war Austria).<sup>26</sup> In this regard, one may recall the eleventh issue of the periodical, entirely dedicated to the new French literature (*Sonderheft Junges Frankreich*), or the third issue, focused on contemporary Czech literature (*Kleine tschechische Anthologie*). We are not dealing with an ‘Austrian product,’ but instead with a project aimed at building an artistic and literary constellation of common sympathies and intentions. “Arbeit, Aktivität, positive Leistung” are the watchwords of Basil’s cultural program, to which another important element could be added: the promotion of the new generations.<sup>27</sup> The young and unknown protagonists of this *Wiederbeginn*<sup>28</sup> are called to awaken and renew Austrian culture from the condition of indolent apathy (“oblomovism,” as Basil calls it) that had marked it during the years of the National Socialist regime. In the introduction to the seventh issue in July 1946, Basil writes, “Ich kann unsere jungen Freunde nur ermahnen, sich an uns Älteren kein böses Beispiel zu nehmen. Sie müssen es anders machen, von Grund auf anders!” (Basil 1946: 531). *Plan* soon became a forum in which young first-time writers could make their voices heard and participate in the reshaping of Austrian culture. In 1948, the first German poems by Paul Celan were published here, as well as the first experiments by Friederike Mayröcker, Christine Busta, Milo Dor, Erich Fried and Ilse Aichinger<sup>29</sup>.

In addition to the aspects of cultural renewal, it should be noted that the renewal advocated by *Plan* is inscribed in a line of continuity with tradition. Proof of this is in the graphic aspect of the periodical, with its fiery red cover, which was unequivocally reminiscent of the cult cover of Karl Kraus’ *Fackel*, closed in 1936, two years before *Plan* was born. Even a quick glance at the texts in *Plan*, as well as in other

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24 Vocelka (1985).

25 Basil (1945).

26 “Wir sind nicht nur materiell arm geworden, wir sind auch geistig verarmt. Was wissen wir von den großen Strömungen der letzten sieben Jahre?” (Basil 1945: 2).

27 The July 1946 issue of *Plan*, entitled *Stimme der Jugend*, was entirely written by young people between 17 and 25 years of age.

28 “Wir rufen diese unbekannte geistige Jugend!” (Basil 1945: 2)

29 Although significant in the Austrian context, *Plan* did not have any success outside. See Zeyringer (2008: 59). That was also the reason why some authors, such as Aichinger and Ingeborg Bachmann, sought attention outside Austria, in West Germany for example, within the Group 47.

Austrian periodicals of the same time,<sup>30</sup> allows to ascertain a constant presence of elements of rupture and continuity. Alongside the newcomers, the ‘old guard’ of Austrian literary tradition coexists and resists in various forms (poems, short prose, quotations, reviews, aphorisms, essays)—from Musil to Kraus, from Kafka to Hofmannsthal, up to Trakl, Bahr and Grillparzer. On a superficial level, these names evoke an illustrious past<sup>31</sup> and a shared canon. On a deeper level, however, the presence of the ‘father poets’ in *Plan* is not accidental. In fact, their names are associated with the tradition of Austrian self-criticism and linguistic skepticism. Moreover, these figures also convey an ethical message. For example, the recovery of a figure like Trakl in the seventh issue (which is astonishingly written entirely by young people) is symptomatic of a spiritual affinity, an “interlocution”<sup>32</sup> that links two generations and two distant, yet somehow very close epochs. The new generation, fresh from the new conflict but mutilated by many affections, finds “Trost und Mut” (comfort and courage) in the hallucinated visions of the young poet from Salzburg, who committed suicide while serving on the Eastern Front in 1914.<sup>33</sup> The disturbing hell of *Grodek* is thus reenacted and reinterpreted thirty years later as an affirmation of life.

### Ilse Aichinger: the po-ethical mistrust of language

“Ilse Aichinger, 1921 in Wien geboren, studiert derzeit im dritten Semester Medizin, will aber auf Philosophie umsatteln. Sie schreibt an ihrem ersten Roman ‘Die größere Prüfung.’”<sup>34</sup> This is the short biography of Ilse Aichinger at the end of the seventh issue (July 1946) of *Plan*. Her presence in the periodical is episodic and linked only to two programmatic texts of then-medical student Aichinger. The first text, published in *Plan* in February 1946, is part of a dossier written by Basil entitled *Stimme der Jugend*.<sup>35</sup> The dossier contains poems written during the war by Hans Heinz Hahl, which show a strong influence of Trakl’s poetry, and some poems by Gertrud Ferra (Vera Ferra-Mikura), who later became a famous children’s book author. The dossier closes with a prose text by Aichinger, entitled *Junge Dichter*, presented by Basil as “Kollektivbekenntnis der jungen Dichtergeneration.”<sup>36</sup> The first issue raised by Aichinger is in the term *Dichter* itself, which is symbolically written in the title of the text and very often recurs in periodicals like *Plan* in order to present the young writers to the audience: “Wir sind befangen

30 In the immediate post-war period, other periodicals contributed to the reshaping of the cultural landscape, such as *Der Turm* and *Die Furche*, which had the support of the Catholic Church and of the People’s Party (ÖVP). See Gross (1982) and Pfeiffer (2006).

31 Pfeiffer 2006: 31–32.

32 I borrow from Michael Eskin the effective notion of “interlocution” as “a hermeneutical relationship between agents or entities, such as texts.” See Eskin (2008: 23).

33 “Bis wir in der Vision von Grodek die bis zum Schmerz vollzogene Ordnung erkannten, welche uns eine Überwindung des Todes schien und ein Bekenntnis zum Leben. Und aus den herbstlichen Untergängen stieg das Sinnbild des einfachen Lebens, von Melancholie und Sehnsüchten beschattet. Es war die Heiterkeit, die aus dem Leid wächst, die uns tröstete und aufrichtete.” (*Plan* 1946/7: 554) Another poem by Trakl, *Menschheit* (1912), opens the first issue of the periodical *Wort und Wahrheit*, founded in April 1946.

34 See *Plan* (1946/7: 610). This was probably the provisional title of the novel *Die größere Hoffnung*, published two years later in Amsterdam by the publisher Querido (i.e. Bermann-Fischer-Verlag).

35 The text is not indexed in *Plan*. This may be one of the reasons why it has little critical fortune.

36 See *Plan* (1946/4: 309).

vor diesem Namen" (Aichinger 1946a: 309), she writes at the beginning of the text. The embarrassment of being called "poets" stems from the path of pain that led to the 'new' poetic word: silence, the experience of persecution and death, the constant threat, uncertainty.

Denn das haben wir in sieben tödlichen Jahren vollendet gelernt, zu leiden und die Frucht des Erlittenen zu verbergen wie etwas sehr Kostbares. Zu schweigen und wieder zu schweigen, so lange, bis die Tiefe schmerzhaft und unaufhaltsam hervorbricht und zum Wort wird, zeugend, daß hinter allem Gesagten mächtig das Ungesagte ruht (Aichinger 1946a: 310).

What emerges from Aichinger's words is a deep sense of discouragement deriving, first and foremost, from the awareness of being a survivor of the Holocaust. One of the first certainties to be questioned by Aichinger is the ethical appropriateness to make poetry after Auschwitz, which was a doubt expressed by two seminal questions which create a strong sense of mistrust in the whole text: "Was wollt ihr von uns?" and "Dürft ihr uns vertrauen?"

Nun erschrecken wir, da man uns ruft, und fragen zweifelnd: Was wollt ihr von uns?  
[...] Wie habt ihr da den Mut, uns zu vertrauen, die wir Kinder waren, als der Krieg begann, die wir am Zerrbild der Verwirrung die Wahrheit erkennen mußten, an der Maßlosigkeit das Maß, an der Kritiklosigkeit die Kritik, an dem hochmütigen Haß des Nationalismus die Liebe zu allen Menschen! Wir mußten an allem verzweifeln, ehe wir glauben durften, und alles, was wir schreiben, ist gezeugt worden im Dunkel der Verfolgung und der Verlassenheit. Dürft<sup>37</sup> ihr uns vertrauen? Überlegt es gut! (Aichinger 1946a: 310).

Terrified by the invocation of the 'adult' poets, the young writers recognized their state of vulnerability: "Ihr ruft uns ans Licht! Versteht unser Zögern!" (Aichinger 1946a: 310). Aichinger's reflection is profoundly 'metaphysical.' On the one hand, the matrix that generated and nourished the new poetic word after Auschwitz was the experience of violence, death and physical disintegration of bodies and cities. On the other hand, the National Socialist regime also annihilated a whole set of moral values; freedom and democracy were replaced with ruthless mechanisms of production and destruction, as Herbert Marcuse cogently described in 1942.<sup>38</sup> The starting point of Aichinger's long poetic journey is precisely the need to rebuild a democratic and humanitarian sentiment. This idea of refoundation, however, departed from the later dominant notion of a 'Stunde Null.' In Aichinger's vision, to make a cathartic *tabula rasa* of the past is both wrong and dangerous. The new function of literature consists in seeking ways of expression that are mindful of history and aware that, after 1945, writing in German also means to speak "under the gallows."<sup>39</sup>

The second text written by Ilse Aichinger for *Plan* was published in the seventh issue (July 1946) of the periodical, and is a call to self-reflection entitled *Aufruf zum Mißtrauen*. The importance of this text lies not only in its programmatic and manifesto character, but also in the fact that it outlines the framework of Aichinger's later oeuvre.<sup>40</sup> Also in this text, attention must be paid to the title, which seems to imitate the "Aufruf zur Mitarbeit" (Pfeiffer 2006: 61) by Otto Basil. For example, in the preface to *Plan*, he exhorts young people to action and speech. Aichinger's *Aufruf* is an invitation to mistrust or doubt.

37 The modal verb *dürfen* recalls the ethical meaning of "being allowed" to do something.

38 Marcuse [1942] (2007).

39 This is a reference to Aichinger's famous text *Rede unter dem Galgen*, published in 1952.

40 See Moser 1990: 37.



The verb *zögern* of the first programmatic text and *misstrauen* in the second are key words and a symptom of the Austrian post-war condition, in constant tension between the urgency of a new beginning and the dreadful lack of answers (*Antwortlosigkeiten*) generated by the “neue Art der Barbarei” (Horkheimer/Adorno 1973: 16) of the National Socialist regime. In her *Aufruf*, Aichinger once again resorts to clear and ironic language, which somehow seems to echo some of the rhetorical techniques of propaganda discourse. The text is intended to unhinge the common thought that sees a threat in the “stranger” and the neighbor. Both *Junge Dichter* and the *Aufruf* aim to show the reader that it is necessary to deeply rethink the unthinkable, or the absolute evil. The starting point of this process is the absence of handholds, of an inherited common tradition,<sup>41</sup> an idea rooted in Hannah Arendt’s metaphor of “thinking without a banister” (“Denken ohne Geländer”).<sup>42</sup>

Sie sollen nicht 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. Der Klarheit unserer Absichten, der Tiefe unserer Gedanken, der Güte unserer Taten! Unsererer eigenen Wahrhaftigkeit müssen wir mißtrauen! (Aichinger 1946b: 588)

It is up to each individual to question his or her own thoughts, actions, intentions and voice. In this text, every element immediately takes on a strong political and ethical connotation. It is precisely the gesture of questioning oneself, before the other, the neighbor or the stranger, that makes this reflection so ethically relevant. The *Aufruf* is not only intended to launch a warning, but also to stimulate a dialogue between the individual, him- or herself, and history. In Aichinger’s poetic quest, which develops through experimentalism and the subversion of literary and linguistic conventions, takes shape from this ‘humanistic’ reflection on mistrust, at the center of which lies the *ethos*, in the sense of the individual way of inhabiting the world.<sup>43</sup> Aichinger’s poetics, which is too often hastily defined as surrealist or assimilated to absurd literature, springs from a continuous questioning ‘from within’ of both the language and the world. This attitude of po-ethical mistrust of language results in a marked tendency towards experimentalism and breaking the formal and structural orders of the text. The radical collapse of all certainties, as in the short story *Wo ich wohne* (1952), and of the creative power of the poetic word clearly emerges when Aichinger urges the readers to be wary of their own voice.

Moreover, the performative level of the text is particularly striking for the use of personal pronouns. Both manifestos, in fact, show a dynamic alternation, or a movement between *wir* and *Sie* (or *ihr* in *Junge Dichter*). The first pronoun is used to express a sense of community, closeness and inclusiveness.<sup>44</sup> Aichinger identifies herself in the inclusive subject *wir* because there is a *Sie/ihr* subject from which she can maintain a distance and, by contrast, become aware of herself. The *Sie/ihr* pronoun is actually used by Aichinger to address the recipient of the message with irony and distance. Susanne Komfort-Hein provides an interesting clue on the interpretation of the pronoun *wir*: in relation to the content of the text, this pronoun seems to want to unhinge the *Täter-Opfer* dichotomy, one of the basic elements of

41 “Wie habt ihr da den Mut, uns zu vertrauen, die wir Kinder waren, als der Krieg begann, die wir am Zerrbild der Verwirrung die Wahrheit erkennen mußten, an der Maßlosigkeit das Maß, an der Kritiklosigkeit die Kritik, an dem hochmütigen Haß des Nationalismus die Liebe zu allen Menschen! Wir mußten an allem verzweifeln, ehe wir glauben durften, und alles, was wir schreiben, ist gezeugt worden im Dunkel der Verfolgung und der Verlassenheit” (Aichinger 1946a: 310).

42 See Arendt (2018) and Eshel (2020).

43 See Heidegger (1976: 354 ff.) and Heidegger (2004).

44 See Ratmann (2001: 13).

the construction of the Austrian *Opfermythos*, and to convey the idea of the *Verstrickung*, i.e. a general entanglement in National Socialism.<sup>45</sup> In its disconcerting simplicity—a dialogue between the author and an audience—the *Aufruf* takes on a strong ethical, historical and political connotation and, once again, crosses the trajectory of the discourse of writing and making poetry after Auschwitz. Aichinger’s “implicated subject”<sup>46</sup> reminds us of Ingeborg Bachmann’s “I without guarantee” (“Ich ohne Gewähr”), i.e. a subject which is not situated “within the history,” since the history itself inhabits—or even haunts—the subject’s consciousness.

Kaum haben wir stammelnd versucht, wieder “ich” zu sagen, haben wir auch schon wieder versucht, es zu betonen. Kaum haben wir gewagt, wieder “du” zu sagen, haben wir es schon mißbraucht!  
(Aichinger 1946b: 588)

The difficult experience of saying “ich,” or of affirming one’s identity, the risks of the “Ich-Gewissheit” after the caesura of 1945, but also the struggle to rekindle trust in the other (“du”), is the starting point of an experimental poetics which constantly questions and reshapes the world in new linguistic forms. This basic lack of certainties is the structuring principle of Aichinger’s po-ethics. It is a testimony of the Holocaust that continues to feed the long debate on how to live in the world after Auschwitz, but it also raises the question of how to (re)negotiate the relationship between ourselves and the others today, in a profoundly changed world, yet so full of uncertainties and ethical dilemmas.

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45 Komfort-Hein (2001: 28).

46 I borrow this expression from Michael Rothberg (2019).

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