

BENJAMIN BALINT

Ilse Aichinger's Bad Words

190

“It’s a sad poem,” Bettina said as we walked down the glistening wet ribbon of a Vienna street one rainy evening. “I don’t read it every day.” Bettina, a Viennese psychoanalyst, was describing the daily walk from her home in Leopoldstadt, in the Second District, to her office in the inner city, the First District. The journey takes her across a bridge over the Danube canal which bears a poem by Ilse Aichinger inscribed in cast iron along the span. The poem reads, in part:

191

The world is made of stuff
that wants watching,

no eyes left
to see the white fields,
no ears to hear birds whirring
in the branches.
Grandma, where are the lips you need
to taste the grasses,
and who will sniff the sky till it's done?

When the German language billowed with Nazi contaminations, said George Steiner, it got “the habit of hell into its syntax.” Those who repaired that syntax and got it whirring again, those who after the Shoah expressed estrangement from the German language in German, were by and large “non-German Germans”: Paul Celan in Paris, Nelly Sachs in Stockholm, Elias Canetti and Erich Fried in London, and Ilse Aichinger in Vienna.

Unlike German writers who found in the German language an inalienable form of belonging, each of these writers grappled with a language that had become foreign, hostile, a sign of non-belonging. Each of these adversaries of postwar forgetting wrestled with a language, as Celan put it, that “gave back no words for that which happened.” Of these figures, Ilse Aichinger, with whom the story of postwar Austrian literature begins, has been until recently the most overlooked and undertranslated. Since her death in 2016, a spate of new English translations affords us an opportunity to correct this literary injustice, to take some soundings from the still-potent body of work that Aichinger bequeathed us.

Ilse and Helga Aichinger, identical twin sisters, were born in Vienna in 1921. Their mother, a Jewish pediatrician and one of the first women to study medicine in Vienna, and her father, a Catholic schoolteacher, were “opposites in race

and character,” Ilse said. They divorced when the twins were six years old. “A threefold suffering dominates my life,” Ilse recalled. “The antagonism between my parents, the antagonism within me, the antagonism to my surroundings.” Only “the powers of childhood held the world together.” Ilse and Helga were raised in Vienna by their grandmother, “the dearest person in the world to me.” One spring day in 1933, a twenty-two-year-old Bavarian medical student spending the semester in Vienna appeared at their door and politely introduced himself as someone with a professional interest in twins. “My name is Josef Mengele,” he said. They shooed him away and never saw him again.

Long before the Anschluss, Hitler’s annexation of Austria in March 1938, Vienna had suffered from virulent and politically successful anti-Semitism. But the Anschluss unleashed a pent-up brutality that amazed even the Germans. The German playwright Carl Zuckmayer described Vienna during the following days as a once-cultured city transmuted “into a nightmare painting of Hieronymus Bosch,” as if “Hades had opened its gates and vomited forth the basest, most despicable, most horrible demons.” The racial restrictions that had gradually taken root in Germany over the previous five years demonized Austrian Jews almost overnight. The National Socialist regime classified Aichinger as a so-called *Mischling*, a “half-breed” or “mixed-race.” In August 1938, SS officer Adolf Eichmann set up his Central Office of Jewish Emigration in an “Aryanized” palace not far from where Ilse lived with her grandmother.

Ilse’s sister Helga escaped on July 4, 1939, with the last Kindertransport to leave Vienna’s Westbahnhof. She fled via Holland to London. Ilse’s father had urged her to leave, too: “I don’t understand it, it’s much nicer out there in England.

A young person belongs outside.” The superficial materiality of his remark, Ilse noted in her diary, showed “a great lack of understanding.” Ilse chose instead to stay in Vienna to protect her mother, who remained safe from deportation so long as she had a “half-Aryan” child to support. As a Jew, the mother was ostracized, and forced to support herself as a factory worker. With this reversal of roles, the daughter protecting mother, Ilse and her mother — by then stripped of her job as a school doctor — lived in constant fear, billeted with a hostile landlady in a small room on Marc-Aurel-Strasse, adjacent to the Vienna headquarters of the Gestapo in the former Hotel Metropole. As Paul Hofmann, later head of the *New York Times* bureau in Vienna, recorded, the Hotel Metropole “became the synonym for terror and torture.” It was where former chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg and Baron Louis Nathaniel Rothschild were held.

In March 1945, when the four-story building sustained heavy damage from an aerial bombing raid, a passerby cautioned Ilse: “Don’t look happy or you’ll be arrested, too.” (A scene in *The Third Man*, shot in Vienna in 1948, uses the building’s ruins as a stark backdrop. Helga makes a cameo appearance in the film. After the war, a plaque at the site described it as an “inferno for those who believed in Austria... It crashed to pieces like the Thousand-Year Reich.”) The twins meanwhile corresponded through Red Cross messages limited to no more than twenty-five words. In these clipped messages sent across the Channel — intended, as Ilse wrote to Helga in November 1945, “to rip the veil between us” — Aichinger whetted her terse prose style. The editor of their correspondence suggests that it served as Ilse’s “engine of literary writing.”

Once released from their inhibitions, the Aichingers’ neighbors proved so untroubled by the roundups of Jews

that before long the Gestapo conducted raids with impunity in broad daylight. In May 1942, Ilse watched as her seventy-four-year-old grandmother, together with her aunt Erna and uncle Felix (awarded the Iron Cross in the First World War) and about a thousand other Jews were forced before jeering onlookers onto a truck which disappeared over a bridge across the gray-green Danube canal. “Those who watched as my grandmother and my mother’s younger siblings were driven on an open cattle car across the Swedish Bridge toward torture and death looked on, to be sure, with a certain glee,” Aichinger recalled. “And someone called out: ‘Look, there’s Ilse.’ But she didn’t turn around.” This is the bridge that today is sanctified by Aichinger’s lyrics, the one that burdens Bettina’s daily walk. The Austrian writer and Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek said that ever since that day on the Swedish Bridge Aichinger had her gaze riveted on this most excruciating sight of her childhood. The horror that took place on that bridge is never really past,” Jelinek said. “Only who sees it anymore? Ilse.” In an interview fifty years later, Aichinger said that her greatest wish would be to see her grandmother again.

Only after the war did Aichinger learn that her relatives had been transported east on “iron rails running straight on into infinity,” as she wrote, and had met their deaths at an extermination camp near Minsk — they were three of over sixty-five thousand Austrian Jews murdered during the Nazi occupation. In her last diary entry before a white flag was hoisted over St. Stephen’s Cathedral, signaling the end of the war for Vienna, Aichinger confessed to a fatigue so extreme that she wished to die. Ilse and her mother survived, at least physically. “You don’t survive everything you survive,” Aichinger wrote. The state grudgingly offered her mother a paltry ten thousand shillings for the loss of her apartment, her

medical practice, and her murdered relatives — a “disgraceful” restitution, Ilse said.



Storytelling can be another form of restitution, of restoring what has been lost or looted. In 2021, the Belarusian writer and Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, whose work, none of it fiction, is a monumental project of recapturing the lived experience of suffering in the Soviet Union, expressed her admiration of the ways in which Aichinger tore through the banal idea of peaceful dwelling-in-the-world in which so many bystanders had swaddled themselves.

The Moscow Declaration of 1943 had defined Austrians as the Germans’ first victims and thus free of obligation to make reparations for Nazi crimes. The preamble to Austria’s declaration of independence, signed in April 1945, interpreted the years between 1938 and 1945 as a violent, externally imposed interruption in the country’s history, foisted on the “defenseless state leadership” and on “the helpless people of Austria.” If Austria had ceased to exist in 1938, if it was an occupied nation rather than an aggressor, it could not be held itself responsible for crimes committed in the name of the Third Reich. This was pure self-exculpation, the brazen foundational lie — the *Lebenslüge* — upon which modern Austria rebuilt itself and which Aichinger sought to shatter for the sake of “the attempt to translate our hope into a future.”

In 1946, at the age of twenty-five, she suggested how to accomplish this great sobering in a trailblazing two-page political manifesto called “A Call for Mistrust.” Aichinger implored her young contemporaries to question the self-exculpating complacencies of their “wounded world,” to prefer

self-doubt to self-pity, to direct mistrust “toward ourselves, in order to be more trustworthy!”

This is how the tremendous thoughtlessness of these last years called us to think; this is how the inhumanity from which we suffered like tormented animals summoned us to seek and to condense everything human; this is how we learned, first of all, to be human before we became poets.... For what we say today was unsayable yesterday!

André Gide once remarked that if skepticism is the beginning of wisdom, it is often the end of art. But Aichinger’s art begins with an address to skepticism—with a distrust of language, of collective self-righteousness, and, above all, of oneself. She wrote her first and only novel, *Die grössere Hoffnung* or *The Greater Hope*, in fragments during the war. On September 1, 1945, Aichinger published a chapter of *The Greater Hope* under the title “The Fourth Gate” in the daily newspaper *Wiener Kurier*. The entire novel appeared in 1948, and it came out in a deft English translation by Geoff Wilkes in 2016. She intended it, as she told her sister, “to show that miracles happen even amidst the darkness.” It is an astonishing book, a book like no other.

Aichinger centers the novel on the wartime experiences of Ellen, the sensitive adolescent daughter of a Jewish mother and a Nazi policeman who disowns his daughter and asks her to forget him. This is one of the first literary texts, if not the very first, which mentions the term “concentration camp.” But Aichinger avoids the term “Nazis” — the father and his subordinates are described as “lost souls” — and leaves the city unnamed, as though the unembellished story could have unfolded anywhere.

We first meet Ellen lying across a map on the floor of the consul's office, "tossing uneasily back and forth between Europe and America." Having failed to obtain a visa to rejoin her mother, who has fled to America, Ellen endears herself with a group of Jewish children who find themselves trapped. "The last *Kindertransport* had left long ago. The borders were closed." When the children are no longer allowed to go to school, an old teacher is surprised that they want to forget German. "I won't help you do that," he says. "But I'll help you learn it anew, the way a foreigner learns a foreign language."

As the anti-Jewish edicts tighten and Hitler youth skulk outside their doors, Ellen and her friends ask what is left.

You keep only what you give away. So give them what they take from you, for that will make them ever poorer. Give them your toys, your coats, your caps, and your lives. Give away everything in order to keep it.... Laugh when they tear the clothes from your bodies and your caps from your heads.... Laugh at the satiated people, laugh at the placid people who have lost hunger and uneasiness, the most precious gifts which are vouchsafed to human beings.

198

But the children do not laugh, certainly not at the prospect of receiving deportation orders. "Who'll help us onto the truck, if it's too high?" one asks. "We're guilty of being alive," another says. They wonder where they can find refuge. "Not the south and not the north, not the east and not the west, not the past and not the future."

Before long, only the children's imaginations offer the semblance of a safe harbor. In one game, the children wait on a riverbank hoping that a baby will fall into the water so that

they can save him, as the infant Moses was rescued from the Nile. "We'll dry it off and take it to the mayor. And the mayor will say: Good, very good! You're allowed to sit on all the benches again." In another, the oldest boy, Leon, with "four grandparents of the wrong kind," plays the role of an angel. Angels permeate Aichinger's writing, and they bear messages neither of hope nor consolation but of vigilance toward intrusions into fixed reality. One of the children comments on the unseen adult audience: "Don't you hear how they're already laughing, how they'll laugh when we're being led across the bridges?"

At first, playing together is a confirmation of belonging. But before long the children lose track of what is rehearsal and what is performance, of which game they are playing and which game — with all-too-real malevolent rules — is being played with them. "Already the two plays were beginning to flow into each other, weaving themselves inextricably in a new play." Yet the performances allow the children to give words to the unspeakable. Aichinger elevates playing to the status of a mitzvah: "To play. It was the only possibility remaining to them, composure before the incomprehensible, grace before the secret. The most unutterable commandment: 'Thou shalt play in my presence!'" (In the same year that Aichinger published *The Greater Hope*, Paul Celan published his "Death Fugue," a poem which invokes the word "played," *spielt*, seven times.)

199

Ellen's uniformed father, "who had asked Ellen to forget him," instructs the children that Jews are no longer allowed to play in the city park. In a chapter called "The Holy Land," they decide to play instead in the Jewish section of the cemetery. Aichinger describes the tram rattling rapidly past the graveyard gates, as if it had a bad conscience. The children

dart among the gravestones of their ancestors until at last the dead and the living seem to play with one another. “Our dead people aren’t dead,” they shout. “They’re playing hide-and-seek with us.”

Aichinger’s book was one of three important novels about children in Vienna during the Nazi dictatorship. It joined Jacob Glatstein’s *Emil and Karl*, published in Yiddish in 1940, a book written for children in order to explain to them the historical convulsions that they were witnessing (Emil is a Jewish boy and Karl a Christian boy); and *Children of Vienna*, published in 1946, by Robert Neumann, whose books had been banned and burned in Germany, and who left Vienna in 1934. But *The Greater Hope*, a story filigreed by exclusion, itself became excluded from public perception; it sold poorly and got few reviews. The Vienna-born writer Erich Fried was one of the few to recognize its merit. Within a year of its appearance, he called the novel “one of the most profound and — despite all the horror — one of the most beautiful and joyful books of our time.” It would be a dozen years until it was reissued, in paperback in 1960. (The German writer Peter Härtling called it “a book that waits patiently for us.”) It embarrassed a readership inclined to regard those who dredged up their country’s complicity in Nazi crimes as “befoulers of the nest” (*Nestbeschmutzer*). It denied such readers the comforts of exoneration. For the rest of her life, its author — who understood her own survival as a surprise — refused to play the role of absolver in Austria’s theater of guilty memory.



In 1952, four years after the appearance of *The Greater Hope*, Aichinger read her “Mirror Story,” in which time runs in reverse, to a transfixed gathering of writers that included Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann. Hans Werner Richter described the experience: “She was able to put everyone under her spell... and it was not only the quality of her texts, it was her voice that fascinated everybody. Of course, the declared realist writers of our group tried to resist... yet they could not escape her charisma.” This was Group 47, a loosely knit, mostly male vanguard of young writers who wished to make a clean sweep in the aftermath of the “zero hour” (*Stunde Null*, in German), as they called the final Nazi defeat. If the increasingly occult Martin Heidegger understood language as the “house of Being,” these rehabilitators understood that the house had collapsed. Though the group’s early efforts were often seen not so much as “tabula rasa literature” as defeatist “rubble literature” (*Trümmerliteratur*), books by its members — including Ilse Aichinger, Heinrich Böll, and Günter Grass — would overshadow the ruins of the German-language literary landscape from 1947 to 1967.

Many of her colleagues in this circle perceived Kafka’s influence in Aichinger’s spare style and parables of powerlessness. One member of Group 47 went so far as to call her “Miss Kafka.” Another, the literary critic Walter Jens, praised her “Kafkaesque technique.” “The great K., the holy K.,” Aichinger said in exasperation, “that’s what I heard.” Yet on accepting the Kafka Prize, Aichinger insisted that other than a single passage from his letters (later incorporated into his early story “Conversation with the Suppliant”) — a childhood memory of overhearing a perfectly mundane conversation between his mother on the balcony and a neighbor below, she had read almost nothing of Kafka’s

writing and had avoided conversations about him. She could not bear his precision.

Even as she cast a skeptical eye on promises of radical renewal, Aichinger grew particularly close to two members of Group 47: the poet Ingeborg Bachmann, cherished by the Aichinger family as a “third twin,” and the poet Günther Eich, whom she married. When Bachmann met Aichinger in war-wrecked Vienna, their experiences could hardly have been more different. Bachmann, whose father had joined the Nazi party in 1943 and served as an officer in the Wehrmacht, had spent the war years in almost idyllic safety in Klagenfurt. But in its dissonance and tenderness, the close friendship between the two writers could almost stand as a metaphor for Austria’s postwar entanglements. (The Bachmann-Aichinger correspondence, more than a hundred letters spanning the years from 1949 until their estrangement in 1962, came out in Germany in 2021. In her last letter, Bachmann confesses to her friend and mentor that she “said far too little... thanked you too little.” The letter was never sent.)

In the decade after the publication of *The Greater Hope*, a realistic novel with touches of surrealism, Aichinger’s language grew more condensed and more self-scrutinizing, as it turned toward the cracks through which the past splinters into the present. This becomes evident also in works such as *The Bound Man and Other Stories* (1951); “Buttons” (1953), a radio play in which workers in a button factory turn into the products they make; and “Squares and Streets” (1954), a series of vignettes on Vienna places (including Judengasse, or “Jews’ Alley,” and Seegasse, the Jewish cemetery in the city’s Ninth District dating to the sixteenth century), on the theme, as she put it, that “the places that we saw now look at us.” So, too, in *At No Time* (1957), a collection of Aichinger’s surreal dialogues.

A mundane conversation between a maid and a policeman, for example, ends with the prophet Elijah whirling through the cobalt sky above in a crimson chariot.

Throughout, as she told an interviewer, Aichinger slanted her writing toward an “identification with the weak, the disabled, the injured.” The truly strange people, says her novel’s narrator, “are those who feel most at home.” Aichinger held this to be true both geographically and linguistically. The truest and most individual language, Aichinger said, “has to counter the existing language, the established language.” As it tilted away from the literal, her own language turned within a tight radius, almost with a will of its own. “My language and I, we don’t talk to each other,” she writes, “we have nothing to say to each other.”

After her husband’s death in 1972, Aichinger devoted herself to *Bad Words*, which appeared four years later, a collection of short stories clotted with memory, dense texts that ask us to overcome our desire to decipher everything. The English translators of *Bad Words*, the poets Uljana Wolf and Christian Hawkey, resist the impulse to “fill in the gaps.” Instead they preserve the lexical choices that tighten Aichinger’s writing, above all the wariness of verbal virtuosity and pretty words. (Aichinger is to the German language what her fellow Viennese Adolf Loos, author of the essay “Ornament and Crime,” is to architecture.) She prefers “bad words,” words that “never occur in lullabies.” Many writers feel commanded to reach for the right words, *les mots justes*. If, as Aichinger said, “the best is always an imperative,” she refused such imperatives. “Life is not a special word, and neither is death,” she writes. “Both are indefensible; they disguise instead of define.”

If Aichinger belongs to the avatars of bad words rather than to the seekers of the sublime, it is because to write is,

for her, to define, to say what a thing is. “Already as a child I hated the word fantasy. I didn’t want fantasy, I wanted precise realness, as precise as possible.” That desire — especially when the precise is less beautiful and less enthralling than the imprecise — informs her sole poetry collection, *Squandered Advice*, which appeared in 1978 and was published two years ago in English translation. Its translator, Steph Morris, delivers the rhythmic density of Aichinger’s poems, the way she juxtaposes words to give them the unsettled loneliness that she said they need “in order for them to produce meaning.” Some, like the following, can be read as attempts to rescue possibilities of remembrance.

Moby Dick,
Rabbi Fingerhut
has drowned,
has died,
gone.
He had yellow eyes
and a large mouth,
dark regalia
packed onto him.
Moby Dick,
Rabbi Fingerhut.
Tell Ahab too,
and the others,
the helmsmen
and the harpooners,
and tell them soon.
Pass it on,
Don’t forget.

204

In 1988, Aichinger returned to Vienna after four years in Frankfurt, and resumed her strolls across the bridges over the Danube canal. Because she had cut against the Austrian grain, she was a solitary figure. Only late in life did she see the corona of her recognition brighten. In 1991, to mark her seventieth birthday, S. Fischer Verlag published an eight-volume edition of Aichinger’s collected works, edited by her companion, the literary critic Richard Reichensperger. Her books, translated into eighteen languages, won many prestigious awards, including the Grand Austrian State Prize for Literature in 1995. Several years earlier she had declined the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. Aging, she said, “means learning to play better.”

She had never sought easy applause, much less fame. “Ever since I was a kid,” she told an interviewer, “I’ve wanted to disappear. That was my first passionate wish.” In *Film and Fate*, which appeared in 2000, she stages the story of her early life in the form of an autobiography of a moviegoer who felt that cinema’s flickering ephemerality matched her own self-effacement. During the war, she writes, the cinema had served as a “place of disorder,” a welcome refuge from the Nazi order. In her last years, Aichinger would disappear after a day of writing into the dark of the Bellaria movie theater, which screened vintage films, including Laurel and Hardy comedies. (She kept a life-size cardboard cutout of Stan Laurel in her bedroom.) She often attended the Burg Cinema’s Sunday screenings of *The Third Man*. Aichinger died in 2016, a few days after her ninety-fifth birthday, in her native Vienna, a city that she called “murderous but familiar.”

205



The Habsburg emperors bore many titles, among them King of Jerusalem and Duke of Auschwitz. Ilse Aichinger's language of hope and suffering, Reichensperger said, moved between those two poles, Jerusalem and Auschwitz.

Like Aichinger, the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld, her younger contemporary, who was born in Czernowitz and lived most of his life in Jerusalem, and wrote in Hebrew, understood children as carriers of continuity. He, too, told stories of hope and suffering through a child's eyes. His stories, set in the outer precincts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, likewise allowed a child's incomprehension to bring the Shoah's incomprehensibility into focus. In *The Age of Wonders*, Appelfeld describes a ghoulish group of Jew-haters on a train in the late 1930s as they taunt the main character's father, a man of letters and of culture. "Am I not an Austrian like you are?" he cries out. "Didn't I go to school here? Graduate from an Austrian gymnasium, an Austrian university? Weren't all my books published here?" And yet, says the son, "Father's determination to remain in Austria was even stronger than before. To leave at a time like this, with evil spirits raging, meant admitting that reason had lost out, that literature was to no avail."

206

Aichinger called voicelessness "the tuning fork of the wise." But if the Shoah strained the limits of language, after Auschwitz certain silences also sounded different than before. The silence of the survivor, she insisted, is unlike the hushed reticence of the perpetrator, a respectful silence unlike an indifferent silence. On accepting the Nelly Sachs Prize, she commended "the engaged silence without which language and conversation are impossible." Although the accents vary, everything Aichinger wrote over sixty years records her efforts to reclaim both an engaged silence and an

afflicted language. In defiance of the evil spirits, she kept her composure before the incomprehensible, in the greater hope that her writing would be of some avail.



207