2.4 Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte*

At the End the Beginning

> "(In der Geschichte) gibt es ein Mädchen, das im Sterben sein Leben wie im Spiegel wieder erlebt, das einem Freund, als es ihn zum letzten Mal sieht, begegnet, und sich von ihm, als es ihn zum ersten Mal sieht, trennt, dem zuletzt die Zöpfe wieder wachsen und das bei jeder Prüfung immer mehr von dem, was es wusste, vergessen haben muss, bis es endlich im Augenblick des Todes zur Welt kommt."
>
> Ilse Aichinger

THE QUESTION REVERSED

I will now turn to Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte,* the oldest text considered in this thesis and the one with which I will conclude the close-reading review of second-person narrative examples written during the post-war period and after. Aichinger's story is a narrative masterpiece with a remarkable symbolic character and richness in poetic and rhetorical properties. It offers a basis for drawing some final conclusions regarding the poetics of the second-person narrative perspective and expands the notions and concepts discussed in the previous parts of this thesis. Moreover, *Spiegelgeschichte* invites further investigation into philosophical, socio-political and gender themes that this chapter will gesture towards.

Spiegelgeschichte has the limited page range of a *novella*. Without involving or developing a narrative hero, at least in the traditional sense, it involves two parallel narrative levels assigned to two different narrators. From different perspectives, both narrative levels refer to and tell the same plot, namely a woman's life and her dying, but in a different way since they reflect different kinds of logic and connotations. Written in 1948-1949 in the aftermath of the Second World War, *Spiegelgeschichte* primarily deals with mortality, guilt and human experience and, implicitly, also with language, expression and narrative limitations. Praised for her striking narrative artefact, the thirty-one-year old author received the prize of the Group 47 for this text in 1952. Having joined the literary company of the canonical authors of German post-war literature very early in her writing career, Aichinger enjoyed continual respect and recognition from then on.

Spiegelgeschichte reveals its experimental and revolutionary character from the very start, beginning with a sentence in the conditional that correlates the opening of the story with its end, composing its unusual plot in a highly poetic and symbolic style and employing an uncommon structure of duplicity. Because of its cryptic language and challenging form, Aichinger's masterpiece was described as a "sperriges Sprachexperiment,"[267] and indeed, due to its striking content and innovative style that consists of formal experimentation and challenges the traditional themes of writing, it marked a turning point ("Wendepunkt"[268]) in the history of German literature. The author's language gives expression to a period of fear, anxiety and distrust and responds to the need for change and innovation in storytelling in order to voice aspects of a silenced and polemical reality. With *Spiegelgeschichte* Aichinger introduced the theme of reversal and transformation narrated within an alternative narrative strategy

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267 | Wilfried Barner, "Ilse Aichinger: Spiegelgeschichte." In *Interpretationen. Klassische deutsche Kurzgeschichten*. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004) 76.

268 | Barner (2004), 77.

that develops in two streams, involves a number of innovations and reveals new possibilities in writing. The creativity of language is emphasised by giving words unexpected meanings and connotations, and incidents appear in an unforeseen order. Aichinger thus challenges the cause-effect relationships of a life narrated in a way that (re-)creates it, and that enables her to offer a new approach to philosophical questions about life and death and also the concept of beginning and ending.

Aichinger's text experiments with the limits of language and representation while thematising writing as a transforming dynamic that challenges traditional ideas and concepts. Examples are the association of death with the end and birth with the beginning; narrating as a means of forgetting rather than remembering; even the composition of a novel in which the main figure is unable to act. *Spiegelgeschichte* reflects events and perceptions of reality in different ways and with different connotations. It also offers a remarkable example of self-reflexivity, liminality and transgression in fiction as it employs the second-person viewpoint in a novel and totally unique way: once again the second-person perspective is employed for a self-centred story, though this time the story doesn't present a self-discovery process but rather the possibility and result of revisiting the past and recreating life at a poetic level. To do so, Aichinger invents an enigmatic mirror which reflects the events, but with distortions. What is seen in the mirror of *Spiegelgeschichte* is narrated by an enigmatic voice that employs the *du*.

Der **blinde** Spiegel mit den Fliegenflecken läßt dich verlangen, was noch keine verlangt hat.
[...]
Und da erschrickt die Alte. Und in dem großen Schrecken, in dem **blinden** Spiegel erfüllt sie deine Bitte. Sie weiß nicht was sie tut, doch in dem **blinden** Spiegel geling es ihr.[269]

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269 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.

The following close-reading analysis of *Spiegelgeschichte* will focus first on its content and structure, concentrating on the two narrative levels of which it is composed; then discuss the mirror element as a catalyst for the theme and as a rhetorical tool; and finally examine and clarify the value and dynamic of the second-person pronoun as employed by Aichinger in a total reversal of what we have seen so far.

The Two Plots

Two narrative levels and plots referring to the same topic make up *Spiegelgeschichte*. It tells the story of the episodes of a life (and death) in three parts and from two different perspectives, which approach the topic according to their own logic and consequently select different parts of the life and death theme. *Spiegelgeschichte* generally refers to the life and death story of a young woman whose name is never revealed and who is dying in a hospital bed after a botched abortion. The first narrative level has a linear flow, reports the final stages of her life and the decline in her health, and is composed in the third person. This level shows the perspective of others, namely the hospital staff, regarding the woman's situation and her experience.

It appears in *Spiegelgeschichte* in only four sentences that resemble announcements as they inform us of the condition of the woman's health, and divide her life (and the novel) into three parts addressing the corresponding periods: that of suffering and death, that of a youthful period of love full of expectations and hopes, and that of childhood and infancy. The order in which these periods appear in the text is reversed, going against the forward flow of the narrative, and they belong as narrative-fragments to the second narrative.

The sentences of the first narrative are positioned at intervals in the novel. They signal the transition from one life-period to another and raise salient points which, although they cannot be subverted, are brought into question in the second narrative. The end of *Spiegelgeschichte* is emphatic as the second-person narrator, desig-

nated by the enigmatic voice, questions the death announcement by the third-person narrator.

> "Es ist zu Ende –" sagen die hinter dir, "sie ist tot!"
> Still! Laß sie reden![270]

The narrator of the second narrative level which prevails in the majority of the pages and covers the period from burial to birth, is an enigmatic voice that employs the second person and tells the woman of episodes of her life and death in reverse, as they are seen in the mirror mentioned earlier. The theme of reversal affects every condition of the narrative: it is apparent in the reverse flow of events that is followed, and impacts on their meaning and the ways in which those events correlate.

The *ordo inversus* influences the casual and temporal relationships of the narrated events, with reasons depicted as results, altered sequences and connotations. Manifesting the theme of reversal, the second narrative level describes a backward progress of reversing and thus transforming in the sense of undoing life events, and when at the end it refers to the woman's birth (coinciding with her death as per the other narrative flow) it questions this (her death) as well. Striking also is the condition of this route as a process of forgetting and unlearning, so as to reach a terminal point.

Das schwerste bleibt es doch, das Sprechen zu vergessen und das Gehen zu verlernen, hilflos zu stammeln und auf dem Boden zu kriechen, um zuletzt in Windeln gewickelt zu werden. Das schwerste bleibt es, alle Zärtlichkeiten zu ertragen und mehr zu schauen. Sei geduldig! Bald ist alles gut. Gott weiß den Tag, an dem du schwach genug bist.[271]

In the end the two narratives reflect both terminal points (death and birth) which, though not identical, are treated equally in *Spiegelge-*

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270 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 52f.
271 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 52.

schichte. They manage to deprive them of any positive or negative connotations. The story opens with the mysterious voice describing scenes of a burial and a funeral up until the final moment of death.

Wenn einer dein Bett aus dem Saal schiebt, wenn du siehst, daß der Himmel grün wird, und wenn du dem Vikar die Leichenrede ersparen willst, so ist es Zeit für dich, aufzustehen, leise, wie Kinder aufstehen, wenn am Morgen Licht durch die Läden schimmert, heimlich, daß es die Schwester nicht sieht und schnell![272]

The employment of the second-person perspective at the beginning has the more generic sense of describing a common, though strikingly unpleasant situation gesturing both towards the woman and the reader. Its syntax and content set reversal as a dominant theme and style of the (dominant) second-person narrative and establish the conditions for reading *Spiegelgeschichte*. Even in its title, the novel announces the key role that the mirror holds and implies its being a catalyst for the theme of reversal.

Aichinger assigns to the mirror a double role in *Spiegelgeschichte*: it shows the events that the voice has exclusive access to, and narrates and defines the structure and rhetoric of the text, since the events are narrated in a modified way because of the distorting mirror. The rhetorical value and ambiguity of the role the mirror acquires in *Spiegelgeschichte* is more prominent in the title's English translations. They show variation, *Life Story in Retrospect (Mirror Story)*[273] and *Story in Reverse*,[274] and they thus interpret the ambivalence and duplicity of the distinction between the two words more expressly and orientate the reading of the narrative and the reception of the

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272 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

273 | Ilse Aichinger, "Life Story in Retrospect." In *Ilse Aichinger*. Ed. J. C. Alldridge. Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1969. 65-77.

274 | Ilse Aichinger, "Story in Reverse." In *German Short Stories 1= Deutsche Kurzgeschichten* 1. Ed. Richard Newnham. Trans. Christopher Levenson. London: Penguin Books, 1964. 27- 51.

mirror in a rhetorical direction. Before we continue with the close reading of the novel, it is important to emphasise that the analysis of *Spiegelgeschichte* is based on the relationship between the "Spiegelndem" and the "Gespiegelten," a constellation that has an impact on all narrative conditions including plot, narrator and structure.

Aber da hat er schon begonnen, der Vikar, da hörst du seine Stimme, jung und eifrig und unaufhaltsam, da hörst du ihn schon reden. Laß es geschehen! Laß seine guten Worte untertauchen in dem blinden Regen. Dein Grab ist offen. Laß seine schnelle Zuversicht erst hilflos werden, daß ihr geholfen wird. Wenn du ihn läßt, wird er am Ende nicht mehr wissen, ob er schon begonnen hat [...] Und sie nehmen den Kranz vom Deckel und geben ihn dem jungen Mann zurück.[275]

The reverse narrative involves words that validate its reversed logic: "zurück, wieder zurück, wieder hinauf"[276] and give the second narrative an uncommon character with a flow that is hard to follow, continuously challenging by reversing, undoing and then transforming and recreating the story of the woman's life. Actions, emotions and feelings are mostly recorded descriptively and in a consistently affirmative tone; meanwhile rhetorical, self-reflexive questions ("Was bleibt jetzt zu tun?"[277]) pop up.

At other points ("Er weint. Du bleibst nicht länger in der Leichenhalle. Warum weint er?"[278]), the tone is more intimate, subjective and comforting. Thus it creates a consultative and personal aura, one that characterises the proximity the voice has to the woman, taking the role of adviser sometimes; this also can be seen in a syntax full of subjunctive forms ("Du hättest ihn warnen können, aber um dieser Ehre willen ist noch keiner aus dem Sarg gestiegen"[279]); these forms

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275 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

276 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

277 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

278 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 45.

279 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 44.

reflect the unreal but fictionally realised process of revisiting the past. The future reflects the past, being already known, and is therefore articulated in an oxymoronic style as something definite and concrete ("Du wirst es später lange nicht mehr fertigbringen, so still zu liegen. Am nächsten Tag kommt der junge Mann wieder"[280]).

> Und sie haben dir das Tuch wieder um den Mund gebunden, und das Tuch macht dich so fremd. [...] Und ein wenig später werden sie dir das Tuch vom Kopf nehmen müssen, ob sie es wollen oder nicht. [...] Der Morgen wird schon dunkler.[281]

In the first part the voice describes moments after the woman's death, hence incidents that the woman could not have had access to while she was alive. This point raises additional doubts about the already controversial and enigmatic relationship the woman has with the narrating voice. Since, however, the discourse covers only the moment of burial, it is not that disturbing in the logic of the narrative. Regarding the relationship between the woman and the voice, which will be reviewed in the following section, this thesis prefers a rhetorical approach and will discuss it only in poetic terms avoiding any metaphysical or other types of approaches. The brief post-death period finishes when death is announced in the first out of the four sentences articulated by the people in the hospital.

> "Die Fieberträume lassen nach", sagt eine Stimme hinter dir, "der Todeskampf beginnt!" Ach die! Was wissen die?[282]

The almost ironic response of the voice gives a first hint about the relationship between the two narratives and the way they interrelate. From the moment the irreversibility of the woman's condition is declared, the voice continues the reverse narrative flow, but from

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280 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 45.
281 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 45f.
282 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 46.

this point onwards describes events from her life, starting from its very last moments. The moments of suffering are depicted in detail; the tension and emotional intensity reach their peak with the experience of the abortion that, as we know from the beginning, is fatal and linked to feelings of disappointment with the young man who didn't meet the expectations of his lover.

Die Schmerzen jagen dich, den Weg wirst du ja finden. Erst links, dann rechts und wieder links, quer durch die Hafengassen, die so elend sind, dass sie nicht anders können, als zum Meer zu führen. Wenn nur der junge Mann in deiner Nähe wäre, aber der junge Mann ist nicht bei dir, im Sarg warst du viel schöner.[283]

At certain moments we detect traces of criticism and despair ("Wie soll denn auch eines davon dein Kind sein, wenn du zur Alten gehst, die bei der Kneipe wohnt?"[284]) that emphasise the personal tone and the insistent focus on the voice-woman relationship, the nature of their communication and connection, and that almost immediately dispel from the reader the sense of being addressed, inherent in the second person and offered at the opening of the narrative. The focus on the woman is emphatic as can be seen in the narrative's lack of any direct characterisation of secondary narrative figures, with the exception of the actual abortion, when the voice is permitted some negative observations about the old woman who performed it and who is described as an alcoholic who lives in a dirty haunted house.

Das weiß der ganze Hafen, wovon die Alte ihren Schnaps bezahlt. Sie steht schon an der Tür. Die Tür ist offen, und sie streckt dir ihre Hand entgegen, die ist schmutzig. Alles ist dort schmutzig.[285]

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283 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 46.
284 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.
285 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.

The secondary characters are bare and mostly male; about the father, for example, very little is revealed. Children make an appearance more frequently and they signify the emotions associated with the abortion. Other characters simply provide the means to undermine social institutions: the priest, for example, is shown as a neutral figure who with his words represents a particular culture but poses no threat to the young woman. He is treated with implicit irony by the narrative voice while he conducts the funeral.[286] The same critical approach is found in the description of the woman's feelings towards her lover, spread throughout the narrative but without such indirectness: in the case of the lover, a lack of empathy and social understanding is emphasised.[287]

Sie lassen dich allein. So allein lassen sie dich, daß du die Augen aufschlägst und den grünen Himmel siehst, so allein lassen sie dich, daß du zu atmen beginnst, schwer und röchelnd und tief, rasselnd wie eine Ankerkette, wenn sie sich löst. Du bäumst dich auf und schreist nach deiner Mutter. Wie grün der Himmel ist![288]

Other people are referred to as hostile somehow, especially to the world of women, and they remain unnamed and distant. In terms of linguistics this is expressed in universal statements in an impersonal syntax while in specific parts of the discourse the collective term *Leute* is used to show the contrast between the woman and the rest of society. At a moment of high emotional intensity, the perspective of the text changes when the narrative voice begins to use the first person, adopting the voice of the woman so as to speak to

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286 | "Er schüttelt dem jungen Mann heftig die Hand und wünscht ihm vor Verlegenheit viel Glück. Es ist sein erstes Begräbnis, und er errötet bis zum Hals hinunter." Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

287 | Henry U. Gerlach, *Einwände und Einsichten. Revidierte Deutungen deutschsprachiger Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.* (München: Iudicium, 2002) 292-294.

288 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 46.

the old woman who performs the abortion, demanding that she try to, and succeed in (in the context of the second-person narrative) bringing her baby back to life, in other words, *undoing* the abortion.

"Mach mir mein Kind wieder lebendig!" Das hat noch keine von der Alten verlangt. Aber du verlangst es. Der Spiegel gibt dir Kraft. Der blinde Spiegel mit den Fliegenflecken läßt dich verlangen, was noch keine verlangt hat.
"Mach es lebendig, sonst stoß ich deine gelben Blumen um, sonst kratz ich dir die Augen aus, sonst reiß ich deine Fenster auf und schrei über die Gasse, damit die hören müssen, was sie wissen, ich schrei."
Und da erschrickt die Alte. Und in dem großen Schrecken, in dem blinden Spiegel erfüllt sie deine Bitte. Sie weiß nicht was sie tut, doch in dem blinden Spiegel gelingt es ihr.[289]

This moment is the climax of the narrative. It shows the profound difference between the two narrative streams and what they connote: what is done in the third-person narrative is altered and transformed in the second-person narrative. This climax also displays a key element of the narrative when the distorting mirror is mentioned for the first time, the one that we have described as a fundamental tool for the plot and thematic catalyst for *Spiegelgeschichte* right from the beginning and the one which is used for the composition and constellation of the dominant plotline in reverse. This mirror doesn't offer a true reflection of the objects but a reversed and modified one, therefore it is characterised as *blind*. In German, a *blind* mirror is one that has turned dirty and milky-white due to age and that therefore cannot reflect images placed before it. Such a description may suggest alienation and an obstacle to self-revelation, but it may also offer a chance to see things anew, from a different perspective, taking advantage of a temporally advanced and thus superior angle.[290]

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289 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.
290 | Deborah Janson, "Ilse Aichinger's Spiegelgeschichte: Challenging the Symbolic Order." In *Frauen: MitSprechen MitSchreiben. Beiträge zur*

At this point we can explain the double function that the *blind* mirror has in the text: thematically it generates the plot of the narrative while formally it points to the mechanism that reverses the events of the past as they are reflected back, transformed, and thus defining the reverse rhetoric of *Spiegelgeschichte*. Of course, apart from what the mirror literally *does* in the narrative, it also suggests a metaphor and echoes self-reflexivity as it makes concrete in the narrative the reflective sense of literature and poetics as *poesies,* while at the same time it underlines the creativity and transformative properties of language.

Bevor er weiß, daß du das Kind erwartest, nennt er dir schon die Alte, bevor er sagt, daß er dich liebt, nennt die Alte. Sei ruhig! Er weiß nicht, daß du bei der Alten schon gewesen bist, er kann es auch nicht wissen, er weiß nichts von dem Spiegel. Aber kaum hat er's gesagt, hat er es auch vergessen. Im Spiegel sagt man alles, daß es vergessen sei. Und kaum hast du gesagt, daß du das Kind erwartest, hast du es auch verschwiegen. Der Spiegel spiegelt alles.[291]

Omniscient and omnipotent (as per the limits of the woman's story), the mirror portrays the fantasy of undoing the damage caused by the entanglement of the woman with the young man. It may show nothing new, but by exposing the past to new perceptions and in a reverse way, it enables events to be judged anew, reformed and then forgotten as they recede into the future while the narrative progresses further into the past. By making true forgetting possible, the woman can revisit and re-experience her past in a new way and proceed to the end which actually coincides with her birth, a symbolic start and new beginning.

Coming back to the close reading of the text, the section dealing with despair ends with a sentence that marks the second sentence

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literatur- und sprachwissenschaftlichen Frauenforschung. (Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz Akademischer Verlag, 1997) 500.

291 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 48.

of the third-person narrative following the reference to the mirror when, again, the voice doubts the ultimate meaning of death:

Was flüstern die in ihren hellen Hauben? "Das ist der Todeskampf!" Die laßt nur reden.[292]

From that point onwards the properties of the mirror and their impact on the second-person narrative are emphasised, especially in reference to the abortion, which is described as left behind and, with relief, forgotten.[293] The narrative in this part chronicles the period of love, including the despair of parting and revealing the expectations, hopes and eagerness for a bright future together with some irony as we know already how things have turned out.

Gib acht, jetzt beginnt er bald von der Zukunft zu reden, von den vielen Kindern und vom langen Leben, und seine Wangen brennen vor Eifer. Sie zünden auch die deinen an. Ihr werdet streiten, ob ihr Söhne oder Töchter wollt, und du willst lieber Söhne. [...]
Die Zukunft ist vorbei. Die Zukunft ist ein Weg am Fluss, der in die Auen mündet. [...]
Drei Tage später wagt er nicht mehr, den Arm um deine Schultern zu legen. Wieder drei Tage später fragt er dich, wie du heißt, und du fragst ihn. Nur wisst ihr voneinander nicht einmal mehr die Namen. [...]
Ihr werdet immer fremder. Von der Zukunft habt ihr schon lange zu reden aufgehört. [...]
Eines Tages ist er dir so fremd, daß du ihn auf einer finsteren Gasse vor einem offenen Tor zu lieben beginnst.[294]

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292 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 49.

293 | "Du hast genug geweint. Nimm deinen Kranz zurück. Jetzt wirst du auch die Zöpfe bald wieder lösen dürfen. Alles ist im Spiegel (...) Im Spiegel tut man alles, dass es vergeben sei (...) Und das verdammte Haus bleibt hinter euch zurück." Aichinger (1954/1979), 49.

294 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 50.

Soon after this part is over, the third-person narrative sets in again with the hospital nurses announcing that death is approaching, thus introducing the third period of the woman's story that reflects childhood and infancy.

"Es dauert nicht mehr lang", sagen die hinter dir, "es geht zu Ende!"[295]

In this final episode the young man is now a stranger to the woman who is pictured as a girl getting younger and younger:

Ein Tag wird kommen, da siehst du ihn zum erstenmal. Und er sieht dich. Zum erstenmal, das heißt: Nie wieder. [...] Jetzt darfst du mit deinen kleinen Brüdern spielen, und du darfst mit ihnen den Fluß entlanggehen, den Weg am Fluß unter den Erlen, und drüben sind die weißen Schindeldächer wie immer zwischen den Wipfeln.[296]

In a sequence full of connotations and reversed metaphors, the girl begins school, unlearns how to write and, when autumn comes, accompanies her father to the cemetery to meet her mother, whose death – provocatively – allows her to join her little daughter in play and to help her with her siblings. The journey back stops after the years of infancy, and when the whole process of unlearning is completed as it reaches the moment of birth, it coincides with the hospital team announcing the death. The end of the narrative, though forming an oxymoron, underlines its duplicity and symbolism and highlights the reversal even more.

Bald kommt der Sommer mit den langen Tagen. Bald stirbt deine Mutter. Du und dein Vater, ihr beide holt sie vom Friedhof ab. Drei Tage liegt sie noch zwischen den knisternden Kerzen, wie damals du. [...]
Es ist gut, daß deine Mutter gestorben ist, denn länger hättest du es mit den kleinen Brüdern allein nicht machen können. Jetzt ist sie da. [...]

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295 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 50.
296 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 51.

Das schwerste bleibt es doch, das Sprechen zu vergessen und das Gehen zu verlernen, hilflos zu stammeln und auf dem Boden zu kriechen, um zuletzt in Windeln gewickelt zu werden.[297]

The fourth and final sentence of the third-person narrative appears very close to the third sentence mentioned earlier, at an accelerating tempo reflecting both the tension and the agony of the imminent death. The moment the story reaches its conclusion and the woman the limits of her physical existence (death and birth), time speeds up, thus emphasising the extreme *Raffung* that characterises the text (*Erzählzeit < erzählte Zeit*).

Es ist der Tag deiner Geburt. Du kommst zur Welt und schlägst die Augen auf und schließt sie wieder vor dem starken Licht. Das Licht wärmt dir die Glieder, du regst dich in der Sonne, du bist da, du lebst. Dein Vater beugt sich über dich.
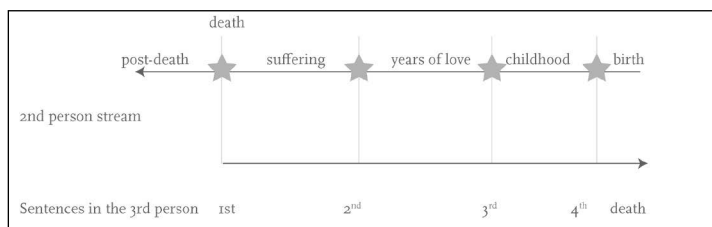"Es ist zu Ende –" sagen die hinter dir, "sie ist tot!"
Still! Laß sie reden![298]

The two narrative levels run parallel in the text and form a symmetry that culminates in the voice announcing the birth of the woman and the nurses announcing her death at the end. The unequal amount of text assigned to each is striking as the reverse plot dominates the narrative while the third-person stream appears only in four sentences that interfere with the dominant second-person narrative stream. This phenomenon should be understood as part of Aichinger's narrative tactics rather than suggesting lesser importance. The sentences of the third-person narrative flow may be brief and few but they serve the structure of the whole story.What is described so far in terms of plot is displayed in the graphic below:

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297 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 52.
298 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 52f.

Spiegelgeschichte is a woman's story of life and death that develops between the two poles and that exceeds its limits by adding onto the first level of happening a second level that reflects that happening as a different plot, changed on the level of language. The second person stream designates the mode of language in which more possibilities are open; the third-person stream is the one describing the events that appear distorted on the other level. The two narrative levels may be contradictory in content and flow but they are complementary in that they inscribe two different yet coexisting narrative modes, and two kinds of logic referring to the same plot in a way that emphasises their differences while they reveal the possibilities of language and representation.[299]

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299 | "*Spiegelgeschichte* erzählt von zwei unterschiedlichen Geschehnissen, deren Abläufe ineinander verschoben und gegeneinander ausgespielt werden. Auf der einen Ebene wird das Leben einer namenlos bleibenden jungen Frau im Rücklauf erzählt, auf einer zweiten Ebene werden die einzelnen Phasen dieser rückwärtig wiederholten Biographie zu den Stadien des regulär fortschreitenden Todeskampfes der Frau in Beziehung gesetzt. Die beiden Ebenen nehmen innerhalb der Erzählung unterschiedlich breiten Raum ein. Den vier umfangreichen Abschnitten, die den Lebensweg der Protagonistin vom offenen Grab bis zum Augenblick ihrer Geburt zurückverfolgen, entsprechen vier kurze Zwischenrufe, die den Beginn, den Höhepunkt, das Ausklingen des Todeskampfes und schließlich den Eintritt des Todes bezeichnen." Annette Ratmann, *Spiegelungen, ein Tanz, Untersuchungen zur Prosa und Lyrik Ilse Aichingers.* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2001) 76.

To that extent we could argue that the one narrative level suggests the reflection mode, in other words the plot, and the second reflects the poetic mode in which language is empowered by the mirror to recreate the plot. In contrast to the third-person narrative level which reflects traditional norms, forms and connotations, the second-person narrative level is more symbolic; it reflects the innovative and thus poetic properties of the technique that is used to explore the dynamics of language within the plot itself and that shows the story in reverse order in all parts and aspects: narrative flow, order of events, reasons and consequences.

In brief, the third-person narrative level expressed by the hospital staff stands for reality and reflects objectivity, while the second-person narrative level voiced and coming from an undefined origin reflects the personal aspect of the same story and appears ambiguous, subjective and even subversive. The third-person stream is more focused on the events and the object of the narration, while the second-person stream emphasises the way these events can be re-narrated and thus transformed in a process of recreation and metamorphosis, which is possible only at the level of language and representation. In the lines of the second-person narrative stream, Aichinger is able to approach themes, forms and metaphors from a reverse angle and explore the frames by challenging the limits of representation at the same time.

Die Kinder spielen mit den Kugeln am Weg. Du läufst in sie hinein, du läufst, als liefst du mit dem Rücken nach vorn, und keines ist dein Kind. Wie soll denn auch eines davon dein Kind sein, wenn du zur Alten gehst, die bei der Kneipe wohnt?[300]

Before we proceed to the next section of this chapter we need to add an observation. The way in which the voice is offered access to the past, telling it backwards while moving forward with the back turned to the future, is a concept similar to Walter Benjamin's study

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300 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.

Über den Begriff der Geschichte and the historical and philosophical implications he draws from Paul Klee's famous painting *Angelus Novus*. [301] Benjamin's essay, written in early 1940 at the beginning of the War, involves a critique of historicism based on poetic and scientific analogies. One key criticism is the rejection of the past conceived of as a continuum of progress. Benjamin argues that to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it the way it really was but rather to seize a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Aichinger, who wrote *Spiegelgeschichte* a few years later, alludes to Benjamin's ideas about historicism and thematises the representation of the past as a process that involves modification and alternation when seen from a temporally superior point of view.

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301 | "Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das Angelus Novus heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht *er* eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm." Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" In *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 1 - II. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) 697f.

THE TWO NARRATORS

Involving two narratives, *Spiegelgeschichte* also has two narrators. Whereas the third-person narrator(s) of the first narrative does not provoke any severe problems and challenges in the study of the novel, reflecting the *actual* life events from an external perspective to the woman and a linear and thus more orthodox description of the events, the situation is not the same for the narrator of the second narrative, a voice that remains enigmatic until the end and that challenges the reading of the story. The attempt to understand the voice and its function in *Spiegelgeschichte* is one that reflects on both narratives that compose the novel: being the narrator of the second-person narrative and commenting on the third-person narrative relies on the relationship the voice has with the woman and the narrative itself.

The fact that the voice is narrating post-death events rules out any interpretation of it being the woman's voice. The separation between the voice and the woman becomes more prominent through the fact that the voice tells the story to the dying woman though she is actually the person who has experienced the narrated events.
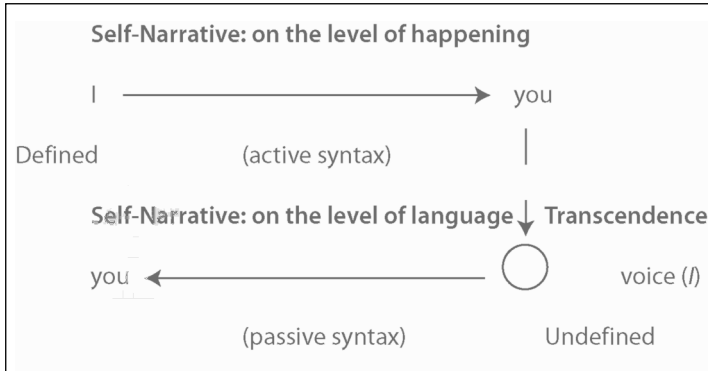
Auf den ersten Blick scheint der Du-Erzähler die Funktion des Bewusstseins der Sterbenden zu erfüllen. Wie sich jedoch am Ende der Erzählung herausstellt, ist es nicht mit ihr identisch. [...] Es kann sich unmöglich um das erlebende und erzählende Ich allein handeln. Außerdem fällt auf, dass die junge Frau nicht in die gleiche Vergangenheit zurückgeführt wird, die sie bereits erlebt hat. Der Erzähler begleitet sie vom Grab bis zur Geburt, navigiert sie aber in eine neue vergangene Zukunft. Diese entsteht durch die verkehrte Kausalverkettung der Ereignisse und stellt die alte Vergangenheit in Frage. Die Sterbende scheint auf diese Führung angewiesen zu sein [...].[302]

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302 | Andrea Nagy, *"Spiegelgeschichte" von Ilse Aichinger. Eine Analyse*. (Norderstedt: Grin Verlag, 2004) 5.

However, the esoteric tone of this narrative and the fact that the information revealed is more personal and subjective, reflecting an internal perspective on the story, implies that the voice shares some sort of direct association with the woman. Aichinger implies in *Spiegelgeschichte* that while alive, one engages in autobiographical self-talk in the second person. In her example the transcendence of the *I* to a *you* is a primitive and autonomous lifelong process. This phenomenon is elaborated on and embedded in the novel with the addition of the (distorting) mirror, located in between life and death and allowing this autobiographical talk to be seen. Since the voice has exclusive access to what is seen in the mirror, it is the one that narrates it in the same way that it generates the content and the form of the second-person narrative.

As for the question of the relationship between the woman and the voice, supported by the personal and intimate tone of the second-person narrative and the exclusive access to personal details, emotions and feelings that the voice enjoys, the argument maintained in the thesis is that the voice should be understood as belonging to the woman, even if it is not *her* voice. It suggests a non-identical reflection of the woman's silenced and deceased *I* which had been the *speaking I* while she was alive, performing a continuous second-person self-talk narrative about the events of her life which are now narrated transformed and reversed as they are reflected back to her in the *blind* (distorting) mirror. The way these life events are shown in the mirror and are narrated reversed allows the woman to re-experience them in this new context, composing in the end *another* life than the one that will soon come to an end.

The voice reflects an *I* in *off* modus, the one that has been performing this lifelong self-talk, and at the moment of death (or birth in the second-person narrative) which represents actual transcendence, is narrated backwards the way it is seen in the mirror. Hence the voice narrates the story using the second person in sequence with the lifelong *I-you* transcendence. The transformation of the *I* described above is pictured below:

Self-Narrative: on the level of happening

I   →   you

Defined   (active syntax)

Self-Narrative: on the level of language ↓ Transcendence

you ←   ◯   voice (*I*)

(passive syntax)   Undefined

In the graphic above, we see that in such a constellation and with the second narrative generated in the mirror, we actually have two narrative *you-s* which, though related to the same plot and being reflections of the same events, are quite different. The second occurs after the mirror is used and this reflection is not only thematic/biological but poetic as well. At this poetic level and confirming the original meaning of the word deriving from the Greek verb ποιέω, which means to create, the events are re-created, oxymoronically, given that first they needed to be forgotten. The result of this process is the second-person narrative which addresses the themes of reversal and metamorphosis, and shows how plastic the properties of language are at a level at which a (re)creation of life (for example one without the failed abortion), is possible.

In this we notice an intriguing difference between Aichinger's narrative and Wolf's novel in terms of life-assessment and past access: whereas in *Kindheitsmuster* the main aspiration was related to remembering and employing the proper devices and mechanisms to examine and rectify memories in order to arrive at a genuine representation of the past, in Aichinger the process of dealing with the past is actually related to a process of forgetting, unlearning and undoing, reflecting the theme of reversing that dominates *Spiegelgeschichte*.

The notion of reversal is also expressed in the fact that the active syntax of the lifelong self-talk in which the *I* (the woman) was an active agent has transformed into the passive, as due to the condition of her health the woman is unable to act. She is but a passive recipient of the narrative, the one that the voice needs to narrate. Before proceeding to the next section of this chapter, which will be concerned with the structure of the novel and the way the reversal is linked to a so-called *poetics of metamorphosis,* it is important to raise an additional point: Aichinger expands and reverses constellations that were previously discussed in the other second-person narratives.

Her innovation lies in the following constellation: in *Spiegelgeschichte* the issue of determining the reference of the second-person pronoun that dominated our earlier close readings is reversed as it reflects the problem of determining the voice of a narrator who uses the second-person perspective throughout the text and not that of the addressee who is specified. In Aichinger's example the *du* is defined; in contrast to all previous novels, it is definitely referring to the dying woman and including the reader at the beginning of the narrative. What remains undefined until the end of the narrative is its origin, the mysterious voice designating the narrator of the second-person narrative. The voice remains ambiguous and enigmatic until the end, only the relationship with the woman and its role in the novel can be speculated on through the narrative, but even as a narrator, the voice designates an *off*-type that contains no existential status or autonomy of any kind, designating in the novel what the mirror actually does and shows.

In this total reversal that takes place in the mirror, not only the content, rhetoric and the narrative conditions are reversed and transformed, but even the syntax itself. *Spiegelgeschichte* challenges the readers throughout and especially by choosing the post-death period as the beginning of the story. The reverse narrative stream brings the terminal points very close to each other as we move from the end to the start and then back to the end again, which is actually the start. The narrative circle created reflects the notion of a loop,

echoing that of the *life-cycle* and emphasising how close birth and death are, as with the end and the beginning, implying also that their meaning as well as their connotations are subjective.

Spiegelgeschichte challenges the norms of convention and, based on the relationship between "Spiegelndem" and "Gespiegelten" that we highlighted at the beginning of this chapter; how a plot, narrator and also a form and structure can appear differently in a *blind* mirror, that is at the level of language and representation. Aichinger presents not just a story of a distorting mirror that can reflect life back once it reaches its end; it is also a story that thematises the process of writing and that challenges the limits of expression and language itself. *Spiegelgeschichte* is a symbolic story about expression that experiments with its possibilities by applying the mirror as a key element for the plot and as an essential factor for the rhetorical strategy, adding to the structure of the narrative and showing on a separate narrative level the protean character of language and its dynamic.

THE THEME OF REVERSAL AND TRANSFORMATION

The theme of metamorphosis is fundamental to the second-person narrative stream and its rhetoric since the *ordo inversus* that the distorting mirror generates affects its content, structure and language in every respect. As a linguistic symbol the mirror represents the author's idea of language as subversive and transcendental, recasting the opinion that literature can serve to reflect reality by showing aspects of life often absent in conventional narratives and also different from the way they originally occurred.[303]

In the following, I shall analyse the rhetoric of the text, clarifying the meaning of the term "poetics of metamorphosis" as used in this chapter to describe the consistent reversal as a narrative technique Aichinger relies on, inscribed and legitimised in the text by the dis-

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303 | Janson (1997), 500.

torting mirror and combined with the rhetorical and poetic properties inherent in the second-person narrative perspective that enables her to compose a story about, and also as reflected within, a mirror.

The rhetoric of metamorphosis is evident firstly in the way the content of *Spiegelgeschichte* is organised in the text. As we have seen in the previous section, the story involves both the reversed narrative of the woman's life as shown in the distorting mirror and the (post-) death episodes as well as the third-person narrative that chronicles the decline of the woman's health culminating in the ultimate reversal in which birth coincides with death, both leading to the post-death sequence. The reciprocity and narrative dualism with which the narrative attains the dynamics of (distorted) mirroring serves as a contrast between two poles, the inner and the outer, as well as the different order and logic they reflect; this is the main metamorphosis we witness in the text.

The second-person narrative technique assures the coherence of the text by initiating a sort of dialogue between the two (when the voice comments on the third-person sentences) and by keeping the two narrative levels together.[304]The technique of transformation and the rhetoric of metamorphosis are evident in the reversal of the life and death episodes and they have an impact on the time sequence and the cause-and-effect relationship which in the style of the second-person narrative stream justifies the dominance of subversive language: this figural reversal is the other aspect in which the rhetoric of metamorphosis manifests itself, affecting the narrative as a whole and also the individual components.

Aichinger's images are whimsical and perplexing on a first reading, and they contrast with conventional metaphors and evoke a sense of ambivalence. Words, metaphors ("wenn du siehst, dass

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304 | "Durch die Simultaneität der Außen- und Innenperspektive erscheint die Biographie gleichermaßen individuell wie allgemein, ebenso speziell wie exemplarisch. Eine ähnliche Wirkung geht auch von der Protagonistin selbst aus – als ein "Du" rückt sie in vertraute Nähe und bleibt doch namenlos und distanziert." Ratmann (2001), 78f.

der Himmel grün wird")[305] and similes acquire contrary meanings and connotations; the sky and the sea, for example, are rather surprisingly associated with serious illness and the tragic fate of the woman. Infancy is associated with death since at the opening of the text the coffin brings birth and its decline through youth and rejuvenation. Happiness reflects pain and, as a ceremony, even the funeral is reminiscent of a wedding in several ways ("Und der Leichenwagen fährt fröhlich nach Hause").[306] It is as if the truths of life were fully realised only in retrospect.[307]

While these conventional figurative elements carry inverted connotations thereby challenging their customary positive and negative values, Aichinger manages to employ the same tactics in the syntax itself. *Spiegelgeschichte* is a text that portrays the experience of mortality on the verge of its limits, located on the threshold between life and death, depicting the sense of *not anymore* but still *not yet*. At this in-between temporal stage the present tense is the only legitimate choice for maintaining the coherence and balance of the text.

Spiegelgeschichte in its second-person stream challenges and reverses all the norms of tenses, resulting in the striking phenomenon that present perfect is used to describe future events while incidents of the past are described by future tenses, with the adverbs following the same principle ("Und ein wenig später werden sie dir das Tuch vom Kopf nehmen müssen, ob sie es wollen oder nicht. Und sie werden dich waschen und deine Hemden wechseln, und einer von ihnen wird sich schnell über dein Herz beugen, schnell, solang du noch tot bist"[308]). The only solid, definite temporal ground is that of the present tense ("Ihr werdet immer fremder"[309]); it establishes a sense of contemporaneity and of an evolving narrative while

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305 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

306 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 44.

307 | Carol Bedwell, "The Ambivalent Image in Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte*." In *Revue des Langues Vivantes* 33 (1967), 364f.

308 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 45.

309 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 51.

extending the time of the narration in the perception of the reader, delaying the moment of death.

The sense of contemporaneity and actuality is emphasised not only in the use of temporal adverbs ("jetzt") but also in the imperative syntax ("Geh jetzt! Jetzt ist der Augenblick!"[310]), the rhetorical questions ("Was soll jetzt werden?"[311]) and in the short sentences ("Und die Alte ist viel zu freundlich. Und die Treppen knarren auch hier. Und die Schiffe heulen, wohin du immer gehst, die heulen überall"[312]) that dominate the text and accelerate the tempo of the discourse.

The rhetorical function of metamorphosis extends to every single detail of the novel: sentences often resemble the structure of poetic verses; two phrases reflect one another, separated by a comma that functions as a line break between them; the phrases, while similar in that they involve repeated words, reflect a transformed meaning. What is stated in the first phrase is undermined or altered in the second ("Laß seine schnelle Zuversicht erst hilflos werden, daß ihr geholfen wird"[313], "so lassen dich allein. So allein lassen sie dich, daß du die Augen aufschlägst und den grünen Himmel siehst, so allein lassen sie dich, daß du zu atmen beginnst, schwer und röchelnd und tief, rasselnd wie eine Ankerkette, wenn sie sich löst"[314], "Der blinde Spiegel mit den Fliegenflecken läßt dich verlangen, was noch keine verlangt hat"[315], "Du wirst es nicht vergessen, wenn er es auch vergißt"[316]). Consistent with the same pattern and emphasising the rhetoric of metamorphosis, words are often repeated throughout the text ("da hörst, Trägern – Träger"[317], "blaß – Blässe, verdammte – ver-

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310 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 46.

311 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 50.

312 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.

313 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

314 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 46.

315 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 47.

316 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 48.

317 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

dammt"[318]) or they come in opposing pairs ("Da reicht der Morgen noch lange in die Nacht hinein"[319], "darauf – hinauf"[320]).

Opening the text with a conditional sentence is also regarded here as an example of the rhetoric of metamorphosis. The first word *(wenn)* of the story suggests lexical ambiguity and creates a sense of unease and doubt that *Spiegelgeschichte* continues to provoke even after this first glimpse.[321] Rather than choosing a sentence with which to start her text on firm ground with an affirmative expression, Aichinger uses a doubtful *wenn* to open a sentence in which further ambivalence is created by the tense employed and which hangs between the temporal and the conditional.

Wenn einer dein Bett aus dem Saal schiebt, wenn du siehst, daß der Himmel grün wird, und wenn du dem Vikar die Leichenrede ersparen willst, so ist es Zeit für dich, aufzustehen, leise, wie Kinder aufstehen, wenn am Morgen Licht durch die Läden schimmert, heimlich, daß es die Schwester nicht sieht – und schnell![322]

In German grammar *wenn* can be used as a temporal conjunction *(dann wenn)*, a hypothetical-conditional conjunction *(falls)* or as an iterative *(immer wenn)* conjunction. Consequently a reader of the initial sentence is puzzled by the lack of precision. In the context of *Spiegelgeschichte*, the temporal aspect may be dominant and correspond with the general lack of specificity, but since the two other functions coexist, the sentence acquires a hybrid ambiguous meaning filtered by the conjunction *(wenn)* and implying the experimental character of the text and its reciprocal structure: one narrative level is a modified version of the other, and is also the one reflecting the other.

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318 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 49.

319 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 44.

320 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

321 | Barner (2004), 78.

322 | Aichinger (1954/1979), 43.

The problem of determining the meaning of the opening conjunction is more evident in the English translations of *Spiegelgeschichte,* where we get different interpretations as no equivalent form exists that encompasses the functional ambiguity of *wenn.* One of the translations chooses a temporal interpretation:

When someone pushes your bed out of the ward, when you see that the sky is growing green and when you want to save the priest the trouble of holding a funeral service, then it is time for you to get up, softly, as children do when in the mornings the light shines through the shutters, secretly, so that the nurse doesn't see – and quickly![323]

Others, however, prefer a conditional interpretation:

If someone pushes your bed out of the ward, if you see that the sky is turning green, and if you want to spare the curate the trouble of a funeral sermon, then it is time you got up, as quietly as children get up when the light shimmers through the shutters in the morning, stealthily, so that the sister does not see you – and quickly![324]

If the speculative conjunction is startling, the undefined subject *einer* further amplifies a sense of ambiguity as the sentence continues, creating a context of generic references as times, places and subjects are unnamed and remain so until the end.[325] The sense of impersonality and the lack in the narrative of any determining details encourage the reader to identify with the narrative *du.* However, this sense fades very quickly as the subjectivity and intimate tone of the narrating voice is not eliminated but rather orients itself increasingly towards the woman, shifting the focus onto the relationship between the woman and the narrative voice, thus also reflecting on the rhetoric of the text.

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323 | Aichinger Trans. Alldridge (1969), 65f.

324 | Aichinger Trans. Levenson (1964), 29.

325 | Barner (2004), 78.

As early as the third word (*dein*) in the opening sentence, Aichinger establishes the second-person as the dominant narrative perspective for most of the story, with the exception of a first-person passage at the climax of the abortion, a passage that we have discussed earlier in the chapter, as well as the four sentences in the third person that also serve the rhetoric of metamorphosis. In *Spiegelgeschichte* we can observe how the notion of dialogue and the emphatic tone of address that characterise the second-person storytelling serve the ongoing metamorphosis, starting with the reversal of the roles of the narrator and addressee and then affecting all other conditions of the text.

The way the narrative is generated as pictured in the mirror, hence narrated unchanged from a second-person perspective, shows the voice to be impersonal, an inanimate figure that functions as a voice-over (off-screen) narrator positioned in an in-between place, at a middle point in, and superior to the world of fiction. The second-person narrative is the reflection of the self-talk the woman was performing as an active speaking *Ich (I)* while alive and which has now been transformed and transposed to a *gespiegelten du (you)* that reflects this narrative back to her reversed in order and meaning, keeping – though only formally – the same (second-person) perspective as both addressees (woman/reader) are unable to react or participate in any form of dialogue, in a novel where there is no narrative figure.

This reversal also implies that the syntax is subject to a transformation from active to passive, at least as long as it refers to the authority that the woman has on the narrative, shifting to being a passive recipient of the narrated events instead of an active speaker. The personal and intimate tone that characterises the voice and its association with the woman also explains why Aichinger preferred the more personal, singular form *du* to other pronouns like the more common but still distant (external) German *Sie*. Her choice is also bound up with an attempt to create a secret, coded language that resembles that of children and is unknown to adults, designating

the *others,* who appear hostile to the woman throughout the entire narrative.

The voice taking over the second-person perspective in the text represents the central enigma of *Spiegelgeschichte*, that is the unique use of the technique to narrate a story in reverse in all single aspects and elements involved, based on the oxymoronic condition of forgetting so as to recreate the life and even reversing and moving the focus of interest, from the addressee of the second person and its reference to its origin and source. The second person here – as a narrative figure per se – reflects a duplicity and designates the transformation that the subject has experienced when reaching the limits of existence. Linguistically, it is the proposed narrative alternative that can be used effectively when the first-person perspective has become unavailable, having reached its own expressive limits. In other words the use of the enigma of the second person in the story is related to the reverse of the definite and indefinite, given the fact that whereas this *you* is a definite reference to the woman, it is then transformed into a *you* coming from the voice of the indefinite narrator.

Considering the innovative technique of *Spiegelgeschichte,* Aichinger's text may be situated in the dominant general atmosphere of distrust regarding language at the time. It answers the need for innovation in both literature and expression by offering a convincing narrative alternative. Aichinger's reflexive technique is also applicable to other art forms. In cinema we encounter it as *flashbacks, jump-cuts* and *voice-over* or even *off-screen narrators.*[326] In

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326 | "Filmisch an der *Spiegelgeschichte* ist aber nicht nur diese Rückwärtsbewegung und die Ähnlichkeit mit einem Lebensfilm, sondern greifbar ist Filmisches auch in einer deutlichen Medienverschänkung und einer Palette von filmischen Verfahren, die intermedial eingesetzt werden: Visualisierung und filmischer Blick, Handlungsstrukturierung in visuell intensive Szenen und Parallelmontage, dazu das Sprechen aus dem Off, um die wichtigsten filmischen Elemente zu nennen." Peter Beicken, "Die Geschichte von Leben und Tod: Ilse Aichingers *Spiegelgeschichte* als intermediales Kino." In *Ilse*

Spiegelgeschichte Aichinger offers ideas relating to socio-political and philosophical problems, gender theory, historicism and revolt. The expansions in these directions that the narrative employs reveal that the theme of reversal and transformation, apart from a narrative quality that enriches the rhetoric of the text, affects meanings and interpretations on a level other than that of narratology, giving the novel a wider social dimension. *Spiegelgeschichte* is a remarkable narrative not only due to its unique composition and unusual theme but also because of its position regarding important issues of human life and social structure.

In relation to gender, for example, with its two impersonal narrators (that of the others and that of the voice) Aichinger's story may be of undetermined time, space and heroes, but it does have – to our surprise with regard to the subversive logic of the text – a clear and subjective tone stemming from an undoubtedly female perspective. Aichinger exploits the profoundly gendered grammar of German to compose a consciously female text: while thematically the narrative transgresses the limits of mortality and reverses and transforms traditional and conventional forms rhetorically, it still keeps gender – its definition and social limitations – bracketed and out of the reversing process.

Spiegelgeschichte investigates the distance between birth, death and after-death clearly from a female point of view. It is not only the themes of abortion and the seduction of a woman which dominate the plot that leave no doubt about this, but it is also the feeling of isolation that the woman experiences, especially compared to the other (mostly male) characters, and the compassion shown towards her that almost none but her deceased mother express.

As a reflexive text that echoes the female voice of its time, *Spiegelgeschichte* may be considered a precursor to the literary revolt of Julia Kristeva. In "Women's Time", Kristeva refers to the specific interaction between the symbolic and the semiotic modal-

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Aichinger. Misstrauen als Engagement? Eds. Rabenstein, Retif and Tunner. (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2009) 110.

ities expressed within each individual: the symbolic indicates the social contract to such an extent that the semiotic can be perceived only as a disruption, silence or absence. Recognising this phenomenon, Kristeva maintains that writers of the generation of the 1960s began searching for a means of expression closer to the body and the emotions, an endeavour that resonates with Aichinger's work. Their literature reflects "women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex."[327]

Aichinger's narrative exemplifies this literary revolt to the extent that it addresses semiotic aspects of reality that usually remain hidden, such as emotions, intuitions, physical sensations, grief, remorse: all the psychological processes the woman of the story undergoes, from pregnancy to illness and ultimately death. By illuminating the causes of the woman's demise, Aichinger confronts the patriarchal tradition of sacrificing the female so as to uphold a male unity as well as Christianity as a social institution, and with her specific, subversive use of language she offers a counter-perspective on death.[328]

CONCLUSION

So können alle, die in irgendeiner Form die Erfahrung des nahen Todes gemacht haben, diese Erfahrung nicht wegdenken, sie können, wenn sie ehrlich sein wollen, sich und die andern nicht freundlich darüber hinwegtrösten.

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327 | Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" in *The Kristeva Reader*. Trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. Ed. Toril Moi. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 207.

328 | Janson (1997), 501.

Aber sie können ihre Erfahrung zum Ausgangspunkt nehmen, um das Leben für sich und andere neu zu entdecken.[329]

To sum up, Aichinger presents a text structured on two levels, one reflecting and the other reflected at the level of language. She employs a distorting mirror to deal with boundaries and limits both biological and expressive in a fictionally credible way by discussing mortality, and the possibilities that literature offers as a means of recreating reality. By thematising the terminal point (death-people/silence-language), her story inverts it: *Spiegelgeschichte* is a narrative that discusses the poetics of the end by applying consistently the technique of reversal and the rhetoric of metamorphosis and implies that ends and endings, though existing in traditional forms and norms (as reflected in the third-person narrative), can always be approached and rediscovered as starting points (as reflected in the second-person narrative).

Aichinger revisits the terminal nature of death and accepts it as part of life without attempting any metaphysical interpretation, while her resilient and versatile symbolic narrative demonstrates that language offers inexhaustible ways of expression and re-creation. Considering the historical and cultural context in which it was written and published, *Spiegelgeschichte* may be considered as giving an optimistic twist to solving problems of literary expression that contemporary writers were facing during the Cold War, when the fear of espionage dominated social relationships.

Aichinger presents an innovative and striking text that provokes uneasiness due to its uncommon technique and theme but also admiration for its uniqueness and brilliance. Her *du* is inscribed in the text in a way that puts a spotlight on its properties and functions. Aichinger achieves this by combining two narrative levels in one and also by employing the third-person perspective as a break from

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329 | Ilse Aichinger, "Das Erzählen in dieser Zeit." In *Ilse Aichinger: Der Gefesselte. Erzählungen 1948-1952.* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991) 10f.

the dominant second-person narrative tactic which invites a comparison between the two.

This *du* stresses the rhetoric of metamorphosis that forms one level of the narrative in direct opposition to the other; a strong sense of dialogue since no reaction from or interaction with the addressee is possible; an emphatic sense of the present and of contemporaneity since all other temporal components are challenged by the reversal; reflexivity per se, triggered by the mirror and evident in the narrative; ambiguity and ambivalence due to being intimate and distant at the same time as it provides the impersonal tone in a subjective narrative of constant depersonalisation.

Spiegelgeschichte is placed last in this thesis because although older, it reflects aspects of all the other second-person narratives discussed earlier and also because of its narrative complexity: it is hoped that its reception and the understanding of the second-person employment have become clearer after having discussed these earlier in less complicated second-person texts. In Aichinger's text we witness a strikingly innovative story of an assessment of and reconciliation with the past, that is like but also unlike what is in Christa Wolf, that describes an emphatic modification such as in Michel Butor in the form of a total metamorphosis, and in contrast to Perec's creation of a person we find ourselves reading the unmaking process of dissolution.

The problem of saying *I* may be easier to trace in Aichinger as the woman is deceased and hence we can argue that the duplicity of the *Spiegelgeschichte* echoes the sense of reversal in its rhetoric as well. Since it involves a known though anonymous addressee the narrative contains no figure of *apostrophe* which is otherwise common in second-person narratives, but it does involve *prosopopoeia* in the way the voice acquires personal properties by narrating and the woman existential status through being addressed.

Also notable regarding the self-reflexive character of the text is that intertextuality may not be as fundamental and generative here as in *Un homme qui dort*, but here, too, it involves the influences and concepts of other authors such as Walter Benjamin. Moreover, inter-

textuality is also implied in the title, expressing the interrelation of literary works as an outcome of mutual reflection, thus commenting on the writing process. Aichinger's story is an outstanding example of second-person fiction, not only for its theme, striking rhetoric and structure, but also because despite its very small number of pages it contains implications and expansions that invite multiple readings and that demonstrate almost excessively the dynamics of language and the possibilities inherent in narrative expression focussing on the second-person narrative mode.

It is also a case of the second person enjoying its most symbolic and poetic narrative employment as it comes from an enigmatic and thus undefined voice that addresses a dying person, positioned in an in-between territory of life and death. Having discussed Aichinger's poetics of reflection, terminal points and the themes of reversal and metamorphosis, this thesis now enters its final stage. It will outline its conclusions regarding the second-person technique and try to list the major observations and assumptions, summarising what has been discussed so far in a comparative way. An overview of the fundamentals of second-person storytelling studied here based on milestones of literature will be offered, expanding and elaborating on the central arguments and observations and formulating some final conclusions.