

Marlen Haushofer: Recollections of Crime and Complicity

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Was wir haben, ist die Erinnerung, oder vielmehr, wir werden von ihr besessen, ob es uns gefällt oder nicht.

All we have is memory, or rather, we are possessed by it, whether we like it or not.

—Marlen Haushofer, *Die Tapetentür*

Ilse Aichinger's "Call for Distrust" ("Aufruf zum Misstrauen") of 1946 is widely known and not only in German Studies circles. This amazingly brief manifesto, barely a printed page in length, was published in the journal *Plan* and has since been considered a testimonial to the postwar mood among intellectuals. In it Aichinger puts the following urgent questions to her readers: "Haven't we looked past each other long enough, whispering instead of speaking, creeping and crawling instead of walking? Haven't we avoided one another long enough, paralyzed with fear? And where are we today?" She vehemently insists that our future lives will depend on our ability to go beyond responding skeptically to all ideology and start distrusting our very own selves: "We must doubt the clarity of our intentions, the depth of our thoughts, and the goodness of our actions. We must distrust our own veracity! [. . .] Aren't [our voices] transparent as glass in their animosity? Isn't [our love] half-rotten with selfishness? Isn't our own honor brittle with arrogance?" Aichinger's reflections conclude with the appeal, "Let us distrust the snake in our hearts! Let us become distrustful of ourselves so that we might become

more trustworthy!" (my translation here and throughout 588).

As we all know, there was no resounding response to Aichinger's call, even though it was aimed at the whole of postwar Austrian society, the persecuted as well as those who had not been persecuted, the bystanders, the fellow travelers, and the perpetrators. In the postwar restoration frenzy there was no time for such moral self-questioning and analytical self-reflection. The program to rebuild Austria did not rest on the moral foundation that Aichinger considered indispensable to collective regeneration and the recovery of humaneness after the horrors of National Socialism. Repression and forgetting as well as exculpations of all kinds quickly became routine strategies for survival after the collapse of the Third Reich. And most Austrians simply did not experience this collapse as liberation.¹

Marlen Haushofer (1920–1970) was a writer with very special antennae for the sentiments of the postwar Austrian society and its notions of survival. In this essay we shall encounter her as an artist who was profoundly distrustful of herself and of her contemporaries—an artist who certainly did question, quite harshly and unrelentingly, "the clarity of our intentions, the depth of our thoughts, and the goodness of our actions," whether in her psychological realism, or in the allegorical realism that characterizes several of her short stories.

A writer who is preoccupied with the ideology of National Socialism does not necessarily have to write about the Shoah. Haushofer's more famous colleague Ingeborg Bachmann went so far as to suggest that fascism is perhaps "the basic characteristic of a relationship between man and woman" (144). Bachmann made this remark in an interview in 1973, three years after the death of Haushofer, who had long since discerned, however, that fascism starts in human relationships.² Furthermore, she was a keen chronicler of the collective "inability to mourn" (*Unfähigkeit zu trauern*). Her seismographic recording of multiple ways to repress and forget the past is overwhelming and almost uncanny in its accuracy—certainly from the point of view of today's reader.

Haushofer's contemporaries, however, did not recognize the political and consciousness-raising dimensions of her analytical perspective on human behavior and human relations as shaped by National Socialism. Perhaps what they did see in it seemed too normal,

too ordinary, and did not point blatantly enough to the most recent (horrible) past. Dorothea Zeemann, for example, considered her colleague Marlen Haushofer to be “escapist,” whereas she claimed political awareness for herself (67). In general the different groups of postwar writers, mentors such as Weigel and Hakel, journalists, and critics of the 1950s and 60s, agreed that Marlen Haushofer’s novels and stories were strictly women’s fiction, lacking in historical and political weight, bourgeois, banal, and harmless. Even when the demonic quality of her protagonists was recognized and when her unflinching gaze at social relations was noticed, the resulting interpretation rarely extended beyond narrowly psychological and biographical contexts.

Only in the last twenty years has the feminist component of Haushofer’s writing been detected and discussed at length.³ This recognition of her gendered perspective has led to the rediscovery and reprinting of her oeuvre. Exhibits pertaining to her life and work have been organized and scholarly anthologies published. This development has been very positive: scholars of German literature such as Sigrid Weigel, Regula Venske, Elke Brüns, Daniela Strigl, Anke Nolte, Franziska Frei Gerlach, and others, have reframed Haushofer’s work in feminist modes of critical discourse and have analyzed the author’s contribution to our understanding of gender issues.

The correlation between the world in which Haushofer lived—postwar Austrian society—and her fictional worlds deserves, however, more critical attention. Her literary production can no more evade the impact of collective trends and sentiments than the work of any other artist. Recent scholarship contains references to the political-historical aspects of her writing, but one of the very few critics really to focus on them is, significantly, another Austrian writer, namely Anna Mitgutsch, like Haushofer from Upper Austria.⁴ She sees Haushofer as addressing the very questions of the legacy of National Socialism, with which she herself has been constantly preoccupied. She has published a remarkable essay on this the title of which, “The Evil of Banality” (inverting Hannah Arendt’s famous “The Banality of Evil”), directly refers to the political content of Haushofer’s work.⁵

In the following pages I propose to follow the train of thought set by Mitgutsch and discuss the works in which Haushofer most

prominently captures the political atmosphere of the postwar period and the ways in which she does this. I shall explore her coming to terms with the collective dilemma of having to balance remembrance and repression. What position does she assume vis-à-vis questions about guilt, responsibility, and “distrust of our very own selves?” What gendered behavior and strategies of memory does she identify? Can we detect a specifically female literary representation of the National Socialist experience, given that Haushofer’s socialization coincided with Austro-Fascism and the Hitler reign?

After an introductory discussion of the relevant historical-political context, I shall comment briefly on two thematically related short stories and then proceed to analyze the text *Wir töten Stella*. I regard this masterpiece as representative of Haushofer’s writing due to its complexity, its motifs, its structure, and its narrative perspective. This does not mean, of course, that the historical-political dimensions of *Wir töten Stella* highlighted in this essay can or should be applied to Haushofer’s work in toto. The significance of her literary achievement rests, as Konstanze Fliedl confirms, in her ability “to find simple and compelling metaphors for the collective condition of the postwar period, and to reveal ‘non-worldliness’ as a strategy of self-protection and self-destruction” (624).

History: The Context

Let us first recall the political situation and the social conditions that existed in Austria in the 50s. We know that the claim to have been occupied, to have been the first victim of the Nazi conquest—accurate in terms of international law—officially allowed Austrians to refuse any and all responsibility for Nazi crimes. The financial gains (deriving from this claim) were enormous for the Austrian state, and the collective gain in self-confidence was quite extraordinary: a pragmatically useful white lie was quickly transformed into “a kind of foundational state myth” (Botz 56) and became part of the national memory.⁶ Furthermore, 85–90% of all registered Nazis (ca. 0.5 million) succeeded in utilizing a legal loophole that would secure them the famous *Persilschein* testifying to their “innocence, harmlessness, and pro-Austrian attitude” and thus whitewashing them from any suspected NS activity (Eisterer 175). By 1995, when

the state treaty was signed by the Allies and Austria was dispatched into democracy and neutrality, all discussion of shared responsibility for the Nazi past had already become moot.⁷ All parties agreed fully on who would be considered a victim, and the victim category did not include those persecuted by the Nazis for their race. It is no wonder, therefore, that Jewish survivors of the Shoah were regarded as a threat to postwar efforts at integration and swift restoration.⁸

Refusing to accept any responsibility for the NS crimes, ignoring the true victims, and trivializing the survivors' legitimate requests for reparations, the Austrian elite as well as the ordinary people of Austria were able to put their energies into redefining their national identity and building up the economy. Some historians and political scientists believe that repression may have been the only viable strategy to secure the country's survival and to meet the general need for harmony and trust-building. It was a way of smothering the fear of ideological divisiveness.⁹ Anton Pelinka points to the salutary consequences of repression as long as its duration is limited: "Taboos and other ways of living a lie serve an ambivalent protective function. They help to cover up painful wounds; they allow for a healing process through ritualized prohibition of touching on the issues, that is, of any discussion of them [. . .]. At some point this process has to be completed and 'the wound' healed" (30). The ambivalence of most Austrians about their claims of victimhood while knowing full well—without ever admitting to it—that they were close "to the world of the 'perpetrators'" (Botz 61) required a history of keeping quiet. Mario Erdheim is convinced that "the memory of the past had to be made a taboo because of the danger that dealing with the past might reactivate former proclivities—that is, fascism with its racism" (quoted in Botz 61).

Creating wholesome order and establishing material well-being were certainly the unquestioned programmatic goals of the restoration during the 50s. Women contributed substantially to the success of this program even though they were driven out of the positions of gainful employment they had occupied during the war and in the immediate postwar years. The independence brought about by "a state of emergency" had no long-term impact on gender relations, probably because the majority of women were socialized during the years of the corporate state (*Ständestaat*) or the Nazi regime.

This made it easy to uphold traditional, conservative notions of the woman as wife and mother. Historian Karin Schmidlechner comments that “after 1945 very little had changed in societal expectations of how women ought to live their lives, and these expectations differed minimally from those held under the Nazis” (321). Gender difference in responsibilities and assignments was definitely desirable in that it assured men their undisputed prerogatives in the public sphere. In the minds of most Austrians as well as in the laws of the country, it was determined that a woman’s duty was at home (even in the case of some form of employment): “The idealized image of the female as peace-loving, conciliatory, and charitable came to guarantee postwar normality. All women’s organizations promoted a politics of difference, not equality, and a maternal mission of global reconciliation” (Bandauer-Schöffmann 227).

This concept of the female peacemaker and women’s non-participation in public, political life exacerbated the tendency for women in the postwar period to evade any sense of responsibility for National Socialism. Their fight on the “home front” had become a non-political activity—regardless of its importance to the racial war—and when it was over, women were not really involved in “losing the war,” at least not in the widely shared collective construction of this experience.¹⁰ I would also like to stress that the absence of any actual places for women’s remembrance itself made it possible for any gender-specific contribution to Hitler’s reign to be discreetly ignored. Women had no regulars’ table in pubs or inns where they could get together, nor could they join veterans’ clubs in order to practice socially acceptable rituals of remembering, whatever the content of that remembering might be.¹¹ Nobody erected war memorials to women; nobody introduced special commemorative anniversaries for them. For women there were no opportunities to glorify their heroism, but there was the shared belief that women simply had not known “about anything.” In the 50s keeping quiet, widely preached and propagated as a female virtue, became a stabilizing force in Austria and thus very useful. Participation in NS life, welcoming the war, etc. turned into taboo topics in the family. The most important educational principle was to learn how to avoid any involvement, how to keep a low profile and stay out of trouble—even when one’s own well-being was not in danger. In their function

as primary caretakers, women assumed the responsibility of teaching the next generation “how to follow a series of rules, norms, and rituals [and] how to make sure that taboo topics were not opened up” (Hauer 23).

As far as the status of women in Austria is concerned—their duties, rights, subordinate functions, and internalized gender typology—women writers of the postwar period are no exception. They frequently base their works in their personal experience, and their perspective on life outside themselves comes essentially from the inside and follows the contours of their own life-story. The events of the most recent past, saturated as they are with ideology, are mentioned, if at all, in the context of effects felt in the private world (Hofmann-Schmidjell 10). There is no place for any activism regarding political alternatives, nor for courageous objection to imposed roles. Christine Hofmann-Schmidjell notes in her study of post-1945 women writers, “In the conservative postwar climate unquestioned internalized patterns of behavior and insufficient strength for resistance functioned as the major obstacles” to a new beginning or an emergence of a public female counter-sphere (20). The public sphere was occupied by men, and young female writers were not permitted to enter it. This kind of exclusion from positions of influence also applied to literary organizations and cultural events, which were, as a rule, led and administered by males. Women and their literary production were definitely not assured publicity or broad reception.

Gender and History: Two Examples

Marlen Haushofer was quite aware of the inferior position in which women (writers) found themselves. She constantly faced the dilemma of how to steal a few hours for literary creativity at her kitchen table, torn as she was between domestic chores, family demands, and assistance in her husband’s dental practice.¹² She was desperate to have some time for her writing even though her commitment to this effort was ridiculed rather than commended or admired. Haushofer’s biography reflects her state of captivity in patriarchal (reactionary) structures and her general lack of connec-

der, Mela Hartwig, and others).¹³ From her heavily annotated copy of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, we can see, however, that subversive material found its way into Haushofer's own writing and helped her to construct alternative realities in her imagination.¹⁴

The painful discrepancy between what was real and what seemed possible was something Haushofer experienced in her own life; her own alienation from her immediate (family) surroundings and her conscious withdrawal into a separate female interior space shaped her literary reflections on the interdependence of the war experience, postwar behavior, and gender roles. Again and again she grappled critically with the betrayal of the self, with responsibility for one's own acts, with guilt for deeds done or left undone. The resulting, often devastating narratives show how the inevitable consequence of morally questionable behavior is the inability to create a meaningful life for oneself and to engage in dialogue with others.

Several of Haushofer's stories and radio plays from the 50s explicitly refer to World War II (bombardments, war activities, refugees, loss, death, and issues of culpability), but these are not the ones that concern me here.¹⁵ I am going to draw attention to only two stories of this period which I regard as early studies on the themes that then become the prime focus of the novella *Wir töten Stella*. These two stories, "Entfremdung" (Alienation) and "Die Geschichte vom Menschenmann" (The Story of the Male of the Species) are, in fact, parables which unambiguously point to National Socialist crimes against humanity—though they are also open to other interpretations, given the mythically stylized and ahistorical world created through the allegorical mode of representation. Of central significance in these quite frightening texts are gendered behavior, power and impotence, and complicity in crime and remorse, as well as the ineluctable consequence of dehumanization.

The "male of the species" thinks for a long time, and then, following his inspiration, he first kills a tyrant in the name of his ideals; he then proceeds to murder all those whose big toe is longer than the second toe; and ultimately he kills his children and his wife. The "great mother," learning about her child's rampage with growing horror, decides to offer her monstrous son to a hungry she-wolf in order to give his life some meaning. Haushofer contrasts the destructive male principles, driven by hubris and intellectual

fanaticism, with a female principle comprising “the great mother” (nature) and the tormented wife. The latter patiently endures the activities of “the male of the species” until her children are victimized and killed—thus until all hope for the future is destroyed. The process of alienation between woman and man has its parallel in the ultimate divorce or reversal of nature and *homo sapiens*. Through her sowing of grass seeds upon the earth, “the great mother” symbolically determines a future evolution independent of the male species and thus negates the continuity of male power.

The female protagonist of the story “Alienation” sees her only chance of survival in her radical separation from her vain, indeed cocky, lover. It is her only chance to escape from her disturbing dream visions that seem to be revealing something truthful to her. In fact, the dream images leave her ensnared in guilt and make her question her sense of reality. She sees all the children of a town being killed by violent attacks of horrific, gigantic roosters with “shiny black beaks, iridescent feathers, and crimson combs” (234). Even the one child entrusted to the protagonist’s care is killed in a strange epidemic causing a rash of deadly “brown spots.” By blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and linking the images of the dream sequence with events in the narrative frame, Haushofer succeeds in representing “the continuity of historical atrocities that only seem to belong to the past” (Laumont 147), i.e. she draws on the recent horrors of National Socialism, connecting them through her narrative of the woman’s life to relations between the sexes. The violent activities of the gorgeous, seductive animals, the complete lack of any (popular) resistance, and the destruction of all life through the deadly rash—these are all far more palpable, more real to the female protagonist than the extramarital affair that used to brighten up her daily life. She recognizes suddenly that her life is a kind of sleepwalking and that “any moment [she] could wake up and see those huge roosters again” [237], which would be a terrible reality. Her lover dismisses such ideas as hysterical, but for a moment even he feels “a breath of this strange, cold, and deadly world” (238). Haushofer leaves it up to the reader to decide how to interpret the “alienation” in the story’s title. It might refer to interpersonal relationships underscoring the gender difference; it might also refer to alienation from one’s own former self. The appearance

of images from the past undoubtedly has a traumatic impact on the protagonist's behavior in the present. Her distrust of her own self and her intuitive grasp of her own surrender to the splendor of the strutting roosters force her to leave her lover. We do not know whether the woman will succeed in living a future life without "betrayal and disloyalty" (237).

Gender, History, and Memory: *Wir töten Stella*

The almost surreal images of "Entfremdung" and "Die Geschichte vom Menschenmann" may have prevented Haushofer's contemporaries from recognizing the stories' social and gender criticism and their radical feminist perspective. These images, however, point to three essential concerns of the author, namely the absence of successful female opposition to a forceful and destructive male principle, the failure of women to recognize the seriousness of existing danger, and the flight of women from any responsibility to change the order of things themselves. Transposed as these concerns are in *Wir töten Stella* into the petty, banal, and deceptively harmless reality of family life in the 50s, they assume great poignancy. Here we actually witness the subjection of the female (Other) to a patriarchal, fascist-like order, which destroys her; we become aware of the dynamics between perpetrators and accomplices in maintaining this order; and we experience the modes of remembrance and forgetting in coping with the (suppressed) guilt about supporting the order.

In this story Haushofer tightly intertwines the psychological, political, and ethical dimensions of the gender conflict. The catastrophic context of the Nazi past whose hold no-one can escape is invoked here in the family microcosm. Haushofer "privatizes" public dilemmas and directly addresses woman's shared responsibility for the problems; in the words of the critic Frei Gerlach, "Haushofer approaches the memory of National Socialism through the conditions that allow fascist-like power dynamics within the family structure which, among other things, create a disposition for the National Socialist disaster" (327). The role of Anna, the first-person narrator in *Wir töten Stella*, cannot imply innocence: the author is highly critical of her shirking responsibility and does not grant her

any (political) absolution, finding her guilty of aiding and abetting the crime(s) committed.¹⁶

The plot of the story can be sketched briefly: Stella, a friend's daughter, comes to stay with Anna and her husband, Richard, so that she can attend vocational classes in town. The young woman's presence disturbs the heavily routinized family interactions between the parents and their two children, Wolfgang and Annette. For a while Richard makes Stella his secret lover and then promptly abandons her when his interest fades. Distraught over this, Stella steps in front of a truck and is killed. Her death is a relief for everyone in the family; the cause of Stella's "accident" is never addressed. The repercussions of this course of events haunt the narrator and compel her to write down an account of it—to record what she can recollect—with the explicit purpose of regaining composure and thus restoring the familiar order in her household.

The novella's plot does not in itself suggest a literary treatment of National Socialism. The story, however, skillfully interweaves textual cues and references that in various ways evoke fascism as a mental habit, a behavior, and a historical reality—without ever explicitly identifying the most recent past, from which Haushofer's generation had just emerged.¹⁷ Quite accurately, K. Fliedl notes that these concealed allusions may be read as "a technique that is self-referential in its depiction of the process of repression, the subcutaneous presence of non-permissible memories" (633).

The title of the novella promises a detective story; however, there is no "whodunit" puzzle for the reader. The title itself tells us that a collective "we" admits to the crime. The choice of the present tense of the verb "töten" makes any distancing of the crime impossible; the deed lingers in the present, suggesting continuities of mental dispositions and behavioral patterns. In this tale Anna, the first person narrator, participates in the tacitly choreographed destruction of the Other. As Haushofer's recurring textual images suggest, the concept of the Other operates at two separate but interconnected levels: one is the female self of the early, pre-symbolic stage of development, that is, the female self still unfettered by the socializing reigns of patriarchy; then there is also the Other in this story as embodied by Stella, the outsider and stranger whom the family briefly accepts into their house. In both incarnations, if you will, it is the

female self that is betrayed, excluded, and led to her destruction.

On the surface of the fictional events one topic of discussion is completely off-limits: nobody is permitted to address Stella's fateful development from her arrival to her amorous adventure and her death by "accident." The crime against Stella—her nature, her innocence—is taboo. Under no circumstances can the reasons for her exclusion, her ostracism, and her death be mentioned. Both Richard and Anna agree on this without even having to talk about it, and this is possible only because the Stella "incident" seems to be an integral part of a systematic pattern of mis/deeds that everybody wants to ignore, or rather repress, in order to avoid any dissonance in the carefully orchestrated family harmony. We realize, however, that "the horror and the knowledge about the truth we ought not to know" (Haushofer, *Wir töten* 26) resound in the silence even though the family's scrupulous insistence on a strict daily routine usually succeeds in drowning out the disturbing noise.

Richard and Anna are masters of a well-coordinated routine that exposes their hypocritical response to the crime as almost natural ensemble acting between accomplices: "Stella had become a burden to all of us, an obstacle that was now finally cleared out of the way" (13). As Frei Gerlach explains, "In *Wir töten Stella* the crime inside the community does not disrupt the functioning of the community; on the contrary, the social order seems to be maintained by the elimination of the disrupting factor" (326). The intruder into this order must actually be destroyed so that the fissures in the façade of the family idyll will not crack open suddenly and make the construction—only superficially solid—collapse. Anna's written account emphasizes in a self-righteous way Stella's threatening presence: her appearance is irritating—"a bit too healthy and strong" (Haushofer, *Wir töten* 14); her behavior is annoying—"unable to learn the rules of the game" (10); her interests are bothersome—"I really wouldn't have any idea what she could have done well" (22); her emotional outbursts—"wild and unrestrained" (45)—are infuriating. Stella's clumsy efforts to connect with her host family—"Her glance was submissive and plaintive" (21)—prompt Anna to consider the girl a "foreign body in our system" (21) and treat her, accordingly, with utter disdain.¹⁸ When Stella is dead, she is reductively called a "foreign white bundle" (65) even though, now that

she has disappeared altogether, the family can testify to her “dignity of heart” (15): “It was so considerate of Stella to step off the sidewalk, quasi inadvertently, so that everybody could take it for an accident” (14).¹⁹ Outsiders will not raise questions about responsibility, and Anna’s account quite shrewdly turns the family into a community of victims to whom something unseemly has happened or who have been greatly inconvenienced.

On occasion Anna realizes that a former part of herself is mirrored in Stella. She reluctantly accepts the existence of this intrapsychic Other, feels highly ambivalent about it, and senses a lurking danger even in facing it. The now alien aspect of her femaleness threatens Anna’s subject status in the existing order; she must fight it in the name of the powers that be. At the same time, Anna rightly fears that opposing the Other (inside herself) will not allow her to survive. She will perish from her obedience, her willingness to please, and her “exaggerated caution” (11) vis-à-vis the patriarchal system. In fact, she intuitively perceives that over the years her genuine self/the Other has been stifled. Anna’s role in eliminating Stella makes her acutely aware of her pain over her own loss: “My law has been the dignity of life, and I have crossed my own boundary by calmly and absent-mindedly permitting Stella’s life to be extinguished before my very eyes” (30). The reader knows the degree of Anna’s initiative as well as her passivity leading to Stella’s death; we know that it would not have happened without her help; and we also recognize that Anna’s identity includes the roles of both perpetrator and victim. The crime against the younger woman finalizes Anna’s betrayal of her own (but alienated) female self. Her successful perfect compliance with male domination is devastating: “How much more dead am I than you!” (32), the narrator exclaims. Her dutiful withdrawal from the public sphere and her existence behind a protective wall in a space where she cannot “get entangled in the affairs of others” (7) fail to provide her with happiness in a safe zone. This is no such thing; it is an enclosure attained at the price of self-denial and at the expense of others in need of help. In this “safe zone” Anna has let her heart expire.

Lots of rules about appropriate behavior in Anna’s household substitute for “heart-felt” actions or responses, and personal interactions seem to proceed according to internalized roles and studied

lines. Such performances tightly based on scripts mimic real life. These staged acts lose their power of illusion, however, as soon as a non-member joins the cast: "Our household is such that it cannot accommodate an intruder nor even a guest" (19). Outsiders such as Stella, unfamiliar with the prescribed rituals of communication and acceptable patterns of relationships, cannot help but endanger the perfected routine, and this means they have to be eliminated. Anything that may lead to a "sloppy" (37) situation or cause inappropriate behavior must be prevented. Haushofer's text suggests that it becomes extraordinarily important to uphold the impression of a happy and successful family in order to avoid any suspicion that the opposite might exist: "Nobody is stricter about following the letter of the law than the secret law-breaker, because he realizes that civilization would collapse if everybody were given the chance to live the way he does" (37).

This kind of hypocrisy, which applies moral scruples to like-minded spirits but ruthlessly sacrifices anybody else in the pursuit of one's own goals, informs the survival strategy in *Wir töten Stella*. Richard has internalized deception and deviousness completely. He is a master of mendacity and dissembling. He has no compunction about expressing his condolences to Stella's mother, and he indulges in the shameless posturing of a concerned spouse and father when, in high spirits, he returns from his licentious adventures. Confronting him with his immoral behavior would merely "bounce off a smooth wall of denial" (49). Richard is a convincing actor because he always lives in the moment and is a "master of forgetting." Since he directs what is to be "staged" in his house, he is superbly skilled in his performance, whereas Anna cannot always control her acting, even if it permits her to conceal her horror about a "sloppy" and disorderly life. Throughout the novella the narrator is worried about the intrusion of disorder and adamant about repressing any spontaneous emotional displays—not included in the female script. Anna is unable to cope with outbursts of joy, fear, affection, hatred, or any other feeling, and determinedly avoids such experiences. We can fathom the degree of her self-imposed rigidity and emotional disfunctioning when we read about her disgust at Stella's sobbing (after Richard has ended the affair) and, at the same time, her "genuine sorrow" at the dying-off of a small cactus (47). Anna's inability

to mourn—in her own grief and that of others—ultimately destroys life: she can only subsist “in a reduced state” (24).

Her “reduced state” may explain if not excuse Anna’s continued passivity and complicity in her husband’s evil-doing. In her eyes Richard, like numerous other male protagonists in Haushofer’s texts, is “a monster, a traitor, a liar, and a murderer” (25), and his “angelic face” conceals a “devil’s grimace” (45). Every single one of his actions and every decision, so it seems, serves his own wishes and his claim to undisputed power. Women like Anna succumb to this scheme of thought and behavior; they allow themselves to be instrumentalized—often charmed by the “angelic face” and, in case of resistance, intimidated by the “devil’s grimace.” Such compliance and obedience—manifest in female reticence and intentional non-involvement in decision-making—stimulate male desire for domination and its destructive consequences and, furthermore, allow these consequences to be forgotten.

This is particularly disconcerting since Haushofer’s women characters actually possess the key to future transformation in that only they are capable of archiving what happens. Being able to draw on memory, they hold and preserve knowledge indispensable for any intervention into the course of “normal” life. Like other female protagonists in her novels, the narrator of *Wir töten Stella* carries the gift (and burden) of memory. Haushofer attributes the ability to re-collect the past and thus control the flow of remembrance exclusively to women. This privileged and gendered access to the past brings great distress precisely because it cannot be shared. The burden of knowledge (about the past) quickly generates a sense of being caught in a web of memories, which is paralyzing: “Those who know are unable to act” (25). Neither the will to act nor the energy for action can develop from this (dark) knowledge because it actually fills the female consciousness with fear and trepidation.²⁰ “It has forced its way into me,” writes Anna; “it has saturated me and is with me wherever I go. There is no escape” (26). Like other modern women writers, Haushofer represents memory as a physically palpable experience—a bodily shock—that transforms sediments or traces of the past into somatic inscriptions. Anna, for example, has learned to expect sudden panic attacks when the memory of Stella’s death inundates her consciousness and she almost drowns in her

own horror.

Such “nervous” afflictions cannot be allowed to take the upper hand, because if they did, no normal life would be possible.²¹ A complex safety net of rituals, routines, and rules that allow Anna to practice forgetting provides the necessary protection against painful memory. Immersing herself frantically in the maintenance of domestic order helps her to hold on; however this artificial scheme to induce forgetting does not blind Anna to the dangers of her own self-delusions: “I fear nothing more than the day when I will forget that everything was once different” (72).

As in almost all of Haushofer’s works, the narrator of *Wir töten Stella* also feels compelled to write down her memories. The process of writing is here a highly ambivalent mixture of admission of murder and defensive justification, and it is intended to make it possible finally to forget. A written document may capture and thus preserve the painful past, but at the same time the words on the page may free the mind from its burden.²² Anna writes, “I must write about [Stella] before I start forgetting her. Because I will have to forget her if I want to take up my quiet life again” (7).

Anna’s labor of remembrance does not become an act of mourning. The reader can witness the hurtful and quite contradictory meandering between analytical reflection and emotional denial. In the narrator’s account we can discern her recurrent, circular approach to an unspoken truth underlying the destruction of Stella.²³ Her sense of guilt remains opaque—atonement is not considered—and so we may agree with Mitgutsch and her assessment of the narrator as a “middle-aged crippled soul” and “a monster of decency” (184).

In the story the crime against Stella and her death are the immediate causes for Anna’s writing process—a creative act which, incidentally, she cannot begin until she is all alone and thus able to create some mental space for it.²⁴ The memory of Stella’s irritating presence and of the relief brought about by her disappearance trigger, however, other unpleasant and more deeply buried experiences. In the case of Stella, Anna has been denying help and looking the other way with a certain degree of self-satisfaction despite some belated and half-hearted self-reproaches, but this experience takes her back to events in a dim past: “I have lived the life of a well-situated woman. I have been standing at the window inhaling the smell of

the seasons, while all around me people have been hurt and killed" (Haushofer, *Wir töten* 30). And elsewhere she states, "I have always thought that if you keep quiet, you cannot get entangled in others' affairs" (7). This may be as close to a confession of guilt as Haushofer's protagonist comes—a reference to her hypocritical way of life amidst horrific injustice and destruction.

In contrast to the narrator, who fails to comprehend the social setting and its conditions (Nolte 39), Haushofer presents a scathing picture of femininity in the patriarchal order of the 50s. She clearly recognizes how women, through their willingness to accept assigned roles and tasks dutifully, become accomplices in the perpetuation of corrupt structures and strategies of domination. It is their own subordinate services and their conspiracy of silence about evildoing that permit the mechanisms of (destructive) power to continue. As long as this sort of collaboration persists, the Other, such as Stella, will be destroyed; anybody opposing the given system of norms or disturbing its operation will be eliminated. Haushofer shows little sympathy for the cowardice of women who, like Anna, prefer to live "in a reduced state" rather than look for ways out of the patriarchal world before suffocating in it. Even if the absence of women's solidarity and women's fear of the repercussions of their "conscientious objection" may explain their failure to undertake "minimal escape ventures" (Haushofer, *Wir töten* 9), it is women's silence about all the "murders" that squarely turns them into culprits. Because women, according to Haushofer, carry the key to collective memory and are thus—thanks to their sensitivity—equipped with the effective tool of remembrance against the male "masters of forgetting," they also bear responsibility for sharing their insights into the course of events and counteracting any collective suppression of painful truths. Any other behavior is reprehensible. Quietly enduring the burden of unarticulated and unshared knowledge is a masochistic gesture and thwarts any hope for change. As *Wir töten Stella* illustrates, Haushofer puts no trust in the idealized female attributes of demureness, docility, and pliability, knowing that they are not useful in any endeavor to establish a humane (non-patriarchal) social order. These qualities effect no change: rather they function as powerful obstacles to any reorganization of the status quo and, furthermore, they are utilized to legitimize (irresponsible) inaction.

The dynamics of the highly unsatisfactory family setting of *Wir töten Stella* were a familiar phenomenon in Austrian postwar society at large. Despite careful attention to the creation of external order and peace, which was supposed to foster a democratic mind-set, rigid and asymmetrical power relations stayed deeply rooted. These conditions strengthened men's control over public and private spheres while at the same time encouraging women's withdrawal into the prescribed role of the "peace-loving, conciliatory, and charitable" caretaker at home. In fact, the story—particularly when placed in the context of Haushofer's entire oeuvre—suggests convergences between Richard's personality, patriarchal social structures, and the fascist mentality. The consensus reached in society to ignore the legacy of National Socialism is expressed in Anna's comment, "There are plenty of Richard's sort, and the whole world knows about it, accepts it, and nobody puts them on trial" (25). This legacy has poisoned the atmosphere; it has eroded any sense of justice and moral judgment. "Life with Richard," Haushofer's narrator explains, "has corrupted me and made me useless. Even if I wanted to start something new, it would have no purpose, because I have come to realize that there are benevolent murderers; there are representatives of the law who violate the law on a daily basis; there are courageous cowards and loyal traitors" (45). Haushofer, of course, was perfectly familiar with the historical situation and knew about the NS continuities in postwar Austria, the generous amnesty laws that allowed "murderers, cowards, and traitors" to return to their well-paid civil service positions. She was aware of the mental and psychological structures the ideology of National Socialism had shaped and buried in the minds and hearts of Austrians.²⁵

The family portrait of *Wir töten Stella* exemplifies in quite terrifying fashion what existential fears governed the collective (not just female) desire for quiet and harmony in the 1950s. Memories of the past had to be suppressed in order to avert the risk of a manifest continuation of fascist thinking. Even if these efforts functioned perhaps as understandable defense mechanisms, they resulted in long-term collective suffering that caused harm—no matter how well concealed it was. Haushofer certainly did not believe in recovery or restoration, because she could not discern any potential for genuine change anywhere, least of all in the private sphere of the family.

Wir töten Stella is a conscious literary effort at breaking out of a pattern, crafted by an astute and analytical writer to make her disconcerting insights public, a writer who, according to critics, “went out of her way to polish her image of the writing homemaker, provincial, stolid, bourgeois to the marrow of her bones” (Strigl, “Wer fürchtet” 117). We cannot know the extent to which the fictional exploration of *Wir töten Stella* was provoked by the socio-political conditions of the hypocritical 50s—with their collective denial of responsibility for National Socialism, its roots, and its results. Emerging clearly from our reading of the novella, however, is a sense of how the course of historical events sensitized the author and made her “distrust,” in Aichinger’s words, “the clarity of our intentions” and “the goodness of our actions,” so that she set out to take “the murderers, cowards, and traitors” to task in her way and on her territory. She spoke up because she found reason to be concerned about what had survived National Socialism, not what had been destroyed by it.

Notes

1 The reflections of Günther Anders, a Viennese writer and remigré, on this issue are illuminating. He was convinced that there are only two ways to deal with the legacy of National Socialism, either through education or through forgetting. And the latter is much easier: “Da aber der zweite Weg der leichtere Weg ist, den man gar nicht zu gehen braucht, weil man sich ‘gehen lassen’ kann, ist er der Weg, den man eingeschlagen hat: die heutige Situation [1950] liegt an seinem Ende” (162).

2 Particularly good examples of Haushofer’s writing illustrating this “privatized” fascism are the novels *Die Tapetentür* (Door in the Wallpaper; 1957), *Die Wand* (The Wall; 1963) and the novella *Wir töten Stella* (We Kill Stella; 1958).

3 Only Dagmar Lorenz’s two scholarly contributions came earlier, in 1973 and 1979.

4 Note also the unpublished dissertation by Christine Hofmann-Schmidjell on the topic of “Young Women Authors after ‘45,” Evelyn Polt-Heinzl’s

essay on Haushofer's radio plays, and Irmgard Roebeling's articles, which identify more or less cryptically encoded references to Austria's succumbing to Hitler's conquest, the sale of the Austrian "Heimat," and the rejection of racist-fascist thinking.

5 It is hard to tell how wide the reception of this sensitive and illuminating essay in the 1995 *Stifter Jahrbuch* has been and how many would recontextualize Haushofer as a consequence of their reading the Mitgutsch piece. In recent Haushofer scholarship, at any rate, I have not come across any reactions to Mitgutsch's approach.

6 Historian Thomas Albrich comments, "Die propagierte Loslösung Österreichs von seiner 'deutschen' Vergangenheit und damit auch von seiner Mitverantwortung an den Verbrechen des Regimes verlief sehr rasch: Schon Anfang März 1947 sahen 71 Prozent der Befragten keine Mitschuld Österreichs am Zweiten Weltkrieg; 15 Prozent glaubten, die Österreicher seien nur teilweise mitverantwortlich, und nur vier Prozent anerkannten eine Mitschuld" (57).

7 "Die Entnazifizierung war de facto mit der Minderbelastetenamnestie von 1948 bereits abgeschlossen worden. Von den über 13.000 nach dem Kriegsverbrechergesetz Verurteilten befanden sich [. . .] bei Abschluss des Staatsvertrags [. . .] nur noch 14 [in Haft]. Unmittelbar nach der Unterzeichnung des Staatsvertrags war Österreich endlich frei, das zu tun, was man schon immer wollte: Der Nationalrat verabschiedete ein Gesetz, das eine Amnestie für den Großteil der von den Volksgerichten verurteilten NS-Verbrecher brachte, denen auch noch die Bezüge nachbezahlt wurden und deren Haftzeit als Dienstzeit angerechnet wurde. Ebenso wurde die Dienstzeit von SS-Männern voll für den Pensionsanspruch gewertet" (Mannschek 102).

8 All the way into the late 50s there was a concerted effort at the political level to practice so-called "equalizing justice," according to which "jede Initiative zugunsten der Opfer [der Nazis] von einer zugunsten der ehemaligen Nazis begleitet [wurde]" (Albrich 70). At the social level this strategy had a profound impact on the collective consciousness which definitely prevented "eine inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung mit dem nationalsozialistischen Erbe" (Mannschek 102).

9 Cf. Manfred Rauchensteiner and Anton Pelinka.

10 Cf. Irene Bandauer-Schöffmann and Ela Hornung.

11 For the relevance of these practices to male reconstructions of the war period, see Karl Müller's essay in this volume.

12 Critic Rita Morrien observes, "Das spannungsreiche Nebeneinander von Schreibsucht und inneren wie äußeren Widerständen, das Paradoxon, dass Schreiben und Nicht-Schreiben gleichermaßen auf ein Pflichtversäumnis hinauslaufen, dass Gegensätze und Distanz einerseits durch das Schreiben aufgehoben werden sollen, die Autorin sich andererseits im Akt des Schreibens von ihrer Umwelt isoliert, führen zu der Frage, inwiefern eine derartig ambivalente Disposition symptomatisch für weibliche Autoren ist" (25).

13 "Marlen Haushofer," according to Hofmann-Schmidjell, "war als einzige junge Schriftstellerin der Nachkriegszeit in Österreich dem Erfahrungshorizont und der Lebensgeschichte ihrer Frauengeneration nachhaltig verhaftet" (2).

14 For the connections between Haushofer's biography and her creative writing, see especially Daniela Strigl.

15 Examples of her stories are "In dulci júbilo," "Die Verwandlung," "Das Morgenrot," "Der General stirbt," "Die Geschichte vom Menschenmann," "Entfremdung," "Der Staatsfeind," "Das Weihnachtsmahl der Untermieter," and "Frühling 1945." Among the radio plays are *Die Überlebenden* and *Ein Mitternachtsspiel*. Thematically related but written in the 60s are the stories "Schreckliche Treue" and "The Willows," which focuses on two young women helplessly witnessing the persecution and deportation of Viennese Jews. With few exceptions these stories—almost all initially published in Austrian journals—are narrated from a woman's point of view. In her recollections the narrator re-experiences traumatic past events. The postwar order seems to have brought material wellbeing, but the sense of humanity lost during National Socialism has not been recovered. In addition, the burden of one's own memory and one's own guilt has stifled the ability to communicate with others and show empathy.

16 On this last issue, see Nolte.

17 Cf. Roebeling (*Wir töten Stella*) and Lorenzen.

18 Repeatedly we are told that Stella is accommodated in the “Fremdenzimmer,” not in a “Gästezimmer.” Furthermore, Anna remarks that in her preparation for Stella’s arrival, she has put various knick-knacks into her room. This stuff then looks “neben dem großen, ernsthaften Mädchen [. . .] seltsam genug” (22). In different ways Haushofer emphasizes that Stella is utterly displaced in this household—that, in fact, she finds herself in a hostile environment.

19 I agree with Lotte Podgornik’s interpretation “als hätte Anna trotz ihrer Distanz gegenüber Stella, dem Ausdruck ihrer Furcht vor Erinnerung, einem unbewussten Wunsch nach dieser Erinnerung folgend, eine Wiederholung provoziert” (57). Podgornik’s and other critics’ allusion to a link between Stella and Anna’s destruction of her own (former and split) self is not my focus, but I concur with the interpretation that the seemingly choreographed murder of Stella actually allows Anna to refuse the ascribed role of silent accomplice and approving bystander. In the course of her reflections, Anna repeatedly expresses her lost hope of any such demonstration of resistance: “Wenn wir in ein gewisses Alter kommen, befällt uns die Angst und wir versuchen etwas dagegen zu tun. Wir ahnen, daß wir auf verlorenem Posten stehen, und unternehmen verzweifelte kleine Ausbruchversuche” (Haushofer, *Wir Töten* 9). Because most of these attempts usually fail right away, the story of (self-)betrayal continues, and more and more experiences become taboo.

20 Frei Gerlach considers this knowledge to be dark in many ways, especially because it affects “die verborgenen Grundlagen der geltenden Ordnung, das Versteckte, Verschwiegene, Ausgegrenzte. Dieses Wissen über die Schattenseiten der Ordnung ist zwar abgespalten und den Frauen zur Aufbewahrung überantwortet, gehört als Verschwiegene aber ebenfalls zur Ordnung” (325).

21 Anna frequently complains about the “dreadful state” of her nerves, which she suspects of causing her lack of peace. This assessment reflects

her internalization of common male notions that a woman's heightened sensitivity and sharpened critical abilities must be related to ailing nerves and thus in need of therapy.

22 For detailed discussions of the connection between writing and memory/forgetting in Haushofer, see Frei Gerlach, Podgornik, and Klugsberger.

23 Thomas Lorenzen remarks, "In achtundfünfzig immer neuen Bildern, Redewendungen, Andeutungen und Beschreibungen umkreist der Text den Tod Stellas. Annas Versuche, Leiden und Tod des Mädchens zu verklären und zu ästhetisieren, werden dabei hart konfrontiert mit schonungslos genauen Erinnerungen an die Tötung Stellas" (266).

24 See Podgornik's accurate observation, "[Annas] Blick zurück, dem Prozeß der Zerstörung und dem Zerstörten auf der Spur, kann nur gewagt werden fern vom Blick dessen, der an diesem Prozeß beteiligt war, doch nicht erinnert werden, nicht wissen will" (59).

25 The analogy, directly from the Austrian social context of the 50s, is illuminating: "Aber wenn man bedenkt, daß die hiesige Bevölkerung aus den Schlägern von gestern und den Geschlagenen von gestern besteht, ohne daß man dem Einzelnen je ansehen könnte, welcher der zwei Gruppen er zugehört hatte; daß sie in der Stadtbahn nebeneinander sitzen oder gar einander Platz machen; daß der ehemalige SA-Mann zur Zeit Kellner, zum gestrigen Konzentrationshäftling, zur Zeit Gast, 'danke ergebenst, Herr Doktor' sagt; daß der Verprügelte dem Prügler die Ladenkasse führt; und daß, wie in heimlicher Verabredung, im Alltagsverkehr kein Mensch dem anderen gegenüber die kritischen Jahre erwähnt, denn weiß der Himmel, was sich da herausstellen würde—also wenn man das alles bedenkt, dann wird einem hundeelend. Aber, wie gesagt, keinen Augenblick darf man es vergessen: der heutige Zustand verhöhnt den blutigen Ernst der vergangenen zwölf Jahre, er macht ihn ungültig und degradiert ihn zu einem Schauspiel; und das Schauspiel ist eben abgesetzt, weil ein anderes nun auf dem Spielplan steht" (Anders 160–61).

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