INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
OVERCOMING LANGUAGE IN THE WORKS OF
GEORG TRAKL, RAINER MARIA RILKE, AND ILSE AICHINGER

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

Cynthia Susan Chalupa

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
2001

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. John Davidson, Co-Adviser
Dr. Mark Roche, Co-Adviser
Dr. Harry Vredeveld

Approved by

Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures
Copyright by
Cynthia Susan Chalupa
2001
“Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles.”
- Rainer Maria Rilke

“Why it’s a Looking-glass book, of course! And if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again.”
- Lewis Carroll
ABSTRACT

The mirror has been a source of fascination for centuries. Its occurrence in written and oral traditions from antiquity to the present reveals its importance as both a physical and aesthetic object and as a verbal image with numerous figurative meanings. The mirror has served in various capacities, representing alternatively divine countenance and the human soul, the intellect, conscience, and the alter ego. Based on its optical function, theories about the structure of consciousness, humanity’s relationship to the divine and the supernatural, and the nature of love between lovers and friends have all been defined in terms of reflection.

In the seventeenth century, the mirror assumed particular importance as an image used to denote concepts of the mind, theories of aesthetic production, and the perceived mimetic quality of language. Art was prized as an aesthetic copy of the natural world, and the mind was thought to mirror reality. Similarly, language, a production of the mind, was believed to represent the empirical world with visual accuracy in the form of mental images. Poetic language, in particular, was conceived as a mirror of the natural world. Based on the notion of *ut pictura poesis*, the poetic text was believed to provide an image of reality as accurately as painting. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, however, developments in epistemology slowly undermined the concept of language as a medium of visual representation; the mind as a mirror gave way to the subjectivism and self-consciousness of romanticism. When the mirror of the mind was no longer understood to
reflect reality, language similarly lost its mirroring function, culminating in the crisis of representation and language skepticism in the early twentieth century.

Through analyses of mirrors in modern lyrical texts, this study examines how twentieth-century authors both acknowledge and reject the tradition of mimetic art while simultaneously registering the linguistic uncertainty that accompanies the shift away from a conceptual foundation in visual mimesis. Although contemporary theories of linguistic crisis predominately mourn the loss of language's communicative ability, I argue that Georg Trakl, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Ilse Aichinger react to doubts about the representational quality of language by developing a poetry grounded in pictures to overcome the "problem of language." The mirrors that appear throughout their works both recall and transcend the traditional basis of art and language in visual mimesis by employing images that possess a productive rather than reflective quality. These generative mirrors serve as the source of poetic language liberated from the burden of representation and suggest alternative realities within the context of the poem. In a moment of intersection between linguistic and visual realms, the mirror bridges the subject-object dichotomy attributed to the crisis of representation.
To my mother, whose strength and courage have always inspired me.

In the memory of my father, who could not share in this achievement.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would be impossible to express my gratitude to all of the friends, family members, and mentors who have supported me during the development and completion of this project. I would like, however, to thank a few individuals who were particularly crucial in helping me attain this goal. Without the support of my dissertation committee, this document would not have been possible. Thanks to John Davidson, whose avid interest in the project and in my professional development provided me with motivation at a crucial point during the writing process. His enthusiastic discussions of the texts encouraged me to delve into the questions of this study more deeply. Thanks to Mark Roche, who helped me form the earliest conceptions of the project and saw it through to completion despite geographical distance and logistical challenges. His intellectual insights and careful reading inspired me to be a more critical reader and writer. Thanks to Harry Vredeveld, who has supported me throughout my graduate career and was a constant presence during the stages of this study. I would also like to thank the Ohio State University College of Humanities and the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures for their generous financial support of this project.

I am grateful to Nik Sathe, Jennifer William, Christine Moeller-Sahling, and Yogini Joglekar for the many helpful comments and discussions during our “WIP” meetings. I would also like to thank Sheila Cowley, Karen Sobul, and Diane Birckbichler
at the Foreign Language Center for encouraging me during the past three years and enabling me to maintain a professional position while finishing my graduate degree. I would also like to thank Gregor Hens, whose food for thought, both figurative and literal, helped fuel the composition and completion of this dissertation.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Kathryn Corl, who has mentored me throughout every stage of my professional development. She has provided me with many valuable lessons and excellent advice, both personal and professional, and has been a wonderful teacher and dear friend. Finally, I want to express my deepest love and gratitude to my mother, Karen Chalupa, for always believing in me and being a true role model.
VITA

October 13, 1969......................................... Born – Chicago, Illinois

1991 ....................................................... B.A., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

1993-94................................................... Ohio State University-Bonn Graduate
Exchange Fellowship

1995........................................................... M.A., Ohio State University

1992-1998................................................ Graduate Teaching Associate, Ohio State
University

1999.......................................................... U.S. Department of Education Foreign
Language Area Studies Fellowship for
Summer Research

1998-2001................................................ Assistant Director, Ohio State University
Foreign Language Center

PUBLICATIONS

“Meeting the Needs of International TAs in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Model for
Extended Training,” Mentoring Foreign Language TAs, Lecturers, and Adjunct
Faculty. AAUSC Series: Issues in Language Program Direction (peer-reviewed). Ed.

“The Ohio Foreign Language Association/Ohio Department of Education Model

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Germanic Languages and Literatures
Focus: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century German and Austrian Poetry.

Supplementary Field: Foreign Language Pedagogy
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.......................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication...................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ v
Vita................................................................................................................................. vii

Chapters

1. “Now we see through a glass darkly”: Mirrors, Mind, and Poetic Language.......................................................... 1  
   Ut Pictura Poesis: The Mirror Theory of Art............................................................... 13  
   Mirror of the Mind................................................................................................. 17  
   Mirror of Language............................................................................................... 20  
   Romantic Skepticism............................................................................................ 29  
   Language and the Crisis of Representation............................................................. 36  
   Image and Word: The Generative Mirror................................................................. 41

2. “In Meiner Seele dunklem Spiegel sind niegeseh’ner Meere”: Georg Trakl’s Imagistic Poetry........................................ 50  
   Mimesis, Madness, and Poetic Images.................................................................. 55  
   The Role of Silence in Trakl’s Work...................................................................... 62  
   Overcoming Tradition: The Generative Mirror...................................................... 75  
   Poetic Self-Reflection and Confrontation............................................................... 85  
   Conclusion.............................................................................................................. 90
CHAPTER 1

"NOW WE SEE THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY":
MIRRORS, MIND, AND POETIC LANGUAGE

From the earliest recorded discovery of its optical effects in China (ca. 1200 BC) and the scientific discussions of reflection among the Greeks to present-day literature and pop culture, the mirror has assumed metaphorical qualities whose implications have been as consequential as its technical function.¹ The sheer number of occurrences of the mirror in written and oral traditions, from antiquity through the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment and modernity, attests to its importance as both a physical object of fascination and a verbal image marked by its metaphorical versatility. Its often artistic design, its mysterious ability to capture the semblance of displaced objects in reality, and its link to spirituality and the supernatural have captivated thinkers for centuries. Benjamin Goldberg explains, “As the mirror evolved from a pool of water to the modern looking glass, it developed into an instrument of strongly diversified attributes: feared or extolled by some, worshipped or exploited by others, it is an instrument both for self-revelation and revelation of the universe” (xii). The mirror has served in various

¹ An understanding of reflection is implicit in Aristotle’s discussion of echo and light in Problematet although he does not provide geometric proof of the phenomenon. Heron of Alexandria, a Greek engineer, wrote a quantitative proof of the law of reflection in his book Catoptrics (ca. 100 A.D.). Less than one hundred years later, Ptolemy wrote a five-volume treatise on optics, two of which address a theory of mirrors and contain an experimental confirmation of the law of reflection (Goldberg 105-06).
capacities representing divine countenance and the human soul, the intellect, conscience, and the alter ego. In the form of a looking glass, windowpane, or reflective pool of water, the mirror is a familiar and readily accessible object and thus serves as a seminal aspect of the human conceptual foundation.

Perhaps the most recognized early literary example of the mirror and an individual’s self-reflexive confrontation with it comes in the form of the Narcissus myth. In Book III of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the young man, after falling in love with his own visage reflected in a pool of water, attempts to embrace the other figure and drowns. Implicit within this myth are three important aspects of the mirror image that have served as symbolic material for artists and writers, philosophers, and psychologists ever since: the ideal, the real, and the surreal. On the one hand, the reflective surface offers a moment of elation inspired by the love the subject experiences for the idealized “other.” Through the physical phenomenon of reflection, Narcissus enjoys a sense of unity with his object extension in the mirror and simultaneously an instant of self-knowledge and self-love. On the other hand, the mirror offers a deceptive picture in the idealized concept of unity it represents. In the moment that Narcissus attempts to realize the potential communion with his object extension, the illusion is destroyed, and the ideal world collides with reality, resulting not only in the destruction of the mirror image, but also in the dissolution of the viewing subject. Finally, the mirror confrontation between the ideal and the real leads to the subject’s recognition of the rift between subjective perception and objective reality and a sense of psychological anxiety.

---

2 For an in-depth discussion of the Narcissus myth, the mirror, and its role in works of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance see Frederick Goldin’s *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (1967) and Kenneth Knoespel’s *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* (1985).
over its lost grounding in the object world. Particularly in works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the realization of this disjuncture materializes in the surreal form of a terrifying double; the Narcissian reflection assumes palpable form and, like the mirror image of the myth, threatens to destroy the subject.

Based on the mirror's optical function, theories about the structure of consciousness, about humanity's relationship to the divine, and about the nature of love between lovers and friends have all been defined in terms of reflection. Both actual and perceived mirror functions, such as reflection and the generation of light, have been used to describe the divine relationship between humanity and God. The mirror appears as a metaphor for light and divinity in such diverse religions as Shinto of Japan, the idol worship of the Aztecs, and Christianity (Goldberg xi). Plato was one of the first figures of Western thought to link the mirror to the reflection of the ideal. According to Plato, the material world is filled with objects and their images, which are imperfect reflections of the realm of ideas. The Christian correlate to Plato's concept of mirror reflections is the Pauline mirror describing the imperfect material world and our knowledge of it vis à vis the perfection of God: "For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians 13:12). Whereas Plato argues that the mirror provides an indirect view of the sun via reflection, for Paul the mirror of the soul offers a mediated reflection of God. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christian theologians combine Platonism and the notion of the Pauline mirror, to arrive at three overarching topoi that, as we shall see, are revisited at various points in the ensuing centuries: the soul as a
mirror of God, holy scripture (or the text) as a mirror of God, and the mind as a mirror that reflects the sensory world.

The concept of the human being and God mirroring one another was further developed by writers of the German pietist tradition who viewed the soul as a “stiller und ungetrübter Spiegel” (Langen 270) that takes in the image of God in a moment of unio mystica and reflects its purity. God as creator and the human soul as creation stand opposite one another in a moment of mutual reflection. ³ In Das Wesen des Christentums (1841), Ludwig Feuerbach offers an alternative understanding of the mirror relationship between human beings and the divine when he states that God is the mirror of humanity (“Gott ist der Spiegel des Menschen”) and the individual’s ideal self (73). The theory of mutual reflection between God and human beings was also carried over to concepts of friendship and love. The human mirror that reflects the image of a loved one frequently appears in literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Based on Platonic theories of love and visual perception and conceits of courtly love poetry, the eye, and hence the soul, of an individual is a mirror that reflects the loved one’s image (Grabes 85). The image of mutually reflecting mirrors was used in many texts to describe the spiritual quality of friendship. In a letter to Reinawald, Schiller calls friendship “die Anschauung unserer Selbst in einem anderen Glase” (Werke 23, 79). Similarly, in a letter to Goethe in which he discusses friendship, Schiller refers to himself as the mirror of the latter (Neureuter 23-24). Goethe refers to Frau von Stein as his “beloved mirror” (Goethe, I, 264), and Hölderlin’s Hyperion

³ August Langen offers a detailed discussion of the significance of the mirror in the German pietist tradition in his seminal article of 1940: “Zur Geschichte des Spiege尔斯ymbols in der deutschen Dichtung.”
considers himself a mirror that captures the divine light of Diotima. Indeed, the romantic authors Jean Paul, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Hoffmann, and Brentano all use the conceit of the human being as a living mirror that reflects the soul of the friend or beloved. In addition, Jean Paul, and Brentano and later realist writers such as Stifter and Keller come to view the mirror as a fitting analogy for the artist’s creative faculty. The understanding that the artist’s view of the world, filtered through the imagination, was the only authentic view led Jean Paul to refer to the poet as a mirror of God and the world, who unknowingly reflects spirituality in his artistic work: “Der wahre Künstler bringt ohne Wissen das Göttliche, wie es sich in seiner Seele speigelt, in sein Werk” (qtd. in Langen 272). The many literary texts that declare the soul a mirror of God and the human being a “living mirror” of the beloved reveal the reliance on a pictorialization of abstract metaphysical concepts in order to make sense of them with regard to the cognitive categories of the mind.

Despite the scientific understanding of reflection not as a magical but as a physical process, widespread misunderstandings about the mirror’s function among the uneducated secured it a prominent position in folk belief and superstition. The magical power of the mirror is found in literature and folklore throughout the world, and primitive cultures worldwide believed that the reflection and the soul were linked, thus

---

4 Here Hölderlin draws on a tradition of courtly love lyric, influenced by Platonic thought, in which the beloved emits a fiery stream of divine light that is received and reflected by the eye of the lover. He likewise refers to the mystical discourse of Meister Eckhart that likens God’s heavenly luminescence to the light of the sun. See Hans Leisegang’s “Die Erkenntnis Gottes im Spiegel der Seele und der Natur” for a history of the mirror and its connection to theology and metaphysics. Beginning with Neoplatonic philosophy and medieval mysticism, Leisegang identifies the mirror as a metaphor of divine presence and the relationship between God and human beings.

5 For an examination of the mirror as an analogy for friendship, see Hans Peter Neureuter, Das Spiegelmotiv bei Clemens Brentano, 23-61.
imbuing the mirror with supernatural power. Not only does the mirror represent the soul of sacred human beings and divine figures, it likewise houses the souls and spirits of the dead. This dynamic function of the mirror renders it a portal by which spirits leave this world and cross over to the next, and by extension it serves as the gateway through which the devil enters the world and snatches away souls of the unwitting. For this reason folk belief advises children not to gaze into the mirror at night (Grimms Wörterbuch) and to cover mirror surfaces after the death of the body in order to prevent the soul of the deceased from emerging to haunt the living (Ziolkowski, Disenchanted Images 161). Composed of water, metal, glass, or any other reflective surface, the mirror is a readily accessible medium through which one gains knowledge of the past, the future, and the self.

The mirror's magical and delusive power in folk tradition contributed to its importance as an image in mythical and fantastic literature. Depictions of the mirroring function of the mind and the ambiguous nature of the subconscious are paralleled by literary uses of the mirror to represent ideals such as morality and love, poetic creation, and the subconscious of the artist. The Doppelgänger and its embodiment of a protagonist's past, conscience, or guilt particularly fascinated many authors of romantic and modern literature. The mirror double is directly linked to the concept of the fall from paradise and the conflict between ideal and real conceptions of the self. The mirror

---

6 For an in-depth discussion of the mirror in folk tradition see Goldberg and Ziolkowski, Disenchanted Images.

7 The concept of the double has been studied in depth since the publication of Freud's well-known essay "Das Unheimliche" (1919), which analyzes the reaction of the subject to the appearance of its double. Otto Rank discusses the double's importance in psychoanalysis in his book Der Doppelgänger (1924). With the renewed interest in psychoanalytic theory as an interpretive apparatus, the double and its relationship to identity and narrative have become important subjects of contemporary literary analysis. See Robin Lydenberg's "Freud's Uncanny Narrative" for recent scholarship in this area.
image has likewise been used to describe the formation and the constitution of the human psyche in its various states. Goldberg describes the psychological significance of the mirror: "[It] has served as the screen of man's projections of his identity, his uncertainties, and his desires... The mirror continues to provide a way toward self-examination" (240).

With the romantics' rediscovery of the ancient Edenic truth that consciousness creates conscience, the mirror becomes an instrument that exposes horrors of the self and reveals truths that are horrifying to the viewer (Ziolkowski, Disenchanted Images 158). As subjectivism grows, the mirror represents not only the general consciousness of humanity, but also the critical self-consciousness of the individual and the feelings of guilt and fear it experiences in recognizing its fallibility. For many writers, the mirror represents creative faculty and offers a poetic realm in which the contours of the empirical world are overturned, as in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass (1872). In other works, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Geschichte vom verlorenen Spiegelbild” (1815) or Franz Werfel’s Der Spiegelmensch (1920), the mirror reflection reveals the artist’s scrutiny of the poetic persona and likewise feelings of oppression vis-à-vis the artistic calling. Here the mirror image of the protagonist takes on corporeal dimensions, and the enlivened reflection serves both as a token of the fantastic and an embodiment of the protagonist’s unconscious; the surreal image represents his alter ego and his self-critique of the authorial subject.

Mirroring likewise describes the interaction between characters in a literary work or the relationship of the reader to the text. The mirror is used metaphorically to describe the literary correspondence between the characters of a drama or a novel. One
character is said to mirror another, although there is no physical correlation between the two, and in fact the “reflection” actually serves as a completion of the subject. Examples of this mirroring relationship include Minna and Tellheim of Lessing’s *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767), the good and evil twins of Klinger’s *Die Zwillinge* (1776), and Astragalus and Rappelkopf in Raimund’s *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind* (1828). Theories of artistic production in antiquity, views of comedy and tragedy as replicas of life on the stage, and contemporary newspapers and news journals reveal the understanding of art and the written text as a reflection of life. Shakespeare uses the mirror for self-examination and revelation, while Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray, in a moment of narcissistic disillusionment, shatters the mirror reflecting the destructive beauty that has debased his soul.

As this brief overview suggests, the mirror has played a seminal role in cultural history for the last fifteen hundred years. In light of its frequent appearances in literary, philosophical, and theological texts and its breadth of symbolic meanings, the mirror may be considered one of the most telling cultural objects in the Western world. The shifts in its literary character reveal that the mirror’s importance stems, not from its quality as a universal concept, but rather from its ability to represent variously the social, cultural, and historical contexts of any given period. Particularly during the two hundred years leading up to the nineteenth century, the mirror gained importance as a model for the human mind and its interaction with the world and thus provided a stable foundation for philosophical and aesthetic discussions of the time. The understanding of cognition as a reflecting faculty not only explained the manner in which the mind perceived the world; it likewise served as the basis for reflective theories of art and
language. Based on its ability to capture the images of the world around it and reproduce them faithfully, the mirror was interpreted as the embodiment of realist art. Like the aesthetic mirror, the purpose of which was to reflect the natural world, the primary role of language was, according to thinkers from Descartes to the early Wittgenstein, to represent the empirical world with visual accuracy. Knowing something required representing it with ocular exactitude (Rorty 3), and thus language was used as the medium through which the human mind conveyed its mental images. Poetic language in particular was understood to be a mirror of the natural world. Based on the notion of ut pictura poesis, poetry was believed to provide an image of reality as accurately as visual art forms: to quote Simonides of Keos, poetry was a “speaking picture,” and painting was poetry without words.8

The grounding of knowledge and representation in the notion of mirroring represented an inherent desire to understand the world in visual terms. The idea that the mind could accurately reproduce what it experienced provided a sense of stability by reinforcing the notion that seeing something ensures its existence. Language, too, was viewed as a type of verbal mirroring, and words were believed to represent objects in the mind’s eye with the same visual clarity as the painted canvas. Ludwig Wittgenstein refers to this visual understanding of the mind and language with his well-known statement: “Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen. Und heraus konnten wir nicht, denn es lag in unserer Sprache, und sie schien es uns nur unerbitterlich zu wiederholen”

---

8 The statement by Simonides of Keos, “The poem is a speaking picture, the picture is a silent poem” was recorded a century after Ars Poetica by Plutarch in De Gloria Atheniensium (3.347a).
This negative assessment of the picturing function of language reveals the philosopher's criticism of linguistic theory based on visual mimesis and points to the source of the crisis of representation that culminated at the end of the nineteenth century: the interdependence of theories of mind and language based in a notion of mirroring. Even as mirror models of the mind and language reached their highpoint during the mid-eighteenth century, thinkers such as Lessing and the early romantics began to question the concept of language as a visually mimetic medium of representation. Conceptions of the mind as a "mirror of nature" (Rorty 12) gave way to the subjectivism and self-consciousness that ultimately culminated in the perceived failure of language at the beginning of the twentieth century.

This study examines how the mirror, traditionally a symbol for the mimetic quality of language, registers both the perceived loss of language's representational quality and the means of overcoming it in the modernist poetry of Georg Trakl, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Ilse Aichinger. Many studies have analyzed the various functions of the mirror in literature, e.g., as a metaphor for divine love and friendship or as an image of self-consciousness or self-alienation. Few, however, have focused specifically on

---

9 Wittgenstein's early belief in a picture theory of language and his apparent turn from it will be discussed in further detail below.

10 These studies generally focus on a singular aspect of the mirror as it appears in individual works or authors. Frederick Goldin's *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (1967) and Kenneth Knoespel's *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* (1985) trace the development of the mirror from antiquity through the Middle Ages, while Grabes studies the mirror motif in English literature titles of the Middle Ages in *The Mutable Glass. Mirror Imagery in Titles of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance* (1982). Langen's "Zur Geschichte des Spiegelsymbols in der deutschen Dichtung" (1940) offers the first comprehensive discussion of the mirror motif, beginning with the pietist tradition in early eighteenth-century Germany through romanticism, and Hans Leisegang discusses the history of the motif specifically in its connection to theology and metaphysics. Johannes Krogoll continues August Langen's literary discussion of the mirror motif in "Der Spiegel in der neueren deutschen Literatur und Poetik – Beobachtungen und Bemerkungen zur Semantik des Irrationalen" (1979), providing only a superficial overview of examples of the mirror through the early twentieth century. Theodore Ziolkowski discusses the mirror image in twentieth-century texts from various cultures, specifically examining its supernatural
the mirror in twentieth-century German literature, and virtually none have looked specifically at the way in which the mirror embodies the notion of linguistic skepticism and the means to overcome it in the texts of various poets during the twentieth century. While the link between language and the mirror in Western cultural history has been well established, with the advent of romanticism and the transcendental subject, the mirror metaphor of language seems largely to disappear in theoretical discourses, giving way to what M.H. Abrams calls, in his seminal study The Mirror and the Lamp, expressive theories of art and knowledge.

Despite Abrams's claim that the mirror is replaced as a metaphor for poetic language by figures such as the fountain or the lamp, thus suggesting a modern turn in aesthetic understanding, the works of Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger reveal the continued presence of the mirror as a seminal image in modernist lyric. In the discussions of the three poets' works, I examine how the mirror has shifted from a mimetic medium to a device that produces poetic images, thus applying Abrams's concept of modern expressivity to the very concept that seems to reject it. By using the mirror, Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger attest to their comprehension of aesthetic tradition and simultaneously the desire to break free from it. Similarly, the authors acknowledge the failure of language as a mimetic medium by using blind and distorted images throughout their works. While the poets thus express pessimism over the disintegration of the linguistic qualities in Disenchanted Images (1977). Benjamin Goldberg's The Mirror and Man (1985) and Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's The Mirror (2001) are compendia of mirror images and offer only cursory readings of the mirror image in twentieth-century literature.

11 Eric Williams's extensive study, The Mirror and the Word (1993) is an exception. Williams looks at historical links between language and the mirror and relates them to the poetic works of Georg Trakl. Williams places Trakl's works specifically in a Lacanian framework, understanding his many broken mirror images as an embodiment of the subject's alienation from the Imaginary realm upon the acquisition of language.
system based on "absolute visual mimesis" (Williams, The Mirror and the Word), I suggest that they likewise celebrate the liberation of language from its relationship to empirical reality by highlighting the poetic mirror as a generative rather than reflective device. Although philosophical and aesthetic arguments surrounding the crisis of representation in the twentieth century often conclude that the perceived loss of linguistic representation leads to a profound skepticism and postmodern language games, Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger use the mirror to represent, in figurative terms, the potential of the poetic text to move beyond the problem of language through a poetry of pictures. These pictures represent an understanding of poetry that is liberated from the burden of representation and external reality and suggest alternative realities within the poem. Situated between the linguistic structure of poetic language and the graphic image, the mirror, as a verbal image, acts as a bridging concept between the two and offers the potential of closing the gap attributed to the crisis of representation.

In order to understand how Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger use the mirror to comment on aesthetic tradition and to liberate language from its mimetic function, their works must be considered in light of the discourses of mirroring in art and the mind and the connection between these discussions to the crisis of representation. The following pages reveal how, after gaining momentum for two hundred years, the mirror loses its reflective capacity; this break reveals a deep-seated anxiety stemming from the lost visual connection to the world and exhibits the beginnings of a modernist view of language.
Ut Pictura Poesis: The Mirror Theory of Art

When Plato linked poetry to the imitative function of the mirror in the tenth book of the Republic, he initiated a discussion about the mimetic function of art that has persisted into the twentieth century. In the well-known passage, Socrates likens the artist to a man who spins a mirror round and round until an exact image of the world is replicated on its surface: “You would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror” (Republic x. 596). For Plato, the imitative ability of the artist is foremost a negative assessment, for the copy of nature that he creates is yet another replica of the Idea upon which nature itself is based. In a further analogy, Plato likens the poet to the carpenter whose constructed bed is a replica of the original Idea of a bed. Unlike the carpenter whose artifice is only once removed from its true essence, the artist’s version of the bed is an imitation of an imitation and as such is like the reflected image of a mirror. Thus, the artist does not offer a glimpse of truth; instead, he obscures it:

I think, he said, that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which others make.
Good, I said; then you call him who is third in the descent from nature an imitator?
Certainly, he said.
And the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth?
That appears to be so. (Republic x. 597)

For Plato the artist’s work is comparable to that of the artisan who attempts to replicate the Idea, yet it is subject to greater scrutiny because it does not fulfill a useful function and in its attempt at beauty is in fact more distanced from the beautiful and true forms
of the realm of Ideas. While Plato’s references to art and imitation are not of distinct aesthetic character, they formalize the oldest and most rudimentary conceptions about the purpose of art as a form of imitation and simultaneously open discussion about its link to nature and a striving for the values of truth and beauty.

According to Aristotle, the purpose of art likewise rests in its ability to imitate nature. Doing away with the realm of Ideas, Aristotle does not negatively assess the replicas of art. “Epic and tragic poetry, comedy too, dithyrambic poetry, and most music composed for the flute and the lyre, can all be described in general terms as forms of imitation or representation” (Poetics 31). Aristotle argues that the origin of mimesis as an aesthetic principle results from human nature’s inherent “instinct for imitation” and the “inborn instinct [in human beings] to enjoy imitation” (35). In his discussion of poetics, Aristotle links the concept of mimesis with a pragmatic view of art that was later continued by Horace in Ars Poetica, stating that imitation inspires pleasure and learning in the spectator, both of which form the foundation of aesthetic theory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.\footnote{See Abrams (14-21) for a discussion of pragmatic theories of art from Aristotle and Horace to the nineteenth century.}

Links between poetry and the mirror prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as Aristotle’s positive assessment of the imitative art form became the established basis for aesthetic value.\footnote{For a complete examination of mirror imagery and a compendium of titles containing the mirror in medieval and Renaissance texts, see Grabes, The Mutable Glass.} Augustine recalls the imitative and didactic function of verse set forth by Aristotle and Horace when he refers to Scripture as a mirror of reality and the ideal (Grabes, The Mutable Glass 101), and similarly the text of Jean de Meun’s Le roman de la rose imitates the ideal as a “mirror of love”.

\footnote{12} See Abrams (14-21) for a discussion of pragmatic theories of art from Aristotle and Horace to the nineteenth century. 
\footnote{13} For a complete examination of mirror imagery and a compendium of titles containing the mirror in medieval and Renaissance texts, see Grabes, The Mutable Glass.
In the Renaissance, satire served a didactic purpose in its reflection of reality, and from Cicero to Lessing, comedy, as an early form of literary realism, was considered a "copy of life, a mirror of custom, a reflection of truth." Leonardo da Vinci deemed the mirror an analogy for the relationship of the artist's mind and the painting to nature (Abrams 32), and it likewise served as a fundamental instructive element in painting. Art students used a mirror while painting in order to examine the work in its entirety because there it appeared inverted and looked as if it were the product of another master, and thus one could better judge the errors within it (Haart-Nibbrig, Spiegelschrift 57). In a chapter entitled "Von der Nachahmung" in his Poetischem Trichter (1653), Philip Harsdöffer recommends copying proven models as a fundamental practice for the artist (Buch 21), and Samuel Johnson commends Shakespeare for faithfully mirroring life (Abrams 32).

The understanding of mimesis as the foundation of both visual and written art forms culminated in the eighteenth-century image of the mirror and the celebration of the ut pictura poesis notion of art. This phrase coined by Horace in Ars Poetica (361), meaning "a poem is like a picture," became the primary validation for arguments about the picturing ability of poetry and the speaking quality of pictures among German-language writers in the eighteenth century. Barthold Brockes, one of the founders of the Teutschübeende Gesellschaft (1714), exemplifies the emphasis placed on the correspondence between art and nature, denying that any distinction between them.

14 In the fourth century Donatus attributes the phrase "imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis" to Cicero. Ben Jonson later quotes the same phrase (Abrams 32).
15 For extended discussions of mimesis and artistic production in German works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Hans Christoph Buch, Ut Pictura Poesis: Die Beschreibungsliteratur und ihre Kritiker von Lessing bis Lukács and Hans Peter Herrmann, Naturnachahmung und Einbildungskraft: Zur Entwicklung der deutschen Poetik von 1670 bis 1740 (1970).
exists: “Wofem nicht auch die Kunst Natur, / Und wesentlich nicht unterschieden” (VII, 327). In his nine-volume work *Auszug aus dem Irdischen Vergnügen in Gott* (1721-48), Brockes outlines the mimetic concept of poetic art forms and further likens them to painting. In the final volume of the work he cites a poem entitled “Übersetzung” that reveals the principles of his aesthetic program:

Die Poesie ist eine Kunst, das Wesen der Natur zu schildern ... 
Sie weis der zwo beliebtesten Künste, der Tonkunst und der Mahlerey, 
Vortrefflichkeiten zu vereinen. Sie ahmt des Pinsels Zauberschlag 
In ihren Bildern, und dabe 
In ihrem Wohllaut der Musik beliebt – und süße Töne nach. (IX, 541)

Brockes did not write the poem; however, its inclusion in the volume suggests the importance of it for his aesthetic program. The primary function of poetry is to provide an accurate mental image, like a painted picture, in the mind of the reader. United by a common goal of visual representation, poetry and painting were argued to be parallel media governed by the principle of mimesis. While Horace, in fact, differentiated between the two art forms, his phrase was misunderstood by later writers and used as the basis for comparing poetry and paintnig on the basis of a shared mimetic function. Proponents of this aesthetic view believed poetry should reflect objects and events with the same visual clarity as painting. Friedrich von Hagedorn, called ‘the German Horace,’” summarizes the principles of this aesthetic in a poem about Brockes:

Gleicht Poesie der Malerei  
Und kann in wohlgetroff’nen Bildern  
Homer, wie der Apelles, schildern,  
So leg’ ich, Brock’s, dir beide bei.  
Ist doch, wie wir zu sagen pflegen,  
Ein jedes Bild ein stumm’ Gedicht,  
Und also ein Gedicht hingegen,  
Nur eine Malerei, so spricht (qtd. in Wehl 214)
Similarly, Bodmer argues that the primary rule of poetic creation is “das Natürliche nachspüre[n], und copiere[n]...” (qtd. in Herrmann 164). Along with Bodmer, Brockes, Hagedorn, Gottsched, and Breitinger all believed in the equation between art and mimesis because of a similar discourse regarding the nature of the mind as a reflective faculty that gathered impressions of the objective world and reflected them faithfully as mental, i.e., visual, images. As Williams argues, “Art, as imitation, was merely one manifestation of man’s copying capacity — it amounted to doing (and perfecting) that which comes naturally” (The Mirror and the Word 45).

Mirror of the Mind

Analogic uses of the mirror culminated in the eighteenth century when representational theories of the mind and mimetic concepts of art came together to register an overarching visual understanding of the world and the intellect’s relationship to it. The very persistence of the mirror image in texts from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century reveals that the concept of imitatio served as the anchor not only for aesthetic discussions but also for epistemological and ontological principles centered on a mimetic understanding of the mind. At least since Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave,’ visual perception has acted as the primary faculty by which we examine, understand, and order the world. Kent Kraft explains:

Perhaps because of its very vacancy or indeterminateness, the image of the mirror has been used to represent both the mind’s stability and its inconstancy, its quicksilver fluidity and insubstantiality, as well as its

---

16 Herrmann examines in depth the debate between Bodmer and Breitinger and Gottsched about the ut pictura poesis notion of art. Herrmann explains that the conflict arose from differing views of mimesis. For Gottsched, mimesis was the means by which the moral didactic goal of poetic art could be achieved. For Bodmer and Breitinger, the mimetic rendering of nature was the primary goal of poetry.
apparent power to convey infinitely many forms and psychological conditions (40).^{17}

Particularly in the century leading up to Kant and the Copernican revolution in epistemology, the mirror was used metaphorically to represent the mind's reflective function vis à vis the phenomenal world. Like art, the mind was considered a receptor of the material realm and was thus bound to it through its imitative function. Based on the Cartesian concept of the intellect, the nonmaterial mind (res cogitans) was defined by its ability to mirror nature, "that is, to represent to itself the material world (res extensa)" (Williams, The Mirror and the Word 31). For Descartes, the mind was a static receiver of outside phenomena, which takes in objects and images and reflects them unchanged; it took no active part in the interpretation or representation of phenomena in the objective world. Its purpose was to provide visual representations that were then viewed by the "Eye of the Mind," a visual metaphor, as Richard Rorty argues in his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, which has served as the foundation for Western thought (39).

In Descartes' conception — the one which became the basis for "modern" epistemology — it is 'representations' which are in the "mind." The Inner Eye surveys these representations hoping to find some mark which will testify to their fidelity... How do we know whether what the Eye of the Mind sees is a mirror (even a distorted mirror — an enchanted glass) or a veil? The notion of knowledge as inner representation is so natural to us that Aristotle's model may seem merely quaint, and Cartesian ... skepticism seems to us so much a part of what it is to "think philosophically" that we are amazed that Plato and Aristotle never confronted it directly. (46)

According to Rorty, Descartes was the first to discuss the mind in terms of specular metaphors; his theory generated the understanding that the mind was both secondary to

^{17} See Kraft for an in depth discussion of the mirror image and representations of the mind in Plato and Aristotle and Grabes and Leisegang for a discussion of mirror analogies from Plato to the present.
the world and bound to it through its mirroring function. Rorty explains how knowing requires a comprehension of "the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations" (3). The image of the mind as a mirror containing various representations "holds traditional philosophy captive" (12). Without the notion of the mind as the reflector, Western thought would not have anchored itself in the notion of accurate representations as the measure of knowledge. This emphasis on the reflective function of the mind rendered it both subordinate to and dependent on the world by an imitative function. Thus, the Cartesian theory of the mind represents a series of mimetic models of the mind that are only called into question at the end of the nineteenth century.

Like Descartes, John Locke determined that the primary function of the mind was to mirror phenomena of the objective world. Perhaps the most influential thinker in establishing a popular view of the mind (Abrams 57), Locke describes the mind in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689) as a passive faculty that receives the images of the objective world and reflects them unaltered: "The understanding can no more refuse to have [these ideas], nor alter when they are imprinted, nor blot them out and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do therein produce" (142-43). According to Locke, the human mind can think about non-mental entities only by first recognizing that mental concepts represent them. Georg Friedrich Meier and Christian Wolff further disseminated the argument that in its most basic function, human understanding is representational. According to Meier, the mind possessed a painter-like quality (Meier
76), and Wolf argued that the impressions given to the mind were considered paintings or pictures (Wolff, pars. 747, 751).

Ultimately, the representational theories of the mind that culminated in the Enlightenment were dependent upon metaphors of vision, and all of the classic dichotomies of Western thought (mind/body, subject/object) can be explained in terms of "the relation between visual images and the objects they stand for" (Mitchell, Iconology 16). Consciousness itself was understood as an agent that produces, reproduces, and represents pictures; thus, the mirror was a natural image for describing the pictorialization that took place within the mind, as when Friedrich Nietzsche calls consciousness the mirror by which the thinking subject scrutinizes itself (III, 590).

**Mirror of Language**

Theories propagating the inherently visual and imitative foundation of the mind also regarded language as a medium based primarily on the images received from the exterior world. Because theories of the mind depended on visual metaphors to explain its interaction with the world, it is not surprising that literary art, too, was measured in terms of accurate (visual) renditions of reality. Mitchell suggests that since empiricism, the philosophy of language was based on the idea that "beneath words, beneath ideas, the ultimate reference in the mind is the image, the impression of outward experience printed, painted, or reflected in the surface of consciousness" (Iconology 43). The belief in the ability of the mirror to acquire an image and return it unchanged leads to a reliance on visual assurance of the act of reflection. Similarly, Enlightenment thinkers believed that words, as the linguistic product of the reflective mind, reflected the
essence of what they described. Words, poetic words in particular, were thought to paint
an accurate picture of the world they described, and they appeared to be linked to the
objects they named both meaningfully and naturally. Thus, it is not surprising the ut
pictura poesis understanding of art reached its apex in the seventeenth century. In its
formulation, this dictum contains three prevalent views that form the foundation of
knowledge and art in the Enlightenment: first, that art is primarily mimetic; second, that
the intellect is a visually representational faculty; and third, that language has a
representational character. If the mind was linked to objective reality through a
picturing relationship, then language, particularly poetic language, must create images
of nature accurately, like painted renditions of natural objects. Williams argues that the
focus of Enlightenment thinkers on the link between the poetic text and painting was
driven by an attempt to explain the world and knowing in terms of accurate visual
perception and “a subliminal desire to keep language determinate” (The Mirror and the
Word 48). By linking poetic language to the visual representation of painting, language,
like the mind, could be considered a primarily representational medium and thus
inherently connected to the material realm.

But already during the eighteenth century, the link between poetic language and
the empirical world was becoming more tenuous. While Gottsched and Joseph Addison,
like Brockes, Bodmer, and Breitinger, laud the poetic text for its ability to represent the
world in terms of visual accuracy, in the early eighteenth century the sister arts were
being separated: poetic language was conceived as having a picturing ability greater
than painting. Addison makes a further claim for the picturing ability of language,
particularly poetic language, to surpass the object’s impression on the mind as a mental image:

Words, when well chosen, have so great force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves. The reader finds a scene drawn in stronger colors and painted more to the life in his imagination by the help of words than by an actual survey of the scene which they describe. In this case the poet seems to get the better of nature; he takes, indeed, the landscape after her but gives it more vigorous touches, heightens its beauty, and so enlivens the whole piece that the images which flow from objects themselves appear weak and faint in comparison of those that come from the expressions. (60)¹⁸

While Addison still clearly operates under the notion of a pictorial view of language, he reveals a break between poetry and its painting-like mimetic rendering of reality. While he stresses the verbal image as “the keystone of all language” (Mitchell, Iconology 23),¹⁹ he does not refer to a purely mimetic image. Rather, in contrast to Brockes’ argument about the function of poetic language as a mirror of nature, Addison proposes poetry as the superior art form because of its link to the imagination; precise descriptions stemming from verbal images are more vivid than the images that objects themselves impress on the mind. Here Addison both addresses and breaks free of characteristic notions of language in the Enlightenment. Consistent with the understanding of the mind as a representational medium, Addison stresses that the mind functions by conceptualizing the empirical world in terms of mental images. Unlike the static quality of the Cartesian mind, however, according to Addison, the imagination contains pictures formed by the descriptive ability of the verbal image.

¹⁸ Originally printed in The Spectator, no. 416, June 27, 1712.
¹⁹ Mitchell highlights two meanings of the verbal image: first, it is a metaphor for all literary tropes; and second, it refers to the representation of physical objects in literary language.
The distinction that Addison makes between the visual and verbal arts and his suggestion that language, in fact, surpasses mimetic renderings of the world is a precursor to Lessing’s complete undoing of the *ut pictura poesis* understanding of art in his *Laokoon* (1776). Lessing’s essay reveals a stark break from the prevailing Enlightenment sentiment that poetry and painting were equivalent art forms and is both the culmination of this debate and a harbinger of the Kantian division between subject and object worlds that would follow. While Lessing ultimately retains the classical belief that mimesis is the basis of all art, he undermines the customary view of poetic language as a visual medium like painting. Instead, he suggests that poetic language possesses a dynamic quality of mirroring, which it exhibits as the descriptions of action; this form of representation stands in contrast to the static mimesis of painting, which depicts the various hues and colors of stationary objects. For Lessing, the primary difference between the arts rests in the distinction between temporality and spatiality. The verbal art form unfolds over time and is thus more aptly suited to depict actions rather than objects while the plastic arts are spatial and therefore better equipped to represent objects pictorially, revealing all of their nuances of color and shape simultaneously.

By stressing the temporal quality of language, Lessing rejects his predecessors’ understanding of poetry as a picturing art form. While poetic language purports to recreate reality with visual accuracy, it is fundamentally unable to generate pictures in the mind: “Es sind Kräuter und Blumen, welche der gelehrte Dichter mit großer Kunst und nach der Natur malet. Malt, aber ohne alle Täuschung malet. … Ich höre in jedem Wort den arbeitenden Dichter, aber das Ding selbst bin ich weit entfernt zu sehen” (99-23).
100). Unlike a painting, which suggests a visual correlation between the object on the canvas and the object as the viewer experiences in reality, the poem is unable to evoke a visual replica. Lessing further undoes a picturing notion of language by implying the arbitrary connection between words and the things they identify: “Die Zeichen der Poesie sind nicht bloß aufeinanderfolgend, sie sind auch willkürlich; und als willkürliche Zeichen sind sie allerdings fähig, Körper, so wie sie im Raume existieren, auszudrücken” (97). For Lessing, the expressive power of poetry lies in its ability to reveal the invisible quality of an object; its representational strength lies in its depiction of what cannot be seen. In this regard, the poet’s art surpasses that of the painter; it reveals not only what the painter shows but also what he can never illustrate. In their ability to represent what is not visible to the human eye, words are more specific than painting.

Ultimately, Lessing’s text both illustrates the premise of mirror theories of art and poetry and debunks the idea of language as a mimetic medium, thus anticipating nineteenth-century views of expressive poetic language. Although he ultimately retains an understanding of poetry based in visual mimesis, the distinctions he makes between the media of poetry and painting suggest doubts about the representational quality of language that persist into the early twentieth century. In his attempt to divorce poetic language from painting and its apparent function as a visual medium, Lessing intimates a shift from reflection to expression, not only in aesthetic models, but also in the function of language and the mind. Abrams explains that the change in aesthetic views that took place throughout the course of the eighteenth century was linked to an overall change in the understanding of the mind as a picturing apparatus:
The change from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues ... was an integral part of a corresponding change in popular epistemology — that is, in the concept of the role played by the mind in perception which was current among romantic poets and critics. And the movement from eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century schemes of the mind and its place in nature is indicated by a mutation of metaphors almost exactly parallel to that in contemporary discussion of the nature of art. (57)

Lessing’s belief that poetic language is a superior art form because of its ability to depict the invisible rather than the visible aspects of the world suggests a shift in the understanding of the mind as a mirroring apparatus and of art as a mimetic medium. The conclusions he makes about the arbitrariness of language and its apparent shift away from visual representation in favor of the imagination foreshadow the romantics’ organic theories of language, their celebrations of subjectivity, and their interest in the non-representational medium of music.

With Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781) and theory of the transcendental subject, the mind that heretofore acted as a mirror assumes an active role in the individual’s experience of the material world. The mind, in interpreting phenomena of the world around it, also helps construct an understanding of that world. While through this understanding of reality the subject was granted a newfound importance and freedom in the interpretation of its surroundings, it also undermined the stability of the subject’s knowledge of the objective world. With this development, the human mind was considered incapable of grasping the essences of the world around it. Thus one could no longer speak of an exact replication of reality in the mind’s eye or of the ability of language, a product of the conscious mind, to capture the true nature of the objects it describes. Instead, the connection of language to reality appeared to be
arbitrary, and the belief that words were visually connected to the objects they described was viewed as an attempt of the conscious mind to exercise control over the exterior world it was no longer able to know fully.

Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as Novalis, offers a surprisingly modern view of language in his discussion of its arbitrary nature in his “Monolog” (1798):

Es ist eigentlich um das Sprechen und Schreiben eine närrische Sache; das rechte Gespräch ist ein bloßes Wortspiel. Der lächerliche Irrtum ist nur zu bewundern, daß die Leute meinen – sie sprächen um der Dinge willen. Gerade das Eigentümliche der Sprache, daß sie sich bloß um sich selbst bekümmert, weiß keiner. Darum ist sie ein so wunderbares und fruchtbares Geheimnis. (426)

In this passage, Novalis foreshadows the philosophies of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein with his assessment of language as “word play.” Like Nietzsche, who calls words “willkürliche Übertragungen” (I, 878), thus suggesting human beings’ willful creation of meaning behind words, Novalis suggests that human beings convince themselves that their language identifies “things” when really it only refers back to itself. In his assessment of language, Novalis identifies the very crux of the linguistic crisis that plagued authors at the end of the nineteenth century. Elsewhere he refers to the sign, which he uses interchangeably with “word,” as a thing of ornamentation; its usage is based not on a naturally determined order but rather on a false inclination: “Ist das Zeichen nicht ein schönes Bild, oder ein Gesang, so ist Anhänglichkeit an Zeichen, die verkehrteste aller Neigungen” (356). Novalis reveals that the adherence to language and its collection of signs is not an organic relationship; it is a matter of convention. While Nietzsche and other modern writers identify the detrimental aspects of language’s arbitrary character, Novalis considers it a “wonderful and fruitful secret,” thus implying
the liberating effects of a language system no longer based on mimesis; with this view, he exhibits a sense of what Williams calls "romantic optimism" (The Mirror and the Word 57). For Novalis, learning to live with the "Zeichenwelt" and to surrender the dependence of language on external reality is merely a question of habit, and poetic texts are the embodiment of this emancipation (qtd. in Williams 57). Based on his understanding of the magical powers of poetry to unite the external world with the spirit, Novalis was able to move beyond the representational problem of language. Indeed, he accepts its arbitrariness and inherently self-conscious nature and uses it to give shape to poetic creativity:

So ist es auch mit der Sprache – wer ein feines Gefühl ihrer Applikatur, ihres Takts, ihres musikalischen Geistes hat, wer in sich das zarte Wirken ihrer inneren Natur vernimmt, und danach seine Zunge oder seine Hand bewegt, der wird ein Prophet sein. (426)

Ultimately, Novalis, who was greatly influenced by Fichte, overcomes the gap between arbitrary language and its tenuous link to the empirical through a celebration of the divine, narcissistic cohesion between subject and object in the poetic text. Based on the ability of the poetic text to overcome the problem of representation signified by Kantian schematism, the poet, as creator of the unifying artwork, assumes a mystical role.

While the link between language and accurate visual representation is called into question at the end of the eighteenth century, the persistence of verbal images throughout the nineteenth century reveals a lingering desire to ground language in visual representation. Despite the view that language is no longer representational, but instead organic and imaginative, in romantic and modern poetics the verbal image retains its hold over the understanding of literary language, and the notion of imagery is

27
sublimated and mystified. As Mitchell states, “Under the aegis of ‘imagination,’ in other words, the notion of imagery is split in two, and the distinction is made between the pictorial or graphic image, which is a lower form and often associated with the empiricist model of perception, and a ‘higher’ image, which is internal, organic, and living” (Iconology 25).

Considering this desire to reject the visual metaphors of classicism and the attempt to achieve an internal, imaginative art form, many romantics, not surprisingly, esteemed music as the most non-representational form of art. It was an entirely independent art form that signified nothing other than its own autonomous nature: “Der Musiker nimmt das Wesen seiner Kunst aus sich – auch nicht der leiseste Verdacht von Nachahmung kann ihn treffen. Dem Maler scheint die sichtbare Natur überall vorzuarbeiten – durchaus sein unerreichbares Muster zu sein” (Novalis 393). Unlike painting, which relies on a system of representation as the foundation for its aesthetic value, music is not constricted by a mediating relationship to the objective world. In its spontaneous and emotional embodiment of the soul untainted by the intellect, music is the perfect embodiment of Schopenhauer’s \textit{Wille}, the all-encompassing and formless force that shapes the nature of all things.

Similarly, Nietzsche’s \textit{Geburt der Tragödie} (1872) exhibits a neo-romantic vein by moving away from plastic or Apollonian art forms in favor of music as an expression of the Dionysian will:”[D]ie Musik ist, wie gesagt, darin von allen anderen Künsten verschieden, dass sie nicht Abbild der Erscheinung, oder richtiger, der adäquaten Objectität des Willens, sondern unmittelbar Abbild des Willens selbst” (I, 106). Basing his view on Schopenhauer’s understanding of music as the primary expression of the
will, Nietzsche argues that music is a higher art form than painting or poetry because its direct link to the artistic will is non-representational and thus closer to the Dionysian experience of mystical oneness.\(^9\)

**Romantic Skepticism**

While Novalis responds optimistically to the subject-object dichotomy after Kant by suggesting poetry’s magical quality and elevating music as a non-representational art form, many romantic writers respond with anxiety to the inability of knowing the empirical world. The mirror, in particular, reveals the uncertainty with which many authors viewed the subject’s decreased capability to shape reality. Based on Kantian skepticism toward visual perception and the aesthetic shift from “objectivity in the classical view” to “romantic subjectivity” (Abrams 32), the mirror turns from the external world to focus on the interior realm of the viewing subject. It does not simply replicate images of the world around it; rather, like the imagination, it modifies outward appearances to suit the interior of the artist, a process to which Frank Kermode refers as the “sublimation” of the poetic image.\(^{21}\) Distorted mirror images reveal the angst associated with the “fall” signaled by the growth of consciousness and the poet’s skeptical view of language and thus the poetic process.\(^{22}\)

---

\(^9\) In the chapter entitled “Genesis and Genealogy” in his *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man deconstructs Nietzsche’s *Geburt der Tragödie* based on his attempt to describe music as a non-representational medium. According to De Man, the concepts of art and the medium in which they are mediated do not correspond so closely that the medium can disappear. Music is likewise described as an art form based on its representationality.

\(^{21}\) See Kermode, *The Romantic Image*. In addition to Abrams’s work, it is considered one of the classic studies examining the transformation of romantic imagery.

\(^{22}\) One should note that not all instances of mirrors in nineteenth-century texts are distorted. Hölderlin, Clemens Brentano, Jean Paul, and Feuerbach all provide examples of the mirror as a unifying or
This shift from the purely imitative mirror to the mirror that is deceptive appears in texts throughout the nineteenth century. Although no longer a symbol of exact mimesis, mirrors appear with continued frequency in romantic and realist texts. Abrams explains, “Allusions to poetry as a representation or image, as well as the implied analogy of art with a mirror, survive the criticism of the early nineteenth century, but usually with a difference.... Often the reflector is reversed, and images a state of mind rather than of external nature” (50). Texts by Kleist, Brentano, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff all feature mirrors that abandon their reflective quality to highlight instead the artist’s creative faculty and perspective of reality. Unlike earlier examples of reflective surfaces that provide a pure imitation of the objects before them, these mirrors function through deception. While the imitative function still serves as the fundamental understanding of reflection, the mirror gains its significance because the image it offers does not correspond to the picture it purports to reflect. As Robert Holub points out, romantic mirrors “are employed to convey a notion of distortion” (25).

A paradigmatic text featuring this type of mirror is Kleist’s “Über das Marionettentheater” (1810-11). Kleist, who after reading Kant’s first Kritik experienced his so-called Kant crisis, writes the story of a young man whose momentary glance at his reflection in a mirror marks the passage of the individual from a state of unconscious grace to self-conscious scrutiny. The “fall” occurs when the protagonist attempts to reduplicate the classical naïveté of the Spinario statue but is instead confronted by his own lack of grace. Here, the act of gazing into the mirror leads to self-reflection and thus self-consciousness. While examining himself in the mirror leads to self-knowledge,
it simultaneously undermines the subject’s sense of union with its object self. While previously the young man had moved according to instinct, after seeing himself in the mirror, he discovers the unidealized manner in which others view him and suffers a symbolic fall from grace. The encounter with the mirror not only initiates the man’s loss of innocence; it also continues to serve as an object by which he measures his inadequacies and reflects upon his fallen state.

While looking in the mirror leads to a form of self-knowledge in this text and the anxiety that accompanies it, in other texts the mirror image engenders a sense of fear or alienation, as in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Geschichte vom verlorenen Spiegel* (1815). Instead of reflecting pictures of the physical world or an ideal image, the mirror reveals the cleft between the subject and external reality. In the story, which serves as an allegory of the poet’s growing skepticism toward his profession, the protagonist’s lost mirror reflection is the embodiment of themes such as the fall, evil, and guilt. In exchange for the love of a beautiful temptress, the young Spikher, who is one of Hoffmann’s typical artist figures, surrenders his mirror image to the devil.\(^\text{23}\) The image engages in a series of ethically questionable activities that signify Spikher’s fall from grace and his moral debasement. Once the mirror is liberated from its reflective relationship to the world, its freed image takes on the corporeal form of the Doppelgänger, who reminds Spikher of his guilt. Confronted by dark, non-reflecting mirrors, he is forced to look inward to achieve spiritual reform. More important than the didactic component of the story is the mirror’s connection to Hoffmann’s conception of art and the artist. The non-reflecting mirrors that embody Spikher’s guilt represent Hoffmann’s understanding of an art form

\(^{23}\) Spikher’s role as the poet figure is suggested by a manuscript he gives to the narrator of the story in which he tells the story of his decline from moral existence into a spiritual void.
that no longer reflects a higher ideal. Like Spikher, the artist is for Hoffmann a fallen character. With this representation of the artist figure, Hoffmann intimates a waning belief in the mystical quality of art the romantics celebrated; in his works, the romantic optimism of Novalis gives way to images of the artist’s struggle between his poetic calling and the demands of reality, thus suggesting the poet’s fallen or criminal status.

The critique of romantic art and of its cult of the imagination that we see in Hoffmann’s text becomes increasingly apparent in the works of later nineteenth-century authors. While earlier confrontations with the mirror produce consciousness and the beholder’s recognition of its imperfections, later uses of the image express the compulsive generational concerns of modernism (Ziolkowski, Disenchanted Images 175). In these works the mirror captures neither the anxiety stemming from the subject’s newly acquired consciousness nor the artist’s sense of alienation in a post-romantic world. Instead, it symbolizes the growing sense of estrangement the individual experiences in a modern world characterized by the dehumanizing effects of technology and growing consumerism. Faced with a deepening spiritual and cultural void, the modern protagonist sees in the mirror not an accurate reflection of its own visage but rather a projection of its internal fears and heightened anxieties. The mirror is a realm in which the disenchanted subject engages in an alienating confrontation with itself (Krogoll 64). As literary conventions changed, writers no longer externalized the unconscious like the romantics, giving it a fantastic or magical form; instead, they internalized their motifs, focusing on the psychological struggle of the individual.

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s poem “Das Spiegelbild” (1842) is a formalization of the lyrical subject’s psychological self-study. The dialectic between appearance and
essential reality (subject and object) in this text takes the form of the lyrical subject’s struggle with her mirror image. The poem thematizes the tormenting uncertainty with which the lyrical subject questions the nature of her own being and the relationship of her internal world to her exterior environment. The mirror represents the alienation from which the modern subject suffers with regard to her surroundings and to herself; its surface serves as a barrier, suggesting the eternal division from the object world that the post-romantic subject experiences: “Es ist gewiß, du bist nicht Ich, / Ein fremdes Dasein...” (I, 148). While the lyrical subject hopes to overcome the dichotomy of existence through the acceptance of herself as other, ultimately the moment of confrontation is precarious, and the union that the poem suggests is ephemeral. The object self remains hopelessly foreign; its otherness is the embodiment of the growing industrialized environment from which the self-conscious subject feels separated.

The poem’s treatment of the relationship between subject and object and its focus on the lyrical subject’s interior landscape distinguishes it as a primary example of literary realism and its growing interest in the bourgeois subject. While Droste-Hülshoff’s use of the mirror and her apparent attention to detail suggest a return to earlier mimetic concepts of art, this text reveals a self-consciousness that undoes the very notion of mirroring it alleges. The mirror appears to offer a reflection of life; instead, it reveals a psychological dimension of the text that is absent from the eighteenth-century understanding of mimesis. As Robert Alter suggests, realist writers are, in fact, “imaginists – writers caught up in the autonomous power of their own fantasy world even as they strive to make it a true image of the world of contemporary society” (97). In a reversal of traditional mirroring, the exterior world that is reflected in
the text is colored by the subjective perception of the narrator, author, or protagonists. Despite the many mirrors and portraits in so-called realist texts of the nineteenth-century German tradition, these mirrors reveal, in varying degrees, moments of self-reflection and at times precarious relationships to the external world.24

The skepticism exhibited in "Das Spiegelbild" toward the subject's ability to know reality becomes a primary question in Nietzsche's philosophy. Most often aligned with high modernism rather than the intellectual movements of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche enunciates the growing skepticism toward visual perception and objective knowledge that texts of the nineteenth century begin to suggest. In particular, he links growing self-conscious to the development of language, concluding: "Kurz gesagt, die Entwicklung der Sprache und die Entwicklung des Bewusstseins (nicht der Vernunft, sondern allein des Sich-bewusst-werdens der Vernunft) gehen Hand in Hand" (III, 592).

Language, in its link to consciousness, serves as the medium through which the thinking subject reflects upon itself; it is the mirror of human understanding. Serving as the means by which one gains self-knowledge, language at the same time leads to self-deception; it is a distorted mirror that misrepresents and even contorts the true nature of the concepts it describes. Like the mirror whose image is disconnected from the object of reflection, language lacks the fundamental essence of the concepts it describes.

In his early essay "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne" (1873) Nietzsche questions the ability of language to depict reality: "Ist die Sprache der adäquate Ausdruck aller Realitäten?" (I, 878). He answers the question negatively,

---

24 See Robert Holub, Reflections on Realism for an examination of what he considers their inherent subversion of a realist poetics.
arguing that language is a constructed medium whose link to the object world is entirely random:

Wir glauben etwas von den Dingen selbst zu wissen, wenn wir von Bäumen, Farben, Schnee und Blumen reden und besitzen doch nichts als Metaphern der Dinge, die den ursprünglichen Wesenheiten ganz und gar nicht entsprechen. (I, 879)

The arbitrary relationship between language and things that Novalis considered a part of the mystical nature of language is, for Nietzsche, an artificial attempt by humans to establish a stable foundation in an external reality. Applying names to things suggests an inherent understanding of them. Nietzsche argues, however, that language can never represent "things-in-themselves." On the contrary, it only shows the relationship of "things" to people, and in doing so makes use of metaphor. Metaphor becomes the vehicle through which humans attempt to fulfill their desire for a priori truth: "Jetzt wird nämlich das fixiert, was von nun an ‘Wahrheit’ sein soll d.h. es wird eine gleichmässig gültige und verbindliche Bezeichnung der Dinge erfunden und die Gesetzgebung der Sprache giebt auch die ersten Gesetze der Wahrheit" (I, 877). Nietzsche concludes that there is no original perception or knowledge of an object; only an "aesthetic relationship" exists between being and meaning that is conveyed through the word (I, 884). Because words are subject to human interpretation in the translation from referent to signified, language is always marked by its metaphorical, i.e., deceptive, quality. In answer to the question then, "What is truth," Nietzsche responds:

Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen,

Paradoxically, when Nietzsche argues that metaphors do not match the objects they describe, he succumbs to the very practice of stating truths that he criticizes in the essay. Since Nietzsche himself could not know the essence of things, he is unable to say definitively that language does not correspond to the objects it names. At best he should conclude that they might not correspond.
Language, the very means by which humans establish truth, turns against itself. The concepts, whose metaphorical foundations have been forgotten, become meaningless and outdated. Language, with the metaphors that characterize it, embodies a notion of truth not because it is inherently linked to the essence of things, but because its meaning has been canonized. Custom and tradition are the only factors upon which the truth value of language is founded, and when they are called into question at the end of the nineteenth century, language, too, loses its grounding.

**Language and the Crisis of Representation**

The critique of language and the relativization of its truth value that Nietzsche asserts in "Über Wahrheit und Lüge" takes on aesthetic form in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" (1902). This essay is viewed, perhaps more than any other literary text at the turn of the century, as the prototypical representation of linguistic skepticism at the outset of the twentieth century. The text takes the form of a fictional letter that Lord Chandos, a seventeenth-century author, writes to Francis Bacon to explain his creative silence. After years of success and with plans to write subsequent works, Lord Chandos suffers a linguistic crisis, in which words lose their meaning and lead not to specific objects, but instead to a void (49). Before arriving at the problem of linguistic expression, Chandos offers a compendium of aesthetic forms and topics of the seventeenth century, none of which he is able to use as an impetus to his own creative
drive. In keeping with seventeenth-century aesthetic theory, he bases his creative philosophy on a naturalistic depiction of reality: "[I]ch wollte die ersten Regierungsjahre unseres verstorbenen glorreichen Souveräns, des achten Heinrich darstellen!" (46). Similarly, he compares his art to painting and sculpture, concluding: "Ich wollte die Fabeln und mythischen Erzählung … an denen die Maler und Bildhauer ein endloses und gedankenloses Gefallen finden" (46). Unlike the visual artists whose "gedankenloses Gefallen" reveals their ability to create art without self-consciously reflecting on its character, Lord Chandos questions the capacity of his aesthetic medium, words, to depict his surroundings accurately. Words, which he once considered "Hieroglyphen einer geheimen, unerschöpflichen Weisheit" (46-47), now "zerf[al]len … im Munde wie modrige Pilze" (49). For Chandos, words that previously pictured the essence of things now lose their referential quality in his perception of the cleft between subject and object worlds.  

The linguistic crisis that Hofmannsthal voices through the figure of Lord Chandos originates in the same problem of representation to which Nietzsche alludes in "Über Wahrheit und Lüge." Initially Chandos does not experience the external world as a separate entity; "geistige und körperliche Welt schien [ihm] keinen Gegensatz zu bilden" (47). Like the thinkers and artists of his day, Chandos bases his understanding of the world in visual mimesis; he believes the images of things in his mind mirror

---

26 This list of aesthetic works reveals Hofmannsthal’s own efforts to confront traditional art forms and question their validity in his own aesthetic framework. In highlighting their inability to keep Chandos from his representational crisis, Hofmannsthal likewise reveals the inability of traditional art forms to overcome the representational gap of the modern age.

27 This romantic notion of language is clearly anachronistic if we consider the fictional time of the letter. Hofmannsthal’s use of the term thus undermines the fictional (i.e., representational) quality of his own text, suggesting that the language crisis he depicts is really his own. In this light, “Ein Brief” can be seen to undermine the very criticism the author makes about the inability of the poetic text to represent his surroundings.
precisely things as they exist in reality. Likewise, he believes that language likewise possesses a mirroring function, creating pictures of objects in the mind as they appear in the world; as Nietzsche might argue, he does not question the "canonized" understanding of language and its inherently metaphorical character. When Chandos recognizes a rift between his perceptions of objects and their independent essence, he is no longer able to draw connections between the two: "Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen" (48).

Chandos thus expresses Hofmannsthal's own skepticism toward the dissolving mirror models of thought and language that had dominated epistemology and aesthetics. He further embodies Hofmannsthal's views when he alludes to the lost foundation of language in the world:

Die einzelnen Worte schwammen um mich; sie gerannen zu Augen, die mich anstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muß: Wirbel sind sie, in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt. (49)

This passage also suggests the dissolution of a linguistic model founded in visual mimesis. Using a traditional mirror motif, the eyes, Hofmannsthal reveals how words are no longer grounded in the stability of visual perception. The words, disconnected from their chain of signification, swim before Chandos's eyes. They then become eyes themselves ("sie gerannen zu Augen"), and as Chandos looks into them, expecting the mirror reflection of his own mental images, he instead encounters nothingness. The words do not signify things; instead they refer back only to themselves in a "wundervolles Verhältnisspiel" (50) to which the subject has no access.
In “Ein Brief,” Hofmannsthal summarizes the linguistic skepticism that marks the advent of the twentieth century. While he places the plot in the seventeenth century, the aesthetic development he traces in the form of Chandos’s creative life alludes to the history of Western aesthetics. His reflections on tradition and his ensuing linguistic crisis represent the modernist author’s confrontation with traditional art forms and their inability to express the growing sense of alienation that Hofmannsthal and others experienced in an increasingly industrialized and isolating environment. Particularly the dissolution of the subject’s mirror relationship to reality and the lost mirroring quality of language lead to changes in the ways writers at the turn of the century treat their understanding of the world in art. The mirror appears repeatedly in works of the twentieth century as an image that registers the crisis of representation. Embodying the breakdown in mimetic relationships between things, mind, and words, the mirror in modernist texts renounces the process of reflection and instead becomes generative, producing pictures that serve as the foundation of the poetic text.

Like Hofmannsthal, Wittgenstein reacts starkly to the linguistic skepticism in the first decades of the twentieth century. His early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), represents an attempt to re-instill language with representational quality. In the work, Wittgenstein develops his so-called picture theory of language, stating that a formal connection between language and reality exists; pictures are connected to reality through the logical form that they share with it (2.18). Language is likewise linked to reality because languages “prove to be pictures, even in the ordinary sense, of what they represent” (4.01). By relating language to pictures, Wittgenstein’s linguistic theory represents one manner in which thinkers and writers attempted to re-infuse language
with communicative and declarative power. In this attempt to reassert the representational relationship between words and things, Wittgenstein reveals affinities with his philosophical predecessors. With his Philosophische Bemerkungen (published posthumously in 1953), the thinker ultimately rejects his picture theory, concluding that language consists of nothing but “Sprachspiele,” whose variable rules are based in multiple cultural and behavioral interactions. The discursive ability of language is not an inherent aspect of its nature; it is a product of use: “Was zum Wesen der Welt gehört, kann die Sprache nicht ausdrücken. Daher kann sie nicht sagen, daß alles fließt.... Daß alles fließt, muß in der Anwendung der Sprache ausgedrückt sein...” (84-85). Words and concepts do not have an essential meaning independent from their use in forms of life; only in their individual contexts do they take on meaning.

While Wittgenstein turns away from his picture theory of language in Philosophische Bemerkungen, pictures continue to pervade his work, revealing that he still uses images to describe the inherent character of language. While words and concepts can never embody the essence of things, the images they create in the mind of any individual are related specifically to the context in which they occur. Wittgenstein continues to state that we have mental images associated with thought or speech; he argues, however, that these images should not be taken as absolute or metaphysical entities. Drawing a connection between images and the nature of language, Wittgenstein concludes:

Wie ist das Bild gemeint? Die Intention liegt nie im Bild selbst, denn, wie immer das Bild geschaffen ist, immer kann es auf verschiedene Weise gemeint sein.... [D]ie Intention drückt sich schon jetzt darin aus, wie ich das Bild jetzt mit der Wirklichkeit vergleiche. (65)
Wittgenstein suggests that pictures in language are not unmediated copies of reality. Instead, he argues that they are artificial, conventional signs like the pronouncements with which they are linked. He replaces connections between mental images and visual perception with the “interplay of the visual and verbal” (Mitchell, Picture Theory 52). While Wittgenstein, like Hofmannsthal, debunks the idea of the organic link between language and world, he retains the idea of picturing, even in its arbitrary form, as the fundamental nature of language.

The interaction between language and image in Wittgenstein’s philosophy represents the inability of thinkers and writers in the early twentieth century to break free of a picturing notion of the mind and language. Even with his purported rejection of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein continues to talk about language in terms of pictures. As Wittgenstein’s later philosophy exhibits, the integration of language and image, as long as they are not inherently linked to reality as a form of objective representation, reveals the link between both visual and verbal media in interpreting and discussing individual experience. The poet’s use of the generative mirror to address the crisis of representation indicates a similar attempt to dissolve the link between the mind and objective reality. The mirror breaks from its referential mode and produces images that refer back only to the poetic text.

**Image and Word: The Generative Mirror**

The turn of the century marks a historical moment in which the mirror loses its passive mirroring quality and becomes active or dynamic. Unlike its mimetic predecessor, this mirror, which I will refer to as the “generative mirror,” gains power as
a poetic device precisely to the degree that it does not imitate what is placed before it, that is, through its heightened degree of metaphoricity. As Holub states, "Whereas [the mirror] formerly was compelled to reflect reality, it now creates reality; the medium has become an agent" (208). Two distinctive features mark the generative mirror. First, as a reflecting medium, it recalls earlier mimetic mirrors but moves beyond them by creating images rather than copying them. In this dialectical relationship between its past function and its autonomous creativity, the generative mirror serves as the embodiment of the modern poet's confrontation with and overcoming of literary tradition. The mirror serves as a means by which the poetic innovation of modernist texts can be distinguished from earlier poetic models. The second distinguishing aspect of the generative mirror involves its relation to language and the narrative text. Like the mirror that no longer provides a reproduction of reality, words are now unable to represent objects in reality. While the mirror's loss of referential quality parallels the disintegration of the representational capability of language in the modern age, its creative quality and semiotic nature make it a plausible substitute for the poetic word. The mirror serves as a fitting representation for the problem of poetic language because its physical property of reflection recalls and reinstates a concept of reflection; yet the mirrors in these poetic texts synthesize and rise above the concept of reflection, culminating in a reflective medium that creates images. Similarly, the poetic text takes on these qualities, as a text that both reveals the problematic function of language and its inability to picture and moves beyond it through its generation of pictures in the body of the text. In their ability to communicate meaning without words, these pictures serve as the means by which the poet overcomes the problem of language. Through the poetic
images generated in the mirror, lyrical language attains what Peter Szondi calls its naturally silent character: "In der Lyrik wird ... das Schweigen Sprache" (36). Through their visual, rather than verbal quality, poetic images serve as an alternative to linguistic mediation.

The generative mirror, as an image-producing device, suggests the desire of modernist poets to approximate a non-linguistic, visual form of art within the poetic medium. By using an image historically associated with language, they acknowledge the necessarily verbal quality of poetry. Through its production of images, however, the generative mirror implies a non-linguistic character of the poem through which the representational problem of language can be overcome. If, as Art Berman suggests, "the visual attests to an a-linguistic cognition of reality" and can provide "direct and even pre-linguistic knowledge" (49), then the mirror images of these poetic texts indicate a means of moving beyond the language problem through a celebration of the autonomous poetic image. Poetic images imply a medium that is free of the strictures of language and mark a distinctly modernist attempt at integrating visual and verbal media, what Mitchell calls a "pictorial turn" (Picture Theory 11). When the communicative ability of language is brought into question, the relative certainty of visual images and their perceived natural quality deems them a "universal means of communication that provides a direct, unmediated, and accurate representation of things, rather than an indirect, unreliable report about things" (Mitchell, Iconology 79).

Unlike mirrors of the eighteenth century, through which vision was considered "perception through eyesight," the generative mirror embodies the idea of "perception through insight" (Berman 43). Like their romantic forerunners, authors at the beginning
of the twentieth century attempt to reveal the internal, psychological landscape of the subject; however, mirrors no longer attempt to link the interior realm with external existence. The reflective surface does not comment on the discrepancy between the mirror reflection and reality, but instead it creates its own meaning that is not derived from the outside world. While the mirror images in the works examined in this study gesture fleetingly toward their inherited connection to reality, their primary purpose is to generate images of the interior world that is represented in the poem.

Inward vision can imply, on the one hand, a projection of the author’s psychological nature onto the mirror’s surface. Freud’s notion of the uncanny, Otto Rank’s theory of the double, and most recently Lacan’s concept of the Imaginary all represent mirror embodiments of the psyche through the creation of images physically experienced as “other.” In addition, one can make arguments for the mirror’s underlying psychological import in the works of Trakl and Rilke and other modernist writers. In the following analyses, however, I contend that mirror images reveal the authors’ confrontation with poetic tradition and the problem of linguistic representation and thus primarily address the challenges of lyrical production and the attempt to create a distinctly modernist form of art through the mixing of visual and verbal media. Inherent within these authors’ use of images and words in the form of the generative mirror is an attempt to reinstate the expressive power of poetic language.

---

28 Recent studies reveal the influence of Lacan’s influential mirror stage theory. In addition to Williams’s reading of Trakl within a Lacanian framework, Lars Ingesmann’s discussion of Droste-Hülshoff’s “Spiegelbild” (1841/42) and Gerald Peters’ analysis of the well-known mirror scene in Rilke’s Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) both base their understanding of the subject’s confrontation with its mirror image on Lacan’s psychoanalytic view.
Rosalind Krauss argues that in the early part of the century, modernism within the visual arts was marked by “its will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse” (qtd. in Mitchell, Picture Theory 215), a premise that seems to work equally well for the texts of Rilke, Trakl, and Aichinger. Unlike their predecessors, who attempted to parallel visual and verbal art forms and thus argue for the primacy of the written word, these authors incorporate visual images as a means of moving beyond language. The generative mirror, as an embodiment of the language/image dialectic, suggests a means by which these authors attempt to overcome the limitations of language, and its incorporation of visual and verbal media marks the modernist characteristics of these authors’ works.

In the following pages, I examine the generative mirror and its link to language, image, and poetic tradition in chapters devoted to Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger. In Chapter Two, I examine how the mirror serves as the source of Trakl’s many cryptic and unsettling images. As a form of visual mediation, these images vividly communicate the complex kinesthetic impulses in the poet’s verse, while through their intrinsically silent character they circumvent what the poet considered the aggressive and alienating verbal character of language. The mirror realm embodies creative liberation and gestures toward the unifying nature of a pre-linguistic state. Androgynous figures, mythic creatures, and quasi-religious imagery all suggest the transcendent quality of the mirror realm and its ability to obliterate the boundaries between experiential and dream worlds, male and female sexuality, and physical and spiritual experience. Although the generative mirror suggests a form of poetic liberation in its break from objective reality, it likewise serves as a medium of self-reflection and
depicts the poet’s divided experience. Despite Trakl’s suggestion that the crisis of representation can be overcome by generating an alternative reality in the mirror realm of poetry, the reflective surface ultimately serves as the very embodiment of the gap between subject and object worlds that he seeks to transcend.

In Chapter Three I consider Rilke’s use of the mirror to portray his confrontation with literary tradition and to debunk a mimetic understanding of art. The mirror appears throughout his oeuvre, revealing the poet’s constant concern with the role of visual representation in poetic texts and how it can be used to expand the limitations he saw in language. Like Trakl, Rilke responds to the linguistic crisis at the turn of the century through an invocation of silence. In lieu of words that can accurately define experience in the material world, Rilke relies on visual images, which, like the sculptor’s plaster, serve as a more tangible artistic medium than abstract language. While early examples of the mirror reveal its function as the medium in which the poet confronts the poetic persona and contemplates the effectiveness of writing, in Rilke’s late verse, the mirror captures his vision of an alternative reality in the parameters of the poem. The mirror is the embodiment of his transcendent notion of “Raum”: it signifies the transformation of reality and a quasi-mystical sense of unity between subject and object worlds within the poetic text.

In Chapter Four, I investigate the role of the mirror and its relationship to narrative in Aichinger’s works. While the mirror does not appear as frequently in her texts as it does in the poems of Trakl and Rilke, the story she devotes to the mirror, “Spiegelgeschichte,” reveals fundamental aspects of her poetology. In the story, Aichinger expresses ambivalence toward the ability of language to convey reality after
the events of the Holocaust. In response to her own questions about how to make language speak in the wake of such an event, Aichinger suggests in the text that silence is the only effective form of social and aesthetic engagement. For Aichinger, the mirror captures the twofold purpose of writing. It fulfills the search for language by taking on narrative function, while simultaneously providing the sought-after silence through a visual, not verbal, image. In the story, the mirror achieves a new level of dynamism, becoming a narrative vehicle. Here the story of the young female protagonist is told through a reflection in the mirror. Adopting the optical function of the mirror, the narrative reverses the events of the girl’s life, beginning with her death and ending at birth. Through this inversion, the text itself becomes both a reflective medium and a reflection. In this sense, the mirror may be viewed as an absolute metaphor of the text that reflects upon itself.

Whereas many non-poetic texts in the twentieth century feature the mirror as a representation of the rift between subject and object worlds and a thematization of the artist’s experience, I use poetic texts in this study to address the issue of the mirror and language in modernist literary works because of their implicit link to the ut pictura poesis debate. More than dramatic or prose forms, poetic works have a historical link to the visual arts through the discussion about their relationship to painting as a visual form of artistic representation. Through the tradition of ekphrasis and the baroque picture poem as well as works of the imagists and concrete poetry, the poetic text has traditionally assumed a picture-like quality. In addition, the poem’s form lends itself most readily to a discussion of visuality and picturing in the literary text. Relying on verbal images and lyrical form rather than plot development and narrative, the poem
exhibits the spatiality not typically ascribed to literary texts; in this regard, it is more akin to traditional understandings of the visual arts than drama or prose, both of which unfold temporally. Indeed, Aichinger’s “Spiegelgeschichte” blurs the distinction between prose and poetic forms; however, its heavy reliance on images rather than narrative to convey the import of the text links it more closely to poetic texts than to other modernist prose forms. Because of their imagistic nature, Aichinger’s texts, both prose and poetry, have been viewed as primarily poetic works.

The final chapter of this study synthesizes the progression of the generative mirror in the works of these three authors and considers the manner in which the mirror embodies the distinctly modern character of their texts. Even as the mirror was used historically to symbolize the connection between mind and the world, between art and reality, the generative mirrors of Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger undermine the very concept of unity the mirror formerly represented. This traditional emblem of wholeness becomes the very symbol of disjunction between subject and object worlds in modernity. While these authors use the mirror to represent their skeptical views toward language and toward the ability of the poetic text to represent the world, they simultaneously indicate the means of overcoming these fissures of modernity through the creation of a unifying aesthetic realm, the world behind the mirror. With its emphasis on visual images, the mirror suggests an overcoming of language by removing a level of mediation. Similarly, its spatial construction and silent character signify the inviolate world of the poetic text. In light of their uses of the mirror, one can draw conclusions about the authors’ varying degrees of success in overcoming the strictures of language and the subject-object divide. Most interesting, however, is the process by
which they problematize the attempt to attain transcendence and the manner in which it
is represented in the poetic text.
CHAPTER 2

"IN MEINER SEELE DUNKLEM SPIEGEL SIND NIEGESEH'NER MEERE":

GEORG TRAKL'S IMAGISTIC POETRY

Georg Trakl's poetic productivity spanned a period of only eight years before he
died of a self-delivered cocaine overdose in 1914 at the age of twenty-seven. During
this short period of creativity, however, he became one of the most influential poets of
the twentieth century, exercising a great impact on authors and literary critics alike.

"Wer mag er gewesen sein?" Rainer Maria Rilke wonders of the poet who created the
macabre images of Sebastian im Traum (1914) that left him "ergriffen, staunend,
ahnend, und ratlos" ("Brief an den Herausgeber" 9). His question is indirectly
answered by Else Laske-Schüler, who commemorates Trakl in verse with the words,
"Er war wohl Martin Luther" (9), thereby attesting to the indelible mark the poet made
on the early twentieth-century literary world. Ludwig von Ficker, editor of Der Brenner,
recognized Trakl's poetic talent early on, and from 1912 until Trakl's death in 1914
every issue of Der Brenner carried one or more of Trakl's poems. In addition to
promoting Trakl's literary career, Ficker likewise became the poet's primary source of
financial and emotional support, and at his mansion in Innsbruck, Trakl wrote "Helian,"
considered one of his greatest poems and a lyrical monument of German verse

50
Karl Borromäus Heinrich, a poet to whom Trakl dedicated the poem “Untergang” and the first person to write a critical assessment of his work, summarized the reception of Trakl by his contemporaries as follows:\(^2\)

Mit großer Klarheit kam mir zum Bewusstsein, was diesen Dichter vor der Masse all derer, die heute Verse machen, auszeichnet: während solche, ihrer Mehrzahl nach, hübsche, glatte, wohlgeriehmte Sachen gleich Pillen drehen... ohne irgendwelche aufscheuchende Emotionen befürchten zu müssen, nimmt dieser Dichter Seele, Aug’ und Ohr des Menschen ganz gefangen. Solches habe ich an ihm erfahren. (100)

In this passage, Heinrich distinguishes the deep, primeval quality of Trakl’s verse from the stylized, formalistic poetry that was prominent in the first decade of the twentieth century. In contrast to the highly constructed and aestheticized texts of Stephan George and the carefully crafted poetic form of the French symbolists, Trakl’s verse is profoundly intuitive and darkly emotive in nature. While his early poetry, with its experiments in rhyme scheme and its musical quality, reveals a direct affinity with symbolist verse, Trakl’s later texts assume the abstract, disjointed, and apocalyptic quality typical of German expressionist poetry.\(^3\) Unlike Georg Keyser, Stefan Heym, and Ernst Stadler, who clearly voiced their alliance with the expressionist movement, however, Trakl never associated himself with that generation (Lindenberger 138-40). His works are void of a politically or socially motivated desire to break from the past.

\(^1\) In a letter of 1913 to Ludwig Ficker, Trakl emphasizes the importance of Ficker, the journal, and the entire Brenner circle to him: “Für Ihren gütigen Brief sage ich Ihnen herzlichsten Dank. Immer tiefer empfinde ich was der Brenner für mich bedeutet, Heimat und Zuflucht im Kreis einer edlen Menschlichkeit” (I, 504). Citations refer to the historical-critical edition of Trakl’s works by Walter Killy and Hans Szklenar.

\(^2\) Trakl not only had an impact on the literary world, he likewise drew the interest of prominent philosophers including Wittgenstein, who became the poet’s patron, and Martin Heidegger, who wrote one of the most influential studies of Trakl during the 1950’s, presenting the poet as a hero of modernity and connecting Trakl’s work to his own through its embodiment of pure “Sein” (Lindenberger 141).

\(^3\) The inclusion of ten of Trakl’s poems in the anthology of expressionist poetry, Menschheitsdämmerung (1920) was one of the first connections made between Trakl and the expressionist movement.
and his poems do not exhibit a universal desire to create a new order of humanity. As Michael Hamburger concludes, “Of the early expressionists, Trakl was the least rhetorical and dogmatic” (182). Indeed, Trakl carries out the break from his literary predecessors methodically throughout the various stages of his poetic development, as he both acknowledges and moves beyond the literary influences that shape his verse. His attempts to address and overcome the language crisis that marked the literary production of his day are characterized less by a lament over the inadequacy of language than the drive to replace it with a poetic form based on the unprecedented representation of visual and kinesthetic experience.

The unusual and often disturbing images in Trakl’s work and their unusual ability to draw on several senses simultaneously reveal the influence of the symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, also a precocious literary talent, who stopped writing verse at the age of nineteen. ⁴ Trakl’s indebtedness to the French author is plainly apparent: Rimbaud bases his work on unusual rhythms and a brilliant use of color, and his poems are filled with hallucinatory visions, featuring alternating moments of aggression and tranquility. In particular, Rimbaud’s use of abstract and bizarre imagery influenced Trakl’s creation of a fantastic and mythical world in the context of the poem. Trakl’s dark, obscure, and often grotesque pictures, which have contributed to the long-held view of his verse as indecipherable, serve as the foundation of his poetic production.

The mirror is one of Trakl’s most prevalent images and arguably the most telling for the poetological theory evident in his works. While Trakl gestures to the historical, metaphysical, and literary importance of the mirror, he defies its traditional function as

⁴ Trakl was first exposed to Rimbaud’s poetry through K.L. Ammer’s German translation of his works.
a medium of pure reflection to engender a poetic world that rests behind the mirror's surface. In the form of "Spiegel," "Weiher," "Wasser," and "Fenster," these mirrors undermine the concept of physical reflection and with it a mimetic understanding of both language and art. Already in his early poems, the mirror represents Trakl's shift to a primarily visual form of representation and embodies both his criticism of language and the means to overcome it. For Trakl, language has lost its referential function, and he turns to the mirror as a poetic image whose perceived ability to reflect the world accurately is likened to the visually mimetic quality of language. His many references to distortive and broken mirrors, however, reveal his fundamental distrust of the visual link between language and reality. Thus, Trakl attempts to overcome the inadequacy of words and their lost mimetic value by writing about the reflective medium as a generative device.

Trakl's mirrors do not offer images of the world placed before them; instead, they engender pictures of a realm that rests behind the mirror's surface in what Rilke refers to as the poet's "Spiegelraum." The world of the mirror is a textual space in which the ability of language to communicate about the objective world and the interior environment of the poet is continually tested and expanded. Of particular interest is Trakl's use of the mirror to describe metaphorically the experience of the poet. Even as he expresses a fundamental distrust of language, as a writer he necessarily relies on the meaning of words, in particular the meaning of the word "Spiegel," to conjure up the images that constitute the foundation of his verse. Thus, the poetic text assumes a mirror-like quality as the medium of poetic self-reflection.
Most studies of Trakl's verse examine his works in terms of four stages of poetic development. The years 1906 to 1909 mark Trakl's early experimentation with conventional forms and romantic imagery and reveal his initial attempts to situate his work within the German literary tradition. Poems from the years 1909 to 1912 demonstrate Trakl's evolving use of color, synaesthesia, and poetic images and exhibit the paratactic "Reihungsstil" typical of expressionism. Texts he created from 1912 to 1914 are generally written in free verse and feature an explosion of unusual images, hallucinatory visions, and neologisms. The poems he wrote in the final months of his life feature hypotactic structures and are heavily influenced by the hymnal tones of Hölderlin's poetry (Böschenstein 27). As one of Trakl's most prevalent images, the mirror appears throughout the various phases of his poetic development and registers the changes in his poetic style. Most scholars argue that the works the poet composed from 1912 onward are the most representative of his lyrical style and the themes with which he was preoccupied. By looking at Trakl's use of the mirror throughout his career, however, I suggest that his preoccupation with poetic representation, the problem of language, and the attempt to generate an independent aesthetic realm are present from his earliest works to his final poems written at a military hospital in Crakow.

Trakl experiments early on with traditions in German-speaking poetry, such as the confessional style Erlebnislyrik, but later he largely breaks from a narrative style of poetic writing and attempts to circumvent linear language by relying on heavily imagistic verse. His poetry transcends the limitations of language through this network of interrelated images whose meanings are linked from poem to poem and signify
mythic paradigms within his entire oeuvre. Trakl's poetry takes on new creative potential that acknowledges lyrical conventions of the past but offers an alternative to them through references to visuality and the use of pictures. His collection of fantastical pictures enables Trakl to engender a poetic world that reaches beyond the confines of language and to observe, on an abstract level, a code of silence. Like the mirror that suggests an alternative reality within the context of the poem, Trakl's verse is a reflection of the inner, lyrical world of poet.

Mimesis, Madness, and Poetic Images

Despite far-reaching discussions of Trakl's poetry by his contemporaries, by generations of poets after him, and by many literary scholars who have addressed his work in detail, the meaning of his poetry continues to perplex readers, and the origins of his imagery remain an object of dispute. Rilke captures best the self-referential and impenetrable character of Trakl's poetry when he calls it a symbolic mirror realm into which the reader seeks unsuccessfully to enter:

Ich denke mir, daß selbst der Nahstehende immer noch wie an Scheiben gepreßt diese Aussichten und Einblicke erfährt, als ein Ausgeschlossener: denn Trakls Erleben geht wie in Spiegelbildern und füllt seinen ganzen Raum, der unbetretbar ist, wie der Raum im Spiegel. (“Brief an den Herausgeber” 9)

The world of Trakl's lyric is not comfortably linked to an objective reality in which words and the objects they describe correspond. Rather, in a variety of synaesthetic combinations (e.g. "lauschende Augen," "weiße Schritte") and personifications (bleeding trees, singing bushes, weighty shadows, among others), the poet creates fantastic and horrifying images based on objects that originate in the empirical world
but that are, in their surreal character, strictly relegated to the poetic realm. These images supplant a traditional narrative structure in Trakl’s poetic works, acting as the fundament of each poem through which Trakl offers pictures of a poetic world that the reader is unable to experience firsthand. Thus, the generative mirror serves as the embodiment of Trakl’s aesthetic world, or, as Williams concludes, as “a psycholinguistic textual space that mediates between the poet and reader” (The Mirror and the Word 141). In the act of reading, the reader is confronted with images of Trakl’s psychosocial reality that have been made into an aesthetic product.

Scholars and readers alike agree that Trakl’s verse profoundly draws the reader into his mirror-image world without his knowing why, an aspect that Helga Cierpka describes as the visceral effect of Trakl’s poetry, concluding: “[Die Poesie] affiziert und aktiviert das Unbewußte des Lesers, weil sie eine Wirklichkeit zur Erscheinung bringt, die in jedem von uns verborgen liegt... Der Leser fühlt sich ergriffen, ohne zu wissen warum...” (qtd. in Kemper, Georg Trakls Entwürfe 2n5 ). The mystery surrounding Trakl’s verse can be attributed to two main factors: first, the reader does not gain easy access to the meaning of the poems because its system of symbols appears to be self-referential; and second, Trakl never composed a poetological treatise that would provide a foundation for the interpretation of his work. These factors have lead to widely varied approaches to the poet’s work.

Since the 1950’s, following Walther Killy’s analysis of Trakl’s poetry as a purely aesthetic object with no symbolic reference, many scholars have focused their studies on lyrical elements in the poet’s works and the structure of his language,
abandoning the attempt to establish meaning out of his poetry. Accordingly, then, Trakl’s poetic images are considered “Chiffren” (Killy qtd. in Detsch 3), which lack a referential framework and a determinable object that is being symbolized (Detsch 3). This viewpoint ultimately leads to a devaluation of authorial intent by which Trakl is considered, as Leiva-Merikakis argues, “a successful artist who shifts his perspective and exchanges images arbitrarily, considering only their aesthetic effect” (2) and paying little regard to content or meaning.

The appearance of a critical edition of Trakl’s works in 1969, however, made necessary the establishment of an empirical school of Trakl scholarship. Since the 1970’s, views of Trakl’s verse as entirely meaningless have been replaced by an examination of Trakl’s verse in light of his personal life and psychiatric condition. Previously, the poet’s mental condition was considered a “taboo” topic, which was not adequately addressed in the Trakl literature out of respect for the text’s “supremacy” or the fear of psychology’s reductive tendencies (Sharp, The Poet’s Madness 11). In drastic response to the elevated interest in Trakl’s psychological profile, many scholars have concluded that his poetry is obscure and deranged, largely the product of his clinically diagnosed schizophrenia and early-onset drug addiction, and they dispute the degree to which Trakl consciously directed his poetic production. Trakl’s unsettling images are thus directly attributed to aspects of his biography: his dire financial straits, the incestuous relationship he had with his sister Grete, and his fragile psychiatric state.

5 Killy emphasized the poet’s attempt to create an artistic realm independent of the empirical world, chaotic and without redemption, and generated decades of critics who abandoned the search for coherence in Trakl’s work. See Detsch (2-6) for an in depth discussion of trends in Trakl criticism.

6 Helmut Guntau points out that Trakl’s early use of narcotics and opium-doused cigarettes at the age of fifteen cast a shadow on his youth (26). Theodor Spoerri likewise claims that Trakl, his mother, and three of five siblings had a tendency toward drug addiction (42). Later in life, as a registered pharmacist, Trakl had ready access to cocaine, which he frequently used.
Maire Kurrik epitomizes the interpretive reduction of Trakl's work to his psychiatric state, calling his life a "coincidence of mental disease and art" (3). Clemens Heselhaus concludes that the effect of drugs on Trakl's poems is the key to understanding their meaning: "[M]an macht sich die Interpretation leichter, wenn man das recht ins Auge faßt... Trakl ist ein Dichter unter dem Anhauch der Drogen wie schon Coleridge..." (400). Similarly Hanns Haeckel concludes, "eine einerseits so empfindsame, anderseits so vitale Natur wie Trakl [wurde] durch seine Drogenhörigkeit ... vollends psychisch zerrüttet. Wie sollte denn seine Dichtung anderes als Produkt dieses Zustandes sein?" (389).7 While later psychopathological readings of Trakl's work attempt to explain his cryptic and illicit images in light of his mental state rather than as a result of it, such studies suggest that the poetic text is the product of the author's unconscious or repressed desire. As such, the poems appear to be a brand of self-therapy; thus, the aesthetic nature of Trakl's poetry is attributed to his psychological impulses rather than to conscious decisions about the form of the aesthetic work. This approach ultimately reduces Trakl's verse to singular manifestations of his personal history and does not take into consideration the programmatic manner of his poetic production or the distinctive, calculated style of his expression.

While one should not discount the purely formalistic analyses of Trakl's verse or

7 Other scholars such as Theodor Spoerri, Gunther Kleefeld, Francis Michael Sharp, and Eric Williams consider a more tempered influence of Trakl's mental state on his writing, stressing the importance of the poetic work while analyzing it through the lens of psychopathology. Kleefeld interprets Trakl's numerous poetic motifs as the symbolic representation of unfulfilled wishes; according to him, the poems are filled with repressed desires that have become verbal in a censored manner (Das Gedicht als Sühne 129). Sharp argues for a reading of Trakl's poetry based on an antipsychiatry model. This paradigm, founded by R.D. Laing, enables the reader to examine the psychopathological and human aspect of Trakl's texts without specifically defining the poet Trakl. Readings of poems are thus "directed toward activating the human presence within the texts, reinvesting them with a referential density that much of Trakl criticism denies" (Sharp, The Poet's Madness, 10).
underestimate the degree to which his psychiatric state shaped his writing, such readings overlook the clear poetological statement that his poems reveal. Indeed, the many corrections Trakl made to his works and his frequent substitution of images and themes from one poem to the next reveal the “rationally perspicuous poetic intentions and laws” of his work (Kemper, “Georg Trakl” 26). Unique characters with mythic proportions, such as “Elis,” “Helian,” “Kaspar Hauser,” “Die Schwester,” and “Mönchin,” appear throughout his works, indicating Trakl’s creation of a self-referential system of poetic images. Throughout his poetry, he relies on these and other images in concert with a stock spectrum of colors (“scharlachfarbne Schlangen,” “blut-purpurne Himmel,” “blaues Lachen”) and with repetitive verbal combinations, thus suggesting what Michael Hamburger calls his “self-plagiaristic” style (204).

In order to examine Trakl’s method of self-citation, let us consider references to the poetic subject in the following segments from poems Trakl wrote at different periods of his poetic production:

“Nachtlied” (1909; I, 68)

... Elai! Dein Antlitz
Beugt sich sprachlos über bläuliche Wasser.
O! ihr stillen Spiegel der Wahrheit.

“Landschaft” (1914; I, 83)

Und die gelben Blumen des Herbstes
Neigen sich sprachlos über das blaue Antlitz des Teichs
In roter Flamme verbrannte ein Baum; aufflattern mit dunklen Gesichtern die Fledermäuse
“Offenbarung und Untergang” (1914; I, 169)

Und da ich mit silbernen Fingen mich über die schweigenden Wasser bog, sah ich daß mich mein Antlitz verlassen. Und die weiße Stimme sprach zu mir: Töte dich!

All of the poems feature a figure bending over reflective waters, thus recalling the Narcissus myth and the concept of self-reflection. The first poem features one of Trakl’s many poet figures, who views his reflection in the deep waters of a pool. He is “sprachlos,” a term that suggests the absence of language during this visual encounter in the poetic realm between subject and object. Much like the Narcissus myth, the meeting between the poet figure and his reflection suggests the subject’s moment of self-recognition in an idealized other. The exclamation “O ihr stillen Spiegel der Wahrheit!” implies that the mirror still possesses its reflective function and offers an accurate image of the figure bowing before it.

By contrast, the mirror image of the second segment does not provide an idealized image of the subject that stands before it. Here, we no longer see a figure bending over the water; instead, the entire poetic landscape is reflected on the surface of a pond. The mirror of truth found in the first segment is replaced here with a distortive mirror, which produces images of destruction and horror: the reflected landscape reveals burning flames and flocks of bats. The symbiosis between poetic subject and object in the first poem dissolves in the second, as the dismantled landscape in the mirror image reveals the disjuncture between reality and its reproduction. The distorted reflection of the landscape in the pool likewise suggests the rupture between the objective world and the poet’s reproduction of it as an aesthetic object, a concept that is fully developed in the final poem.
The segment from "Offenbarung und Untergang" duplicates the scenario of reflection established in the first two poems. Combining the Narcissus figure of "Nachtlied" with the image of the devastated landscape in "Landschaft," this poem realizes the dissolution of the poetic persona. When the poet figure peers into the pool at his reflection, he is met, not by the idealized image of his object self, but by the absence of his image and the eerie voice of the double, who commands: "Töte dich!" Like the landscape of the previous poem, the lyrical subject is destroyed through its confrontation with the mirror image.

The comparison of these three segments reveals the importance of substitution and self-citation in Trakl's work. The nearly identical wording and similar constellation of images in each of the poems expose the interrelatedness of Trakl's youthful poems to his mature works. Similarly, Trakl's self-citation highlights the progression that takes place from his early confrontations with poetic tradition to the distinctively modern emphasis on discord that characterizes his late verse. While the context changes slightly in each of the segments, Trakl's repeated use of the mirror image suggests the connection between the poems both formally, through common imagery and lyrical construction, and thematically, through the concept of self-reflection. If we consider again Rilke's assessment of Trakl's poetry as an "unbetretbarer Raum," it would seem that the inaccessibility to which he refers does not imply that Trakl's poetry does not want to be understood, as Killy argues, or that it is a representation of the poet's complex psychoses, as a psychopathological reading might infer. On the contrary, the reader experiences frustration only when he attempts to interpret Trakl's images outside of the context of his poetry. An entrance into the mirror realm requires an implicit
understanding of Trakl’s poetic system and the many alternating images on which it is based.

The Role of Silence in Trakl’s Work

Trakl’s turn to a poetry that is “nearly pre-referential” (Peucker 192) in its use of images originates in his fundamental distrust of language. Throughout his oeuvre, Trakl examines the problem of language and the poet’s ability to speak, placing this struggle specifically within the context of his literary forebears. Trakl considers the methods of his literary “Ahnen” to be ineffectual and “versteinert” in a modern world, whose disjointed events cannot be captured and re-told in the linear narrative style of Erlebnislyrik. Indeed, Trakl’s use of rapidly alternating images (Reihungsstil), his simultaneous emphasis on multiple senses, and his focus on the isolation of the individual do not provide a mirror reflection of reality; instead, they exhibit the subject’s perception of an increasingly chaotic environment. The individual’s experience does not allow for the causal retelling of life’s events; instead, it is made up of multifarious and sundry moments and pictures that appear random and unrelated. Trakl’s neologistic style reveals his skepticism toward language and its ability to communicate about the human condition. In a letter of 1910 to his friend Erhard Buschbeck, he openly states his criticism of language and decries the poet’s reliance upon it: “[E]s bleibt immer bei den Worten, oder besser gesagt, bei der fürchterlichen Ohnmacht!” (I, 477).

For Trakl, the “helplessness of words” refers to the inability of mundane language to capture internal sensations and the nuances of experience. Thus, early on he
attempts to create new channels of linguistic expression through the use of color and images that combine often contradictory impulses or concepts. In addition to the many neologisms he employs as an attempt to overcome the inadequacy of language, Trakl makes repeated use of the word “Schweigen” revealing his turn to the utter absence of language in response to the inability of words to communicate. Like his contemporaries who viewed language with skepticism, Trakl does not simply doubt the validity of linguistic functions; he refers to language as an aggressive, destructive medium that undermines an organic connection between the human subject and its surroundings. In Trakl’s view, the deceptive nature of language can only be countered by silence.

In the early drama fragment Don Juans Tod (1909), Trakl exhibits the same skepticism toward language that is evident in the works of Hofmannsthal and other fin de siècle authors. Sharp argues that the text, in its clear affinities with the “Lord Chandos Brief,” reveals Trakl’s engagement in the literary and intellectual atmosphere of the time (The Poet’s Madness 56-57). Like Chandos, the subject in Trakl’s Don Juan fragment seeks silence as a means of overcoming the anxiety caused by its recognition of the rift between the interior subjective realm and the exterior world. The opening passage of the drama indicates the subtle and deceptive means by which language attacks the tranquility of subjective silence. Figuratively referred to as an animal, language attempts to destroy the quietude of the non-verbal subject, here Don Juan’s servant Catalinon, by scratching at the door of his room.

Was scharrt dort an der Tür! Nur immer zu!
Ich rühr’ mich nicht. – Es scheint geduldig wie
Ein Tier, das selbst dem Schweigen eine Antwort
Entlocken möchte – scharrt und scharrt! He du
Gib acht! Hier ist Hölle – sagt’ ich Hölle?
Vielleicht des Himmels Eingang auch. Wer weiß!
Dem Unfaßbaren hascht das träge Wort
Vergeblich nach, das nur in dunklem Schweigen
An unsres Geistes letzte Grenzen rührt.

... Tritt ein, du Unermüdlicher! Bist du
Ein Mensch, laß deine Sprache draußen,
Daß du vorwitzig sie nicht brauchst. (I, 449)

In the passage, Trakl distinguishes between the outside world, characterized by the alienating effects of language, and Catilinon’s chamber, which represents the inner quietude of the subject. The door serves as a physical boundary between the two realms and embodies the subject’s understanding of the division between reality and his individual perception of it. Language is like an animal that threatens to destroy the subject’s inner equanimity by attempting “to draw an answer from silence” (“Ein Tier, das selbst dem Schweigen eine Antwort entlocken möchte.”), thus further emphasizing the subject’s separation from reality. In an attempt to escape the destructive effects of linguistic structure, Catilinon demands that the visitor at the door “leave his language outside.” (“Bist du ein Mensch, laß deine Sprache draußen, daß du vorwitzig sie nicht brauchst”). By enforcing a code of silence, Catilinon hopes to retain an unmediated relationship to the world, a state of oneness that, for Hofmannsthal, belongs to pre-existence. Language, however, is “sluggish” and unable to grasp the mystical quality of experience that characterizes the silent, outer bounds of the spirit. In this short passage we see the dichotomous forces of Trakl’s poetic verse. Juxtaposed with the spiritual quietude of the non-verbal subject is the intrusive and undermining linguistic world that is at odds with the subject who seeks silence but for whom language serves as the basis of social integration.
Throughout Trakl’s work, silence is associated with words denoting inspiration such as “erhaben” (“Traum und Umnachtung”), or enclosed and protected spheres (which could be correlated with a Lacanian “imaginary” sphere), such as “dunkel,” (Don Juan), “schwarz” and “Höhle” (“An den Knaben Elis”), and “Ruhe” (“Ruh und Schweigen”). In particular, it implies an uncanny restfulness and respite from the socialized and linguistic world and suggests the role of quietude in the poetic process. The poem “Abendmuse” (1912) demonstrates the moment of silence associated with lyrical creativity:

Ans Blumenfenster wieder kehrt des Kirchturms Schatten
Und Goldnes. Die heiße Stirn verglüht in Ruh und Schweigen.
Ein Brunnen fällt im Dunkel von Kastanienzweigen –
Da fühlst du: es ist gut! in schmerzlichem Ermatten. (I, 28)

In the poem the reader is presented with a warm, summer-like scene. Flowers bowing in the shadows of the approaching dusk and the sound of a trickling fountain present an almost idyllic scene. The reference to “Ruh und Schweigen” in the second line conjures up the romantic notion of quietude as the precondition for poetic creativity and suggests its function as a form of divine inspiration. The peacefulness of this image is disturbed, however, by the unusual poetic combinations Trakl’s employs. The sounds of the fountain originate in the boughs of a chestnut tree, and the sweaty brow of the lyrical I “burns” in silence, thus evoking images of sickness and fever associated as the

---

8 This notion of stillness as a precondition for aesthetic production prevailed among nineteenth-century writers and figures prominently in the works of Hölderlin and Novalis, whose verse strongly influenced Trakl’s poetry. The concept of “aesthetic stillness” is closely related to the mystical view of quietude as the catalyst to spiritual union between the human soul and God, an idea that was continued into the early nineteenth century by the German pietists. For an in-depth study of stillness and its function in literary texts, see Mark Roche, Dynamic Stillness: Philosophical Conceptions of Ruhe in Schiller, Hölderlin, Büchner, and Heine. The ideas of “aesthetic stillness” and “religious stillness” that Roche discusses appear frequently in Trakl’s works and often overlap. In most cases Trakl inverts the meaning of both to debunk a traditional view of poetic inspiration.
accompaniment of poetic creativity. The poetic subject’s invocation of the lyrical “Du” in the fourth line interrupts the descriptive flow of the strophe and undermines the mimetic representation of the exterior world portrayed in the first three lines. Trakl’s use of apostrophe recalls the romantic concept of dialogue between the poet and muse; here, however, the moment of interaction takes place between the lyrical subject and its poetic persona, thus suggesting the self-conscious nature of the poem. The figurative reflection implied by this construction in the first strophe of the poem assumes the form of physical reflection in the image of Narcissus in the final line: “Endymion taucht aus dem Dunkel alter Eichen / Und beugt sich über trauervolle Wasser nieder.” Trakl uses this common constellation of images, as we saw above, to allude to the concept of self-reflection that takes place through poetic production.

The final adjective “schmerzlich” indicates the pain involved in poetic creation and alludes to the relationship between suffering and lyrical production in romantic aesthetic theory. For the romantic poet, suffering results in a poetic work of beauty, and death signifies a reconciliation with and return to nature. In contrast to the harmonious link between pain, death, and artistic creativity in romanticism, and particularly the works of Novalis, here illness and decay are linked with decadence and grotesque manifestations of nature in the modern poet’s aesthetic product. In the poem entitled “Das Grauen” (1909) Trakl further emphasizes the corrupt character of the poet’s communion with nature in its association with the creative moment. The poem

9 In particular, Trakl draws on Novalis’s understanding of the connection between night, death, and poetry. Trakl’s allusion to the poet whose death at a young age epitomizes the romantic concept of artistic suffering is perhaps clearest in “Nachtlied II,” in which the lyrical subject invokes pain as a form of inspiration: “Triff mich Schmerz! Die Wunde glüht. / Dieser Qual hab’ ich nicht acht! / Sieh aus meinen Wunden blüht / Rätselvoll ein Stern zur Nacht!” (I, 261).
begins with the narrative of the lyrical subject who watches himself wander through empty rooms of a house and wild, storm-raged fields, the eeriness of which produces a sense of foreboding in the reader. The second strophe of the poem follows with an uncanny stillness and reads:

Doch plötzlich: Stille! Dumpfe Fieberglut
Läßt giftige Blumen blühn aus meinem Munde.
Aus dem Geist fällt wie aus einer Wunde
Blaß schimmernd Tau, und fällt, und fällt wie Blut. (I, 220)

The words “Doch plötzlich: Stille!” serve as a caesura, isolating the moment of poetic inspiration from the rest of the poem. Through the use of the colon and exclamation mark, Trakl evokes a pregnant moment of stillness and suggests the creative process that is to follow. What should be an instant of lyrical celebration, however, is in fact perverse: nature appears in the form of poisonous flowers springing like words from the feverish mouth of the lyrical subject. This macabre communion between the human being and nature is further illustrated in the anti-romantic image of a tree’s bleeding branches. Just as the lyrical subject expels odious images of vegetation from his body, nature performs unnatural human functions (“Tau ... fällt wie Blut”). This transference of characteristics makes it unclear where nature ends and the human body begins; the boundary between the natural world and the linguistic interior of the poet becomes indistinct. The grotesque manifestations of nature are a symbolic representation of poetic production, the fleurs de mal of a disenchanted subject in a linguistic world.

When nature is confined to the formal restrictions of language, it is destroyed, and thus the lyrical subject’s reproduction of it in art is perverse. While Trakl implies the spiritual quality of art through images of Christ’s passion (“Wunde,” “blaß,” and
"Blut"), he undermines a belief in redemption through the poetic process by applying sacred imagery to tainted visions of nature.

Ultimately, the silence evinced in "Abendmuse" and "Das Grauen" is not connected to the spiritual silence of aesthetic production revered by the pietists and romantics. In contrast to these inspirational notions of quietude, the silence of the modern poet represents a loss of poetic language and of creative illumination. In the poem "De Profundis II" (1912), Trakl again draws a parallel between the romantic poet, who possesses the divine silence of God, and the modern poet, whose loss of inspiration results in the inability to communicate with words:

Ein Schatten bin ich fern finsteren Dörfern.
Gottes Schweigen
Trank ich aus dem Brunnen des Hains. (I, 46)

This poem, too, draws on the romantic image of the poet, whose communion with nature and God serves as the source of his creativity. The shadow of the first line recalls Novalis's associations of the poet with darkness and Hölderlin's view of the poet as a stranger. An isolated figure, the poet is alienated from the rest of humanity in distant "finsteren Dörfern": he is a "shadow," who receives divine inspiration from a fountain in a secluded grove. The suggestion that the poet "drinks of God's silence," recalls pietistic notions of lyrical production that allude to the spiritual union of the poet and God through the creation of art; Trakl, however, inverts this concept of inspiration. The poetic subject is not blessed with lyrical ingenuity after imbibing divine silence; instead,

---

10 Hans Esselborn examines the influence of Novalis on Trakl's poetry in ""Blaue Blume" or 'Kristallne Tränen?" Trakl's Poetology and Relation to Novalis." See Bernhard Böschenstein, "Hölderlin und Rimbaud: Simultane Rezeption als Quelle poetischer Innovation im Werk Georg Trakls" for a discussion of Hölderlin's influence on Trakl's late verse.
his words are extinguished when he encounters the image of his poetic persona on the reflecting pool's surface:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Auf meine Stirn tritt kaltes Metall} \\
\text{Spinnen suchen mein Herz.} \\
\text{Es ist ein Licht, das in meinem Mund erlöscht.}
\end{align*}
\]

When the poetic subject gazes into the pool, he does not meet the image of his idealized other; instead the picture of the poetic persona is horrifying, as it slowly turns to cold steel and is overrun with spiders. The adjective “kalt” suggests the frozen quality of the poet’s lyrical language in contrast to the illuminating word of God: “Es ist ein Licht, das in meinem Mund erlöscht.” Unlike the romantic poet whose creativity is driven by mystical inspiration, the poetic subject, for whom God is dead and the divine light has extinguished, is unable to produce lyrical language.

In contrast to the protective silence we see in Don Juans Tod, here silence represents a failure of language and the ensuing muteness of the poet. Trakl’s inherent criticism of romantic language and poetic inspiration reveals his confrontation with the German-speaking literary tradition and the placement of his language problematic specifically within this context. Trakl repeatedly examines the role of the modern poet in overcoming not only contemporary language but also lyrical traditions of the past. For Trakl, the lyrical language used by his literary forbears is obsolete in the modernist framework, as is evinced by his frequent use of “versteinert,” “steinern,” “Marmor.” Ultimately their inspired notion of silence gives way to a horrible muteness, as poetic words lose their ability to communicate in the increasingly chaotic atmosphere of the technologized world. The poems “Farbiger Herbst” and “Musik im Mirabell,”

---

11 The confrontation of the poet’s subject and object selves on the surface of the mirror is a common theme in Trakl’s poetry and will be discussed in more detail below.
"Naturtheater" and "Seele des Lebens" all reveal Trakl’s attempts to come to terms with
the past and his literary forbears and his inherent criticism of their defunct lyrical
productivity.

The poem “Verfall” (1909) demonstrates Trakl’s leave-taking of the literary past
by highlighting the inefficacy of traditional lyrical language and its natural tendency to
fall mute.¹²

Es weht ein Wind! Hinlöschend singen
Die grünen Lichter – groß und satt
Erfüllt der Mond den hohen Saal,
Den keine Feste mehr durch klingen.

Die Ahnenbilder lächeln leise
Und fern – ihr letzter Schatten fiel,
Der Raum ist von Verwesung schwül,
Den Raben stumm umziehn im Kreise.

Verlomer Sinn vergangner Zeiten
Blickt aus den steinernen Masken her,
Die schmerzverzerrt und daseinsleer
Hintrauen in Verlassenheiten.

Versunkner Gärten kranke Düfte
Umkosen leise den Verfall –
Wie schluchzender Worte Widerhall
Hinzitterend über off’ne Grüfte. (I, 233)

Like “Abendmuse” and “Das Grauen,” “Verfall” begins by evoking an image of nature:
the wind. The verb “wehen” introduces movement into the poem and suggests the
concept of lyrical creation by simultaneously alluding to the “Wehen” that accompany
childbirth. Trakl immediately debunks this organic or natural notion of poetic
production, however, by introducing the constructed quality of the hall. The artificial,

¹² This poem is also referred to as “Verfall I” with “Verfall II” appearing as the poem “Herbst” in
Sammlung 1909 and later, with minor revisions, in Trakl’s Gedichte (1913), where it receives the title
“Verfall.”
interior world of this manmade structure, with its "green lights" that cast an uncanny
glow, is distinguished from the exterior world characterized by the natural light of the
moon. In an unusual synaesthetic combination, "Hinlœschend singen die grünen
Lichter," Trakl suggests that the poem is foremost about lyrical production. The concept
of song recalls the romantic view of music as the foundation for poetry, while the lights
again imply divine inspiration. As in "De Profundis," however, the lights grow dim, and
their poetic song surrenders to the silence of the dark hall. The green color of the lights
and the adjectives "groß" and "satt" infuse this opening scene with an air of decadence.
The movement in the form of wind with which the poem opens gives way to an
atmosphere of stagnation and decay, a mood that is expanded throughout the remainder
of the poem.

In the second strophe, Trakl brings the notion of degeneration to the fore with
the description of the room filled with decay: "Der Raum ist von Verwesung schwül."
The stagnant air of this interior realm again stands in stark contrast to the dynamic
quality of the wind and moon, which remain outside. In this strophe, Trakl first
mentions his "predecessors," who appear in the form of pictures, "Ahnenbilder," which
contribute to the static atmosphere of the room. The predecessors are both distant and
ethereal: they are mere shadows in the dark room. Their only movement takes the form
of a quiet smile, which recalls the animated picture in Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray,
whose "cruelty around [its] mouth" alludes to its evil character (Wilde 90). With the
reference to ravens that mutely fly in a circle, Trakl introduces the concept of muteness

---

13 Otto Basil states that The Picture of Dorian Gray was one of Trakl's "favorite books [...] to which he
was attached with all his heart" (113-14). The poet possessed no less than five of Wilde's works,
suggesting the latter's influence on Trakl's poetic themes (Williams, "Georg Trakl" 97).
associated with the language of his literary forebears. The circular motion of the birds, which represents the only movement in the room, suggests the futility of the poetic calling in light of language's inability to speak.

The problem of language and the outdated quality of traditional literary production serves as the topic of the third stanza: "Verlorner Sinn vergangner Zeiten blickt aus den steinernen Masken her." By referring to the lost meaning of a past era, Trakl addresses the inability of his predecessors' language to retain meaning in a modern world. The muteness of their words is underscored by the stony immobility of their features. Even as words have lost their meaning and do not possess the essence of the things they describe, so too are the predecessors' faces mere masks, marked by a lack of experiential import. The literary forebears are unable to provide consolation in the alienating environment of a modern world because they, like the modern poet, are torn by pain and are void of meaning.

In the final strophe, the stagnant, decaying atmosphere of the hall extends to the natural environment, creating sunken gardens and sick fragrances. This moldering view of nature suggests that the paradise of Eden likewise succumbs to the decay that characterizes the poetic predecessors and thus finalizes humanity’s fall from grace. The hope for a romantic re-connection with nature is destroyed, not simply because language no longer possesses representational meaning but also because the organic world itself has dissolved. What was once the harmonious musical verse of the romantic poet becomes the modern poet's wailing words that infinitely echo themselves. Without a referent in the empirical world, poetic words must necessarily reflect their own senseless nature. Much like the mute ravens that fly in circles, poetic words are caught
in an unending chain of meaningless signification, hovering over the open tombs of the predecessors in an attempt to regain the connection to the world that they once possessed.

The late poem “Im Park”(1913) from the collection Sebastian im Traum also addresses the demise of tradition and the muteness of previous poetic language, thus revealing that Trakl’s attempts to come to terms with his literary past continued throughout his career:¹⁴

Wieder wandelnd im alten Park,
O! Stille gelb und roter Blumen.
Ihr auch trauert, ihr sanften Götter,
Und das herbstliche Gold der Ulme.
Reglos ragt am bläulichen Weiher
Das Rohr, verstummt am Abend die Drossel.
O! dann neige auch du die Stirne
Vor der Ahnen verfallenem Marmor. (I, 101)

Unlike the earlier poems examined above, “Im Park” clearly exhibits defining characteristics of Trakl’s late poetry including his use of free verse, liberal use of color, and a break in syntactical structure coinciding with a series of static visual images that form the bulk of the poem. The opening line of the poem “Wieder wandelnd im alten Park,” suggests that the poet is re-visiting a theme that has been addressed previously.

Here the “old park” signifies at once a physical location but likewise may be understood as a metaphor for literary tradition. Like the garden in “Musik im Mirabell,” in which the ancestral marble statues allude to outdated literary forerunners, “Im Park” establishes a scenario in which the lyrical “I” confronts its literary forerunners in an old park. The adjective “old” in the first line already looks ahead to the conclusion of the

¹⁴ The volume of poems, Sebastian im Traum, was originally to appear in 1914; however, because of the outbreak of the war, publication was delayed until 1915, the year after Trakl's death.
poem in which the lyrical “Du” is implored to pay homage to the fallen marble structures of its ancestors.

Trakl again evokes a notion of inspired quietude by referring to the stillness of the flowers, which he refers to as “sanfte Götter.” Using a construction frequently found in Hölderlin’s verse, Trakl infuses nature with a divine quality and suggests a connection between spiritual quietude and poetic expression. The colors yellow and red, which likewise reveal Trakl’s affinity with Hölderlin and the German expressionists, give a painting-like quality to the vegetation and thereby underscore its static quality. As in the poems above, Trakl ultimately undermines this positive depiction of quietude by identifying the mournful quality of the flowers. He continues this pattern in the fourth and fifth lines, drawing out even more the image-like quality of the stationary object, in this case the elm trees, by describing their mirror reflection. Again, however, he undermines the static quality of the image through the verb “to tower,” which implies the threatening quality of the elms that seem to loom over the waters of the pond.

In his discussion of the poem “Grodek,” Williams argues that the many images of trees in Trakl’s works signify the “pervasive and overshadowing (paternal) agency whose uncompromising law has been transgressed and then expiated or transfigured in the creation of poetry” (The Mirror and the Word 313). The trees of “Im Park” fit this explanation on two accounts. First, that they are elm trees links them to the Germanic concept of the ancestral tree as the source of life; and second, their looming character implies the oppressiveness of paternal order. In the sixth line, Trakl imbues the scene of the opening lines with poetological significance in his reference to the “reeds” (“das Rohr”) and the “thrush” (“die Drossel”). The word “Rohr” appears in fourteen poems of
Trakl’s oeuvre. In six of them it is connected to auditory verbs, and in five of the poems, “Rohr” signifies a bird, which is commonly associated with the poetic voice (Williams, The Mirror and the Word 311). Williams points out that throughout Trakl’s poetry images of birds, particularly “Amsel” and “Drossel,” are linked to the poet and the creation of song. That these birds are often incarcerated suggests the alienated status of the poet.\footnote{Trakl dedicated a poem to Ludwig Ficker entitled “Gesang einer gefangenen Amsel,” which has been read as a discussion of the isolated and involuntary artistic role of the poet. See Preisedanz and Williams for further analyses of bird imagery in Trakl’s work.} The reeds likewise conjure up mythic images of Orpheus, the archetypal poet whose melodies are linked to poetic creativity.\footnote{The figure of Orpheus and his link to poetic creativity is a seminal concept in Rilke’s works and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.} Through the juxtaposition of the “mute” bird and the mythic poet, Trakl comments at once on the lyrical calling of the poet and the loss of the poetic voice of the literary past. The supplication of the lyrical “Du” in the penultimate line recalls elegiac verse and the image of a bowed head in the final line represents an act of homage, both signifying the death of the literary tradition and the modern poet’s ambivalent reception of that loss. That this text occurs in his last collection of poems may also indicate that Trakl was reflecting on his own role as a poet and the significance of his work in the larger German-speaking literary tradition.

**Overcoming Tradition: The Generative Mirror**

Given the poet’s problematic relationship to language and its role in poetic production, Trakl turns to primarily visual imagery as the means of overcoming linguistic impotence. Erich Neumann concludes that Trakl’s poems are “alive with fusions, displacements, and identifications, expressed in a picture language of symbolic
significance that conveys to us the world of the pre-logical, with its dissolutions and nonconceptual plastic forms" (qtd. in Williams, The Mirror and the Word 169). Trakl himself speaks of his “bildhafte Manier” and the poetic framework based on four-lined strophes that act as “einzelne Bildteile” creating an overall impression (I, 478). Trakl voices the conflict he experiences between representing the essence of things as they appear and altering them to suit his poetic world:

Du magst mir glauben, daß es mir nicht leicht fällt und niemals leicht fallen wird, mich bedingungslos dem Darzustellenden unterzuordnen und ich werde mich immer und immer wieder berichtigen müssen, um der Wahrheit zu geben, was der Wahrheit ist (I, 486).

While Trakl emphasizes the difficulty of submitting the poetic word to empirical reality, he implies that there is an objective “truth” and that it is the poet’s role to provide this truth. It is little wonder then that Trakl relies on picturing words as the vehicle for his attempted poetic objectivity and furthermore that the mirror serves as one of his primary picturing images: the physical purpose of the mirror is to offer accurate images of the world it reflects. In the case of Trakl’s lyrical texts, however, the mirror does not mimetically reproduce the empirical world; instead, it serves as a medium through which the lyrical subject attempts poetic formulation and a search for an organic reconnection with the objective world.

Although Trakl argues for the objective reproduction of the world in verse, his attempts at “truth” appear to dissolve very quickly as the many images and the mirror surfaces from which they are generated are linked with his poetic imagination. While the lyrical subject who steps before the mirror is a socialized being who conforms to the structures of language and order, the mirror image he sees rests in a non-verbal world.
released from the strictures of language and provides an ideal environment for the linguistic creativity of the poet. Manipulating the concept of the mirror, which is physically designed to capture the world in its true essence, Trakl uses the mirror as a creative source of images. These pictures of other worlds are directly linked to the poet’s imagination and do not rely on narrative descriptions to communicate their contours and mood. The early prose poem “Verlassenheit” (1906) reveals the link between the mirror, darkness, and silence as aspects of the poetic process.

In the piece, the dark reflective surface of the pond serves as the medium through which the poetic scene is generated. The lyrical I does not describe his environment as he sees it; instead he examines it as it is reflected in the pond. The lyrical I will later describe the scenario again, in the poetic text, and thus it is figuratively reflected a third time on the written page.

Trakl’s use of the mirror as a verbal image throughout his oeuvre reveals two predominant principles of his poetics. First, Trakl provides the “narrative” of the poetic

---

17 This poem echoes the first strophe of Hölderlin’s “Hälfte des Lebens,” which also provides an image of nature reflected on the surface of the pond. Hölderlin’s image of swans that immerse their heads in the pool of water is likewise evident in Trakl’s configuration of the poet figure bending over his image reflected in water.

18 The motionless pool of water is an image that derives from the mystic tradition and was typically employed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to show the relationship between divine creation and poetic inspiration. As Langen explains, “Solches Empfangen des Kunstwerks ist der mystischen Vereinigung mit Gott wesensverwandt auch in der wichtigsten Voraussetzung, in der Forderung der Stille. [...] Die Seele des Künstlers als unberührter Spiegel der Welt, stillegeworden wenigstens im Augenblick der Empfängnis, das ist eine Auffassung vom Wesen der Kunst und des Schaffenden, die sich bis weit in das 19. Jahrhundert verfolgen läßt und in der das Spiegelsymbol eine wichtige Stelle nimmt” (“Zur Geschichte des Spiegelsymbols” 271).
text in images. While at times both his poetry and prose poems appear to follow a relatively linear narrative style, stock pictures and their numerous variants serve as the basis for the aesthetic moment. A second important aspect of Trakl’s poetological project revealed by his poems is the understanding of the text as a secondary reflection of the original subject matter. The text itself becomes a mirror in form. By employing these two principles of poetic production, i.e., a poetry of pictures and the poem as a meta-reflection, Trakl emphasizes the artificial yet aesthetic quality of the poem and further distances himself from the concept of organic aesthetic production. He likewise addresses the ability of the poetic text to “mirror” the empirical world, not in a mimetic fashion, but as a productive medium that is only loosely connected to the scientific concept of reflection. Trakl’s poetology, as I have summarized it here, is best illustrated by the poem “Drei Träume” in which a poetic world is engendered and reflected in the text. The poem is divided into three segments, each representing a different dream. In the course of the three dreams, the poet’s inspiration, moment of creation, and poetic product are thematized.

I

Mich däucht, ich träumte von Blätterfall,
Von weiten Wäldern und dunklen Seen,
Von trauriger Worte Widerhall –
Doch konnt’ ich ihren Sinn nicht verstehn.

Mich däucht, ich träumte von Sternenfall,
Von blasser Augen weinendem Flehn,
Von eines Lächelns Widerhall –
Doch konnt’ ich seinen Sinn nicht verstehn.
Wie Blätterfall, wie Sternenfall
So sah ich mich ewig kommen und gehn,
Eines Traumes unsterblicher Widerhall –
Doch konnt’ ich seinen Sinn nicht verstehn. (I, 215)

The first strophe of the poem revisits the theme of linguistic limitation. The opening lines depict a nature-like setting intended to evoke poetic inspiration. The romantic conception of the poetic muse is once again emphasized by the fact that the images the poet sees occur in a dream. ("Ich träumte von Blätterfall"); here one might recall Novalis’s "blaue Blume." The organic development of this seemingly romantic poem is interrupted, however, by the poet’s inability to understand the "sad words" that are echoed: "Doch konnt’ ich ihren Sinn nicht verstehn." In this strophe Trakl depicts the poetic subject’s struggle with linguistic structures of the verbal, socialized world. (The final line of the strophe recalls Hofmannsthal’s "Ein Brief," in which the protagonist decries his inability to find meaning in words). In this strophe Trakl depicts the poetic subject’s struggle with linguistic structures of the verbal, socialized world. In the third line of the stanza, Trakl alludes to the reflective quality of language and the mirroring effect of the strophes within the poem by referring to the echo, "Widerhall," of the words. Here the concept of echoing recalls a version of the Narcissus myth in which the young man’s lover, Echo, repeats his words in a manner of linguistic mirroring. Narcissus’s inability to comprehend the words, however, ultimately leads to his demise. The word "echo" is repeated three times within part one of the poem, always in the third line: "Von trauriger Worte Widerhall," "Von eines Lächelns Widerhall –," "Eines Traumes unsterblicher Widerhall –," the symbolic nature of which, the lyrical subject cannot understand.
The following two strophes of the first segment of the poem repeat the structure of the first. In the second strophe the lyrical subject recalls a second dreamlike sequence with cosmic dimensions. The image of falling stars is coupled with disembodied components of a face: pleading eyes and an echoed smile, from which the lyrical subject derives no meaning. The final strophe repeats the images from the first two strophes ("Blätterfall," "Sternenfall") again implying a mirror-like function that is further pronounced by the "ewig kommen und gehn" to which the subject refers as "eines Traumes unsterblicher Widerhall" in the third line of the strophe. Here the various episodes of the dream appear to be self-enclosed in an endless process of reflection, and the dream itself is indecipherable to the lyrical subject: "Doch konnt'ich seinen Sinn nicht verstehn." Again, the repetition of this line in the three stanzas of the poem implies a type of mirroring and emphasizes the lack of meaning behind the visual signs that occur throughout the dream. Similarly, the verbal images with which Trakl provides the reader appear to have no referent and no context.

In contrast to the dream-like visions of the first segment of the poem, the second offers images of a pre-lapsarian, mythological world generated from the poet’s soul. Although defined as a mirror here, the soul is not a purely reflective surface. In contrast to earlier pietistic and mimetic understandings of the soul as the reflection of God and nature, Trakl’s poetic “Seele” is the creative source of exotic images. Here the mirror engenders a world that possesses no referent beyond the lines of the poem:

II

In meiner Seele dunklem Spiegel
Sind Bilder niegeseh’ner Meere,
Verlass’ner, tragisch phantastischer Länder,
Zerfließen ins Blaue, Ungefährle.

Meine Seele gebar blut-pururne Himmel
Durchglüh von gigantischen, prasselnden Sonnen,
Und seltsam belebte, schimmernde Gärten,
Die dampften von schwülen, tödlichen Wonnen.

Und meiner Seele dunkler Bronnen
Schuf Bilder ungeheuerer Nächte,
Bewegt von namenlosen Gesängen
Und Atemwehen ewiger Mächte.

Meine Seele schauert erinnerungsdunkel,
Als ob sie in allem sich wiederfände –
In unergründlichen Meeren und Nächten,
Und tiefen Gesängen, ohn’ Anfang und Ende. (I, 215-16)

Although defined as a mirror here, the soul is not a reflective surface. In contrast to earlier, pietistic, and mimetic understandings of the soul as the reflection of God and nature, Trakl’s poetic “Seele” is the creative source of exotic images (“Meine Seele gebar,” “schuf Bilder”). Here the mirror engenders a world that possesses no referent beyond the lines of the poem. Liberated from the categories of space and time, reality gives way to fantastic images of primeval existence, the wild nature of which reflects the interior landscape of the poet. Important to note is that unlike the first segment of the poem, in which incomprehensible linguistic structures are created, here the poetic soul produces images, “Bilder,” of a new reality. Unlike the linguistic world, this one knows no limitations, the images “zerfließen ins Blaue, Ungefährle.”

Using the image of the creative mirror, Trakl replaces traditional mimetic uses of the image and by doing so exemplifies the shift in representation from static to productive images (e.g. lamp, fountain) that M.H. Abrams argues appear in literature of the romantic period and mark the advent of modernity. By undermining the traditional
function of the mirror and making it a creative surface, Trakl comments on the ability of modern art to separate itself from the real world in search of creative material in the poet's interior environment. Particularly in this departure from the mimetic interpretation of the mirror, we can also see the poet's rejection of the mimetic function of language, using pictures in language as a new medium of communication that both recognizes the limitations in the representational quality of language and rises above it. Words are no longer mapped with particular images in reality, but rather the creative mirror engenders neologistic constructions and synaesthetic combinations, as the third segment of the poem reveals:

III

Ich sah viel Städte als Flammenraub
Und Greuel auf Greuel häufen die Zeiten,
Und sah viel Völker verwesen zu Staub,
Und alles in Vergessenheit gleiten.

Ich sah die Götter stürzen zur Nacht,
Die heiligsten Harfen ohnmächtig zerschellen,
Und aus Verwesung neu entfacht,
Ein neues Leben zum Tage schwellen.

Zum Tage schwellen und wieder vergehn,
Die ewig gleiche Tragödia,
Die also wir spielen sonder Verstehn,

Und deren wahnsinnsnächtige Qual
Der Schönheit sanfte Gloria
Umkränzt als lächelndes Dornenall. (I, 216)

"Ein neues Leben zum Tage schwellen," "wahnsinnsnächtige Qual," "lächelndes Dornenall" represent atypical linguistic combinations that initiate the reader's deeper understanding of the images by drawing on several senses simultaneously. "Götter stürzen zur Nacht" and "Harfen ohnmächtig zerschellen" conjure up images of the
creative poet. The picture we get of the poet is, however, critical and resigned. The verb "swell," paired with the noun "day," implies both the birth of a new day and human life; yet, it also conjures up the bloated and decadent image of illness. Similarly the combination "wahnsinnsnächtige Qual" recalls the image of the Romantic genius and his connection to night, for example, Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, Bonaventura's *Nachtwachen* (1804) or Hofmann's *Abenteuer der Silvesternacht* (1815) but also reminds us of the modern poet's struggle with the poetic process and the limitations of language. This sense of resignation in the poetic process is represented in Trakl's image of the word as a theater in which the "ewig gleiche Tragödia" is played again and again. Even as the chain of events from birth to death seems meaningless, so does the poetic project. Finally, through the concept "infinitude of thorns," Trakl implies the martyr-like status of the poet by calling up Christian imagery. The neologic concept "Dornenall," recalls Christ's passion while it is linked with the poetic process through the image of hymn and praise: "Der Schönheit sanfte Gloria."

In this final segment of the poem, Trakl's mirroring structure is complete. The third dream serves as the poetic product that results from the processes of the first two segments and simultaneously reveals Trakl's view of the poet's universal and tragic role. When considering this poem, one recalls Trakl's definition of his poetic style as "imagistic" and of his poems composed of "individual pictures." Each line offers an image of the poetic imagination, and each of the three dreams reveals a singular aspect of Trakl's poetology: dream one - poetic visions, dream two - the process of creation, and dream three - the poet's link to humanity. In turn, all of these dreams, that is, each of the poetic segments, join together to create an integrated impression under the title of
one poem.

By employing his language of pictures, Trakl rises above the restrictions of representation, creating a repertoire of images that, in their various juxtapositions, possess their own narrative significance. Through an intricate process of self-referencing, Trakl freely interchanges phrases and images within a single poem and from one poem to the next. Through this process, his verse attains a mythic quality, with images acting as signifiers of mythic figures (Helian, Elis, Narcissus), situations (incest, rape, murder, self-condemnation and self-destruction), emotions (fear, guilt, anger, repression), and atmospheres (dawn, night, death). Lindenberger explains:

We can think of Trakl as we do of Hölderlin or Blake as a ... "mythopoetic" poet, that is, one who speaks not so much a discursive language as a language of images; whose images, moreover, retain a definable, though often loose relationship to one another from one poem to the next; and who attempts to renew some of the meanings latent within comparable images in earlier poets. (94)

Thus, one can call Trakl's work a poetry of images – not of linear narrative. His texts give the illusion of the story-like quality of myth, however, the unfolding of forms within his poems does not follow a chronological pattern with beginning, middle, and end. Rather, the descriptive ability of Trakl's work is based on a self-referential network of images that signify the concepts or entire poems in other parts of his oeuvre. Lindenberger concludes: "By constructing his poetic world out of images which have a mythical aura about them, Trakl succeeds in endowing each poem with a greater range of reference than he could by means of more discursive expression" (95). The mirror represents a seminal aspect of Trakl's work in that it both recalls the numerous discourses surrounding the mirror, taking into account its superstitious, epistemological,
and ontological meanings, and reveals its seminal role in his own work. It is a generative source, an object of reflection, an occasion for self-reflection, and a symbol of the poem’s self-referentiality. Throughout Trakl’s work, the mirror reveals the poet’s creative energy, the reflection of the world and a volatile move beyond mere reflection to poetic production. Despite the often pessimistic conclusions of Trakl’s poems, his works reveal a celebration of the poetic mind beyond mimesis and the restrictive qualities of language.

Poetic Reflection and Self-Confrontation

As we have seen, the mirror assumes various meanings in Trakl’s work: to depict the poet’s confrontation with tradition, to serve as the source of poetic production, and to scrutinize the truth quality of the external world. Trakl uses the mirror perhaps most frequently, however, to thematize the subject’s confrontation with its poetic persona. Through the process of observation, the poet seeks a union with its object self; ironically, however, the mirror is unable to facilitate this union because its very contours define the parameters of division. While the function of the mirror is to facilitate the recognition of identity between two images, the subject and its “other,” by its very nature it manifests the individual’s alienation from the surrounding object world. Ultimately it is the surface of the mirror upon which the poet examines the dichotomy between poetic production of the mirror realm and the reality of the poet in the socialized, linguistic world.

Trakl uses verse to thematize the crises of modernity as he experienced them by examining the mirror. For him, the mirror represents the division of modern experience
in general, and more specifically the dichotomy from which the poet suffers, the split between artistic life and bourgeois existence. While the mythological realm behind the mirror appears to offer an escape from the verbal world, it also embodies the very essence of the artist's problematic that is featured in many of Trakl's poems. Hans Esselborn argues that the process of reflection serves as a means of objectifying the process of "Selbstbegegnung" and "Selbsterkenntnis" (Georg Trakl 127), which result in either a confirmation of self or the rejection of the counter-image that threatens the primacy of the viewing subject. In the poet's confrontation with his poetic persona in the mirror, the creative force of the artist overpowers the subject, resulting not only in his loss of identity, but also in his physical and spiritual death. Trakl emphasizes the life and death struggle between the subject and his artistic alter ego in the poem "Das Grauen" in which Cain and Abel represent the two conflicting components of the poet.

Ich sah mich durch verlass'ne Zimmer gehn.
- Die Sterne tanzten irr auf blauem Grunde,
Und auf den Feldern heulten laut die Hunde,
Und in den Wipfeln wühlte wild der Föhn. (I, 220).

The poem begins with the subject's vision of himself as an omnipotent observer, "Ich sah mich durch verlass'ne Zimmer gehn." In this case we witness a metaphorical mirror encounter between the subject, the observer, and the poetic persona, the observed. Important to note, however, is that the subject is engaged in the process of reflection, be it physical or metaphorical, in order for an encounter between the subject and his poetic alter ego to occur. In the search for clarity in his alienated state, the lyrical subject turns to the mirror as a point of orientation:
Upon looking into the mirror, the lyrical subject is not met by an image of clarity by which it hopes to reorient itself. Rather, the mirror produces the picture of the subject’s double; its poetic half is personified in the figure of Cain.\textsuperscript{19} Here the figure of Cain represents the subject’s artistic self who is made more powerful through its liberation from the linguistic world. Unlike the subject who uses distorted language to communicate in a socialized world, the poetic self appears as an image in the mirror realm, a picture freed of the confines of language. The lyrical subject’s perception of the mirror image as a threat reveals his close connection with and reliance on the linguistic world despite his criticism of it. The subject must either suffer in the socialized linguistic realm or surrender himself fully to the mirror (poetic) realm, a decision that signifies self-destruction.

Sehr leise rauscht die samtene Portiere, 
Durchs Fenster schaut der Mond gleichwie ins Leere, 
Da bin mit meinem Mörder ich allein. (I, 220)

The lyrical I’s reference to the poetic persona as “murderer” alludes to Trakl’s underlying view of the poet as evil but also his ultimate acquiescence to this evil. With this image, Trakl draws on a topos of the artist as criminal found frequently in modern literature. Once art surrenders its function of imitating a higher reality, it likewise loses moral legitimacy. Thus, the artist questions the validity of his calling and experiences guilt with regard to his role in society. While artist figures in the works of E.T.A. Jealous of his brother who had found favor in the eyes of God, Cain slays his sibling, and after being discovered by God the father, reproves himself, “From thy face I shall be hidden and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me” (Gen. 4:15).
Hoffmann and Thomas Mann exhibit guilt and ambivalence toward their perceived criminal quality, Trakl’s poet figure confronts his criminal nature in the corporeal form of the double from whom he seeks atonement through death. In “Das Grauen,” we see a symbolic acquiescence of the subject to his poetic calling. Although the poetic persona threatens to destroy him, Dionysian intoxication and the dark bounds of its unconscious state are more attractive to the poetic subject than the divided existence of modernity.

Failed attempts at union are repeated throughout Trakl’s poetry. While in one poem, “Abendländisches Lied” (I, 119) a union of the subject and its double is achieved in an androgynous formation of “Ein Geschlecht,” far more prevalent is a fatal attempt at juncture, which reveals Trakl’s ultimately pessimistic view of the poet’s ability to overcome the divisive experience of modernity. Trakl’s pessimism is most aptly illustrated in a later poem “Rosiger Spiegel” (1913):

Rosiger Spiegel: ein häßliches Bild,  
Das im schwarzen Rücken erscheint,  
Blut aus brochenen Augen weint  
Lästernd mit toten Schlangen spielt.  

Schnee rinnt durch das starrende Hemd  
Purpurn über das schwarze Gesicht,  
Das in schwere Stücke zerbricht  
Von Planeten, verstorben und fremd.  

Spinne im schwarzen Rücken erscheint  
Wollust, dein Antlitz verstorben und fremd.  
Blut rinnt durch das starrende Hemd  
Schnee aus brochenen Augen weint. (I, 302)

The first line establishes the dichotomy of the subject and its reflection; the colon acts as a symbolic mirror surface separating the subject from its object reflection. In a typical scenario the reader expects to see the subject, here the poet, confronting its
object extension, the poetic persona. The perspective from which the scene is described is ambiguous, however. With the absence of a lyrical I and subject/object pronouns, the poem can be read from the perspective of the mirror image, which sees the subject standing before it as a “häßliches Bild.” In an inversion reminiscent of Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, here the inanimate image takes on active qualities of the subject, and it carries out the murderous dissolution of the subject. The real world is filled with chaos in comparison to the mirror-image world and perpetuates the division between the subject and its counterpart.

Schnee rinnt durch das starrende Hemd
Purpurn über das schwarze Gesicht,
Das in schwere Stücke zerbricht
Von Planeten, verstorben und fremd.

In the second stanza Trakl provides a dynamic image of the poet’s slow disintegration. Even as the mirror is destroyed (“in schwere Stücke zerbricht”), it generates an active image; the reader views the mirror as it shatters. Using allusions to planets that are distant and cold, Trakl creates a sense of cosmic importance accompanying the poet’s moment of isolated disintegration. In the final stanza, the reader again encounters the generative power of the mirror, which reveals the figure of the poet who has taken on a statuesque, relic-like quality, with flowing blood serving as the final movement of the poem:

Spinne im schwarzen Rücken erscheint
Wollust, dein Antlitz verstorben und fremd.
Blut rinnt durch das starrende Hemd
Schnee aus brochenen Augen weint.

This last disturbing image takes on a mystical quality with the stonelike picture of a face that features the markings of the stigmata. The “brochenen Augen” reveal the
blindness of the lyrical I and its inability to achieve union through the act of visual observation. Here the broken mirror and the blinded subject reveal the lack of correspondence between the objective world and the interior of the lyrical I. That the poem describes the disintegration of the poet rather than his poetic persona indicates Trakl’s growing skepticism about the ability of poetry to overcome the division of experience from which he suffered. Trakl seems to conclude that death or unconsciousness is the only alternative to the division of experience. When it enters the mirror space, the subject violates and fractures the reflective surface. Paradoxically, however, the lyrical subject’s separation from its poetic half in the mirror brings about the poet’s dissolution.

Conclusion

Ultimately Georg Trakl’s use of the mirror remains ambivalent. In his early works, the mirror offers the means by which to overcome linguistic limitations through unusual images and synaesthetic combinations that take place on the surface of the mirror and thereby legitimize their distorted effect. In his works, the dichotomous relationship between vision and speech serves as the foundation of lyrical creativity, resulting in the unique use of visual images to convey linguistic meaning. Abandoning linear narrative as the basis of poetic production, Trakl employs primarily visual images as the source from which the creative impulse emerges. Inherent within this shift from a narrative to a visual representation of poetic experience, however, is the ironic tension between the poet’s distrust of language and his ultimate reliance on it as a means of expression. This problem, with which Trakl never comes to terms, is revealed by the
numerous broken mirrors and distorted images that appear in his texts. Grotesque and
threatening images that spring from the mirror's surface attest to the poet's uncertainty
about poetic creation, and visual images can never be entirely separated from the
linguistic text in which they appear. As a writer Trakl depends on the meaning of words
to convey his message; thus, the poetic text takes on a mirror-like quality as the medium
of self-reflexivity.
CHAPTER 3

"WIE EIN TON, DER IN SPIEGEL SCHAUT":
MOVING BEYOND LANGUAGE IN RAINER MARIA RILKE'S WORKS

Da stehen wir mit Spiegeln:
einer dort ......., und fangen auf,
und einer da, am Ende nicht verständigt;
auffangend aber und das Bild weither
uns zuerkennend, dieses reine Bild
dem andern reichen aus dem Glanz des Spiegels.
Ballspiel für Götter. Spiegelspiel, in dem
vielleicht drei Bälle, vielleicht neun sich kreuzen,
und keiner jemals, seit sich Welt besann,
fiel je daneben. Fänger, die wir sind.
Unsichtbar kommt es durch die Luft, und dennoch,
wie ganz der Spiegel ihm begegnet, diesem
(in ihm nur völlig Ankunft) diesem Bild,
das nur so lang verweilt, bis wir ermessen,
mit wieviel Kraft es weiter will, wohin.
Nur dies. Und dafür die lange Kindheit,
und Not und Neigung und der tiefe Abschied
war nur für dieses. Aber dieses lohnt.

("Für Max Picard," II, 255-56)¹

In the late poem entitled “Für Max Picard” (1923), Rilke uses the image of the
mirror to address the nature of art, the problem of artistic representation, and the
function of the poet – issues that he contemplated throughout his career. For Rilke, as
for Trakl, the mirror is a seminal image; there are 132 different variants of the word
“Spiegel” in Rilke’s poetry alone. Looking glasses, reflective pools, windows, and

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, ed. Ernst Zinn, 6 vols. (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt: Insel, 1955-66). All further citations of Rilke’s works refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.
instances of mirroring appear repeatedly in his texts and demonstrate the author’s questions about poetic language, its link to visual representation, and the poet’s confrontation with aesthetic tradition. While many of his poems that feature the mirror could serve as an appropriate introduction to the meaning of the image for his poetics, “Für Max Picard” is particularly fitting because it demonstrates how the mirror functions as the embodiment of two fundamental aspects of Rilke’s work: first, the interaction between literary tradition and modernist aesthetics in his poetry; and second, the use of visual images as a medium of poetic representation to replace language.

In the poem, the image of the two writers poised with mirrors that mutually reflect one another reveals Rilke’s understanding of the poet’s placement between tradition and artistic innovation. The exchange of images between the mirrors implies the artist’s reliance on his physical environment, artistic trends, and other writers as factors contributing to the creative drive. Yet, the mirrors in this poem do not simply reflect what is placed in front of them; instead, they produce and capture the images that the poets exchange with one another in a god-like game of catch. The image (“Bild”) that each writer passes to the other is a work of art, a picture that is “unsichtbar,” yet delivered as a visual image via the mirror’s surface. The invisible pictures are readily taken in despite their inability to communicate fully the author’s intention (“nicht verständigt”). If they endure, they will be volleyed again and again; the artist’s game of catch is justified alone by the permanence of its aesthetic value.

The generative, rather than reflective, quality of the mirrors underscores Rilke’s understanding of the poet as an originator of poetic images, not an imitator of external reality. Like Trakl, Rilke views the poetic imagination as the primary source of the images that serve as the foundation of his poems. For him, the poet is a source of aesthetic ingenuity and, as such, a figure with quasi-spiritual qualities. It is not surprising that he refers to the exchange of aesthetic ideas as a “Ballspiel für Götter” or
that he has often been considered the poetic prophet. Yet for Rilke, artistic innovation demands both working within the boundaries determined by tradition and expanding beyond them to accommodate his own poetic style. Unlike many modernist authors, he avoids breaking completely with the past, relying heavily on neo-romantic ideas for his poetry, using structured verse forms throughout his work, and promoting a notion of artistic inspiration and patronage as prerequisites for poetic productivity. At the same time, Rilke’s works reveal many aspects of a modernist aesthetic: formalistic innovations such as synaesthesia and neologisms, examinations of the lyrical subject’s alienation in an increasingly urbanized world, expressions of anxiety regarding the gap between subjective perception and reality, and a stark skepticism toward the efficacy of language. The mirror, with its rich metaphorical tradition, encompasses the dialectic between tradition and modernism in Rilke’s works and reveals the progression of his poetic style.

The sustained image of the silent picture that is passed from one artist’s mirror to another reveals a second motivating force behind Rilke’s works: the emphasis on visual images as a substitute for language in his poetic works. As a reflective medium, the mirror gestures toward the belief in the ability of language to mirror the world accurately. Early in his career, however, Rilke exhibits a profound distrust of “die armen Worte, die im Alltag darben” (I, 148), attempting instead to imbue his poetic language with visual acuity that approximates the clarity of sculpture and painting. Indeed, in the poem “Für Max Picard,” the works of art the writers exchange are words rather than images. The images in the mirror are “pure,” and, in their invisible character, they approximate the “Unsägliche” that Rilke believed existed beyond language (II, 259). The generative mirrors in this poem serve as the embodiment of the poetic imagination, and the works of art they exchange are the visual images of the poetic text.
The mirror reveals the intersection of the many strands in Rilke's work, uniting the concepts of silence, the picturing ability of poetry, and the embodiment of an invisible and mythic realm, which serves as the focus of his mature poetry. Similarly, it reveals the progression of Rilke's poetic style from tradition to modernism and the shifts in his poetological views. Early mirrors engendering images of the natural world within the lyrical texts give way to the mirror as an aesthetic object in Rilke's "Dinggedichte." In their generative quality, Rilke's poetic mirrors are linked to images and objects that form the foundation of his lyrical work, and their silent form of communication counters the alienating effects of language. In his later works, which mark a turn from the distinct aspects of the phenomenal world to the more abstract and fluid poetic mood of the Duineser Elegien (1912-1922) and the Sonette an Orpheus (1922), the physical attributes of the mirror give way to its synaesthetic ability to convey the tones of Orphic music serving as the vehicle for poetic expression. Whereas early examples of the mirror reveal its function as the medium in which the poet confronts the poetic persona and speculates on the purpose and efficacy of writing, ultimately Rilke uses the mirror to create visions of an alternative reality within the parameters of the poem. For him the mirror does not represent a reflection of reality; instead, it becomes a textual space within the poem that is linked to the poet's imagination, opening a realm of possibility and creative liberty.

In this chapter, I examine how the mirror illustrates various points in Rilke's poetic development and his conceptions of art. This image, which spans his entire oeuvre, reveals that Rilke's work cannot be easily divided into artistic stages as has often been done with the poet's works. The mirror, with its link to language and the poetic process, is a recurring image: although its function changes during the various creative stages of Rilke's work, its presence throughout reveals the writer's continual concern with poetic representation, the visual image as a substitute for language, and the
creation of an alternative reality in the context of the poem. An extended discussion of all mirrors in Rilke’s work is beyond the scope of this study. Thus, I have chosen seminal texts featuring the mirror to reveal the connection of the image to concepts of silence, picturing, and linguistic transcendence in his oeuvre.

Development of a Poetic Program: Silence, Vision, and the Mirror

Like Trakl, Rilke began his poetic career by experimenting with the lyrical forms and motifs handed down from his Romantic predecessors. The early poem, “Schau, wie die Zypressen schwärzer werden” (1898),\(^2\) reveals Rilke’s reliance on traditional images of nature and the notion of stillness as a precondition for artistic inspiration. The poem’s distinct rhyme scheme and the emotive, personalized voice of the lyrical subject disclose its alliance with the tradition of confessional poetry. The poem appears to be bound closely to the conventions that shape it; Rilke, however, uses established images and verse forms to raise questions about poetic representation and suggests the role of visual images in a verbal medium:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Schau, wie die Zypressen schwärzer werden} \\
\text{in den Wiesengründen, und auf wen} \\
\text{in den unbetretbaren Alleen} \\
\text{die Gestalten mit den Steingebärden} \\
\text{weiterwarten, die uns übersehn.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Solchen stillen Bildern will ich gleichen} \\
\text{und gelassen aus den Rosen reichen,} \\
\text{welche wiederkommen und vergehn;} \\
\text{immerzu wie einer von den Teichen} \\
\text{dunkle Spiegel immergrüner Eichen} \\
\text{in mir halten, und die großen Zeichen} \\
\text{ungezählter Nächte näher sehn. (I, 163)}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^2\) The poem was originally published in the early collection *Mir zu Feier* (1899).
In its regular rhyme scheme (abab ccbecccb) and placement of the lyrical subject within nature, the poem exhibits its foundations in romantic poetry. References to trees, meadows, and flowers imply the organic origins of art, and references to “Zeichen” and “Nächte” in the final two lines recall Novalis’s Hymnen an die Nacht. Many aspects of the poem’s construction and content lead the reader to understand it in light of its romantic currents; whereas an earlier poem might take nature as its aesthetic object, Rilke uses the format of the nature poem to talk about the mediated and thus artificial process of artistic production.

The opening invocation, “Schau,” invites the reader to examine the figures listed in the poem as visual objects, placing emphasis on seeing, rather than merely reading, as the primary faculty used in examining the text. The lines of the first strophe conjure up the atmosphere of a portrait gallery rather than an organic setting, drawing the observer down “unbetretbaren Alleen” lined with statues; they are manmade paths that interrupt the normal development of nature, and their “impenetrability” underscores the alienating and human quality of their construction in contrast to the natural continuity of the meadows alluded to in the first line. Similarly, the objects that the lyrical subject lists in the first strophe, cypress trees and stone figures, are related to art more than nature. The cypress trees, a traditional symbol for mourning, stand alone in the

---

3 Novalis’s fifth hymn to night concludes with the lines: “Erinnerung schmilzt in kühler Schattenflut, / So sang das Lied dem traurigen Bedarfe. / Doch unentzückt blieb die ew’ge Nacht / Das ernste Zeichen einer fernen Macht” (47).

4 Throughout his oeuvre, Rilke draws a connection between trees, the planting of which is a human activity, and the recording of words in the poetic process. In his Buch der Bilder (1902), the link between the poetic word and the tree as an aesthetic object is apparent in lines from the poem “Eingang:”

Mit deinen Augen, welche müde kaum
Von der verbrauchten Schwelle sich befrein,
Hebst du ganz langsam einen schwarzen Baum
meadow; however they are juxtaposed with the majestic statues in the city street. While they appear to suggest the idyllic quality of nature, their link to the constructed character of the alleys and to the process of poetic production undermines their organic nature. Thus, their dark silhouettes outlined in the meadow communicate a sense of grief over the lost naïveté of nature and suggest the modern poet’s leave-taking of an outdated form of nature poetry in light of the industrial developments in a modern age.

The tone of mourning quickly gives way, however, to the majestic images of the statues, whose powerful presence takes command of the cultivated setting of the alleys. While the stony gestures of the statues indicate, on the one hand, petrification and a dearth of motion, on the other hand, their stony features gesture toward the unknown observers they await and thereby imply the dynamic quality of their stillness. In this opening scene, Rilke juxtaposes two worlds, the natural world of the romantic poet and the mediated, architectonic atmosphere of the modern poet. While petrification has a negative connotation in Trakl’s poetry, the stony figures of Rilke’s poem are positive, representing the artist’s craftsmanship and exuding a mystical aura through their aesthetic character. The combination of these two realms, the natural and the artistic, becomes the desired aesthetic material for the modern poet as depicted in the second strophe of the poem.

Und stellst ihn vor den Himmel: schlank, allein.
Und hast die Welt gemacht. Und sie ist groß
Und wie ein Wort, das noch im Schweigen reift. (I, 371)

Here, planting a tree is similar to inventing a poem; after the initial creative impulse, the aesthetic object stands alone and grows, expressing its beauty independently of the force that created it. The tree, like the poetic word, matures in silence until the moment in which it evolves as an aesthetic object.

5 By the time Rilke wrote this poem, he had already lived in Munich and Berlin, in addition to Prague.
6 See Roche for an in-depth study of dynamic stillness and its antithesis, deficient stillness.
The first line of the stanza, "Solchen stillen Bildern will ich gleichen," embodies two important points that are integral to Rilke’s later poetological development. First, the lyrical subject identifies both the trees and the statues as pictures. The natural and constructed three-dimensional figures of the first strophe have become visual images in the second. These pictures, which function as the subject of the poem, reveal the modern poet’s further turn from the natural world to aestheticized mediation as the foundation for art. The images that the lyrical subject wishes to duplicate are not naturally occurring objects; instead, poetic creativity is devoted to the verbal replication of works of art: pictures of the cypress trees and the stone figures that line the borders of the alley. In the lyrical subject’s ruminations about the recreation of sculptural and visual arts in the form of writing, the poem takes on an ekphrastic quality and thereby foreshadows Rilke’s later emphasis on a form of writing that both talks about and acts as a picture, notions that serve as the foundation of the poems in the two volumes of Neue Gedichte.

Second, the mirror in the fifth line of the strophe serves an important role in furthering the concept of visual representation within the poem. In the form of an undisturbed pool of water, the mirror is likened to the poet’s imagination, thus evoking earlier conceptions of quietude and creativity embodied by the mirror. The lyrical subject compares its ability to create images within a verbal medium to the mirror’s ability to project images of the natural world around it. Unlike traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of aesthetic mirroring, however, the Rilke’s poetic mirror does not reflect images; instead, it generates them from within the poetic

7 Like Trakl, Rilke uses the mystical image of the tranquil reflecting pool to suggest the spiritual quality of poetic inspiration.
imagination ("dunkle Spiegel ... in mir halten") and reproduces them in verbal form as "große Zeichen ungezählter Nächte." Here the mirror serves as a link between the visual replications of aesthetic objects (the images of the statues and trees) in the poem and the visual quality of poetic language. If we read the second strophe in its entirety, we realize that the quiet images of the first line, the dark mirrors of the fifth line, and the signs of the sixth line are one and the same. The lyrical subject wishes to examine more closely the poetic images that are recreated in the mirror of the poetic imagination as visual figures denoting language. This link between image and sign recalls Novalis's assessment of alphabetical letters and is telling for Rilke's own view of the relationship between language and images: "Ist das Zeichen nicht ein schönes Bild, oder ein Gesang, so ist Anhänglichkeit an Zeichen, die verkehrteste aller Neigungen" (Novalis 356). While Novalis celebrates words as a representational medium that is equal to image and song, Rilke's "Schau, wie die Zypressen schwächer werden" reveals a turn away from language in favor of silent, visual forms of representation and ultimately, in his late works, of music as the highest poetic medium.

Rilke's focus on visuality is exhibited in this poem foremost through the depiction of the statues, which achieve their aesthetic aura through the visual aspect of gesturing. Ulrich Füllebom argues that Rilke's use of gesture is primarily a characteristic of his late verse and his desire to employ visual forms within poetic expression to overcome the inadequacy of words. The attention Rilke devotes to the statues' gesturing stance in this early poem, however, suggests the poet's preoccupation with visuality and the problem of linguistic expression in the beginning of his career as

---

8 See Fülleborn's "Zur magischen Gebärdensprache des späten Rilke."
well as in his later creative phases. In the second strophe, the attention to vision is exhibited by the lyrical subject who wishes to duplicate the stillness of the statues in the form of silent, visual images in the poem. Finally, the last lines of the text emphasize the images’ appearance as “Zeichen”; they are visual rather than auditory renderings of language. The images displayed on the poetic mirror replace words as the material of the poetic imagination. While this poem does not fully develop Rilke’s linguistic skepticism, it alludes to the complex relationship between silence, language, and visual images in Rilke’s works.

In a poem of the same period, “Und meine Träume warten wandentlang” (1897), we again see the concept of creative silence that is perpetuated by visual images linked with nature and the poetic imagination.

Und meine Träume warten wandentlang
Und sind so rührend in der scheuen Schöne.
Sie schweigen noch; sie harren bis ich töne,
Denn allen ihren Harfen bin ich Klang.

Dann singen sie – und ihre Worte sind
Ganz wie (die) Deinen, nur ein wenig blasser:
Sie sind die Bilder tief im stillen Wasser
Und Deine neigen sich am Rand im Wind. (III, 597)

This poem serves as an interesting counterpiece to “Schau, wie die Zypressen schwärzer werden” because it removes the creative environment from nature, which the lyrical subject wishes to reflect in his poetic work, to the interior realm of his imagination. In contrast to the above poem, here the lyrical subject’s dreams serve as the centerpiece of the text. Like the pictures of nature that originate in stillness, the images in the dreams remain silent until they are brought to life through the poet’s song: “Sie schweigen noch; sie harren bis ich töne, / Denn allen ihren Harfen bin ich Klang.” Interestingly, the
dream images are not brought to life by language, understood to be the medium of the poet; instead, they are activated through the notes of the harp, which represent the poet’s creative voice.

This emphasis on music as the poet’s medium of representation recalls the link between song and the elegiac poetry of Hölderlin, Klopstock, and Hölty, and the images of music in romantic poetry. For Novalis, music serves as the origin of lyrical production, and poetry represents a self-conscious music in the form of words. Rilke, too, draws a direct link between the song originating in dreams to the words of the poem. “Dann singen sie – und ihre Worte sind / ganz wie (die) Deinen, nur ein wenig blasser.” Here, the song of the dreams is transcribed into the words of the poem, thus directly relating the non-representational medium of music to poetic language. The organic link of poetry to music, however, ultimately gives way to a final image of poetic self-consciousness.

In the last two lines, the musical language of the poet turns to poetic images that arise from the still waters of a reflective pool: “Sie [ihre Worte] sind die Bilder tief im stillen Wasser / und Deine neigen sich am Rand im Wind.” In this recollection of the Narcissus myth, the words of the lyrical subject, which take the form of pictures on a mirror surface, are confronted by the poetic words of the lyrical object that bend over the waters to meet them. The figure of Narcissus and the notion of self-consciousness that this image evokes add a dimension of poetic self-reflection to the text and suggest that the lyrical subject is speaking, in fact, with the poetic persona. The image of the lyrical subject’s words reflecting the words of the poet emphasizes the self-conscious nature of poetic production and the necessary challenge of linguistic representation.
Through the course of the poem, it becomes apparent that the music of the text is not the
divinely inspired or magic music of the romantic poet; it is inherently linked to the
problem of language. Both the images and the music represent steps in the attempt to
remove levels of mediation in the writing process. As the reference to Narcissus
implies, however, the modern poet must surrender the notion of naiveté and divine
inspiration and reflect upon the nature of language as the artistic medium of the poetic
form before it can be liberated from the problem of linguistic representation.

The linguistic skepticism implied in the previous two poems becomes acutely
apparent in another poem from the same period: “Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen
Wort” (1897). In this work, Rilke openly addresses the problem of language and poetic
representation. Also from the collection Mir zu Feier, the piece exhibits the poet’s
distrust of linguistic mediation and turn toward the object that communicates without
words:

Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort.
Sie sprechen alles so deutlich aus:
Und dieses heißt Hund und jenes heißt Haus,
Und hier ist Beginn und das Ende ist dort.

Mich bangt auch ihr Sinn, ihr Spiel mit dem Spott,
Sie wissen alles, was wird und war;
Kein Berg ist ihnen mehr wunderbar;
Ihr Garten und Gut grenzt grade an Gott.

Ich will immer warnen und wehren: Bleibt fern.
Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern.
Ihr rührt sie an: sie sind starr und stumm.
Ihr bringt mir alle die Dinge um. (I, 194-95)

In its traditional structure, this poem, like the previous two, reveals Rilke’s indebtedness
to the poetic practices of his predecessors. He employs a rhyme scheme typical of
Volkslieder and folk verse (<abba cddc> in the first two strophes and <eeff> in the last),
and his use of alliteration and assonance throughout the poem reveals the young poet's
goal of mastering previous lyrical forms. While formally the poem is
characteristic of much of nineteenth-century verse, the stark critique of language that it
enacts reveals Rilke's response to a modernist crisis of representation.

The first lines of the poem reveal the lyrical subject's doubts about the validity
of a linguistic system founded on a visually mimetic relationship with the world. The
lyrical subject criticizes the confidence with which speakers use words to label things
because they fail to reflect critically on their accuracy: "Sie sprechen alles so deutlich
aus: / Und dieses heißt Hund und jenes heißt Haus." The statements, given as a priori
truths, become particularly problematic when the assumptions they make about concrete
objects in reality lead to truth statements about abstract notions such as "beginning" and
"end," words that suggest concepts such as life and death, this world and the afterworld,
the earthly and the divine. The lyrical subject expresses discomfort, not only with this

---

9 The critique of language, particularly the assigning of names to "things," spans Rilke's entire work. Like
this early poem, "Sonett XIII" (Part I), of the Sonette an Orpheus, shows the inadequacy of words in
describing the unique qualities of an object. The two quatrains of the poem capture Rilke's attempts to by­
pass language in favor of a sensory experience of the object:

Voller Apfel, Birne und Banane,
Stachelbeere ... Alles dieses spricht
Tod und Leben in den Mund ... Ich ahne ...
Lest es einem Kind vom Angesicht,

wenn es sie erschmeckt. Dies kommt von weit.
Wird euch langsam namenlos im Munde?
Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen Funde,
aus dem Fruchtfleisch überrascht befreit. (I, 739)

The essence of the poetic object, in this case fruit, can be fully comprehended only when tasted. In
contrast to naming the fruits, which disregards the conglomerate of sensory qualities that constitutes their
essence, the lyrical subject suggests the liberating effect of doing away with names and relying on the
sensation of taste to gain an understanding of the fruits.
hubristic naming of objects and concepts, but also with the loss of the objects’ aura as a result of being labeled: “Sie wissen alles, was wird und war; / Kein Berg ist ihnen mehr wunderbar.” Once the object is delimited by the mundane title assigned to it, it loses its three-dimensional character and mystical quality. As the final line of the strophe shows, by providing labels for things, humans transform the objects around them into their possessions (“Ihr Garten und Gut”), likening themselves to God, who introduced the spoken word and originally conferred names on things.

Rilke suggests that the words that signify objects do not convey its inner nature; human beings assume they know an object when they assign a name to it because they believe that a direct link exists between visual perception and the linguistic representation of that perception. As we saw in Chapter One, the deep-seated desire to unite language and the world in a one-to-one correspondence that dates back to the Enlightenment was called into question at the turn of the century. Rilke enunciates this skepticism in poetic form, arguing that the visual relationship between human beings, language, and the world is contrived. While seeing may denote believing in this context, Rilke argues that it does not constitute knowing: “[Der gewöhnliche Mensch] sieht die Oberfläche der Dinge, die er und seinesgleichen seit Jahrhunderten geschaffen haben, und glaubt gerne, die ganze Erde nehme an ihm teil ...” (V, 13). Creating language to capture the essence of things is an act of will and necessarily precludes the true vision that leads to a discovery of the object’s invisible qualities. By contrast, Rilke attempts, “langsам eine Kunst ohne Phrase und Lüge [zu] verwirklichen” (qtd. in Himmel 91).

In the third strophe, the lyrical subject warns against the debasing effect of words and argues instead for the celebration of a quality of objects that is not
immediately apparent. In contrast to words that identify with the appearance of things, the lyrical subject suggests the ability of objects to communicate their essence through the medium of music that does not rely on a visual apprehension of the object. Rilke establishes a dichotomous relationship between the everyday language, which is founded on a concept of visual mimesis, and the non-visual medium of music that disregards this linguistic system as destructive. Categorizing the objects by arbitrary names silences their inner music and essence, they become “starr und stumm,” and leads to the dissolution of the object.

While scholars often consider Rilke’s linguistic crisis a development of his later poetry, generally beginning after the completion of Malte Laurids Brigge, during the years from 1912 to 1914, his skepticism toward language and suggestions for overcoming it are already apparent in these early poems. In “Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort,” Rilke implicitly distinguishes between two forms of mediation: the mundane language of human beings and the non-representational medium of the object. These early categories correspond to Friedrich Wilhelm Wodtke’s distinction between four types of language in Rilke’s works, two of which I wish to highlight: “die alltägliche Umgangssprache der Mitteilung und des Gesprächs” (91) and “die absolute Sprache der Engel, in der die Antinomie von ‘Sprechen’ und ‘Schweigen’ ... zu einer Identität wird” (93). In the poem, the language of the object assumes the characteristics of the angel’s language; music serves as the resolution of speech and

10 Friz Kaufmann, Hans Egon Holthusen, Hermann Kunisch, Dieter Bassermann, and Friedrich Wilhelm Wodtke date Rilke’s linguistic crisis anywhere from his first stay in Paris (1902-03) to the 1920’s when he completed the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus.

11 Wodtke’s linguistic categories include: the language of humans, the symbolic poetic language, the colloquial language that angels use to communicate with humans, and the pure language of angels (91-93). Wodtke does not describe what the “Umgangssprache der Engel” entails, and it is clear that early on Rilke identifies the poet with the figure of the angel, as will be shown below.
silence. The object’s song avoids the linguistic systematization of colloquial speech and, through its avoidance of words, suggests, even if it does not achieve, the inspired silence of the aesthetic object.

Given the positive connotation of the angel’s silence and the poetic stillness to which it alludes, the negative description of the object as “stumm” in the final line of the poem requires more explanation. Like Trakl, Rilke distinguishes the silence that serves as the source of the lyrical voice and poetic images from the silence created by the failure of language. The first type of silence is the stillness that acts as a prerequisite to lyrical creativity, and in its non-representational quality it is similar to music as a poetic medium: “Sie meinen ja die Schweigsamkeit, / wie auch die Geigen Schweigen meinen” (II, 754). In light of Rilke’s many references to music and the poet in his early poems, the “singing” of the object may be understood as the poetic production of the author. Starkly contrasted with the lyrical silence of the poet is the silence that results from the failure of language to express: “Denn mein Verlieb / schlägt Schweigen nieder; nicht der Geigen Schweigen, / Schweigen von Schreien fällt bei mir ...” (II, 372). “Der Geigen Schweigen” is a prerequisite to lyrical creativity and is closely linked with music as the ideal, unmediated form of artistic expression, while the “Schweigen von Schreien” reflects the linguistic crisis of the poet and the anxiety it causes him.

In this poem we see an example of both types of silence. While the objects exist independently of human influence, their silence is marked by the musical mediation; they communicate through song in an example of “der Geigen Schweigen.” When the objects come into human contact, that is, once they are labeled, they lose their aesthetic quality, and their music gives way to silence. Unlike the statues in “Schau, wie die
Zypressen schwärzer werden,” whose stillness possesses a dynamic quality in the form of gesture, these objects become rigid, speechless, and lifeless once they are quantified by language.

Silence is a seminal concept in Rilke’s poetry and becomes a defining characteristic of the mirror as an embodiment of the poetic realm. The many instances of the word “schweigen” and its variants (“schweigend,” “Schweigende,” “schweigsamen,” “Schweigsamkeiten,” “Schweigengebirge”) reveal Rilke’s attempts to overcome the problematic nature of words by turning to the silent nature of objects achieved through visual observation. Like Hofmannsthal, who wished to achieve in poetry “eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge ... sprechen” (54), Rilke attempts to capture the essence of objects, not merely from their outward appearance, but also based on their inward quality. The search for language that would communicate the inner nature of things serves as the primary motivation in Rilke’s writing before and during the creation of the Neue Gedichte. It is, in Hermann Kunisch’s words, the attempt to find “eine Aussageweise ..., die der Erscheinung und dem Wesen des Gegenübers gerecht wird, die das ‘zur Sprache’ bringt, was sich dem Anschauen und dem geistigen Vernehmen des Dichters darstellt” (138). The language of the poet differs from mundane language through its ability to make apparent the inner world of the objects. While naming objects relies on a visual recognition of their outer features, the lyrical treatment of them celebrates their invisible aura, a concept, which we shall see, is central to Rilke’s concept of the “Dinggedicht.”

12 “Schweigen” and its variants appear nearly two hundred times in his poetic works alone.
Linguistic Skepticism: Rilke's Non-Reflective Mirrors

The link between silence and the lost mimetic quality of language serves as a foundation for Rilke's subsequent poetic development and his attempts to use the lyrical text as a means for revealing the invisible nature of objects. As a result of his experiences with Rodin and the painters of the Worpswede colony, Rilke conceived of a new form of vision, which shifted the focus of his poetic texts from subjective perception to the objective representation of things. As Alfred Doppler explains, "[Das lyrische Ich] ist entschlossen, alles anders zu sehen, und es sucht nach Äquivalenten für das Gesehene, das Erfahrene und Erinnerte" (337). These equivalents are not, however, conceived of as replications of the objects' physical appearance in poetic form. In fact, the classical union between poetic subject, the natural world, and language serves as the very point of contention in Rilke's works of this time (Doppler 335). In the early verse selection from Das Buch der Bilder (1906) entitled "Die Blinde" (1900), Rilke undermines the relationship between subject and object worlds based on a notion of exact visual mimesis by featuring the figure of a blind woman, who may be seen as the poet's foil. This short verse piece, in the form of a dialogue between "Die Blinde" and "Der Fremde," may be read as an allegory of the modern poet's evolution.

13 Rilke met the artists of the Worpswede colony after he was invited to stay there by the illustrator Heinrich Vogeler. Among the acquaintances he made were Clara Westhoff, a student of Rodin and his future wife, and Paula Modersohn-Becker, for whom he wrote the requiem "Für eine Freundin." In 1902, Rilke moved to Paris where he met Rodin, about whom he was preparing a monograph. Rilke lived in Paris again from October 1905 to May 1906, during which time he served as Rodin's secretary before the two separated on unamicable terms.

14 References to blindness and its connection to the problem of linguistic expression and poetic ingenuity can be found throughout Rilke's work. Poems such as "Der Blinde," "Das Lied des Blinden," and "Die Erblindende," along with the many references to blind mirrors, blind hands, and blind "things" attest to the importance of the concept for Rilke's work.
from a crisis of representation to the discovery of inward vision as the source of poetic production.\footnote{This poem also fits the description of a “Rollengedicht,” whose lyrical “I” appears as a figure in the poem. With its focus on one person or character, the “mask” poems can be seen as a derivative of the “Bildgedicht,” a genre that depicts sculpted or painted figures in poetic form. This early attention to imaging an object in the body of a poem is a precursor to Rilke’s later development of the “Dinggedichte” (Hamburger 25).}

\begin{quote}
DIE BLINDE:
Wenn deine Augen ruhn
Und wenn sie noch so müd waren,
Sie können wieder steigen.
... Meine schweigen.
Meine Blumen werden die Farbe verlieren.
Meine Spiegel werden zufrieren.
In meinen Büchern werden die Zeilen verwachsen.
Meine Vögel werden in den Gassen
Herumflattern und sich an fremden Fenstern verwunden.
Nichts ist mehr mir verbunden.
Ich bin von allem verlassen. –
Ich bin eine Insel. (I, 467)
\end{quote}

In this passage, the blind woman describes her loss of sight and the existential angst that ensues from the severed visual connection to the object world. An interesting synaesthetic combination, “Meine [Augen] schweigen,” reveals the link between visual perception and linguistic representation. With the onset of blindness, the flowers, colors, birds, and books that serve as the materials of poetic production lose clarity as the poet’s visual relationship to the world expires. Similar to her images of the objective world that lose clarity, the woman’s language relinquishes its expressive quality. While most human beings are able to overlook the rift between subject and object worlds that marks the end of the nineteenth century (“Und wenn sie noch so müd waren / Sie können wieder steigen”), the poet is driven to silence by the lost visual foundation of language. Concomitant with the onset of blindness is the dissolution of the natural objects that
serve as material for the poems: flowers lose their color, and the romantic songbird wounds itself in chaotic flight. The objective world takes on the sense of doom that the poetic subject experiences.

The inherent link between vision and the foundation of art and perception in mimesis is revealed by the image of the blind eyes that become frozen mirrors. Here, Rilke recalls the Neoplatonic symbol of the eyes as the mirror of the soul but uses it to represent the artist's mimetic connection to empirical reality. This allusion to mirrors reinforces the conception of the mind as a mirror of the material world and the understanding of poetic language as a mimetic art form. When the link between the cognitive faculty and external reality is broken through the loss of vision, however, the poetic images that rely on a mimetic rendering of the world lose clarity. The imminent failure of poetic language's mirroring function is further displayed in the image of the bird that flies against the window. The precise mirror reflection of nature that is projected on the pane leads to the destruction of the bird, which mistakenly flies against it; the imitation of reality thus brings about the destruction of the bird, the romantic symbol of the creative voice. As in Trakl's poetry, blindness in this poem alludes to the undermining of the subject's sense of security through the deterioration of a visually mimetic relationship to the world.¹⁶ This idea is further expressed in the line, "Nichts ist mit mir verbunden. Ich bin von allem verlassen." Like words, whose purported organic connection to nature is defunct, the poetic subject loses her connection to reality when her visual apprehension of it disintegrates.

¹⁶ Williams concludes that blindness is indicative of "a postromantic era that can no longer see a reassuring bright unity in the 'colorful images painted by life'" (italics his emphasis, The Mirror and the Word 208).
While the early part of the piece reveals an overarching mood of pessimism and skepticism toward artistic production, the second half of the poem expounds a sense of aesthetic rejuvenation achieved through the knowledge of the invisible quality of “things.” The blind woman describes her turn from a visual dependence on the external world to inner vision of the poetic realm:

Dann wuchs der Weg zu den Augen zu.
Ich weiß ihn nicht mehr.
Jetzt geht alles in mir umher,
sicher und sorglos; wie Genesende
gehn die Gefühle, genießend das Gehen,
durch meines Leibes dunkles Haus.
Einige sind Lesende
über Erinnerungen;
aber die jungen
sehn alle hinaus.
Denn wo sie hintreten an meinen Rand,
ist mein Gewand von Glas.
Meine Stirne sieht, meine Hand las
Gedichte in anderen Händen.
Mein Fuß spricht mit den Steinen, die er betritt,
meine Stimme nimmt jeder Vogel mit
Aus den täglichen Wänden.
Ich muß nichts mehr entbehren jetzt,
alle Farben sind übersetzt
in Geräusch und Geruch.
Und sie klingen unendlich schön
als Töne.
Was soll mir ein Buch?
In den Bäumen blättert der Wind;
und ich weiß, was dorten für Worte sind,
und wiederhole sie manchmal leis.
Und der Tod, der Augen wie Blumen bricht,
findet meine Augen nicht … (I, 468-69)

Here we see a transformation of the linguistic world, which rests on the accuracy of visual representation, into the blind, but richer world of the poetic object. The aesthetic experience based on deformed words written on a page (“verwachsene Zeilen”) gives
way to the physical experience of objects in nature: “Meine Stirne sieht, meine Hand
las... / Mein Fuß spricht mit den Steinen ... / Meine Stimme nimmt jeder Vogel mit.”
Experiences focusing on sound and touch overrule the visual perception of color. The
poet’s earlier reliance on language as a representational medium is replaced by the
celebration of poetic objects in music, “Als Töne.” The poem ends with the poet
figure’s final critique of language: “Was soll mir ein Buch? ... ich weiß, was dorten für
Worte sind, ... / Und der Tod, der Augen wie Blumen bricht, / Findet meine Augen
nicht ....” The blind woman disregards books as the source of poetic expression,
knowing that the words she finds in them inhibit the true comprehension of objects by
adding a level of mediation. Those who rely on language as the source of knowledge
about reality will suffer again and again from doubts about their grounding in the world.
Such misgivings do not, however, plague the blind woman; she is liberated from a
visual, and thus linguistic, relationship to the world.

While it may seem contradictory that Rilke criticizes the concept of vision in a
collection of poems entitled Buch der Bilder, the apparent paradox is resolved in his
understanding of two types of vision and their relationship to blindness and images. In
the first case, vision has a negative connotation and is the foundation for an
understanding of the world and language based on visual perception, which proves to be
faulty. Blindness, with regard to this type of vision, represents Rilke’s confrontation
with a mimetic understanding of the world and the poet’s reproduction of it in language.
The loss of vision signifies the dissolution of the synchronized visual relationship
between subject and world. Language, as the product of this visual connection, must
necessarily become speechless when the visual link is lost. Once the poet comes to
terms with the representational rift that results from the lost mimetic relationship to the material world, however, blindness gives way to the second type of vision, which is directed inward and results in poetic images that attempt to approximate the essence of the object. As Doppler concludes: "Da es in der Zeit der Industrialisierung, wo jedes Gebrauchsding zu einem Verbrauchsding wird, keine sichtbaren Äquivalente mehr für das gibt, was um uns geschieht, muß das Schauen sich immer mehr in ein nachdenkliches Einsehen verwandeln ..." (347). In this regard, the blindness and the frozen mirror above represent an undoing of the mimetic understanding of perception and art and the celebration of images of the poetic imagination that are based on essence rather than appearance.

The questionable relationship between appearance and reality, the inability of language to bridge the two, and the attempt to get at the essence of "things" are all fundamental issues that Rilke takes up in his only novel, Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (1910). Often considered autobiographical, the work examines the problem of artistic representation as it follows the artistic development of the protagonist, Malte.\(^\text{17}\) The novel is foremost about learning to see, and the multiple mirror scenes that appear in the work reveal Rilke's preoccupation with the question of perception as a reflection of reality in contrast to the unperceivable nature of "things." He also addresses the problematic tradition of mimetic art forms and the mimetic understanding of poetic language, suggesting in their place a poetic framework that

breaks away from surface appearances and suggests the invisible nature of things as the focus of the artwork. While Rilke concentrates on the grotesque aspects of people and things in an industrialized world, and his view of art and poetic language is predominantly pessimistic, individual moments in the work suggest Rilke's later interest in the invisible nature of things conceived as art. 18

The book, situated between naturalist and aestheticist conceptions of art, fluctuates between precise descriptions of Malte's decadent surroundings in turn-of-the-century Paris and the fantastic ruminations of his imagination. In the novel, the narrator distinguishes between the surface world of appearances, the autonomous nature of objects, and the interior sphere of the subject. 19

Leben, von denen man nie erfahren hätte, tauchen empor und mischen sich unter das, was wirklich gewesen ist, und verdrängen Vergangenes, das man zu kennen glaubte: denn in dem, was aufsteigt, ist eine ausgeruhte, neue Kraft, das aber, was immer da war, ist müde von zu oft er Erinnern (VI, 766).

In this passage, Malte acknowledges the existence of an invisible world, which he has never experienced personally. For him, part of learning to see is reaching into this world and looking beneath the surface appearance of things. While Malte stresses his desire to gain a knowledge of essence behind the exterior of things, the normally invisible images interfere with his understanding of "was wirklich gewesen ist." The unseen lives of the object world likewise threaten to extinguish the poet's subjective images that take on

---

18 This work is particularly challenging to situate within Rilke's larger poetological framework. Many scholars order the novel chronologically according to its publication date in 1910, suggesting that it marks the beginning of Rilke's creative crisis. The novel contains, however, a conglomerate of the impressions and poetological ruminations the poet had been gathering since he began the novel in 1902. As such, Malte reveals much of the language skepticism of Rilke's early career without achieving the transcendent effects he celebrates in the Neue Gedichte.

19 Exposed to theories of psychoanalysis by Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke treats Malte as a study of human psychology and its relationship to the creative process. See David Kleinbard's The Beginning of Terror for an in-depth discussion of psychology in Malte Laurids Brigge and Rilke's works in general.
the form of memories. This segment offers a reflection on the aesthetic transformation that takes place in the course of the novel. The image of the real world points to a previous mimetic understanding of art based on mirroring "what is real"; by contrast, the image of memories implies the subjectivity of romantic art and its confessional poetry. Both of these art forms become obsolete in comparison to the new art, which represents a vision of the world that rests beneath the surface. Throughout the novel, Malte focuses on uncovering this invisible world by learning how to see. At the outset of the novel, he announces: "Ich lerne sehen" (VI, 710), a process through which he discovers his own nature even as he learns about the world around him: "Ich habe ein Inneres, von dem ich nicht wußte. Alles geht dorthin. Ich weiß nicht, was dort geschieht" (VI, 710-11). As we shall see below, the multiple mirror images in the novel communicate his preoccupation with vision and reveal his confrontation with the past, both his own and aesthetic tradition, and his attempts to achieve a new art form by penetrating into the world of objects.

Rilke expresses skepticism toward the mimetic quality of the mirror, questioning its perpetuation of an understanding of the world based on appearance. In an early passage of the book, the young Malte is confronted by a mirror that has abandoned its reflective function. Its deviation from its mimetic quality causes him to lose his grounding in reality and the ability to distinguish between what he believes is the empirical world and what is a product of his imagination.

Ach, wie man zitterte, drin zu sein, und wie hinreißend war es, wenn man es war. Wenn da etwas aus dem Trüben heraus sich näherte, langsamer als man selbst, denn der Spiegel glaubte es gleichsam nicht und wollte, schläfrig wie er war, nicht gleich nachsprechen, was man ihm vorsagte. (VI, 803)
In this passage Malte has found a collection of old costumes and refashioned himself by dressing in one of them. Upon looking in the mirror, however, he is greeted not by the immediate reflection of himself, but rather by a mirror that rejects its reflective function. It refuses to offer an accurate image; its picture moves more slowly than Malte, who stands before it. With this mirror, Rilke reveals a turn from a mimetic concept of art and language toward a poetic form that is not connected to empirical reality. Instead the mirror encompasses the world of objects and its autonomous aura, which Malte can only experience when he is not allowed to impose his own imagination upon it. In its autonomous quality, the mirror debunks the foundation of perception in surface appearances and instead offers glimpses of the invisible realm beyond the surface.

In describing the reflection in the mirror, Rilke uses the verb “nachsprechen” in describing the mirror’s copying function and its subsequent deviation from it (“Der Spiegel wollte nicht nachsprechen”). What we expect to be visual images produced by the mirror assume a verbal form instead. The mirror’s refusal to repeat to Malte what is placed before it reveals the deterioration of language’s mimetic quality that is already evident in “Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort.” In the poem, Rilke suggests a solution to linguistic skepticism by listening to the objects’ song and thus acquiring knowledge of their essence without relying on words to describe them. In the novel, however, Malte expresses anxiety over the lost primacy of the subject, which is signaled by linguistic failure. The object world, with its newfound autonomy, reverses Malte’s understanding of his relationship to “things” and threatens his stability:

Während ich in maßlos zunehmender Beklemmung mich anstrengte, mich irgendwie aus meiner Vermummung hinauszuzwängen, nötigte er mich, ich weiß nicht womit, aufzusehen und diktierte mir ein Bild, nein, eine Wirklichkeit, eine fremde, unbegreifliche monströse Wirklichkeit, mit der ich durchtränkt wurde gegen meinen Willen: denn jetzt war er der Stärkere, und ich war der Spiegel. (VI, 808)
When Malte stands before the mirror a second time, the reality of the object world overpowers his own. Here the poetic imagination and the world it engenders take precedence over empirical reality and threaten the viewing subject. This scene, imbued with both tension and comical irony, underscores Rilke's position vis-à-vis traditional art forms. The passage reveals his celebration of the mirror, and by extension art as an autonomous medium liberated from its mimetic function. The primacy of poetic vision and ingenuity is also accompanied, however, by the poet's uneasiness toward an art form no longer based in the certainty of empirical reality.

While the mirror in the novel breaks free of its mimetic function, the images it provides do not immediately indicate the celebration of a new poetic form. In another mirror scene that takes place in the family portrait gallery, we gain insight into the mirror's connection to the concept of the invisible after which Rilke strives. In the scene, Malte explains how he and his cousin Erik walk through the portrait gallery in search of the portrait of Christine Brahe, the mysterious relative who at various times appears to family members as a ghost. Erik has brought a mirror to the gallery so that Christine can view herself in it; however, she does not appear on its surface. When Malte asks for an explanation, Erik replies, "Man ist entweder drin, ... dann ist man nicht hier; oder wenn man hier ist, kann man nicht drin sein" (VI, 817). This conversation, that interestingly enough takes place within the portrait gallery, reveals two points about Rilke's developing notion of art. The first refers to the concept of vision in general. If an object or a person is visible, it does not necessarily guarantee its presence or essence. The many portraits in the gallery attest to the fact that the image of a person does not constitute the real human being, a notion that leads us to the second
point. The exact replication of an object in a work of art does not communicate its true nature; on the contrary, when it is in the work of art, its essence is not apparent. Conversely, the aura of an object that one experiences in observing it directly precludes it from being replicated in the work of art: when it is present, it cannot be a work of art. In an attempt to bring together these two concepts, Rilke develops the notion of the "Dinggedicht," in which the aura of the object is not lost through artistic mediation; indeed, the aesthetic medium is necessary to bring out the invisible and transcendent nature of the object. Thus in Malte, a mirroring notion of vision gives way to an artistic understanding of vision, which requires the observer to look beyond the superficial appearance of things to penetrate to the essential nature of things (Martens, Autobiographical Narrative 232).

Moving Beyond Things: The Mirror and the Invisible

The poetic concepts that Rilke introduces in Buch der Bilder and Malte, learning to see and grasping the essence of things in poetic form, are brought to full fruition in the two volumes of the Neue Gedichte (1907-08). Lorna Martens summarizes the nature of the volumes: "In these poems Rilke experiments with techniques for representing objects that circumvent the automatic images that the mere name of these object would evoke in the reader’s mind and at the same time capture their essential quality" (Autobiographical Narrative 239). As in "Die Blinde" and Malte, in his "Dinggedichte" Rilke attempts to get behind the surface appearance of things suggested

---

20 For an in-depth analysis of the principles of the “thing” and the Neue Gedichte, see James Rolleston, Rilke in Transition and Brigitte Bradley, Rainer Maria Rilkes “Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil”: Entwicklungsstufen seiner Pariser Lyrik.
by words and uses the poem as a medium to remove the boundaries between subject and
object, interior and exterior worlds, and artwork and observer. Influenced by Rodin’s
work with figures and space, Rilke treats poetic language like the sculptor’s material
and attempts to express objects in three-dimensional reality, removing them from the
textual mode of time and placing them in spatial orientation. In a letter to Lou
Andreas-Salomé, Rilke reveals his indebtedness to Rodin for the artistic vision and new
objective quality of his poetic work:

Nur die Dinge reden zu mir. Rodins Dinge, die Dinge an den gothischen
Kathedralen, die antikischen Dinge, – alle Dinge, die vollkommene
Dinge sind. Sie wiesen mich auf die Vorbilder hin; auf die bewegte
lebendige Welt, einfach und ohne Deutung gesehen als Anlaß zu Dingen.
Ich fange an, Neues zu sehen: schon sind mir Blumen oft so unendlich
viel und aus Thieren kamen mir Anregungen seltsamer Art. Und auch
Menschen erfahre ich schon manchmal so, Hände leben irgendwo,
Munde reden, und ich schaue alles ruhiger und mit größerer
Gerechtigkeit. (Briefwechsel mit Lou Andreas-Salomé 89-90)

Here, the things of daily life take on the importance of the aesthetic object. Like Rodin,
Rilke desires to recreate the autonomous objectivity of things, emphasizing their
essence over the subject’s perception of them. Rilke begins to view language as an
artistic material that must be manipulated, much like the sculptor’s plaster, in order to
achieve the essence of the object. As Doppler explains: “Die Gegenstände werden in

\[1\] In the poems, Rilke depicts singular objects: animals, plants, people (e.g. “Der Turm,” “Der Panther,”
“Die Kurtisane,” “Blaue Hortensie”) or works of art dealing with mythological or biblical themes (e.g.
“Archaischer Torso Apollos,” “Sankt Sebastian,” “Jeremia”). In addition to real works of art that Rilke
addresses in poetic form, he also creates poems centered around “imaginary pictures” (Ryan, Rilke,
Modernism, and Poetic Tradition 52), themes common to the visual arts at the turn of the century with
which Rilke was familiar through his art history studies (e.g. “Die Genesende,” “Übung am Klavier”).
\[2\] Rilke’s emphasis on the visual arts likewise reveals the influence of Cézanne, particularly the artist’s
use of color. In letters to his wife, he refers to “Cézannes sehr eigenes Blau” (Briefe über Cézanne 22)
and the way in which he used color “wie kein Mensch noch Farbe genommen hat, nur um das Ding damit
zu machen” (Briefe über Cézanne 28).
\[3\] For an examination of Rodin’s influence on Rilke’s work and aesthetic views, see Martina Krießbach,
Rilke und Rodin: Wege einer Erfahrung des Plastischen. For discussions of visual arts in Rilke’s work in
general, see Frank Baron, ed., Rilke and the Visual Arts.
ihre malerischen Äquivalente umgesetzt, und zwar mit einer geduldigen 'animalischen'
Aufmerksamkeit. Jede innere Beteiligung wird aufgebraucht durch die 'Aktion des
Machens‘" (339). Yet these equivalents do not imply a direct replication of the natural
object in aesthetic form; instead, Rilke moves beyond the mimetic rendering of the
objects to reveal the autonomy of the object. For this reason, in poems such as “Der
Panther” and “Archäischer Torso Apollos,” the aesthetic object takes on subjective
proportions, exercising its power over the observer, as signified by the statement: “Du
mußt dein Leben ändern” (I, 557).

Stressing the importance of visual representation within a verbal medium, Rilke
delves into the heart of the sister arts’ debate for which the concept of mirroring played
such an integral role. In contrast to Lessing’s pronouncement that the arts of poetry and
painting are philosophically and aesthetically distinct, Rilke integrates them,
emphasizing the visual quality of the poetic text as a means of bypassing the restrictive
and misleading naming function of language. While the deterioration of vision in “Die
Blinde” refers to the lost representational quality of mundane language, the focus on
vision and the aesthetic object in the Neue Gedichte reveals the ability of poetic
language to reinstate visual accuracy by achieving the spatiality of painting and
sculpture. Through the poetic treatment of objects, Rilke reveals the ability of the
written text to achieve the representational clarity of the visual arts while
simultaneously “imaging the invisible,” a process that can only be fulfilled by the poetic
text (Mitchell, Iconology 42). In this regard, Rilke shares Lessing’s understanding of
the poetic text’s ability to move beyond surface images and awaken the imagination of
the reader in a way that the mere visual representation of an object cannot. Rilke
clarifies this relationship between the visible and the invisible in a 1926 letter to Witold von Hulewicz, stating: "Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l'Invisible" (qtd. in Hendry 153). In the union of visual and verbal arts in the modern poem, Rilke implies a resolution to the traditional *ut pictura poesis* debate and suggests the means by which to overcome the crisis of representation through the intersection of image and text. In the context of the modern poem, he does away with linguistic mimesis in favor of poetic images that move beyond reflection to reveal the invisible.

The mirror, whose connection to language, vision, and artistic representation is introduced in the earlier works, assumes an important role in the *Neue Gedichte* by revealing Rilke's developing understanding of poetic representation and the interplay between vision and text as the foundation of his poetological theory. As both an object of the physical world and a prized aesthetic article, the mirror is an ideal example of the "things" Rilke highlights in the poems of the *Neue Gedichte* and that he imbues with transcendent qualities. The mirror is unique among the many objects Rilke writes about. Unlike the things in nature that he depicts, it possesses an aesthetic quality; yet it is not typically deemed an artwork. The mirror is an intermediary between a physical entity, the reflective glass of the mirror, and the "thing" recognized as a work of art, the

---

24 "We are continually madly plundering the honey of the visible, in order to store it up in the great, golden hive of the invisible."

25 In chapter three of her book *The Mirror*, Sabine Melchior-Bonnet examines the historical importance of the mirror as an aesthetic object. At the end of the nineteenth century, mirrors became increasingly prevalent, particularly in France, as they were incorporated into furniture as decorative pieces and sold as showpieces for various rooms of the house. The mirrored armoire and the *psyché*, a precious ornamental mirror also used for grooming, were signs of bourgeois affluence and sophistication (Melchior-Bonnet 94-95). Given the increased popularity of the mirror at the close of the century, it is not surprising that it became a favorite literary image of the French Symbolists. Works by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, and Rodenbach all feature mirrors of some type, as physical objects, as other reflective surfaces, or in reworkings of the Narcissus myth.
mirror in its entirety, with frame, engraving, and ornamentation. The mirror was created to fulfill a specific physical function; yet the artisanship that characterizes its design and its treatment as an aesthetic piece identify it as a “Kunstding,” a “thing” that is imbued with aesthetic character (Rolleston 187). When the mirror becomes the object of a poem, it takes on a third level of aesthetic mediation; it is an artwork about which a work of art is written. The three aspects of the mirror, as a physical object, as an aesthetic object, and as the subject matter of the poem, collude with its physical ability to reflect to suggest the self-reflexive nature of art. The unique position of the mirror among Rilke’s other art objects and its ability to communicate the invisible, to unite subject and object worlds, and to offer a moment of transcendence is revealed by two poems devoted to the mirror during the period in which he was writing Neue Gedichte: “Dame vor dem Spiegel” and “Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört.”

The poem “Dame vor dem Spiegel” takes as its subject an imaginary picture, the topos of a young woman grooming herself before a mirror. The mirror takes on importance not merely as the subject matter of the painting, but also as the embodiment of the invisible nature of the object that Rilke sought to uncover in the poetic text. The text of the poem incorporates the temporal nature of the written text with the static and spatial nature of the visual image. As such, it reveals a new dynamism of both art forms that can only be achieved in the context of the poem. The mirror in the poem alternately

---

26 In its concrete nature, the mirror is similar to other natural or physical objects Rilke writes about, e.g., the panther, the carousel, the tower, or the island. In its aestheticized nature, however, the mirror approximates the aesthetic objects that likewise serve as the topics of the “Dinggedichte,” for example the torso of Apollo, the Pietà, or the San Marco cathedral in Venice.

27 The imaginary pictures are topoi that were prevalent in the visual arts of the time. While Rilke’s poems about imaginary pictures do not refer back to specific works of art, the images would have been familiar to readers from their frequent renderings in paintings of the time.
takes on characteristics of a vessel into which the protagonist dissolves and a reality-
transforming fluidity which she then imbibes.

Wie in einem Schlafrunk Spezerein
löst sie leise in dem flüssigklaren
Spiegel ihr ermüdetes Gebären;
und sie tut ihr Lächeln ganz hinein.

Und sie wartet, daß die Flüssigkeit
davon steigt; dann gießt sie ihre Haare
in den Spiegel und, die wunderbare
Schulter hebend aus dem Abendkleid,

trinkt sie still aus ihrem Bild. Sie trinkt,
was ein Liebender im Taumel tränke,
prüfend, voller Mißtrauen; und sie winkt

erst der Zofe, wenn sie auf dem Grunde
ihres Spiegels Lichter findet, Schränke
und das Trübe einer späten Stunde. (I, 624)

Here the mirror implies a symbolic space that both encompasses and reaches beyond the
words of the lyrical text. The paradoxical nature of the mirror, its concrete yet abstract
qualities are illustrated by images of the protagonist placing her smile into the mirror,
“sie tut ihr Lächeln ganz hinein” and pouring her hair into its liquid-like image, “Sie
gießt ihre Haare in den Spiegel.” Later in the poem her image becomes part of the
mirror’s fluidity, which she drinks, thus restructuring herself: “trinkt sie still aus ihrem
Bild.” The poem is about expanding the limits of subject and object distinctions. In a
moment of union, the subject both enters the object world and encompasses it within
herself. At the poem’s end, the mystical experience of oneness ceases as subject and
object distinctions become apparent once more. Playing on the mirror’s various
meanings as a mimetic apparatus, a barrier, and a portal, Rilke engenders a new level of
existence in the context of the poem. While the moment of union is short-lived, he
reveals the possibility of overcoming the subject-object dichotomy of external reality through the alteration of perspective in the mirror. While “Dame vor dem Spiegel” was composed during the years in which Rilke was working on the Neue Gedichte, the concepts of movement, fluidity, and the blurring of distinctions it highlights are all aspects of the Duineser Elegien and Rilke’s subsequent poetology. As Martens states, “holding up the mirror is a symbol of power”; seeing “correctly” implies seeing creatively past typical perceptions that have become internalized and “automatic” (Autobiographical Narrative 236). In “Dame vor dem Spiegel,” the subject visualizes truth by looking into the mirror. Truth does not impy the mirror’s exact replica of the figure before it; instead it refers to the invisible conjoinment of subject and object and the fluid boundaries between them. While the crisis of representation reveals the cleft between reality and its representation in language, the mirror enables the overcoming of this gap by undermining the notion of surface appearance and suggesting the ability to apprehend the object world through the transformative power of the poem.

The overcoming of boundaries between subject and object worlds examined in “Dame vor dem Spiegel” gives way to spiritual transcendence through the aesthetic experience in “Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört.” The mirror serves, on the one hand, as a vehicle through which the reader, or observer, gains an understanding of the internal essence of the object world. On the other hand, it also reveals the role of the artwork as the link between empirical reality and a spiritual realm of transcendence.

Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört,
und ich bete, daß ich nicht erblinde
innen, wo die Tiefen sind, die tragen,
und ich brauche selbst ein wenig Ruhm,
nur damit man mich einst wiederfinde
This poem, written in August 1907, was not included in the Neue Gedichte; it reveals, however, the volumes' emphasis on the invisible and eternal quality of the art object and on visual observation as the premise for aesthetic enlightenment. The opening line establishes the autonomy of the art object through the mirror's assumption of a human voice. This use of pathetic fallacy recalls again the influence of romanticism on Rilke's works; unlike the romantic poem that relies on the lyrical subject to describe an object, atmosphere, or emotion, in this poem the object speaks for and about itself. Based on its autonomous nature and its reflections about its own aesthetic nature, the mirror embodies the distinctly modern aspects of Rilke's Neue Gedichte.

In the first half of the poem, the mirror image delves directly into questions about its function as an aesthetic object and in so doing, suggests the ability of the aesthetic object and poetry to endure: "Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört ... ich brauche selbst ein wenig Ruhm." The mirror states its desire for aesthetic perpetuity and argues for its eternal quality based on individual aspects of its artistry. The mirror suggests that the source of its aesthetic value is not in its ability to reflect; rather, "es geht um seinen Silbergriff" and the beauty of its contours. Unlike a true mirror that
reflects life in its stages of decay and reveals the aging face before it, the beauty of this mirror is eternal ("und wer das Unendliche verstände / fände ihre Schönheit in dem Schliff / dieses Spiegels"), thus suggesting the timelessness of art in a world where other objects deteriorate. Indeed, the value of the mirror as an art object is everlasting and can only be undermined by the unwitting or unenlightened observer who destroys it.

The eternal quality of the mirror's visual appearance is likened to a text, "die Sage ihrer Hände," indicating Rilke's emphasis on the visual experience of an object over the description of it in words. By placing image above the text in this poem, Rilke recalls his earlier critique of language and stresses the importance of the visual image within the poetic medium as a means of uncovering the inner essence of the object. In the second line of the poem, Rilke reintroduces the notion of blindness. While in earlier works he links the loss of sight to the lost mimetic quality of language, here he stresses the importance of maintaining inner vision, like that possessed by the poet figure in "Die Blinde." In the second and third lines, the mirror exclaims, "Und ich bete, daß ich nicht erblinde / Innen, wo die Tiefen sind, die tragen." Drawing on the idea of the poet's soul as a source of images, the mirror prays that it can maintain the pictures that originate in its depths. In effect, it neglects its own function of reflecting mere appearances and insists instead on its ability to reach beneath the surface to uncover the invisible essence of things. While blindness implies a breakdown of the linguistic relationship to empirical reality in previous poems, here the maintenance of inward vision through the artwork indicates an enlightened understanding of the world of objects and its aesthetic representation in the poem.
Suggestions of the object's transcendent qualities, which are suggested in statements about the mirror’s eternal beauty in the first two-thirds of the poem, lead to direct connections between art and transcendence at the end of the poem in Rilke’s convocation of the angel.

Und wer das Unendliche verstünde
Fände ihre Schönheit in dem Schliff
dieses Spiegels, – den sie weiterschenkte
an den einsamen Engel, daß er drin
die noch viel zu fernen Feuer finge
<und> den Glanz vom Aufgang Gottes lenkte
über Dunkelnde und Dinge hin.

The image of the angel holding a mirror encompasses an intricate confluence of different meanings of the mirror, vision, and artistic transcendence. Here the mirror, an object from the human world, serves as a portal to the divine realm of the angels. In a symbolic gesture of spiritual communion, the owner of the mirror, whose story is carried in its handle, passes it on to the angel, who uses the reflective surface to capture and cast divine light over the human world consisting of "Dunkelnde und Dinge."

The angel, a seminal figure in Rilke's late poetry, particularly in the Duineser Elegien, takes on several meanings in this poem. First, the angel is a mediator between the divine realm and the mortal world; it is a figure that is directly linked to God but also serves as a messenger to the people. Second, in its isolated character and its ability to capture divine fire and spread its light over the dark world of things, the angel is a celestial embodiment of the poet. Like the angel who employs the mirror to transform

---

28 While Rilke draws on the religious meaning of the angel and its link to both the divine and the artists, he was also influenced by the prevalence of angel imagery in works of art and the popularity of angelology, the science of calling forth a guardian angel, in the early part of the twentieth century. The Pre-Raphaelite painters used angels frequently as a topic of their work, and Rilke was likely influenced by Rudolf Kassner’s analysis of Blake, who frequently used angels in his poetic works (Ryan, Rilke, Modernism, and Poetic Tradition 112-13).
the dark world of objects into light, the poet uses the poem to cast light onto the individual nature of "things" and to involve the reader in a moment of reflection and enlightenment in the process of reading the poem. Finally, the angel is also an embodiment of the very things it illuminates; its naturally incorporeal nature, its ability to take on form visible before human beings, and the awesome power that its unveiled essence evinces are qualities that Rilke also attributes to the art objects of his Neue Gedichte. In a letter of 1915, he describes the link between the angel and its inner objects and the poet's function in revealing them:

Erscheinung und Vision kamen gleichsam überall im Gegenstand zusammen, es war in jedem eine ganze Innenwelt herausgestellt, als ob ein Engel, der den Raum umfaßt, blind wäre und in sich schaute. Diese, nicht mehr von Menschen aus, sondern im Engel geschaut Welt ist vielleicht meine wirkliche Aufgabe, wenigstens kämen in ihr alle meine früheren Versuche zusammen. (Briefe IV: 80)

In this passage, the image of the angel joins together the concepts of vision, language, and the world of objects in Rilke’s earlier poetry with his emphasis on the invisible and spiritual in the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus. The first line highlights the invisible aura of the objects that unite appearance and vision – object and subject – a quality suggested by the mirror in “Dame vor dem Spiegel.” Rilke then expands the image by drawing a parallel between the inner world of objects and the interior of the blind angel, who discovers a realm, not of objects but of creative images, which replace the world of “things” as the poet’s aesthetic material. Here Rilke draws on the concept of blindness to represent a further degree of remove from empirical reality. In “Die Blinde” the absence of vision refers to the failure of language and suggests the need for an inner, essential knowledge of objects achieved through the other senses and
introspection. In “Ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört,” the lost representational quality of language is a given and does not indicate the cause for blindness. The mirror that is afraid to go blind fears losing its ability to reproduce the inner essence of objects in the form of poetic images, the basis of its aesthetic value. Finally, in the letter above, the evolution from linguistic skepticism and fascination with the object world culminates in a celebration of the poetic images in the interior of the angel, which acts as a generative mirror, thus suggesting the poet as the source of poetic images and granting him the ability to effect aesthetic transformation in the experience of the poem: “Diese … im Engel geschaute Welt ist vielleicht meine wirkliche Aufgabe.” Thus, using the angel as a projection of the poet’s ability to picture “things,” Rilke promotes imaging the invisible solely from the poetic imagination as the focus of his poetry. Like the angel, the poet possesses “the power to make present, make visible, what others cannot see” (Martens, Autobiographical Narrative 236).

By examining the development of the mirror in the above poems, from art object to the medium of communication between humans and the angel or poet, it becomes apparent that Rilke was concerned with the same fundamental issues of representation and vision throughout his career. In these poems, the mirror reveals its continuing shift from the mimetic device of tradition to increasingly non-representational forms of poetic expression. As we have seen in the development of the mirror thus far, the image represents alternatively Rilke’s deviation from tradition, his confrontation with the problematic nature of language, and his attempts to overcome linguistic crisis by turning to a poetry based on visual images and figures. The viewer’s outward gaze and simultaneous turn inward, which begins in the concept of the “Dinggedicht,” ultimately
lead to the creation of a complete interior aesthetic world in the *Duineser Elegien* (1922) and the *Sonette an Orpheus* (1922). The image of the blind angel that sees the world by looking inward represents the poet who generates a new world of objects within himself. Whereas the *Neue Gedichte* fuse the subject and the object worlds, Rilke reveals in his later poetry that the communion between the two is realized through the creation of the poem.

**Mirrors and Angels: Pictures of the Imagination**

If we recall the concept of inward vision in both the poem “Die Blinde” and “Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört” and its link to the angel, it is apparent that the notion of a creative interior of the poet, which becomes a fundamental concept in Rilke's mature work, was already important early in his career. The blind person who reveals the invisible character of objects and the angel who reflects the divine light of God become the angel who is a self-reflecting mirror in the *Duineser Elegien*, a shift that suggests the self-reflective nature of the modern poet. In the second elegy, Rilke again uses the mirror as a metaphor for the angel:

> Frühe Geglückte, ihr Verwöhnten der Schöpfung,  
> Höhenzüge, morgemäßliche Grate  
> aller Erschaffung. — Pollen der blühenden Gottheit,  
> Gelenke des Lichtes, Gänge, Treppen, Throne,  
> Räume aus Wesen, Schilde aus Wonne, Tumulte  
> stürmisch entzückten Gefühls und plötzlich, einzeln,  
> Spiegel: die die entströmte eigene Schönheit  
> wiederschöpfen zurück in das eigene Antlitz. (I, 689)

In “Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört,” the angel uses the mirror to join the empirical world with the divine realm and thereby suggests the role of the aesthetic
object in bringing the human being into contact with the divine. By contrast, the angel in the "Zweite Elegie" encompasses the entirety of the earthly and divine realms within itself. The image of the self-reflecting mirror, a common topos in Rilke’s late works, represents the author’s attempts to embrace the object world and its aesthetic treatment within the figure of the poet. As such, the poet becomes the vehicle for transcendence, as the “Dinge” were previously, and takes on a divine character. Like the atmosphere of movement between subject and object worlds demonstrated in “Dame vor dem Spiegel,” here the outer realm of humans and the inner divine realm of art are fluid, with the angel (i.e., the poet) acting as the conjoining figure between them. The angels serve as a primary vehicle in reinstating this unity, mediating the divine sphere to the reader through the poetic text.

While the self-enclosure of the poem might suggest Rilke’s withdrawal from the empirical world, fulfilling an understanding of him as an isolated artist, the goal of his Duineser Elegien was quite the opposite. As Kathleen Komar argues, in the Elegien, Rilke “seeks to surpass isolated self-consciousness in order to recreate a unity with the world which was lost in the fall into self-awareness” (3). Rilke does not propose a poetic world as an alternative to the real one, as does Gottfried Benn or, as we shall see, Ilse Aichinger; instead, he attempts to capture both worlds in the context of the poem. Rilke envisions a continuity between inner and outer worlds in his notion of “Raum,” specifically “Weltinnenraum,” in which the external world and poetic imagination are aligned. His reference in the “Zweite Elegie” to angels as “Räume aus Wesen” reveals his understanding of the poet’s seminal role in creating an aesthetic space in which this union can take place.
The poem “Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen,” (1914) from which the term “Weltinnenraum” comes, represents Rilke’s new understanding of poetry, much as it has been portrayed in his well-known poem “Wendung.” In this text, the speaking object is replaced by the voice of the lyrical subject, a substitution that suggests the new inward focus of his poetry. The poem represents a process by which the outer world of objects is transplanted in the poetic imagination:

Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum:
Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still
durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will,
ich sehe hinaus, und in mir wächst der Baum.

Ich sorge mich, und in mir steht das Haus.
Ich hüte mich, und in mir ist die Hut.
Geliebter, der ich wurde: an mir ruht
Der schönen Schöpfung Bild und weint sich aus (II, 92-93).

As this poem reveals, Rilke’s art is concerned not with the outward representation of reality, but rather with the inner communication of a series of concepts captured by the term “Weltinnenraum.” With this term, Rilke uses a metaphor of space to give physical contours to the poetic imagination. In contrast to the Neue Gedichte, in which the

---

29 There has been a great deal of scholarly discussion focused on Rilke’s so-called years of poetic crisis. This period is typically identified as the years spanning 1910 (concomitant with the completion of Malte) and 1914 (when he wrote the poem “Wendung”). Some scholars extend the duration of this crisis to 1922, when Rilke completed the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus. While various reasons for the crisis have been noted, such as linguistic skepticism, Rilke’s struggle with the disparity between work versus inspiration as the basis for poetic creation, his precarious psychological state, and eventually the outbreak of World War I, most scholars agree that the periods between the completion of his novel and the composition of his late poetry were marked by creative turmoil. In this study I have chosen not to highlight the various aspects of this period because a continuity exists between Rilke’s early examination of the problem of language and vision and the discussion of it in his mature poetics. In this regard, the middle years do not represent a break in his poetic views, but rather a continuation in his examination of this early problematic. By comparing mirrors from earlier works to examples of those in the Duineser Elegien and Sonette an Orpheus, Rilke’s poetological development, including the crisis years, becomes clear.

30 We will recall here that Rilke shares Lessing’s understanding of the poetic text’s ability to highlight the invisible characteristics of an object that painting is not capable of revealing. In his conception of space
subject overcomes the outer bounds of the object world to achieve transcendence, here
the reader reaches into the interior of the poetic space to experience a mystical moment
of oneness. The dynamic process of recognizing and lifting boundaries that Rilke
emphasizes in the “Dinggedichte” is encompassed here in the idea of “der eine Raum”
that is an enclosed space and yet free of parameters. Within it, trees, birds, and houses
emerge, the objects of a complete world within the poetic imagination. The paradoxical
idea of overcoming boundaries that is implicit in the very establishment of them
illustrates, again, Rilke’s understanding of the transcendent value of poetry. William
Gass alludes to the complex of meanings associated with Rilke’s discussion of “Raum:”

If there were one word it would be Raum. The space of things. The space of outer space. The space of night which comes through porous windows to feed on our faces ... The womb of the mother. Weltraum. Not just the room in which the furniture of the world rests, but the space of things themselves. The space made by Being’s breathing. (37)

As Gass’s description suggests, the neologism “Weltinnenraum,” with its many related
forms, is indefinable. While it cannot be quantified or concretely expressed, it is at the
same time “palpable, as though space were smoke, or the mountains of the heart where
the last hamlet of feeling may be discerned” (Gass 37). In his assessment of space in
Rilke’s poetry, Gass expresses the thrust of Rilke’s mature poetic work: the attempt to
grant structure to the ethereal body of “things” and link them with subjective
experience, without defining, and thus constricting them. For this reason, mirrors and
angels are important correlatives to the poetic “Raum”; both of them encompass a
connection to the object world and simultaneously the means to overcome it.

within the lyrical text, however, Rilke deviates from Lessing’s distinction between poetry and the plastic
arts, suggesting that the poetic text possesses both spatial and temporal qualities. This combination of
visual and verbal media marks Rilke’s break from tradition and suggests the inherently modern quality of
his texts.
The link between the mirror and the notion of an interior space as the source of poetic production and the locus of aesthetic transcendence is most clearly revealed in Sonnet III (Part II) of the Sonette an Orpheus. Often called the “mirror sonnet,” this poem seeks an answer to Rilke’s questions about the nature of the aesthetic realm and the modern poetic form used to depict it. In the sonnet, the mirror takes on qualities of space and is ethereal in nature, much like the angels of the “Zweite Elegie.” Not only do mirrors represent space, they also possess temporal qualities as “Zwischenräume der Zeit.” Using a mixed metaphor that gives spatial dimensions to the notion of time, Rilke uses the mirror to examine the nature of modern poetic art and revisit the dialogue between visual and verbal art forms:

Spiegel: noch nie hat man wissend beschrieben,  
was ihr in euerem Wesen seid.  
Ihr, wie mit lauter Löchern von Sieben  
erfüllten Zwischenräume der Zeit.

Ihr, noch des leeren Saales Verschwender —,  
wen es dämmert, wie Wälder weit ...  
Und der Lüster geht wie ein Zechzehn-Ender  
durch eure Unbetretbarkeit.

Manchmal seid ihr voll Malerei.  
Einige scheinen in euch gegangen —,  
der andere scheicht ihr scheu vorbei.

Aber die Schönste wird bleiben —, bis  
drüben in ihre enthaltenen Wangen  
eindrang der klare gelöste Narziß. (I, 752)

In the sonnet he alludes to the long tradition of the mirror as an object of popular and intellectual inquiry, as a literary image with varying degrees of metaphoricality, and as the embodiment of the aesthetic principle of mimesis. “Ihr, noch des leeren Saales Verschwender—... wie Wälder weit.../ Manchmal seid ihr voll Malerei/ Einige scheinen
in euch gegangen...." The mirror is a contradictory concept; mirrors contain "holes" ("Löcher") yet they are also "filled" ("erfüllt"). They depict a world beyond the reflective surface "Wälder weit" yet they are likewise impenetrable ("Unbetretbarkeit"). They represent two-dimensional paintings yet likewise serve as portals ("Einige scheinen in euch gegangen -"). Here Rilke uses the mirror reflection of an empty room, a common topos in symbolist poetry, to emphasize the structured yet infinite quality of the poem.\(^{31}\) Similarly, the mirror that reflects the interior of a room recalls Trakl’s "Das Grauen" and its discussion of the poetic process. Like Trakl, Rilke treats the mirror surface as the threshold to a realm with physical dimensions. "Spiegel: noch nie hat man wissend beschrieben, was ihr in euerem Wesen seid." While for Trakl, this space houses the threatening aspects of his art, the poetic alter ego, Rilke uses the realm behind the mirror as the embodiment of poetic creativity and the notion of aesthetic transcendence in the context of poetic verse.

Here, the mirror represents the development in Rilke’s last poetic phase of the inner, poetic space, the "Weltinnenraum," in which, as Jeremy Adler argues, he both acknowledges a crisis of modernity and attempts to overcome it (117).\(^{32}\) In contrast to his Romantic predecessors, Eichendorff and Novalis, for example, who seek refuge in a mystified notion of nature, Rilke creates an interior realm, characterized by poetic expression. Space is different here from the spatiality that he creates in the

\(^{31}\) The Symbolists commonly used the mirror reflection of empty rooms as the embodiment of aesthetic discussions. Baudelaire and Mallarmé both write sonnets that feature mirrors reflecting empty rooms to thematize poetic production (Ryan, Rilke, Modernism, and Poetic Tradition 203).

\(^{32}\) In "Sonett XXVI" (Part II), Rilke further makes a connection between the mirror realm as a space of poetic creativity, when he refers to "Zwischenräume ... des Weltraums" as instances or pieces of universal existence which are modified by the cry of a bird and its dream-like atmosphere. Finally, in these splices of the poetic world situated between segments of general existence, the poetic subject calls forth the "singender Gott," Orpheus, in a celebration of poetic music.
“Dinggedichte,” in which the poetic word attempts to create an atmosphere that both surrounds the object and reaches into the space of the viewing subject. Adler explains: “In der entseelten Welt nach dem Tod Gottes und im Augenblick, da der klassische Raumbegriff zusammenbricht, übernimmt der neue Raum des Dichters wesentliche Attribute der Transzendenz” (126). Particularly in the Sonette, Rilke rejects the division between inner and outer reality and attempts to bring them together in the context of the poem. In this regard, the mirror epitomizes Rilke’s concept of “Weltinnenraum” and his view of the transcendent quality of poetry. The mirror becomes an ideal model of “Raumgewinn and the lifting, yet emphasizing of barriers” (Martens, “Mirrors and Mirroring” 144). As Werner Günther explains of Rilke’s poetic space: “Im unendlichen Erlebnis des Weltinnenraumes … werden die Widersprüche ‘rein’, weil sie dort sich zum Ganzen folgen” (53). The “Weltinnenraum” serves as a space within the poem in which transcendence takes place, and it likewise refers to the poem itself, whose aesthetic quality opens to the reader a new sphere of existence. As Ryan explains:

[S]patial metaphors became equivalents for the structures he wishes to retain in the process of transforming the tangible world into the imaginary. External reality, he believed, was in the process of vanishing away: the task of the poet was to rescue it by reconfiguring it as abstract structure (Rilke, Modernism, and Poetic Tradition 158).

“Der Engel,” “Weltinnenraum,” “Zwischenräume,” and “Doppelbereich,” all represent attempts to lend concreteness to the impalpable relationship between subject and object because each of these figures transcends the boundaries between both. The mirror is the

33 In Sonnet XIII of the Sonette an Orpheus (Part II), Rilke uses the term “Doppelbereich” to signify the merging of present existence and the afterworld in the context of the poem. With the concept, Rilke diminishes the duality between life and death, suggesting that they are both a part of human experience and thus should be celebrated as unified concept.
portal to a mythic realm in which the impossible is reality, much like Lewis Carroll's literary world in *Through the Looking Glass* (1872). Within the interior realm of the poem, the poet takes on the function of the savior, and this space itself offers an alternative to the alienating effects of modern existence. While Rilke emphasizes a notion of transcendence in the interior realm of the poem, he recalls but does not retreat to earlier, idealist conceptions of art as redemption:

Niemand ... stand dieser idealistischen Weltansicht des Deutschen so fremd gegenüber, niemand war so wenig "Idealist" wie Rilke ... Rilke akzeptierte so etwas nicht wie Trennung von Wesen und Schein, Ich und nicht-Ich ... (Kassner 41).

Whereas Neoplatonic and pietist understandings of the mirror reveal its link to the divine, as an object of the external world the mirror also possesses the material nature of things that Rilke attempted to capture in his poetry. It is, in essence, the joining of spirit and thing.

The dual role of the mirror as an earlier spiritual symbol and as a contemporary image of redemption through art reveals the distinctive modernist quality of Rilke's late poetry. While for Trakl the mirror serves as a source of poetic innovation and the means by which he analyzes and questions the position of the poet in modernity, Rilke expands the mirror, extending its function beyond the personal plight of the poet, to create a notion of art as a form of transcendence in lieu of a spiritual savior. Rilke's poems take on the character of what Kathleen Komar calls "transcendental symbolism," a term which "lends to poetry the function of mediation between man and the transcendent realm that was once reserved for religion" (Komar 4).
Rilke's notion of the artist as a divine figure is not unique at the turn of the century. One need only consider Nietzsche, George, and the many expressionist poets to understand the importance of the link between art and the renewal of humanity. Rilke, however, does not choose the image of Christ as many of his expressionist contemporaries did. Instead he refers to Orpheus as the prototypical artist and the embodiment of the communion between two worlds. Like Orpheus, who moves between the realms of the living and dead, Rilke attempts to create a bridge between subject and object worlds, the interior realm of the poem and external reality. Rilke's "Weltinnenraum" brings the external world, in its cosmic proportions, into the interior realm of the subject; distinctions between subject and object worlds dissolve, and the cleft created by the representational crisis is dissolved in the context of the poem.

Mirrors and Music in Rilke's Late Poetics

While in the above sonnet, the mirror is primarily linked to the notion of poetic space and the transcendence of boundaries within that space, its appearance in one of the Sonette an Orpheus reveals its link to a final aesthetic development in Rilke's late poetry: music. The role of musical sounds and tones in poetry was not new to the symbolists: Mallarmé argued that pure poetry is a type of silence, and Verlaine wanted poetry to become closer to music (Ryan 159). Rilke represents a combination of both of

34 In general, Rilke did not agree with the expressionists' approach to aesthetic renewal. He did not approve of their experimental language or their extreme subjectivity, arguing instead for the "academization" of the German language and poetic production that embodies a responsible treatment of language in the poetic process. This attitude appears contradictory given Rilke's own views about the problematic nature of language (Wodtke 122-23). His rejection of the expressionist program had, no doubt, more to do with his own political and social conservatism than strictly with aesthetic differences. See Egon Schwarz's Das verschluckte Schluchzen. Poesie und Politik bei Rainer Maria Rilke for an examination of the poet's political views.
these views by linking music to the concept of the mirror, which, as we have seen throughout Rilke’s work, serves as an embodiment of the poem.

In the poem “Der Duft” (1907-08), dating from the years during which he composed Malte, Rilke exhibits the link between the mirror, silence, and music. Recalling the poem “Die Blinde,” the poet figure celebrates music, transcribing the aura of objects into tones and smells, suggesting an even less mediated form of representation: “Alle Farben sind übersetzt / in Geräusch und Geruch. / Und sie klingen unendlich schön / Als Töne. / Was soll mir ein Buch?” In “Der Duft,” the mirror takes on musical quality and exhibits an ability to characterize “things” that language cannot properly name.

Wer bist du, Unbegreiflicher: du Geist,
wie weisst du mich von wo und wann zu finden,
der du das Innere (wie ein Erblindend)
so innig machst, dass es sich schliesst und kreist.
...

Ach, wer Musik in einem Spiegel sahe,
der sahe dich und wusste, wie du heisst. (II, 29)

Here, the poetic subject speaks to a lyrical “Du,” whose essence it tries to define. References to its ethereal, incomprehensible nature as well as its link to blindness, suggest that the “Unbegreiflicher” of the poem is again the figure of the angel, who likewise embodies the poet. Angel and poet come together in the concept of music. The tones, which the angel uses as a form of mediation, combine with the poetic words to create a new poetic medium. In the final lines of the poem, Rilke mixes metaphors of music, vision, and language in an attempt to overcome the problem of representation embodied by language alone: “Ach, wer Musik in einem Spiegel sahe, / Der sahe dich
und wüßte, wie du heißt.” Whereas in Malte the mirror represents the inherent link between visual certitude and linguistic representation, here it embodies the non-representational quality of music. In contrast to words, which cannot describe the essence of the angel or poetic form, the mirror of music knows how to identify it (“Der sähle dich und wüßte, wie du heißt.” The process of naming is replaced by the reflection of musical notes on the surface of a mirror, an image that implies at once the representational and the nonrepresentational character of the poem. Music, not language, assumes the power to convey the poetic voice.

The link between poet, music, and mirror is also evident in the late poem “Wie ein Ton, der in Spiegel schaut” (1924):

Wie ein Ton, der in Spiegel schaut,
Klang im November ein Amsellaut
Oder als rührte ans eigene Haar
Einer, weil’s einmal geliebkost war.

Aber am Morgen im Februar
Darf es ein Fink schon wagen
Etwas was kein Erinnern war
Offen ins Jahr zu sagen. (II, 485)

Once again, Rilke mixes visual and auditory media in an attempt to convey the character of poetic language. Unlike mundane language that relies on a correspondence with the visual world, music moves beyond verbal expression. In a complex synaesthetic image of the musical tone that sees its reflection in the mirror, Rilke gestures toward the dissolution of the representational quality of language in favor of the musical quality of the poetic text. In contrast to the early poem “Und meine Träume warten wandentlang,” in which the poetic text consists of words that appear as mirror images, here musical notes are transformed into the figure of birds. Rilke draws a
parallel between the metaphorical concept of music, whose image is reflected in a mirror, and the birds whose images are reflected in the poetic text. The conceit with which the poem opens is ultimately a statement about Rilke’s vision of music as the foundation of poetic art. With its non-verbal, essential character, music is the culmination of Rilke’s aesthetic turn from the world of objects toward the invisible, interior realm of the poetic world.

Rilke states more explicitly his view of music as the ideal poetic medium in the poem, “An die Musik” (1918).

Musik: Atem der Statuen. Vielleicht:
Stille der Bilder. Du Sprache wo Sprachen
den. Du Zeit,
die senkrecht steht auf der Richtung
vergehender Herzen.

Gefühle zu wem? O du der Gefühle
Wandlung in was? –; in hörbare Landschaft.
Du Fremde: Musik. Du uns entwachsener
Herzraum. Innigstes unser,
das uns übersteigend, hinausdrängt, –
heiliger Abschied:
da uns das Innre umsteht
als geübste Ferne, als andre
Seite der Luft:
rein,
riesig,
nicht mehr bewohnbar. (II, 111)

As this poem reveals, music possesses the same attributes ascribed to the mirror. It encompasses the visual component important to Rilke’s conception of poetry through its creation of a “hörbare Landschaft” and its embodiment of the “Stille der Bilder” (II, 111). Like the mirror, it offers the means of transcending the problem of language through its creation of a “Sprache, wo Sprachen enden” (II, 111). Finally, Rilke
suggests another parallel between music and the mirror by calling it an “entwachsener Herzraum.” Similar to the mirror, which is an “erfüllter Zwischenraum der Zeit” (I, 752), music possesses material boundaries and expands beyond them. It represents the invisible, inner realm of the subject, yet reaches beyond the subject to the object world: “Innigstes unser, / das uns übersteigend, hinausdrängt, - heiliger Abschied.” Like the mirror, whose many-sided nature cannot be definitively described, music is characterized as “andre Seite der Luft.” Like the mirror, which embodies the inner, invisible quality of things, music captures the essence of objects in pure, unmediated form.

For Rilke, both the mirror and music represent ideal poetic forms based on their ability to move beyond the representational problem of language. The mirror, through its creation of visual images, suggests a sensory experience of objects and stresses the necessity of inward vision. Music moves beyond language by removing the concept of mediation entirely. While Rilke seems to be returning to a romantic notion of music as the primary form of poetic expression, he does not privilege music over the mirror as a

Rilke refers to music as a spatial realm in several poems: “Bestürz mich, Musik” (1913), “Strophen zu einer Fest-Musik” (1915), and “Ode an Bellman” (1915). In the first poem, music fills the arches (“Wölbungen”) of a cathedral with organ tones, taking on the spatial qualities of the structure into which it is released. In the other two poems, music takes on architectonic form as “Säule” that support the structure in which they are found, even as the concept of music serves as the unifying form in the context of the poem.

Rilke also establishes a link between music, the mirror, and poetic production in the figure of Orpheus. The “Doppelbereich” that Orpheus encompasses is similar to the notion of poetic space represented by the mirror as a “Zwischenraum” and music as a “Herzraum.” While Orpheus embodies the realm of the living through his song, he also represents death through his retrieval of Eurydice from Hades. Based on his dual nature, Orpheus is the mythological embodiment of Rilke’s “Doppelbereich” (I, 736), a term that is equivalent to “Raum” in its emphasis on the overcoming of barriers between this world and the next: “aus beiden/ Reichen erwuchs seine weite Natur” (Sonett VI, I, 734). Through the figure of Orpheus, Rilke brings together the concepts of life and death, the visible and the invisible, and subject and object, all dualities he treats throughout his poetry. Like the mirror and music, Orpheus is a unifying concept, whose music represents Rilke’s understanding for the new direction of poetic language.

35 Rilke refers to music as a spatial realm in several poems: “Bestürz mich, Musik” (1913), “Strophen zu einer Fest-Musik” (1915), and “Ode an Bellman” (1915). In the first poem, music fills the arches (“Wölbungen”) of a cathedral with organ tones, taking on the spatial qualities of the structure into which it is released. In the other two poems, music takes on architectonic form as “Säule” that support the structure in which they are found, even as the concept of music serves as the unifying form in the context of the poem.

36 Rilke also establishes a link between music, the mirror, and poetic production in the figure of Orpheus. The “Doppelbereich” that Orpheus encompasses is similar to the notion of poetic space represented by the mirror as a “Zwischenraum” and music as a “Herzraum.” While Orpheus embodies the realm of the living through his song, he also represents death through his retrieval of Eurydice from Hades. Based on his dual nature, Orpheus is the mythological embodiment of Rilke’s “Doppelbereich” (I, 736), a term that is equivalent to “Raum” in its emphasis on the overcoming of barriers between this world and the next: “aus beiden/ Reichen erwuchs seine weite Natur” (Sonett VI, I, 734). Through the figure of Orpheus, Rilke brings together the concepts of life and death, the visible and the invisible, and subject and object, all dualities he treats throughout his poetry. Like the mirror and music, Orpheus is a unifying concept, whose music represents Rilke’s understanding for the new direction of poetic language.

143
metaphor for poetic production. Both figures work together to create an art form based on mixed media and to reveal Rilke’s creation of a distinctly modernist poetry.

Conclusion

Rilke’s position vis à vis modernist aesthetics is often questioned. The author is noted for his rejection of avant-garde movements such as futurism and dadaism and is linked almost entirely to the aestheticist movement in which his poetic work originated. Generally speaking, Rilke has been understood as a representative of the l’art pour l’art aesthetic and is noted, often problematically, as Egon Schwarz points out, for his anti-political stance. Yet, precisely in his use of neologism, of unusual and abstract images, and of synaesthetic combinations, and through his creation of an imaginary poetic realm that signifies another existential dimension, Rilke reveals his role, not as a prophet of a fin-de-siècle aesthetic movement, but as a representative of modernism, who bridges understandings of aesthetic tradition with modernist notions of art. Rilke likewise found himself situated between questions of poetic inspiration versus aesthetic artisanship and labor. While he developed from a market-driven author to a poet sponsored by patrons, Rilke struggled with notions of poetic inspiration and the effectiveness of the poetic text in a modern, technologized environment. In particular, his attempts to expand the limitations of poetic language through the use of images and concepts of music in his work reveal Rilke’s importance as a figure bridging artistic tradition and innovation. The plaintive aspects of his poetry vacillate between the tradition of apostrophe in antiquity and the demand to mediate between art and life (Ryan, Rilke, Modernism, and Poetic Tradition 224). The evolution that takes place within his work and his changing
views of the poet's function in society is important to this study in particular because the development that occurs is readily identifiable in his use of the mirror image.

Rilke's early uses of the mirror in the poems "Schau, wie die Zypressen schwärzer werden," and "Nein, ich will nicht, daß man mich zerstört" reveal his strong reliance on neo-romantic and symbolist concepts of pathetic fallacy and dynamism of objects in nature and the external world. The mirror serves as the medium during his years of skepticism during and following the completion of Malte, in which Rilke questions the ability of the poet or anyone to comprehend fully objects in reality. The enlivened mirror that challenges the poet rather than returns his gaze unaltered reveals the autonomy of art in a modern world and Rilke's attempts to come to terms with his own function as an artist. Particularly in this phase, the mirror represents the medium by which Rilke questions the problem of representation and the ability of language to fulfill its function in modern poetic texts. Finally, the mirror registers Rilke's overcoming of the problem of language through its creation of images and their link to music, an unmediated art form. The "mirror sonnet" reveals not only a high point in the evolution of the use of the mirror in modernist poetic texts, it likewise celebrates Rilke's own poetic program of creating an imaginary realm of transcendence within the poetic text.

Ultimately Rilke's generative mirrors are telling both for his development as a poet and for the changing views of art in the early years of the modernist era. The mirror represents both artistic tradition and aesthetic innovation, and it reveals Rilke's view of himself as situated somewhere in between the two. In his creation of this imaginary realm, Rilke not only creates a type of fictional and inspirational refuge, he likewise
liberates poetic language from its correlative relationship to the world and in so doing reveals himself to be one of the prime representatives of poetic modernism.

This overcoming of boundaries is particularly emphasized in the mixing of genres that takes place in Rilke’s sonnets, which represent, through the poetic images of Orpheus, a poetic celebration in music that does not rely on a visually mimetic understanding of the world. While Rilke repeatedly questions the idea of seeing, in favor of the invisible essence that rests beyond surface perception, we should not underestimate the importance of poetic images in his works. His extensive work with Rodin and the artists of Worpswede as well as his profound understanding of movements in painting at the turn of the century reveal his interest in incorporating the visual arts into his own work. Yet his focus on the invisible seems at odds with his reliance on the visual. This apparent contradiction is best understood in the context of his poetry, which is an attempt to embody the invisible, the mythological, and music within single poems. Unlike language and artistic tradition, which are founded on the concept of visual accuracy and a mimetic relationship with the external world, Rilke’s poetic images are a celebration of the invisible in linguistic form.
CHAPTER 4

"IM SPIEGEL TUT MAN ALLES, DASS ES VERGEBEN SEI":
THE MIRROR AND POETIC TRANSCENDENCE IN THE WORKS OF
ILSE AICHINGER

"Meine Sprache ist eine Form von Anarchie."1 With this statement Ilse Aichinger reveals her view of poetic language as a form of social engagement. In particular, she argues that the validity and purpose of literary production is based on its ability to act as a form of resistance to the occurrences of history and specifically to the events of the Second World War. In an interview with Heinz Schafroth, Aichinger concludes: "Dass sich die Sprache entzieht, dass sie Widerstande entgegensetzt, halte ich fast fur eine Begründung des Metiers" (Gespräche mit Ilse Aichinger 31). Indeed, for Aichinger the very purpose of literary production is founded on the author’s ability to use language as a form of resistance, to challenge the established system of language, and to create a textual realm that opposes the brutality of the real world. The “anarchy” to which Aichinger refers does not, however, encompass a direct attack on convention; instead, it refers to the careful and highly complex manner in which she breaks with traditional conceptions of writing and the roles assigned to both author and reader in the context of her narratives.

As an author, Aichinger views it as her task to challenge the conventional meaning of

---

1 Excerpted from Luzia Stettler’s 1984 interview with Aichinger printed in “Stummheit immer wieder in Schweigen zu übersetzen, das ist die Aufgabe des Schreibens” (45).
words and the very way in which meaning is constructed as a means of re-infusing
language with the ability to communicate:

Vielleicht sehe ich meine Aufgabe als Autorin überhaupt darin, die
Sprache von ihrem Mitteilungscharakter zu befreien und wieder zu sich
selbst zu bringen; so daß sie wieder mitteilen kann.² (qtd. in Wolfschütz
159)

Aichinger successfully liberates language from its traditional role of representation to a
degree by employing words in an unconventional manner and creating narrative contexts
that are disconnected from reality. She is most effective in achieving the liberation of
language from its established “communicative quality,” however, through the use of a
repertoire of images that generate a new world rather than reflect the character of the
present one. These images, both essential and abstract in nature, point to and encompass a
realm that exists outside of reality and constitute what has been termed Aichinger’s
“Bildersprache” (Lorenz, Ilse Aichinger 2). Like Trakl and Rilke, Aichinger uses a
system of images both to reveal the inadequacy of language in its conventional use and to
overcome it by expanding the reach of her poetic world visually. Through the repeated
use of images that form a chain of signification from one work to the next, Aichinger’s
works take on a self-referential and mythopoetic quality.³

In this chapter, I argue that among the many images Aichinger employs, the
mirror is one of the most important because it provides significant insight into her
poetological agenda. The reflective surface takes on different forms in Aichinger’s oeuvre
and appears in both her non-fictional and fictional works. In some cases the mirror

² This quotation is taken from an interview with Aichinger in Die Presse from June 14-15, 1975.
³ Aichinger’s use of abstract images and a network of mythic characters has precipitated frequent
comparisons of her work with surrealist painting. See Rainer Lübren for a detailed discussion of this
connection.
appears as a physical object within the text, an image among the many others Aichinger employs. At other times, she alludes only to the concepts of mirroring and self-reflection that imply the presence of a mirror. While Aichinger does not use the mirror as a poetic image to the same extent as Trakl and Rilke, when it appears in her works, it is always linked to language, the tradition of writing, and the problem of representation and thus serves as an image that emphasizes the self-reflexive and poetological nature of her texts. Like Trakl and Rilke, Aichinger uses the mirror as an important metaphor for language and traditional mimetic art forms, both of which are founded on visual representation. The generative quality of the mirrors in her texts likewise suggests a confrontation with literary tradition and conventional linear forms of narration through the creation of images that defy any connection to reality and celebrate the autonomy of the text.

Whereas Trakl and Rilke play out the disparity between reality, language, and the artistic experience on the surface of the mirror, Aichinger removes any connection to the real world in her poetic texts. Although she gestures toward the tradition of the mirror as a mimetic device, she does so only to imply the purportedly reflective quality of language, quickly rejecting it in favor of a non-mimetic mirror and, by extension, poetic language as a generative medium. Thus, the mirror serves an important function in Aichinger's poetology in three ways. First, as a visual rather than verbal apparatus, the mirror provides a symbolic escape from the strictures of a linguistic framework by relying on pictures rather than words and the rules that govern them. Second, the mirror fulfills the function of language by acting as the medium through which the story is

---

4 In (Kleist, Moos, Fasane, Aichinger identifies Trakl as her "Lieblingslyriker" and refers to him as "der geheime Leonce" (98). She received the Georg Trakl-Preis in 1979.
narrated. Within the framework of the generative mirror, Aichinger dissolves the
traditional, linear structure of linguistic production and creates a textual space within
which a narrative of pictures unfolds. Third, the images on the surface of the mirror not
only represent a break with aesthetic tradition; they also initiate a new form of language
through the development of a figurative silence, which Aichinger considers the very
purpose of writing: “[Schreiben] bedeutet für mich den Versuch, zu schweigen…”
(Schafroth 32). By conveying meaning through images rather than words, the mirror
maintains a code of silence even as it acts as a narrative device. The mirror serves as a
self-enclosed and self-reflective realm within the poetic work and likewise reveals the
self-conscious nature of the text itself. The text is both dialogic, in the form of a
discussion between the narrator and the protagonist that takes place in the mirror, and
monologic, in its independent stance from empirical reality. I will turn to Aichinger’s
notion of silence and its link to the mirror later in this chapter; first however, I will
discuss the linguistic skepticism that serves as the catalyst to Aichinger’s ultimate turn to
a poetics of silence.

Reappropriating Language

At the time when her first prose work, “Das vierte Tor,” was published,
Aichinger, like her contemporaries Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann, was grappling
with the problem of language after its misappropriation by the National Socialists as an
instrument of propaganda and oppression.\(^1\) As the daughter of a Jewish mother and

\(^1\) Celan’s *Der Sand aus den Urnen* appeared in 1948, and Bachmann’s first collection of poems, *Die
gesündete Zeit*, was published in 1953; both works thematize the threat of power and persecution by an
authoritarian institution and the problematic association of language with authority. Already two years prior
“Aryan” father, Aichinger, unlike Celan, was spared deportation and remained in Vienna throughout the war, where she lived under constant surveillance by the Gestapo quartered a few doors away. Because of her “mixed” ethnic background, Aichinger was not included among the Jews who were sent to the concentration camps, and her mother’s life was also spared by virtue of her daughter’s Aryan heritage. Yet because of her Jewishness, Aichinger also suffered persecution by the oppressor: she was forced to leave the home she grew up in, she was only allowed to visit certain areas of the city, she was required to suspend her medical studies, and she witnessed daily the brutality of the Nazis directed at those in her immediate environment. In essence, Aichinger was situated between the two groups, and her experience of the war and the Holocaust was thus shaped by the loss of friends and family who were deported to death camps, an experience she refers to in her works with the term “Abschied.” At the same time she was motivated by a hope for the future and for spiritual transcendence, two themes that appear, along with “Abschied,” throughout her oeuvre. While Aichinger uses the term “anarchy” to describe language as a medium of resistance, this opposition does not to the publication of Celan’s poems about the Holocaust, Aichinger discusses the topic of Jewish persecution in “Das vierte Tor” (1946), which was published in the Wiener Kurier. The text discusses the Jewish cemetery in Vienna and its transformation during the years of war. For the many Jewish children and adults who were no longer allowed to sit on the park benches, go to the “Wiener Wald,” or leave the city’s center, the cemetery served at once as a meeting place, a playground, and a spiritual space. In an interview with Manuel Esser, Aichinger recalls the cemetery: “Das war so ein merkwürdiger Picknickort, aber doch ein sehr überzeugender. Und so viel Hoffnung, wie ich dort gehabt habe, habe ich in meinem Leben sonst selten gehabt” (Esser 52).

6 Aichinger’s father, Ludwig, was a teacher from Upper Austria, and her mother, Berta, was a doctor born of Jewish parents in Yugoslavia. Thus, according to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, Aichinger was considered a “Mischling 1. Grades,” a status that enabled her to save her mother from deportation as long as they lived together. Berta Aichinger’s early decision to convert to Catholicism spared her children the fate their grandmother suffered. Any children who were baptized after 1935 and had two Jewish grandparents were considered “volljüdisch” and were transported to concentration camps.

7 In an 1980 interview with Hermann Vinke, Aichinger explains concretely her understanding of hope as a form both of existential stability and spiritual expectation without religious connotations: “Man kann ja ohne sehr vieles leben. Man kann leben, ohne etwas vor sich zu haben. Aber man kann nicht leben, ohne etwas vor sich zu haben, und zwar vor sich in einem auch noch anderen Sinne als dem der Zeitlichkeit. Vor sich im Sinne von in sich. Man kann nicht ohne Hoffnung leben (Vinke 37).
typically take the form of aggressive provocation and physical action. As Dagmar Lorenz argues, “Es kam ihr weder auf literarische Prominenz an, noch hatte sie den Ehrgeiz, sich als permanente rebellische Gegenstimme zu etablieren” ("Männlichkeits- und Weiblichkeitskonstruktionen" 19). For Aichinger, resistance is achieved through a poetic re-appropriation of language, first from its association with the authoritarianism and terror of the National Socialists and later from its inexactitude and emptiness of meaning resulting from the ethical and philosophical skepticism toward language and art after the Holocaust. Through the process of writing, Aichinger reinvigorates language with silent images that are free of the historical burden of words; thus poetic production serves as a means to transcend both linguistic doubt and events of the past, a notion that figures prominently in "Spiegelgeschichte."8

Particularly in her first publicly recognized work and only novel, Die größere Hoffnung (1948),9 Aichinger addresses the manner in which language and experience can be overcome through the reappropriation of language in the literary text. In the novel, Aichinger places the problem of language specifically in the context of the Holocaust and life in the Third Reich. In the following description of an English translation exercise that a child has dropped in the street, the narrator addresses the loss of meaning in language ensuing from its misuse by the National Socialists:

Als der erste Tropfen fiel, fiel er auf den roten Strich. Und der rote Strich in der Mitte des Blattes trat über die Ufer. Entsetzt floh der

8 Lorenz further explains that Aichinger was not a representative of typical postwar literature, attempting to achieve a new beginning through a linguistic “Kahlschlag” or historical “Nullpunkt.” Her rich use of language, hyperbole, and fantastic images distinguishes her from the tradition in which, for example, Borchert, Böll, and Eisenreich were working (Ilse Aichinger 2).

9 Aichinger describes the hope of Die größere Hoffnung as follows: “Eine Hoffnung, die im Gegensatz zu den üblichen großen Hoffnungen die mögliche Unerfüllbarkeit der Wünsche nicht einbezieht. Es gibt Wünsche, die offen bleiben müssen, sonst verlemt man im allgemeinen das Wünschen, und dieser Verlust wäre nicht aufzuweigen” (Steinwendmer 7).
The red river to which the narrator refers in this passage can be explained logically; it is the trail left by the raindrop running through the red ink of a notebook. Far more indicative of Aichinger’s future imagistic turn, however, is the symbolism of the red stream, a river of blood that strips the words of their meaning as they cry out to be translated, to be understood. This passage indicates that language is a victim of the Third Reich, much like the novel’s protagonist Ellen. Like houses that are the source of stability in everyday existence and inextricably tied to a sense of identity, words act as the conceptual foundation of human existence and are tied to the young protagonists’ understanding of their heritage and stature (e.g., “Schuld,” “falsche Großeltern,” “Visum”). Even as the advent of the war and the forced evacuation of her home uproots Ellen’s life, events of the war and the Nazi’s rise to power undermine the validity of language, and it loses its capacity to communicate, as the blurred words on the page of the notebook and the exclamation “Übersetz mich!” imply. The final line of the passage most clearly reveals the link between language and the National Socialists in its recollection of racial rhetoric: “Eher soll der Sinn ertrinken, als daß wir das Blut verraten!” By using this ironic formulation, which echoes the wording of Nazi laws

10 Die grösere Hoffnung has frequently been interpreted as an autobiographical text. Details of Ellen’s background closely match those of Aichinger and have led commentators to draw parallels between the fictional life described in the novel and the author’s own. Erich Fried, Helga-Maleen Gerresheim, and Dagmar Lorenz have all commented on the autobiographical nature of the novel while also recognizing the highly aestheticized alterations of any factual material.
forbidding racial mixing, Aichinger thus implicates language in the terror of the Third Reich. Words, too, in the form of racial laws and propaganda, serve as a vehicle through which the Nazis execute their aggression.

Aichinger states more directly the role of language in the National Socialist regime in "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" (1946). Perhaps her most openly provocative work, this essay addresses the problem of language and its link to collective guilt and complicity, holding not simply the German or the Austrian people accountable but rather humanity as a whole. In the text, Aichinger implores her audience to recognize the role that every individual played in the creation of the circumstances leading to the Holocaust: "So wuchs die Bestie unbewacht und unbeobachtet durch die Generationen. Wir haben Sie erfahren! Wir haben sie erlitten, um uns, an uns und vielleicht in uns!" (19). What is unique about this very early essay and uncharacteristic of her subsequent works is Aichinger's direct address of her readership and the poignant and concrete discussion of an actual, historical event. Unlike her later texts, in which the reader must decipher the text in order to gain an understanding of its intricate message, here Aichinger's goal is transparent and delivered with emotion and fervor. It is, in fact, an "appeal" to the German-speaking citizenry to become engaged politically and socially in order to avoid the repetition of history.  

11 "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" serves as the title piece in Otto Breicha and Gerhard Fritsch's anthology of 1967 entitled Aufforderung zum Mißtrauen. Hans Weigel's essay about the origins of postwar literature "Es begann mit Ilse Aichinger" also appears in the volume. 

12 Aichinger's inclusion of Austria along with Germany as a party responsible for the crimes of the Holocaust was virtually unprecedented at the time "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" was published. Based on the Moscow Declaration of 1943, Austria had been declared the "first victim" of Nazi Germany and thus was not forced to contend with its own role as an oppressor. The theory of Austria's victimization was not publicly called into question until the Waldheim affair in 1986. Until then, the "Opfer-Theorie" facilitated the ability of the collective Austrian consciousness to disengage itself from the horrors of the events in World War II (Zeyringer 61). Unlike Germany, the Austrian government along with the Catholic Church,
While "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" is indeed very different from Aichinger's later texts, it already contains the inherent critique of language that became the foundation and catalyst of virtually every work that followed. In the opening lines of the essay, Aichinger indirectly brings to the fore the issue of collective ideology, the question of responsibility and the involvement of language in both the perpetration and denial of the Holocaust:


The typographical error to which Aichinger refers is the title "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" (italics my emphasis), in which the appellant tone introduces the communicative, if confrontational, nature of the text. Her direct reference to "mistrust" at a point when, particularly in Austria, collective conscience attempted to distance itself from the figures and events of the Holocaust, Aichinger implicates every reader in the development of the conditions leading to the Third Reich. Foremost she wishes to enlist the active response of her readers even as she implies the complicity of human nature in the events from which the mistrust ensues. By suggesting that the title of her essay might be considered erroneous or "irresponsible," Aichinger implies the greater problem of collective guilt and responsibility, and she links this question to the problem of language in describing recent events of history by stating, "Sie finden keine Worte."

Here Aichinger intimates, on the one hand, the inability of her audience, the reader, or to which 87.4% of the Austrian people belonged, began rebuilding national and cultural identity based on a concept of "Kontinuität" (Zeyringer 36-63). Under these circumstances, Aichinger's "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" was essentially overlooked, and the journal in which it appeared, Plan, was discontinued in 1948 because the progressive art forms it featured went against the policies for artistic production instilled by the Austrian cultural ministry.
humanity as a whole to speak effectively about the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War: they cannot find the words to describe their experiences. On the other hand, she suggests that by its very nature, language is unable to capture and communicate the meaning of those events, for words cannot encompass the misery that millions suffered. Thus the mistrust in the work’s title, which she calls the “unheilbarste Krankheit dieser tastenden, verwundeten, von Wehen geschüttelten Welt.” is not merely the suspicion against “Gott,” “den Schleichhändler,” “die Zukunft,” “die Atomforschung,” and “das wachsende Gras,” (18) as she states later in the essay; it is also directed at language itself. In an interview, Aichinger states more clearly the suspicion with which she regards language:

Sprache ist immer verdächtig, weil sie im Aufbruch ist, weil sie in Frage stellt. “Es geht mir gut”, ein wie wunderbarer Satz muß das einmal gewesen sein, als auch er aus Auflehnung entstand. Eingesetzt, legitimiert, benützt, abgenützt, wie leer und schwach kann der Satz werden, eine Chiffre, die man sich über zu weite Entfernung zuruft, dem, der genau hinhört, kaum mehr hörbar. (Schafroth, “Gespräche mit Ilse Aichinger” 32)

Language is inherently suspect. The movement and change that define its character, making it a living and dynamic force and enabling it to question the events that shape it, are the very characteristics that likewise promote its misuse. If language is not employed as a form of engagement, as a petition for action or resistance, it becomes “leer” and “schwach” and loses meaning, ultimately fading into speechlessness, a condition that Aichinger also terms “Verstummen” or “Stummheit” (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 98, Stettler 42).

In light of her criticism of language, in particular its role as a vehicle of political power and its inability to communicate the events of history, Aichinger seems to
foreshadow Theodor Adorno’s dictum about “das Verstummen der Kunst,” in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Adorno’s verdict about the muteness of art is most notably delivered in his much-quoted statement of 1949: “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch” (Prismen 31). For him, the problem of writing poetry after Auschwitz does not refer simply to the difficulty of the poet in trying to express the inexpressible; rather, he points to the very inability of language to capture the reality of mass destruction that the Holocaust realized: “Die Worte klingen wie Notbehelfe, weil das Verstummen nicht ganz glückte, wie Begleitstimmen zum Schweigen, das sie stören” (Noten zur Literatur II 215). For Adorno, the muteness of art originates in its recognition of humanity’s guilt and serves as a means of avoiding the relativization of the death camp experience by making it into an aesthetic object.

Aichinger and Celan both share Adorno’s argument that it is the natural propensity of art, particularly poetic language, to become mute as a response to the events of the Holocaust. In his “Meridian” speech of 1960, Celan concludes: “Das Gedicht zeigt, das ist unverkennbar, eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen” (Werke 3, 197).

---

13 Adorno was criticizing foremost the poetry that had been created to that point, what has been termed “zeitflüchtig” poetry that focuses on the internal realm of the poet. In its very desire to retreat from reality it at the same time labels itself as a type of confessional poetry. In its attempt to escape barbarism, it does not provide any resistance to it. The works of Gottfried Benn, O. Loerke, E. Langgässer convey this poetic vein but in a manner that has been termed “naturmagisch” (Deutsche Literatur in Schlaglichtern 443).
While Adorno regards the speechlessness of art as necessary in the face of the Holocaust, Aichinger resists the muteness to which the poetic text threatens to succumb. While she acknowledges the danger of the literary language becoming speechless, she attributes this threat specifically to the inability or the refusal of the author, in the face of fear, to use language in the oppositional capacity for which it is intended.

So liegt auch heute für den Erzählenden die Gefahr nicht mehr darin, weitschweifig zu werden, sie liegt eher darin, daß er angesichts der Bedrohung und unter dem Eindruck des Endes den Mund nicht mehr aufbringt. ("Das Erzählen dieser Zeit," Der Gefesselte 9)

In this passage, taken from the foreword of her first collection of prose texts, Der Gefesselte (1952), Aichinger addresses the challenge facing authors of the postwar era about how to speak about the unspeakable events of the Holocaust and their instinctual desire to become mute as a response to this difficult task. For Aichinger, the concept of "Verstummen" refers specifically to the unwillingness of the text or the author to problematize the events of history. In effect, language is allowed to become mute, unless the author resists this tendency: "[H]eute spricht die Sprache nicht mehr, sie ist sprachlos geworden. Wir müssen sie aus der Manipulationsgefahr herausnehmen, sonst sind wir alle verloren" (Stettler 45). In contrast to muteness, Aichinger emphasizes the dynamic silence of the literary text as the means to combat the speechlessness that has been foisted upon language.

The concept of a silence that speaks appears to be inherently contradictory, and to many critics of postwar literature, the literary text that is silent implies its...

---

14 This collection first appeared in 1951 under the title Rede unter dem Galgen with the Wiener Jungbrunnen-Verlag. Interestingly, the last sentence of the volume reads: "Lebt gegenwärtig in Frankfurt am Main als Lektor des S. Fischer-Verlags, weil ihr in Österreich keine Existenzmöglichkeit geboten war" (Kaiser 179).
fundamental complicity with the Nazi past. Particularly in Austria, where connections to the National Socialists were systematically repressed by the national government and cultural ministry, silence takes on a negative connotation.\(^5\) For Aichinger and other postwar authors, however, the silence of the poetic text tests and expands the limits of expression. Celan, who provides the most recognized counter-example to Adorno’s Auschwitz dictum,\(^6\) argues not simply that it is possible to write poetry after Auschwitz but that language becomes richer because of its moments of silence:

Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem. Aber sie mußte hindurchgehen durch ihre eigenen Antwortlosigkeiten, hindurchgehen durch furchtbare Verstummen, hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede. Sie ging hindurch und gab keine Worte her für das, was geschah. Ging hindurch und durfte wieder zutage treten, “angereichert” von all dem. (Werke 186–87)

Celan concludes that poems created after the Holocaust have the natural tendency to fall silent, but through the process of writing, this absence of words is transformed into a lyrical form that is enriched by the question of responsibility and the “terrible muteness” that serves as a response to the events. While language was abused and ultimately implicated in the crimes of the Holocaust, at the same time it contains the means by which to overcome its manipulation through rebirth and active resistance to established language and the power structures with which it is associated.

---

\(^5\) For example, in Hans Lebert’s novel Die Wolfshaut (1960), the Austrian village in which the story takes place is named “Schweigen,” signifying its inhabitants’ involvement with the National Socialists shortly before the end of the war and their subsequent repression of the town’s secret history.

\(^6\) In the Paralipomena, Adorno cites Celan as one of the most important representatives of hermetic poetry and acknowledges his use of silence to express the horrors of history. The success of Celan’s poetry in thematizing the experience of the Holocaust likely led to Adorno’s later addition to his Auschwitz statement: “Das ... Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu brüllen; darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe sich kein Gedicht mehr schreiben.” (Negative Dialektik 357).
For Aichinger and Celan, the very purpose of writing is to combat the propensity of the poetic text toward muteness by evoking silence. Reichensperger argues that it is the very experience of the war and the Holocaust that these two poets seek to overcome in their works. It serves as both an ending and starting point in terms of poetic production and the meaning of language itself:

“Schweigen” [wird] bei Ilse Aichinger und Paul Celan gleichermaßen zum zentralen Begriff: Für die Erfahrungen des zweiten Weltkriegs mußte erst eine Sprache gefunden werden, eine, die sich der Sprachregelung des Dritten Reiches verweigerte, zugleich aber die Erfahrungen der Zeit in sich aufnehmen und in Sprache verwandeln konnten. (“Die Bergung der Opfer in der Sprache” 85)

For Aichinger, “Schweigen,” in contrast to “Verstummen” or “Stummheit” is not a form of resignation or representative of the inability to speak; rather, she views it as a purposeful aesthetic form. Silence in the poetic text is a sign of language rebelling against its misuse and as such is a means of social engagement and the primary goal of writing: “Die Stummheit immer wieder in das Schweigen zu übersetzen, das ist die Aufgabe des Schreibens” (Stettler 36). In contrast to Adorno’s argument for the necessary muteness of art, Aichinger argues that it is the very purpose of the author to transform speechlessness into silent speech. By creating an atmosphere of silence in her texts, a “Stille” (Schafroth 34) that she deems the most effective form of political and social engagement, Aichinger argues that it is possible to liberate language from its misappropriation as an instrument of power.\(^7\)

\(^7\) In calling “Stille” a form of engagement, Aichinger equates it with her concept of “Schweigen.” The stillness to which Aichinger refers is not the starting point for artistic creation as it is for Trakl and Rilke; instead, it represents the culmination of poetic activity. One might be most inclined to draw a parallel between Aichinger’s “Stille” and the fourth category of stillness that Roche examines in his study: political quietude. Roche identifies political quietude as the lack of resistance to political oppression, a form of “civil repose,” (236) which authors like Heine, Tucholsky, Brecht, and Handke criticize. The stark critique of silence that can be found in Handke’s work is representative of many postwar Austrian
Silence as Resistance

While it appears contradictory that Aichinger questions the ability of language to capture experience and criticizes its propensity toward muteness even as she embraces expression through written language as the only way to confront the paradoxes of existence, the two are linked in Aichinger's concept of silence, the goal for which the written text strives. In Aichinger's own life, remaining silent is the active means by which she protects herself and represents the manner in which she addresses the circumstances under which she lives: "[Schreiben] bedeutet für mich den Versuch, zu schweigen, vielleicht schreibe ich deshalb, weil ich keine bessere Möglichkeit zu schweigen sehe" (Moser 32). For her, the "silent" form of writing serves as a means of overcoming the fear that she attributes, on the one hand, to her own experiences of persecution during the war, and on the other hand, to human nature. It is, as she calls it, a method of "waging war" against fear and the means for reappropriating language as a medium of truth (Steinwendtner 7). Because Aichinger links writing and its correlate, silence, to the idea of coming to terms with personal experience, scholars often attribute the silence of her works to the material characteristics of her life. Silence, however, is an aesthetic form that originates as a response to the conditions under which Aichinger began writing and serves as the foundation of her mature poetology. As Reichensperger explains:

authors, particularly of the 1970's and 1980's, who lash out at the Austrians' collective silence and the repression of Austrian complicity in the National Socialist regime (e.g. Hans Lebert, Gerhard Fritsch, Elfriede Jelinek, among others). By contrast, Aichinger's concept of stillness represents political engagement through silence, as an aesthetic construct that wrests language from political tyranny. Aichinger has lived in relative seclusion since the death of her husband, Günter Eich, in 1972, and prefers to do interviews in a written form or from a distance rather than in person (See Esser 1986 and Steinwendtner 1993.
In Aichinger’s case, the silence that characterizes writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust is not a temporary response to historical events. The many references she makes throughout her works to silence and its connection with writing represent her resistance to established language in general, beyond its use in the Third Reich.

While the role of writing as a means to overcome silently the events of personal history plays a seminal role in Aichinger’s early works, the link between language and silence takes on a greater poetological importance in her later texts, as she addresses the larger questions of poetic creativity and the function of language as a referential system. In the essay “Schnee,” found in the collection Kleist, Moos, Fasane (1987), Aichinger addresses the inability of words to capture the essence of the things they represent and illustrates the arbitrary system upon which linguistic labels are based:

Schnee ist ein Wort und Heu ist auch eins. Schnee ist ein Wort. Es gibt nicht viele Wörter. Es gibt nicht viele, die nicht bezeichnen, womit sie eins sind, weil sie es nicht bezeichnen. Die nicht eins sind mit dem, was sie nicht bezeichnen, weil sie damit eins sind.” (113).

In an obtuse explanation in which Aichinger makes apparent the difficulty of language, she reveals the problem with which her works are preoccupied: the question of how meaning is communicated through words and the arbitrary nature of the words that are associated with particular concepts. Language is a self-enclosed system that hopelessly refers back to itself rather than to the thing it is used to identify; it is not “one” with the objects it names. By contrast, Aichinger argues that silence is “im Stande […], jedes
Wort zu decken" (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 98). While words are unable to encompass the objects to which they refer, the term “decken” implies the ability of silence both to carry and communicate the meaning that words resist and to provide insight into its own function with regard to language. “Decken” has three primary meanings that are fitting for Aichinger’s use of it to describe silence. In the first case, it refers to the function of covering or meeting a need: in this case, silence covers every word by serving as its replacement, implying the various meanings of a term that a single definition cannot. The second meaning of the word, “to protect,” gives silence the role as protector of language. By implying the various meanings of a word, rather than using the established definition, silence forgoes the danger of succumbing to established language. The final meaning, “to coincide, to agree,” reveals most poignantly Aichinger’s connection of silence to language. In essence, they are interchangeable; silence takes on the function of language.

The connection between language and silence as its replacement becomes clear when Aichinger relates it specifically to the process of writing:


Again, Aichinger uses the term “decken” to imply the “fullness” of meaning that is implied by the silence of unwritten sentences. In essence, silence represents the possibility of language to be liberated from the established rules for linguistic formulation and the construction of meaning. It is through this emancipation of words through silence that language and writing serve for Aichinger as a form of resistance:
Alle Mitteilungen sind heute gefährdet. Aber derjenige, der schreibt, ob beredt oder unberedt, setzt das Schweigen dagegen. Das bedeutet für mich immer wieder: das Ergebnis des genauesten, stillsten Hinhörens, das Ergebnis des Schreibens, das Schreiben selbst. ("Ins Wort" Kleist, Moos, Fasane 112)

For Aichinger, the resonance of silence within the written text represents a new language that confronts the spoken word, which ultimately remains suspect. In contrast to the emptiness with which she characterizes the muteness of language in the "Aufruf" essay, "Schweigen" is filled with meaning, a quality that belonged to words before they became mute and that is retrievable through the process of writing.

Silent Images in Aichinger’s Texts

The argument that Aichinger makes for the role of silence in her texts would seem to be inherently flawed; that the author must write about the role of silence and its importance to the written text reveals that it cannot appear independently of the language it is intended to replace. Aichinger’s understanding of language becomes clearer, however, if we consider the form it takes in her own works. She puts her poetological observations into practice by challenging traditional understandings of narrative technique and poetic production through abrupt sentence structures and unembellished, blunt descriptions that are held together by a network of images, often fantastic and otherworldly, which are the primary constituents of meaning in the text. ¹⁹ Klaus Hoffer attributes Aichinger’s truncated narrative style to her poetological mission of achieving silence through writing, concluding: “Aichinger’s Sprache, könnte man

¹⁹ Aichinger’s texts have often been dubbed surrealist, parabolic, absurd, and difficult because of their reductive and highly imagistic style. Analyses by Wallmann, Lübren, Piontek, Arnold, Neumann, among others represent views of Aichinger’s texts as puzzling, paradoxical, and often nonsensical.
sagen, ist eine Fortsetzung des Schweigens mit anderen Mitteln. Ihre Sätze sind ihr Beitrag zum Schweigen...” (221). Aichinger achieves silence through the absence of ornamentation or lengthy descriptions that might serve to communicate elements of time, place, and causality in the text. The “other means” of communicating silence that he implies are the series of images she uses to give shape to the unadorned narrative interludes. Elisabeth Endres aptly describes the interaction between images and language in Aichinger’s texts, stating: “Bilder der Natur, Bilder des Wissens und der Überlieferung werden aneinandergereiht. Und die Worte ballen sich zusammen” (“Ilse Aichinger” 119). Endres explains the interaction between words and images in Aichinger’s texts, stating “Gewisse Bilder, das Stroh, das Eis, gewisse Assoziationen, der Müller, die Hirten [...] sie alle bilden ein Netz von möglichen Kombinationen, in dem sich die Dichtung dartut” (“Eliza Eliza” 228). The dynamic movement in Aichinger’s works, the poetic process that takes place, is achieved through the continual interchange of images that are joined together by words, which create the fiber of the text but do not establish its content.²⁰

By rejecting a linear exposition of plot, a function that distinguishes written art forms from the visual arts, and using images as a narrative vehicle, Aichinger’s writing style is motivated by the same premise that serves as the foundation of surrealist art. Hermann Schreiber draws a link between Aichinger’s work and surrealism in the visual arts, explaining,

---

²⁰ Aichinger employs a wide variety of images, some readily tangible, such as “Feuer,” “Heu,” “Schnee,” and “Eis,” that the reader can relate to her realm of experience. Aichinger’s other images assume a fantastic or symbolic quality like “der Gefesselte,” “Vater aus Stroh,” “grüner Esel,” “der Querbalken,” and “Flecken.”
Auch in den surrealistischen Ausstellungen steht der überraschte Besucher immer wieder vor Bildern, die ihn magisch anziehen, auch wenn sie ihn befremden.... Wie es dort dem Betrachter ergeht... sich erst alles wie ein metaphysisches Bilderrätsel zusammendenken muß, so ergeht es hier mitunter dem Leser mit den Visionen der Dichterin. (158)

Like surrealist painting, the images of Aichinger's texts join together to create the narrative framework; as Lübbren asserts, "the images themselves speak" (223). Images serve much the same function in Aichinger's work as they do in surrealist art. In the painting of surrealism, images add the dimension of plot to the spatial realm of the visual arts. Similarly, Aichinger's texts defy typical narrative development; like Rilke, who transcends the division between visual and verbal art forms, Aichinger's employs images as the foundation of her writing. Her texts are, in essence, visual works of art within the written text.

The Mirror and Language

The mirror is a central image in Aichinger's poetology, although it appears less frequently in her works than in those of Trakl and Rilke. It represents a bridge between her essential images, which are relegated to the real world, and her symbolic images, which originate in the poet's imagination. The mirror represents a link to reality based on the premise of its function as a mimetic device; Aichinger's mirrors, however, like those of Trakl and Rilke, undermine the rules of space and time that govern the empirical world and celebrate a realization of the poetic imagination in the realm between reality and fantasy. Like the other images Aichinger uses, the mirror takes on a narrative quality, communicating the events of the plot and at times reversing the course of history. In its speechless visuality, the mirror, like Aichinger's other images,
embodies the poetological silence that she seeks to achieve in her texts. Unlike the other images that structure her work, however, the mirror reveals a special affinity to language in its lost mimetic function. Like language, which Aichinger reveals to be linked arbitrarily to the empirical world, the poetic mirror’s reflective surface no longer replicates objective reality. Like Trakl and Rilke, Aichinger uses the mirror to thematize the function of poetic language as a form of liberation in contrast to the former understanding of language as a mimetic medium; in its break from a mirroring relationship to the world, poetic language is celebrated. While for Trakl, the mirror embodies the poet’s struggle with the real versus poetic worlds and Rilke’s mirror world takes on a mystical quality, Aichinger highlights the mirror as the embodiment of the poetic text’s liberation. She places the poetic world alongside the empirical one, not as a quasi-religious realm, but rather as one of pure linguistic freedom.

The innovative manner in which Aichinger uses the mirror to demonstrate her poetological theories becomes most apparent when one considers the degree to which she departs from traditional aesthetic and epistemological understandings of the mirror. Like Trakl and Rilke, Aichinger recalls the tradition of the mirror as an instrument of mimesis and a model of visual representation, and through these qualities, its link to language and silence. Like the former, Aichinger makes a purposeful break from the external world early on by stripping the mirror of its reflective function and using it instead as the medium from which to engender images of an alternative reality. In Aichinger’s works, “wird [Die Wirklichkeit] demoliert. Sie ist schlecht, gewalttätig, rücksichtslos und kann erst in der Sprache neu, anders, bewohnbarer aufgebaut werden” (“Vorwort,” Eliza Eliza 2). Here Reichensperger alludes to Aichinger’s poetological
program that begins with the destruction of old art forms and the production of a new language, which is divorced from the events of history.

Aichinger alludes to an inherent link between language and the mirror in the essay “Die Vögel beginnen zu singen, wenn es noch finster ist” (1952):

\[
\text{Es ist nicht leicht, über sich selbst zu reden, es ist so, als würde man in den Spiegel schauen; man macht dann nicht das richtige Gesicht. Aber wenn das Spiegelbild auch irreführend ist, so haben wir doch kein anderes und müssen uns darin durchschauen und müssen den Spiegel zum Fenster machen. (29)}
\]

Aichinger likens the process of self-reflection in speech to the concept of visual self-analysis in the mirror. According to this analogy, speech acts as the medium of spoken reflection and personal narration, while the mirror acts as the medium of visual reflection. In the link she makes between the speech of self-narrative and the “irreführend[es] Spiegelbild,” Aichinger implies the affinities of language with visual forms of representation. Like the distortive mirror image, language can be misleading, rendering self-expression difficult. Even as we cannot change the appearance of our mirror image, we cannot escape the very nature of language. Continuing the visual metaphor, Aichinger argues that we must develop a language with an incisive critical capacity that facilitates the understanding of truth beyond distortion: “Wir [müssen] uns durchschauen, und den Spiegel zum Fenster machen.” This phrase, grounded in a visual metaphor, is similar to another in which Aichinger argues about lending truth to language by overcoming language itself:

\[
\text{Sprache ist für mich [...] das Engagement selbst, weil sie kontern muß die etablierte Sprache, weil sie fort muß aus dem Rezept der Wahrheit in die Wahrheit. (Schafroth 35)}.
\]
The image of the distortive mirror that becomes a window symbolizes a form of liberation and is similar to the transcendence that poetic language enjoys when it confronts and overcomes the established meaning of language and approaches a higher truth. Aichinger views language itself as an active medium that is used to confront and overturn established usage. Given her understanding of poetic language as the means of seeking truth, Aichinger’s analysis of the mirror image and the liberation from the mirror’s enclosed surface to the open window may be understood as the conversion of mundane speech into poetic language.

While Aichinger’s mature poetic works reveal a stark separation from reality, in her early works she openly addresses the concept of liberating language from its mimetic function in favor of poetic language that does not depend on an empirical referent. In 1951, one year before being recognized by the Gruppe 47 as a vanguard of contemporary German literature, Aichinger addresses the break from tradition and the liberation of poetic language and creativity that it engenders:


Aichinger received the Gruppe 47 prize for “Spiegelgeschichte” in 1952. She was the first woman to be given the honor, and there is some speculation about who benefited more from the award, Aichinger or the group, which did not want to be considered a male-only organization. While the group attempted to recognize the works of the newest German-speaking authors, the renown that Aichinger had acquired after the text was first published in 1949 in the Wiener Tageszeitung (three installations beginning in August) also contributes to the argument that the Gruppe 47 profited from her success. For a more detailed discussion of Aichinger’s relationship to and role in the Gruppe 47, see Sonnenleitner’s “Ilse Aichinger und die Gruppe 47.”
In the form of a question about how to “free a mirror image from its mirror,” Aichinger initiates a larger discussion about the liberation of art, specifically poetic language, from the tradition of mimesis. When the image steps out of the mirror, it is freed from an imitative connection to the world. It becomes a picture independent of reality and the rules of realistic artistic production. While the mirror image liberates itself from a mimetic relationship by undermining the process of reflection, it likewise dissolves: “Es muß ganz vergehen.” The moment of death however, is also a moment of transcendence, as the mirror becomes a “window.”

Both Trakl and Rilke express uncertainty about the arbitrary connection between language and reality and the role of the poetic text in overcoming the gap between them, Aichinger, however, applauds the complete rupture of poetic language from its correspondence to the real world. She further argues that the separation from reality and tradition cannot be a symbolic gesture that is only partially carried out, “nur mit einem Fuß”; instead, the initiation of a new art form necessarily demands the demise of the former – the image must leave the surface of the mirror in order to escape the rules of reflection that regulate it, “um aus der Täuschung zu kommen, aus dem nichtigen Raum.” The fissure between the mirror image and the surface that creates it is ultimately the prerequisite for a new art form and the rebirth of silent language of images within it. For Aichinger the overturning of tradition is not a moment of loss, “Es gibt keinen Trost für das Spiegelbild”; instead, the image is celebrated beyond its mimetic function. The picture itself remains, but it is no longer necessarily linked to reality. It thus exhibits its potential and desire to leave the mirror and become an independent art form.
In another story from the same period Aichinger addresses the liberation of art from its mimetic relationship to the world. "Das Plakat" revolves around the figure of a boy on a billboard advertisement who desires to become real so that he may leave the medium that confines him: "Sterben hieß von dem Plakat springen, sterben – jetzt wußte er es – , sterben mußte man, um nicht überklebt zu werden." Similar to the mirror image that breaks free of reflection, the figure on the poster desires to be liberated from the two-dimensional surface and to assume the dimensions of a living human being. In the final passages of the story, the death of a young girl, who is struck by an oncoming train, brings the boy to life, enabling him to leave the poster’s surface, an event that indicates the transcendence of his former, unmeaningful existence:

Das Grün der See vertiefte sich und wurde undurchsichtig. Und mit dem nächsten Windstoß verschwand das Wort Jugend vom blauen Himmel und löste sich auf wie Rauch. [...] "Ich sterbe", dachte der Junge, "ich kann sterben!" Er atmete tief, zum ersten Male atmete er. (Der Gefesselte 46)

The boy’s leavetaking of the billboard represents true life, even as it also signifies material death. Analogous to the mirror image that leaves the reflective surface in order to break free of the constraints placed on it by its mimetic relationship to the world, the boy achieves a moment of transcendence as an image freed from the medium through which it is displayed. The analogy between the liberation of the image and the emancipation of poetic language becomes clear in the second line of the passage in which the word “Jugend” is torn from the poster upon which it is displayed and floats through the air stripped of its semantic significance and imbued with importance as an image of the word alone. The concept of transcendence is further implied as the word
"Jugend" disappears in the form of smoke, which recalls the incense used in the Catholic liturgy.\footnote{Aichinger and her twin sister Helga attended a Catholic Gymnasium and were thus familiar with the ceremonial practices of the denomination. Aichinger recalls of her childhood: "Ich sehe die Laienschwester vor mir, eine der Schwestern, die aufräumen und die – zum Unterschied zu den höheren Ordensfrauen – die weißen Hauben tragen. Ich sehe sie gegen die halbgöffneten Fenster des Festsaals, das helle und ein wenig verdrossene Licht des frühen Nachmittages und den Staub, der wie Weihrauch aufsteigt und sich in diesem Licht bewegt, gegen die kahlen leuchten Äste draußen im halben Wind" ("Vor der langen Zeit", Kleist, Moos, Fasane 19).}

Using the concept of the image that exists independently of the medium that creates it, Aichinger makes a symbolic gesture toward the liberation of poetic language from the linguistic framework that governs it and the transcendence that she associates with the turn from words to poetic pictures. This imagistic turn represents transcendence because it serves, on a figurative level, as the means by which the poet achieves the goal of silence after which she strives. These three themes, the overcoming of language in the form of images, the celebration of silence that these images offer, and the concept of transcendence form the foundation of Aichinger’s poetology and serve as the subject of “Spiegelgeschichte,” the text in which she addresses the mirror in greatest depth.

"Spiegelgeschichte" and Poetic Transcendence

Robert Walser says of Aichinger’s works, “Jede Geschichte … ist auch ein poetologischer Text. Und umgekehrt” (14). While all of Aichinger works reflect to some degree Aichinger’s theoretical understanding of the writing process, “Spiegelgeschichte” is arguably the most poetologically revealing. Ueli Jaussi shares this view of the text as a representative example of the poetological goals she seeks to achieve in her works as a whole:
Man darf die Behauptung wagen, die "Spiegelgeschichte" enthalte Ilse Aichingers Oeuvre in nuce. Schon in ihr wirkt die Wirklichkeit draußen als absurd; schon hier sind die "schlechten Wörter" die besseren. Trotzdem leuchtet der Himmel grün, darf die Hoffnung nicht aufgegeben werden. (187)

The mirror serves as the premise of the story and likewise embodies Aichinger's overcoming of traditional narrative forms in favor of a poetic language based on images. Among the many images that Aichinger uses throughout her works, the mirror is particularly significant because it represents the transcendence, both of literary forms and of personal history, in the symbolic silence of the written text, which is likewise linked to spiritual respite in death.

The story, which assumes the dialogic form of a "Selbstgespräch," recounts the life of a young woman who lies on her deathbed after complications ensuing from an abortion. In the story, an omniscient narrator recalls the events in a young woman's life, interrupting the narrative development at times by addressing the protagonist in the second person. The narrator summons up images of the woman's childhood as a young girl who plays among other children, learning to walk and talk, and who loses her mother at an early age. The narrative proceeds to the woman's adolescence and early adulthood, when she meets a young man, to whom she reveals her name only after they have known each other for three days. The relationship develops, and they speak of children and the future: she would prefer to have sons rather than daughters. The young man pressures the young woman, and one day, in a beach house that is soon to be

---

23 In my reference to "Spiegelgeschichte" and Aichinger's other prose works, I often use the word poetry broadly to denote the lyrical style of her works, poetic as well as prose. I share this assessment of the author's works with Heinz Piontek, who claims: "Ilse Aichinger hat nur wenige Verse geschrieben. Dennoch ist fast alles, was von ihr vorliegt, Poesie. Ich meine mit Poesie Zeugnisse der Literatur, in denen die Sprache den Vorrang vor der Welt hat. Hier wird dem Wort nicht mehr die Aufgabe zuteil, die Welt als Gleichnis zu erfassen, sondern das Wort selbst will ein Beispiel sein für etwas anderes" (224).
demolished, "das verdammte Haus" (70), they conceive a child. The protagonist reveals her condition to the young man, "er dreht seine Mütze" (68), and his last utterance to her is the name of a street where "die Alte" lives. At this point in the narrative the cause of the woman’s death becomes apparent to the reader: "Das weiß der ganze Hafen, wovon die Alte ihren Schnaps bezahlt" (67). With cool clarity the narrator describes the emotional and physical horrors of the abortion the young woman endures, referring to the mirror in the room, "Der Spiegel mit den Fliegenflecken" (68), which reflects the entire scene. "Sie steht schon an der Tür. Die Tür ist offen, und sie steckt dir ihre Hand entgegen, die ist schmutzig. Alles ist dort schmutzig [...] Und die Alte ist viel zu freundlich" (67). For seven days the young woman lies in a feverish state, cared for only by the anonymous "Frau von oben" (67), until she cries out for her mother and dies alone.

The nature of the story is not new; in fact, its content and constellation of characters reflect the almost common theme of a young woman’s lost innocence and the fall from grace symbolized by the death of her unborn child. In its dramatic unfolding of events and highly predictable conclusion, the story could be termed, as Ueli Jaussi argues, "eine Geschichte am Rande der Sentimentalität" (188). The fear and isolation that characterize the young woman’s final days beckon a response of compassion or empathy from the reader.

Through a series of formal ploys, however, Aichinger undermines our propensity toward sentimentality by initiating our active participation in negotiating the

---

24 Throughout the text, Aichinger uses leitmotifs such as this one to denote a particular character, a shift in narrative time, and the cyclical nature of the story. Aichinger’s narrative techniques in this story, including her use of leitmotifs, will be discussed in greater detail below.
meaning of the text and ultimately leading us to celebrate the death that at first appears tragic. First, the narrative of the story is inverted, the chronology of events is reversed, and the reader learns the result of an action before the cause is stated, which dispels an atmosphere of suspense. Because we know the outcome of the plot from the first line of the story, which begins at the young woman’s grave, we are not allowed to become attached to the protagonist or to develop feelings of empathy about her plight. Yet, because we do not know the cause of her demise, suspense is reintroduced as we try to reconstruct events in forward time even as they are told in reverse. Second, the narrative is delivered in short, abrupt phrases, often in the form of stark imperatives, imploring questions, or in long, urgent sentences enunciated with repeated punctuation. The tempo of the narrative constantly changes, thus thwarting the reader’s attempts to gain a sense of comfort during the reading process or to develop feelings of empathy:


This passage not only demonstrates the style of Aichinger’s prose in “Spiegelgeschichte,” but also reveals the complex unfolding of narratological time in the story, the third primary feature of its narrative style. Simulating the optical function of the mirror after which the text is named, the story retells the events of the girl’s life as if through the medium of the mirror, placing them in reverse order, beginning with her death and ending at birth.

175
In contrast to the traditional use of narrative time, this text develops a tension through the reversed narration of events executed in forward-moving time. Reading the phrase, “Geh eh sie wiederkommen und eh ihr Flüstern wieder laut wird,” we are reminded that the narration of the young woman’s life moves backward in time from its starting point at her deathbed; yet the sentence is delivered as a forward-moving command. This concept is perhaps more easily recognizable in simple, paradoxical phrases from the story such as (e.g. “Die Zukunft ist vorbei,” “Am Anfang nimmt man Abschied”). These reversals not only require the reader to take pause and recall the direction of the plot, they also test the logical nature of language itself and its necessarily diachronic nature. The events of the woman’s life unfold; or rather they fold together again as the narrator retraces her steps back through the period of illness and the abortion to the time before she was pregnant, and before she met the child’s father who ultimately abandons her – in essence, to the time before her loss of innocence.

The mirror plays its most seminal role, as a physical presence in the text, at those points associated with the young woman’s “fall.” In the four pages that recount her conception of the child and subsequent abortion of the pregnancy, the mirror appears ten times; in each case the reader is reminded that occurrences of the narrative are displayed as images in the mirror: “Der Spiegel spiegelt alles” (69), “Alles ist im

---

25 Jaussi addresses the way in which Aichinger challenges the logic of language itself by undermining narrative time, stating: “Ein Erzählen, wie Ilse Aichinger es in der “Spiegelgeschichte” übt, ist nicht nur wider der Logik, es ist wider das Instrument des Erzählens, die Sprache selber. Die Sprache ist ihrem Wesen nach transitorisch” (191).

26 Here Aichinger draws on the literary tradition of the “bürgerliches Trauerspiel,” in which the demise of the young woman is characterized by her conception of a child out of wedlock and her subsequent murder of the infant. Whereas, for example, Goethe’s “Gretchen-Tragödie” and Hebbel’s Maria Magdalena end in tragedy, Aichinger ultimately reverses the young woman’s fall through the inverted narration of the story, as we shall see below.
"Der blinde Spiegel spiegelt das verdammte Haus" (70). Throughout the sequence, the mirror serves as a point of orientation both for the protagonist and for the reader. During her ordeal, the young woman keeps the "blind[en] Spiegel mit den Fliegenflecken" in view; it is the object onto which she projects her feelings.

The mirror likewise serves as a central image for the reader, lending insight into the young woman's frame of mind and serving as an emblem of the abortion itself. As she considers her lover's reaction to the death of their child, the narrator concludes: "Er weiß nicht, daß du schon bei der Alten gewesen bist, er kann es auch nicht wissen, er weiß nichts von dem Spiegel!" (69). The mirror represents at once the house and room in which the woman undergoes the procedure and likewise her thoughts about the process. While the narrator refers to a literal mirror in the room, and the segment is filled with references to reflection, the mirror is not a mimetic device. It is "blind" and thus does not capture the objects in its surroundings and reflect them accurately; instead, it generates new images that change the outcome of the plot and serves as a vehicle of transcendence. The first time the reader encounters the mirror in the text, that is, its last appearance in the forward chronology, the woman uses the mirror as a source of inspiration to demand from the abortionist the resurrection of her child:

```
"Mach mir mein Kind wieder lebendig!"
```
dich verlangen, was noch keine verlangt hat.... Und da erschrickend die Alte. Und in dem großen Schrecken, in dem blinden Spiegel erfüllt sie deine Bitte. Sie weiß nicht, was sie tut, doch im blinden Spiegel gelingt es ihr. (68)

In the passage, the mirror acts both as a source of empowerment for the woman who demands to change the course of history and as the symbolic embodiment of the transcendence that the unborn children do not experience after death. In the rejection of its reflective function and its inability to overcome history, Aichinger reveals a link between the mirror and poetic language, which likewise has a palliative effect for the poet. While the story focuses on the lost innocence of a young woman, it also gestures toward the redemptive function of poetic language in light of the symbolic “fall” from which humanity suffers through the acquisition of language.27

Upon further examination, it becomes apparent that the narration of events that depict the protagonist’s fall coincide with the introduction of spoken language in the passage. If we consider again the beginning of the story, we recall that the vicar’s words initiate the narration of events in the girl’s life and the horrors of her final days:

Wenn du dem Vikar die Leichenrede ersparen willst, so ist es Zeit für dich aufzustehen, leise ... und schnell!

The story begins with the narrator’s call for the young woman’s resurrection. The call is urgent and requires a response before the introduction of speech into the silent world of

---

27 Here it is helpful to consider Lacan’s link between the mirror stage and language. Prior to the acquisition of language, the subject exists in the pre-linguistic mirror-stage world and enjoys an undifferentiated unity with its mother and surroundings. Upon the introduction of language, this visual symbiosis is disrupted, and the subject becomes ever more self-conscious and aware of its distinction from its environment. In essence, it suffers a “fall” from the harmonious existence prior to language.

178
death. Quickly, however, the vicar begins to speak, beginning the process by which the protagonist must relive the events that lead to her death. Following the narrator’s description of the vicar’s “good words” is the sentence, “Dein Grab ist offen,” linking the presence of language with the young woman’s fall and death. The reference to “blind” rain, which conceals the vicar’s words, foreshadows the blind mirror that appears later in the story and indicates early on that visual images take precedence over words in the narrative. A more direct connection between the mirror image and the silencing of language occurs again in the abortion segment. The narrator recalls the moment in which the woman’s lover learns of her pregnancy and gives her the abortionist’s name:

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. (69)

Each time one of the figures makes a spoken comment, it is superseded by the visual images of the mirror. In the first case, in a synaesthetic combination, the mirror is capable of reflecting words, transforming them, one would assume, into images that “forget” the statement’s import. In the second case, language gives way entirely to silence, and the mirror takes over the role of language, depicting the phenomenal world on its surface. If we recall, however, that the mirror is blind, then the images that it reveals originate in the mirror and the poet’s imagination instead of reality.

The generative quality of the mirror and its ability to produce images enables it to bring the child back to life and to re-impregnate the woman. The inverted delivery of images replaces the linear development of language and goes back to the young woman’s childhood, before she could walk and before she could talk. The unlearning of
language and return to the naïve state of infancy proves to be the most difficult, until the child once again revels in the visual harmony of a pre-linguistic existence:

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 nur mehr zu schauen. Sei geduldig! Bald ist alles gut. (73-74)

The linguistic world of the adult gives way to the visual world of the infant and culminates in the return of complete silence in the moment of simultaneous birth and death. The quietude achieved after death gestures toward the stillness of the womb, prior to birth.

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 ... “Es ist zu Ende –”, sagen die hinter dir, “sie ist tot!”
Still! Laß sie reden! (74)

The final line, with its exclamation “Still!” marks the moment of silence in which the beginning and end of life meet, and language gives way to a sphere prior to birth and free of the constraints of language. With the words, “Laß sie reden!” the narrator implores the protagonist to remain silent in the moment of death, relegating speech and its alienating effects to the individuals who surround her bed, the living who are still firmly seated in the linguistic realm. By letting “them” speak, the young woman rejects the language that represents her lost innocence and ultimate demise and experiences a moment of transcendence: “Im Spiegel tut man alles, daß es vergeben sei” (70).

This moment does not merely represent the protagonist’s spiritual transcendence of earthly fallibility in death; it likewise reveals the function of writing as a form of transcendence for the author. With the end of the story the young woman reaches
fulfillment in death because she attains silence. Similarly, the end of the poetic text indicates a type of transcendence in its symbolic gesture toward silence through the use of the mirror as an image and the reversals it enables. Based on Aichinger’s definition, silence is “etwas Erfülltes” and is closely aligned with a fulfilling death: “Es hängt eng mit dem Tod zusammen, mit einem erfüllten Tod” (Esser 56-57). The overcoming of life in death is similar to Aichinger’s references to the mirror image that is liberated from the reflective surface, the mirror that becomes a window. Like mirrors that allow creative generation, the silent poetic text, as a form of social engagement, enables a reshaping of one’s personal past and the larger events of history.

Aichinger alludes to the link between artistic liberation and historical progress in a quote from the same period:

In der Kindheit hat es auch schon Spiegel gegeben, aber in größerer Entfernung. Allmählich kommen wir uns immer näher, es bleibt nur wenig Raum mehr um uns, bis wir uns ganz nahe sind. Der nächste Schritt heißt: den Spiegel mit der Faust zertrümmern, bluten, sich zerschneiden. Oder wir bleiben stehen. (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 54)

Here the mirror assumes the larger implication of personal development and collective history. The notion of progress is revealed in the image of childhood that is characterized by movement toward the mirror in the form of self-observation. Progress is triggered by the shattering of the mimetic mirror and the release of the image on its surface, a process which likewise implies personal liberation.

Even as the mirror image is freed from the mirror, so too are poetic images released from the constraints of a linguistic framework. The destruction of the mirror and the constraints it implies reveal an overcoming of the past through the creation of
the poetic text. For Aichinger, silence and the written text provide the most effective way to overcome trauma and find new hope:

Wenn wir es richtig nehmen, können wir, was gegen uns gerichtet scheint, wenden, wir können gerade vom Ende her und auf das Ende hin erzählen beginnen, und die Welt geht uns wieder auf. ("Das Erzählen dieser Zeit" 10)

In Aichinger's work, the self-enclosed realm of the aesthetic mirror makes it possible to overturn the rules of linear linguistic production through the reversal of narrative time and traditional narrative strategies. Because the parameters of the text form the outer bounds of experience, these reversals likewise enable a transcendence of the events of a personal past, placing death before life and life before birth, and suggest a manner in which Aichinger herself attempted to come to terms with the larger occurrences of history. In response to a question about whether she believed writing was necessary for her to make her way through life, Aichinger responds:

Es hat mir ermöglicht, auf der Welt zu bleiben. Ich glaube, daß ich es nötig gehabt habe, sonst hätt' ich es nicht getan. Im Roman Die größere Hoffnung zum Beispiel dachte ich zuerst, ich schreib' einen Bericht, damit man weiß, was geschehen ist. Das war's nicht. Es war notwendig, für mich jedenfalls. (Steinwendtner 7-8)

Thus, Aichinger's “Spielgelgeschichte” must be understood on three levels: first, it represents the depiction of a fictional woman's achievement of autonomy and triumph over life in death through the transcendent quality of the mirror that serves as the centerpiece of the text. Second, the story functions as a metaphor for writing as the means of overcoming the problem of language that Aichinger addresses throughout her oeuvre. Finally, and most striking, in its portrayal of the successful overcoming of language and symbolic gesture of overcoming the past within the story, Aichinger
reveals the process of writing as a means of confronting history. Even as the blind mirror within the story reverses the horrors of the protagonist’s life, the text “Spiegelgeschichte” embodies Aichinger’s view of writing and its accompanying achievement of silence as the means by which the author confronts the events of history that shaped her and other writers of her generation.  

Silence and the Reader

The many reflections and meta-reflections that can be found in “Spiegelgeschichte” are most meaningful if we consider Aichinger’s poetological goal of achieving silence in the text. As shown above, the mirror embodies the essence of silence both in its ability to generate visual images that act as the foundation of the plot and in its undoing of traditional narrative structure, reversing the linear nature of language. “Spiegelgeschichte” likewise manifests a third meaning of silence for Aichinger; the text serves as a form of silent communication between author and reader. This textual silence, or “Verknappung” as she calls it (Steinwendtner 8), may be viewed as purposeful gaps placed in the narrative that demand the reader’s interaction to create meaning. Wolfschütz explains: “Aichinger’s early narrative pieces are for the most part parables; they may not directly proclaim their message and they tend to leave it to the reader to interpret events for himself, but they nonetheless guide him towards a particular solution” (163). The reader is expected not to absorb passively the content of

---

28 In an interview, Aichinger reveals the degree to which she believes her writing is driven by the desire to confront history, concluding: “Ich fühle mich von meiner Geschichte geprägt, aber nicht nur von meiner, sondern auch von der meiner Zeitgenossen und von dem Geschehenen der Jahrhunderte, die dazu geführt haben” (Steinwendtner 10).

29 Andrea Reiter argues that Aichinger makes her readers into “co-authors of her texts” (210).
a text and measure how closely it corresponds with the external world, but rather to
search for the meaning of the text, a process by which the reader becomes ever more
engaged with the literary texts and the process of reading. Aichinger outlines her
understanding of the relationship between writer and reader and their interaction in a
tribute to Nelly Sachs:

Sie ermutigt ihren genauen Leser immer wieder zu dem Versuch, seine
Stummheit in Schweigen zu übersetzen, in das engagierte Schweigen,
ohne das Sprache und Gespräch nicht möglich sind. (Kleist, Moos,
Fasane 108)

Like Sachs, Aichinger seeks to engage the reader in a discussion of the text through a
joint creation of meaning. The conversation that takes place between the writer and
reader is the primary way of attaining the silence that represents for Aichinger both
engagement and by extension transcendence. It is within this silent space of the text that
both interact in a mutual creation of meaning.

Each of Aichinger's texts includes an element of silence, an absence of
information, with which the reader is expected to interact and of which she must attempt
to make sense. This part of the text is like the missing piece of the puzzle that demands
the active participation of the reader in order to create a total picture of the text. Two
early stories, likewise found in Der Gefesselte, “Die geöffnete Order” and “Fenster-
Theater” reveal Aichinger's emphasis on the mutual creation of meaning by an
observer, and by extension the reader, and the writer. In both cases, the
misinterpretation of the text leads to potentially deadly consequences. In “Die geöffnete
Order” a soldier has been chosen to transport a message to his superior, a command
which calls for his execution upon delivery. During the course of the mission, the
soldier learns of the message’s content and must decide whether to follow his call of
duty and deliver the message, thus bringing about his own death, or to disobey orders
and live, but with a feeling of dishonor. Through a chain of events that are rendered in a
dream-like fashion, the soldier attempts to kill his military companion and instead
shoots himself in the arm, ultimately arriving near death in the camp where his superior
is stationed. Upon waking from a feverish state, the soldier is commended for his
bravery and learns that the message, “Shoot upon delivery,” is a string of code words
that trigger the commencement of an offensive attack on the enemy. Here Aichinger
plays with the very idea of language and the arbitrary meanings that it constructs and
the speaker’s propensity to misinterpret it. While the sentence plainly indicates to the
soldier that he faces imminent death, in reality the words carry an entirely different
meaning and act as a type of speech act that initiates a military maneuver. By purposely
undoing the meaning of the words written on the page, Aichinger suggests the
unreliability of language, the danger in misinterpreting signs, and the problematic nature
of a sign system that is not shared by all communicators within the system. 30

Through the process of reading, the reader unravels the mistaken context of the
story and becomes aware of the necessity to look beyond surface appearance and given
meaning of the sign to create meaning. This idea of searching for meaning in the text is
a important aspect of the reader’s role in Aichinger’s poetology. For Aichinger, the
process of reading represents the reader’s active engagement with the text and with the

30 In another story from the collection, “Das Fenster-Theater,” Aichinger similarly reveals the danger of
miscommunication and misinterpreted signs. In the story, a woman calls the police to arrest an old man,
obviously insane, who appears to be threatening her with wild gestures that are both meaningless and
frightening. Upon the arrival of the police, the woman discovers that her neighbor is deaf and has been
signing to a young girl on the other side of the courtyard.

185
author. She demands that her readers put together images and fragmentary sentences and thus construct an overarching meaning of the text. Instead, the author defines reading as a process of searching with regard to her own approach to texts:

Ich lese sie so, wie ich etwas suche, das verlorengegangen ist, indem ich zuerst das Suchen suche, die Form zu suchen, und wenn ich es gefunden habe, im Fall des Textes, die Form zu lesen, und daß Lesen und Schreiben wie Suchen und Finden sich einander bis zur Identität nähern können. (Moser 34)

Aichinger gestures toward meaning through the structuring of the text; the form to which she alludes is represented by the constant interchange between images and words in her work. On the one hand, Aichinger seems to gesture toward the concept of creating a whole, a picture that somehow relates back to some reality of which the reader can make sense. On the other hand, she purposefully defies connections between her work and a comfortable reality. For her, it is foremost the ongoing process of reading and searching, “Das Suchen an sich” (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 51), that characterizes the engaged reader. She incites the reader to engage in a process of learning, to look beyond the surface of apparent meaning, but never to rely on one given meaning as truth: “Suchen ist identisch mit Spielen. Finden kann man nichts, weder Lösungen, noch Dinge” (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 83). Aichinger asks the reader to revel, not in the existence of clear and ultimate meaning, but rather in the process of always uncovering new readings. Rather than asking the reader to draw similarities between the work of art and its referent in the real world, her work demands that the reader situate the events of the story in his own cognitive schemata, to engender a reality that consists of both the author’s elements and those that the reader brings to the text.
In “Spiegelgeschichte,” the mirror serves as the primary object of investigation in the text, beckoning readers to test their understanding of the physical process of reflection, the rules of narration, and traditional plot scenarios. Not only does it embody the notion of silence through its production of visual images; it also serves as the means by which readers gain critical distance to the text. We are constantly reminded throughout the story that the events that are presented are images reflected by the mirror and not directly connected to our experience or emotions. Through this secondary level of mediation, we as readers are motivated to challenge our expectations of a scenario that is familiar to us and are asked to accept the unreal as a moment of possibility, much as in Rilke’s “Spiegelraum.” Aichinger does not imply a realm of mystical transcendence in the realm of the mirror, however; rather, the very process of writing offers a moment of overcoming and intersubjective communication between author and reader. “Wenn ein Dialog keine Farce werden soll, muß die Lautlosigkeit mit im Spiel sein” (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 91). Aichinger celebrates the concept of the author’s conversation with herself, and the dialogue with the reader, both of which take on a silent format.

Aichinger’s desire to engage the reader actively in the creation of meaning and her inherent belief that writing is based on communicating silence between author and reader became increasingly important throughout her career. In the works published after “Spiegelgeschichte” and the other stories in Der Gefesselte, Aichinger’s style became increasingly sparse, both in the narrative structure of her texts and the physical number of works she published. From the sixties onward, many years in Aichinger’s writing career were marked by the publication of single sentences, and since 1987 she has published few works. Hans Wolfschütz describes the growing shortness of
Aichinger's texts as a sign of "her efforts to filter out all but the essential, her search for the individual word in her quest that cautiously and circumspectly seeks out a new language" (162-63). This language, based on silence, was executed through truncated narratives and sentences and ultimately communicated through a narrative of visual images. Eventually the textual silence of her works seems to have given way to a physical silence that has characterized Aichinger's life and career since the early eighties. Recently the author described her life of seclusion, stating: "Ich tauche wenig auf, gehe wenig unter Menschen."\^{21} Thus, it seems that for Aichinger, silence represents not only an approach to the creation of literary texts, but likewise a prerequisite for communication in her physical environment.

Conclusion

While "Spiegelgeschichte" is one of Aichinger's earliest texts, I suggest that it is also the most significant. It is important not simply because it led her to become the first female recipient of the "Gruppe 47" prize and caused critics such as Hans Weigel and Hans Werner Richter to take note of the rising importance of women in the postwar German-speaking literary world. The story is striking because it represents a break with tradition that is also signified by other, more widely known and discussed authors, such as Celan and Bachmann. Aichinger's mirror represents a stark break from that tradition, a characteristic that links her not only to Trakl and Rilke, but also to other authors who turned away from realist art forms, such as Kafka, with whom Aichinger has repeatedly

\textsuperscript{21} Quoted from an interview with Sabine Laerum in: Hamburg Feuilleton, 26 Jan. 2000.
been compared. She shares with him a profound distrust of literary realism and as he
does, she rejects mimesis as the principle of artistic production with the motto “alles auf
den Kopf stellen” (Kleist, Moos, Fasane 91).

While the mirror is traditionally a symbol of imitation and mimetic art, the
“blind mirror” of “Spiegelgeschichte” rejects its reflective function, assuming instead a
generative quality that makes possible the structural and temporal reversals that take
place within the story. It fulfills the search for language, taking on narrative function,
while simultaneously providing the sought-after silence through a visual, not verbal,
image. At various points in the story, the mirror not only mediates the communication
of the story’s events and figuratively accounts for the narrative reversals that take place;
it also enables the transcendence of personal history. Endres explains Aichinger’s turn
from reality not merely as an aesthetic form by which she shapes her poetic texts;
instead, it is an existential necessity if writing is to have the palliative effect and socially
active role that Aichinger prescribes for it: “[Aichinger] vertraut dem Realismus nicht.
Das, was uns verwundet, ist nicht durch spiegelbildliche Wiedergabe darzustellen. Sie
verläßt sich auf Metaphern, auf eine irreale Wiedergabe der Welt” (114).

32 At the 1952 meeting of the Gruppe 47 at which Aichinger was honored one participant referred to her
as “Fräulein Kafka,” and quickly restated that while this was certainly not the author’s name, her writing
style seemed to be directly aligned with that of Kafka (Endres 114). Interestingly enough, when asked at
an interview years later about the authors whose works she liked to read, Aichinger retorted “nicht Kafka”
(Schafroth 35) among others, a remark that is characteristic of her attempt to dispel the parallels often
drawn between her and the pillar of modernist German literature (Endres 114).
33 In her last publication, Kleist Moos. Fasane (1987), Aichinger devotes an essay to Kafka, explaining
the reasons why she did not read the works with which her own were so often compared: “Die Existenz
von Kafka, von dem ich bis heute kaum etwas gelesen habe, hat, seit ich kurz nach dem Krieg davon
erfuhr, für mich immer diese Unaufloslichkeit von Freude und Schrecken bedeutet, ein brennendes Seil
über der mit den Jahren nachdunkelnden Welt.... Entweder ich war noch nicht reif für Kafka, hatte noch
nicht genug Angst erlernt und mußte warten, bis es soweit war, oder ich las ihn nie wieder” (105-07).
Like Rilke, Aichinger suggests that the crisis of representation can be overcome through the creation of an autonomous world that encompasses subject and object in the context of the poem. While Rilke imbues the poetic process with spiritual quality, Aichinger envisions pure poetic productivity as the means for overcoming personal history. Her notion of transcendence does not aspire to a higher spiritual realm; instead, through the production of silence within the poetic text, Aichinger suggests that one can become politically engaged and thus enact change within the present world.

In “Spiegelgeschichte,” the compilation of images that are joined together to construct the narrative as a whole, create a second, larger image, the mirror that is the text. In its self-enclosure, and self-motivated retelling of events, the structure of the story mimics the function of a mirror. As Ernst Jandl concludes about Aichinger’s works:

Auf diese Weise gewann der an sich lineare Ablauf eine neue Dimension: er wurde flächig, er wurde zu einer gemusterten Fläche, einem unregelmäßigen Muster, einem Bild, aber keiner Abbildung. (245)

The mirror of the text is turned toward itself, creating a meta-reflection of the story’s contents. It is at once dialogic, if we consider the narrative voice, and monologic, creating a self-sufficient whole that itself acts as an image, the image of the text “Spiegelgeschichte.” As a visual image, the text itself becomes both a reflective medium and a reflection. In this sense, the mirror may be viewed as an absolute image, what Mitchell calls a “verbal icon” (Iconology 25). The mirror of the text is not an analogue of any aspect of reality; rather the text reflects upon itself, representing “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (25) that is not connected to the world beyond the text. As such, “Spiegelgeschichte” reveals a particular modernist
emphasis on the image as a “crystalline structure, a dynamic pattern of the intellectual and emotional energy bodied forth by a poem” (Icononlogy 25).

While her later works are perhaps more stark in their achievement of the imagistic style that characterizes her oeuvre as a whole, this early story both represents the seeds of her poetology of silence and thematizes the process by which she achieved it through writing. While Aichinger rejects the tendency of scholars to see autobiographical links to her works, claiming “Das Ich meiner Texte hat nichts mit meinem persönlichen Ich zu tun,” “Spiegelgeschichte” embodies the author’s poetological reflections in practice. By using primarily visual images rather than traditional narrative techniques as the foundation of the text, Aichinger makes a symbolic gesture toward the achievement of silence in writing as a form of transcendence. Despite her inherent suspicion of language, Aichinger ultimately uses images as the only viable way of overcoming the arbitrariness of words and the negative occurrences they are associated. As Moser comments, “Wörter sind für die Poetin Aichinger nicht weniger lebensnotwendig als das Visum oder der Stern für Ellen in Der größeren Hoffnung” (14). For Aichinger, the creation of alternative realities and the dissolution of the rules of time and space that take place within the poetic text are not merely the subject of artistic production; instead, they represent a means of coming to terms with events in her own past and developments in history. In this way, they represent the political and social engagement that she attributes to the profession of writing. Poetic language is, however, most effective in confronting the past when it achieves the silence that is the ultimate form of political engagement. By using an “ending,” i.e., tragedy or death, as the starting point for her narratives, Aichinger reveals
how the text serves as a means for overcoming the past and rediscovering hope for a future. This link between silence, the creation of a new language, and an overcoming of the past, including literary tradition, serves as the foundation of Aichinger’s poetology and influences her poetic production throughout.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

In his influential essay “Art as Technique” (1917), Victor Shklovsky argues that the images that artists and authors employ do not change significantly over time or from culture to culture; he concludes that “[p]oets are much more concerned with arranging images than with creating them” (7). With this statement, Shklovsky suggests that the importance of a poetic image lies in its autonomous quality and its natural retention of previous meanings, though its function changes with the different “arrangement” of a new poetic age. If we consider again the focus of this study, the mirror, the accuracy of Shklovsky’s conclusion becomes apparent. The very importance of the mirror as a poetic image rests in its reference to poetic theories of the past in addition to the statements it makes about the contemporaneous concerns of aesthetic production with which an author grapples. Indeed, the changing meaning of the mirror alludes to its continued importance in Western culture throughout several centuries, while it also highlights the singular aesthetic, epistemological, or metaphysical preoccupation of any given age. In the case of Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger, the mirror represents the distinctively modernist shift in the understanding of art and poetic language from reflection to production. Unlike their literary predecessors, who use the mirror to perpetuate an understanding of the world based on visual accuracy and to describe the
mimetic quality of language, these authors infuse the mirror with a new, creative quality. Liberated from its earlier conception as a mimetic device, the mirror becomes in modernity a productive image that dissolves the barriers of the empirical world, linking subject and object within the parameters of the poem. As such, it moves beyond its reflective function to become an occasion for the poet's self-reflection and a symbol of the poem's self-referentiality. The text is a mirror image, not in a mimetic fashion but in the form of a newly generated picture-poetic world through which the poet communicates. As a generative medium, the mirror both embodies the historical understanding of language and its problematic nature at the end of the nineteenth century and represents the overcoming of linguistic crisis through an emphasis on pictures rather than words as the primary poetic medium. In the works I have examined here, the mirror reveals a celebration of the poetic mind beyond mimesis and the restrictive qualities of language. Yet, in its distinction between subject and object worlds, the mirror also represents the very divisiveness from which the poet attempts to escape. Just as the lyrical subject seeks to create a sense of wholeness in joining with its mirror image within the confines of the poem, so too attempts the poet to create unity in fragmented existence through the poetic process. While the excessive self-awareness that results from this attempt produces a self-conscious preoccupation with the self, it also forms the foundation for poetic creativity.

In the poem "I Dwell in Possibility" (1862), Emily Dickinson writes: "I dwell in Possibility - / a fairer house than Prose" (856). For Dickinson, the poem represents an aesthetic realm that takes on physical contours, much like the mirror worlds of Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger. The poem offered, in one sense, the means by which Dickinson
escaped her immediate, material environment, which did not promote the authorial aspirations of a young woman. On a less obvious level, this line is an important poetological statement, revealing the importance of poetry and the textual space that can be created within it, as an aesthetic realm of possibility: the possibility of overcoming history, reality, personal existence and memory, and the physical boundaries of space and time. The concept of possibility about which Dickinson writes and that we witness in the works of Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger is, on the one hand, the abstract notion of all that is doable and achievable, it is the possible; it is the idea of transcendence with which the notion of "prose," the prosaic, reality, and existence is juxtaposed. For these authors, the poetic realm is equivalent to possibility, and with it a notion of overcoming reality, even if it only takes place symbolically, aesthetically, and in the moment and space of a poem.

The line from Dickinson's poem serves as the concluding point of this study and the departure point of a series of questions. If we conclude that the mirror suggests a realm of transcendence, which makes possible the overcoming of language through the creation of a poetry based on silent images, how does the poetic text facilitate it? Is not the text always bound to the physical circumstances of its creation? That is, can one really speak of aesthetic transcendence? These problems are inherently the ones with which Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger all struggle. For each of them the poetic text serves as a point of departure for approaching the problem of language and the representation of reality, and the mirror both addresses and problematizes the moment in which this textual transcendence is to take place. As a visual image, it serves as the substitute for a
faulty or failed language, providing a gesture toward the concept of linguistic mediation while at the same resting solidly within the realm of the visual.

While the author’s use of the mirror appears to succeed in communicating the idea of the visual in language and the use of images rather than sentences to speak, we are repeatedly confronted with an inherent contradiction: even in the moment of poetic transcendence and the liberation of the image from the word, the gesture toward this overcoming can at best be symbolic because the poetic image is always already seated in language and relies on it as a the vehicle through which its import is conveyed. Even as Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger make convincing arguments about the need to transcend language, particularly after the existential questions raised by historical trauma, and while their use of the mirror suggests the figurative transcendence of language through a poetry of images that seems to suspend the linguistic structures through which reality is represented, they ultimately cannot get beyond the very medium they seek to overcome.

This fundamental conflict was surely as apparent to the authors studied in this work as was their very drive to combat the problem of representation. For Trakl, the mirror serves as the very medium through which the gap between the empirical world and the aesthetic one, between material damnation and poetic transcendence, is continually problematized. On the one hand, the mirror realm embodies creative liberation and gestures toward the unifying nature of a pre-linguistic state; images of androgynous figures, Dionysian intoxication, and religious imagery all suggest a mystical connection between subject and object worlds through the mirror’s surface. On the other hand, the many broken mirrors that appear throughout Trakl’s works reveal that the optimism of poems like “Drei Träume” is most often overshadowed by the
knowledge that the aesthetic moment offers only an ephemeral moment of pseudo-
transcendence. The many Narcissus allusions, and the mirrors that break at the instants
in which union between subject and object selves is to be achieved reveal the ultimate
breakdown of the poetic project.

Perhaps Trakl’s material struggles, both physically and financially, determine
the skepticism and loss of hope with which he views the poetic process at the end of his
life. The existential factors shaping his daily existence prohibited him from
experiencing transcendence through the poetic process, and the final images of murder
and destruction at the battle of Grodek may have proved more powerful than the
palliative effect of his own poetic images. Yet, that Trakl wrote poetry until his death
nonetheless reveals his optimism about the ability of the poetic text to offer a type of
transcendence as a medium through which he could objectify the experiences that
horried him. While the mirror images in Trakl’s work establish a fleeting and
ultimately failed union between subject and object worlds and between the poet’s
interior and exterior reality, the smashing of mirrors within the context of the poem and
the use of poetic pictures as a symbolic gesture toward the overcoming of language
provide a moment of overcoming, if only transient and aesthetic in nature.

For Rilke, the knowledge that the cleft between reality and representation could
not be bridged led to his retreat into the aesthetic realm, into a quasi-religious,
mythological world of transcendence. In Rilke’s mature poetics, the mirror realm of the
poem serves as an autonomous poetic space that unites inner and outer realities and
offers a realm of possibility in which the aesthetic moment transcends life. The
experience of the poem thus leads to a moment of self-knowledge and self-overcoming:
"Du mußt dein Leben ändern" ("Archaischer Torso Apollos"). The material world in front of the mirror is of secondary importance with regard to the "Weltinnenraum," which conjoins subject and object worlds within the context of the poem. In a self-sustained, religious-aesthetic experience, the mirror world of the poem or the poetic world of the mirror are preeminent and therefore define the limits of experience. In Rilke's view, the notion of boundaries is not limiting; for within the mirror realm of the poem, the divisions between this world and the next, between language and reality, fall away, and the range of lyrical words and poetic experience are infinite: "Sei – und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins Bedingung, / den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung, / daß du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal" (Sonette an Orpheus II, XIII). In his belief that existence and non-existence are equally possible in the context of the poem, Rilke overcomes the experience of division and representational crisis that continues to plague Trakl in his final works. While the form and content of Rilke's poems suggest his development beyond the aesthetic views of his literary predecessors, however, the mystical nature of his mirror world suggests his retention of an idealist notion of art and its connection to a higher reality as the means of coming to terms with modernity.

Like Rilke, Aichinger upholds the importance of the poetic process in addressing the events of history and personal experience. The mirror of "Spiegelgeschichte" serves as an embodiment of the poetic text, and its ability to enact a figurative reversal of the events in the protagonist's life suggests Aichinger's general view of literary production as a means of transcending historical occurrences. Whereas Die größere Hoffnung attempts to come to terms with events in the empirical world, Aichinger's later texts
reject reality entirely in favor of a purely textual realm. Unlike Trakl and Rilke, Aichinger does not attempt to unite subject and object worlds in the context of the poem. For her, the textual realm takes precedence over the objective world, and she celebrates the “schlechte Wörter,” which assault the logic of the material world and exemplify the autonomy of the literary text: “Ich ge brauche jetzt die besseren Wörter nicht mehr.... Niemand kann von mir verlangen, daß ich Zusammenhänge herstelle, solange sie vermeidbar sind. Ich bin nicht wahllos wie das Leben [...]” (Reichensperger 93). Here the poetic text does not provide the moment of transcendence that shaped the poetic project of “Spiegelgeschichte.” In contrast to the sentence, “Im Spiegel tut man alles, daß es vergeben sei,” the poetic voice of “Schlechte Wörter” does not strive for forgiveness or forgetting in the poetic text; instead it forcefully challenges life and the sense of impotence by which the individual is directed. Aichinger’s early mirror, which serves as a source of poetic images liberated from their linguistic framework, gives way to an array of images that make no claim to the empirical world nor to the necessity of mediation. These late images are truly liberated; the poetic text evolves from a mirror to a window, and it offers a moment of transcendence in the text that aggressively yet aesthetically engages with the world. Unlike Rilke, who views the textual space as a realm of retreat and artistic transcendence, Aichinger makes life an aesthetic experience; the silence that she seeks in her poetic works ultimately shapes her material existence. Aichinger, who has lived a relative life of seclusion for the last twenty years, makes her aesthetic principles the rules by which she governs her own non-poetic existence. To a degree, one might argue, she transforms her life into an aesthetic work and thus achieves the transcendence that she addresses from the earliest stages of her career.
Ultimately, the mirror, which embodies the mimetic principles of art in antiquity, also serves as a primary representation of the rupture between subjective experience and objective reality in modernity. The glass surface acts as an artificial boundary between the image of the world and the things themselves, emphasizing the limits of human perception. Yet the mirror, with its mystical and often magical qualities, simultaneously suggests a strategy for transcending divisive experience by encompassing both subject and object worlds within its parameters. To this degree, it is likewise a symbol of the poetic text and suggests the belief in a redemptive quality of art in modernity. While the texts of Trakl, Rilke, and Aichinger all reveal the authors' understanding of the limits of the aesthetic world, it does not lessen their belief in the power of aesthetic practice as a means of coming to terms with, if not transcending, the dichotomies they witnessed around them. For each of them, the realm of “Possibility,” of poetic creation, is a realm of engagement, and as such offers the opportunity of addressing and shaping life more than the “House of Prose,” of existence without aesthetic experience.
General


---. Noten zur Literatur II. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961.

---. Noten zur Literatur III. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965.


203


**Georg Trakl**


Rainer Maria Rilke


208


---. Briefe aus Muzot 1921 bis 1926. Leipzig: Insel, 1940.


---. "Validating the Possible: Thoughts and Things in James, Rilke, and Musil." Comparative Literature 40 (1988): 305-17.


Ilse Aichinger


