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### Marlene Streeruwitz's *Nachwelt*: Narrative Exploration of Cultural Memory.

Theorists of cultural memory grapple with the distinction of individual memory from the collective. Prior to the introduction of the term by Jan Assmann, Maurice Halbwachs in the first decades of the twentieth century saw memory per se as solely a manifestation of social construction. The *memoire collective* arises out of society to answer expectations and is shaped by those answers. Halbwachs drew a contrast between history, which focuses on differences, and memory, which embraces similarities. Pierre Nora, on the other hand, postulated that society has lost the capacity for memory, that in pre-industrial societies memory, a “perpetually actual phenomenon,” maintained an awareness of social identity as an eternal present. Modernity and a global awareness brought the loss of this capacity for memory. The *milieux de memoire* has disappeared, leaving modern society with fragments of memory clinging to specific localities and objects, the *lieux de memoire*. For Nora, memory is in decline and is becoming synonymous with history. Thus the task of the scholar is to map the past time on the geographical present. Assmann stressed two components in his definition of cultural memory: *Erinnerungskultur*, which helped a culture to pass its identity to the next generation, and *Vergangenheitsbezug*, which helps the present generation understand its collective identity.

Marlene Streeruwitz's recent novel, *Nachwelt*., engages both components in a narrative *tour de force*. Streeruwitz' heroine, Margarethe, a divorced mother and unemployed actor, is conducting biographical research on Anna Mahler, the daughter of the somewhat infamous Alma Mahler. Anna, an artist of some modest renown, lived in Los Angeles, and Margarethe spends ten days in Los Angeles in March 1990 interviewing Anna's surviving friends and companions. The narrative, a mixture of neo-naturalism and fragmented stream-of-consciousness, is organized as a mental journal, interrupted by eight “Geschichten” by eye-witnesses of Anna's life. These stories read like the transcript of the recorded monologues. The narrative form thus promotes the ‘objective’ quality of the endeavor. At one level, she is attempting to reconstruct a ‘cultural memory’ for posterity, for her *Nachwelt*. On the other, she is undergoing a personal crisis and is engaged in self-reflection. Both endeavors are intertwined in the complexities of social gender roles and the price one pays either by fulfilling those roles or by rejecting them. Streeruwitz's protagonist is successful, but only in so far as she fails in her attempt to objectify a life. She comes to the realization that she is unable to reduce the complex reality of her subject into the limited expression of narrative.

Underlying the narrative “objectivity” of form is the mythical realm. Los Angeles is presented as a dark, foreboding world, where the shades of the Austrian past exist in exile. The rules of life, of Austrian social norms and gender roles, do not apply. Margarethe has descended into the *Unterwelt*, and like Orpheus fails to bring back the lost

soul. What can she bring to the Nachwelt? She has been abandoned and has abandoned her own. She encounters the three fates at the end of the novel who warn her to flee and return to life. Streeruwitz's novel is a challenge to contemporary Austrian cultural memory, as it focuses on those broken by the culture, both past and present. Its struggle for the individual and collective identity is in the face of an ever-changing world which allows no absolute judgments. Finally the recipient, or Nachwelt, is illusive— does one really owe anything to posterity, or are we the posterity inheriting the burdens of the past?