The limits of memory: Christoph Ransmayr’s journalistic writings

Christoph Ransmayr’s volume of journalistic prose *Der Weg nach Surabaya* (1997) places him in an Austrian context. Like many of his famous predecessors from the 19th century to the present day, Ransmayr is interested in the way the past plays out in our present. He places himself explicitly in this tradition when writing of Austria’s Imperial legacy, but a similar approach may also be observed in his work dealing with Austria’s more contentious recent past.

The 19th century Austrian *Novellendichter* and dramatist Ferdinand von Saar summarised his own preoccupation with the events of his own lifetime and the immediate past in the following memorable lines:

> Ich bin ein Freund der Vergangenheit. Nicht daß ich etwa romantische Neigungen hätte und für das Ritter- und Minnewesen schwärme - oder für die sogenannte gute alte Zeit, die es niemals gegeben hat, nur jene Vergangenheit will ich gemeint wissen, die mit ihren Ausläufern in die Gegenwart hineinreicht und welcher ich, da der Mensch nun einmal seine Jugendeindrücke nicht loswerden kann, noch dem Herzen nach angehöre.1

For Saar at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries and for many fellow Austrian writers in the succeeding generation who grew up in the final days of the Habsburg Empire, the recent past held a peculiar fascination; yet this was not determined purely by nostalgic sentiment, but more by the ‘reach’ of the past into a more mundane present. In dealing with the lived past as a subject here, there will inevitably come a point at which living witnesses begin to fade.

Christoph Ransmayr is among the most celebrated German-language authors of the past decade, yet his image is that of a recluse. He gives relatively few interviews; his rare TV appearances have been more or less restricted to readings from his own work. Compared with his contemporaries, he has said very little in public about his writing. His speech on receiving the Anton Wildgans Prize in 1989 began with a quotation from Luciano De Crescenzo, who puts these words into Socrates’ mouth: ‘Das Dümmste, was man über irgendein dichterisches Werk sagen konnte, kam stets von seinen Dichtern’.2 This text was later published under the puzzling title ‘Hiergeblieben!’ - which refers to the fact that not only does Ransmayr share De Crescenzo’s Socratic scepticism concerning the value of writers’ comments on their own
writing, he also regards the very act of making a ‘thank-you’ speech as a concession to the seductive limelight of publicity.

All that being so, Ransmayr is no J. D. Salinger. He is conscious of the apparatus of the book market, but chooses to keep it at a distance. Since the worldwide success of *Die letzte Welt* in the early 1990s he has not needed to court public favour. He has also assiduously cultivated an international image. The cover text biographies of all his most recent works note ‘Christoph Ransmayr 1954 in Wels / Oberösterreich geboren, studierte in Wien und lebt zur Zeit in Cork, Westirland’ — the temporal reference underlining his status as a traveller in this world, a kind of Austrian Bruce Chatwin. Indeed, his 1997 collection *Der Weg nach Surabaya* promises exotic travel in its very title. There is a tension between Ransmayr’s would-be postmodern rootlessness and the visible rootedness of this writer that concerns me here. By this I do not mean to refer to the literary rumour-mongering in Austria that Ransmayr’s residence in Ireland is purely a piece of unpatriotic tax dodging. I propose to turn Ransmayr’s public image on its head to investigate this writer not as a purveyor of travel literature on faraway places like Surabaya, or West Cork for that matter, but as a specifically Austrian writer on Austrian themes in what I will suggest is a characteristically Austrian mode. In Ransmayr’s journalistic writings we find an archaeology of his monolithic third novel *Morbus Kitahara*, whose oblique and challenging treatment of the past has caused much controversy. I shall argue that the strategies that caused readers and critics so many difficulties in *Morbus Kitahara* can be better understood if we take into account the same author’s treatment of related subjects elsewhere in other genres.

Let me begin by noting that six of the sixteen pieces collected in *Der Weg nach Surabaya* concern Austria directly and, arguably, a further two deal with closely related matters. Of the six texts on Austrian themes, three deal with the Imperial heritage, two with the more recent Nazi legacy, and one with a tourist site.

When it comes to the decline and fall of the Dual Monarchy, the term ‘Habsburg Myth’, coined by the Italian Germanist Claudio Magris, springs readily to mind. Philip Manger has offered a succinct definition of the term:

In the Habsburg myth the transformation of reality that belongs to every poetic creation is grafted onto a particular historical-cultural process. The intuitive memory of the world of yesterday combines with a partly conscious, partly