Chapter Three

Hermeneutics, Obscurity, and Redeeming Memories of the Past: Hermine Cloeter’s Wanderungen through Vienna in “Durch die engste Gasse von Wien”

Gebt der Stadt ein bisschen ab von eurer Liebe zur Landschaft! Von dieser Landschaft habe ich hier nichts gesagt, habe die Grenzen der Stadt nur flüchtig mit ein paar Worten überschritten. Sie ist ja schon viel beschrieben und gemalt, die merkwürdige Gegend, in der unsere Stadt wohnt, die märkische Landschaft, die bis auf den heutigen Tag etwas Vorgeschichtliches behalten hat.
~Franz Hessel, “Nachwort an die Berliner”~

Geister seien hier ins Buch gebannt,/ Die uns heute noch vertraut und wahlverwandt,/ Die für alles Hohe entzünden,/ Die uns, bodenecht, des Volkes Seele künden—/Geist vom Geist, der uns gebildet hat,/ Der von je bestimmt den Herzenschlag dieser Stadt,/ Ungebrochen wirkt er in uns allen,/ Wird aus alten Zeiten stets in neuen halten,/ Nicht als Echo bloß, nein, als ein Hort der Kraft,/ Der aufs neue stets—das alte Wien sich schafft.
~Hermine Cloeter, Vorwort von “Geist und Geistern aus dem alten Wien”~

The urban landscape is made for living and walking. Human interactions with people, buildings, streets, and events occur every minute, easily forgotten as time marches on and the metropolis changes. And while there are many pedestrians in the city helping to create these daily occurrences, only a few are truly cognizant of the obscurity and illegibility caused by the multidimensionality of the city the masses claim to know.

In Chapter Two, I examined a significant element of Cloeter’s method of urban cultural archaeology and forensics: her technique, as a flaneuse of reading historical significance into the artifacts and built landscape of Vienna. Like Hessel’s Berlin, Vienna lends itself as an urban text, waiting to be read, interpreted, and analyzed by those individuals willing to give the built and lived space of Austria’s capital more than a perfunctory and

---

temporal-based surface look. Part of this spatial and material reading, however, includes interacting with and working through the illegibilities and obscurities of space the city presents to the would-be reader. Walking the streets and lanes of the metropolis of Vienna allows feuilletonist, Hermine Cloeter, to appreciate and redeem the illegible and obscure space and history of her city, including the space and memories forgotten over Vienna’s evolution into modernity.

In this chapter, I will argue that Hermine Cloeter’s feuilleton “Durch die engste Gasse von Wien” is a hermeneutic experience of urban forensics and cultural archaeology in Vienna. During her experience, Cloeter senses the obscurity of the city’s Innere Stadt region, explores and analyzes it, creating a means by which historical memories that exist as a part of the spatial opacity of Vienna may be redeemed. I will do this, first by discussing hermeneutics in relationship to the urban landscape and the phenomenon of obscurity/illegibility in the urban literary setting. Second, I will examine Cloeter’s experience with and recognition of the obscure and illegible material and spatial arrangements of Vienna. Finally, I will analyze the effects of Cloeter’s attention to interpreting the obscurity before her.

The urban landscape is a composite mixture of lifeless matter and human interaction. If we subtract the human factor from the city, we are left with a landscape filled with brick, stone, cement, and glass, poured over an immense span of land and piled high into the sky. The objective observer, with a bird’s eye view of the city, clearly sees the complete layout of the city, how one portion of the city interacts with another. Using this method of observation in looking at the city of Vienna, for example, we would see that Vienna’s Ringstrasse functions as a boundary that separates the First District
from the Second through Ninth Districts. We could also see that Stephansdom, designed with gothic architecture, is taller than any other edifice in the first district. From this perspective, there is no obscurity, no illegibility, because every structure and passageway is blatantly visible and merely portrayed as space. This type of observation, which merely looks at the material layout of the city, however clear and translucent to analysis and classification it may be, completely neglects the true supremacy of what the city is and does.

A closer view of the city, one which acknowledges the human element, is therefore needed to appreciate the value of a metropolis. Through acknowledgement of the human forces and factors, of the urban citizen or “ordinary practitioner” within the city, comes an awareness of a city’s opacity. Obscurity and illegibility in the urban topography arise from the fact that the city is a “lived-in” space, where people interact with each other and their surroundings daily. According to theorist, Michel de Certeau,

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandermänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen...The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor
spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representation, it remains daily and indefinitely other.\textsuperscript{78} The everyday pedestrian, in the very action of walking along the streets, entering and exiting buildings, and communicating with other walkers in the city, uses what is visible (passageways and edifices) to unknowingly create what is not visible: an otherness of story that fills the city space. These created stories, however, are not simple fairytales; they are records of what has transpired within a localizable space during the constant change in time. Turning again to de Certeau, we see that actual locations in the city, that places “are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded.”\textsuperscript{79} No longer can a building or street be considered to be merely a locale—it houses stories, histories, and memories within its very existence, making parts of it hidden and illegible, but not completely undiscoverable.

While an “ordinary practitioner” does not understand, comprehend, or appreciate these stories, the flaneur/flaneuse, equipped with hermeneutic sensibilities, finds the city to be a rich text waiting to be explored and experienced. Hidden memories, stories, and histories are there to be discovered, through the use of hermeneutics, which “must determine the centers of fate by ridding history of its conjunctive temporal tissue, which has no action in our fates.”\textsuperscript{80} For the flaneur, performing urban exegesis allows for the localization of memories to space, but at the same time dismisses and separates the importance of time from those stories. Time is not important, space and history are.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. 109.
Over time, space has changed and the people who walk within a space have changed. It is their stories that the urban writer senses through space and elucidates. De Certeau mirrors this sentiment in his realization that “privileging progress (i.e. time)...causes the condition of its own possibility—space itself—to be forgotten; space thus becomes the blind spot in a scientific and political technology.”\(^{81}\) Time has created lost and forgotten space, which constitutes obscurity, illegibility, and opacity in the urban landscape. The task and pleasure of the flaneur, then, is not simply to look at a building or street and see how it is; s/he must dismiss what s/he is looking at from the present time, must follow Franz Hessel’s admonition: “man muß sich in der ältern Stadt zwischen den einst auf königlichen Befehl geradeanglegten Straßen die paar krummen herausschälen,” and strip back the temporal surface of space to really discover the urban text filled with forgotten space and memory.\(^{82}\)

The urban landscape of Vienna is rich in illegible and obscure forgotten space and memory. Evidence of obscurity within the Viennese streets is readily apparent in “Durch die engste Gasse von Wien.” Cloeter’s very mention of the differences in the lighting of the area is a figurative metaphor for the illegibility filling the old city center. After commenting on the nondescriptive, mundane buildings she observes at the beginning of her wandering, Cloeter quickly notes: “rechts davon öffnet sich eine schmale, dümmerige Gasse, wie eingezwängt zwischen dem vornehmen Bau der geistlichen Herren und dem nächsten hohen, altersgrauen Haus. Zum erstenmal lese ich ihren Namen: Wächtergasse.”\(^{83}\) Squeezed in between the uninteresting high buildings along the \(\text{Hohenstaufengasse}\) lies a previously-unknown darkness. As her attention is drawn

\(^{81}\) de Certeau, “Walking in the City:” 95.
towards the shadowy lane, her experience of urban realization begins. Drawn into the
dim Wächtergasse, Cloeter’s descriptions of the scene soon acknowledge the appearance
of physical light upon the Stockwerkshöhe, far above where she is walking and
subjectively experiencing the streets: “Just fällt die volle Sonne darauf, und ich bin froh,
bald selbst wieder in der Sonnennelle zu stehen.” Although she expresses the desire to
once again be in the sunlight that is shining on the high-trafficked streets of Vienna,
ever once does Cloeter mention actually coming out into the sunlight: the rest of her
experience is an exploration the dimness surrounding her.

It is not the physical lighting itself, however, that constitutes the obscurity she
experiences. The obscurity lies in what the lighting leads to and symbolizes: the
illegibility of the historic city center. In stepping into the darkened streets, Cloeter is
entering a space of the city that itself is obscured due to the memories and figurative
ghosts that inhabit the pavement and buildings. The metaphorical nature of the lighting is
evident in that the words referring to light and darkness give way to detailed descriptions
of the memories lurking about her. The use of lighting as a metaphor is also apparent in
the mental change Cloeter acknowledges in the very next sentence when she returns:
“Wo bin ich aber nun? Das ist ja der Tiefe Graben! Mir war das, offen gestanden, sehr
überraschend, und gerade so, als ob ich zum erstenmal die Hohe Brücke gesehen hätte,
die so befremdlich sich über die Straße spannt.” Although she has been here before,
this trip into inner-city Vienna is a totally new experience for her: she has lost her bird’s
eye view form of spatial orientation. Once she realizes that she is in the Tiefe Graben,
however, her reaction is one of seeing a known space in a completely different manner,

84 Ibid. 106.
of being surprised that she is where she is. The spatial meaning once assigned to this locale is no longer valid. There is another spatial meaning living here, resisting discovery, but at the same time obscuring the official spatial assignments.

It is not just spatial orientation and appropriation that has been obscured. Cloeter confesses, just a few sentences later, that her sense of temporal orientation, in addition to the spatial orientation, has become obscured. Spontaneously turning herself around to see from whence she has just come, she questions herself: "Wo ist die moderne Großstadt mit ihrem echten und falschen Prunk und Glanz, mit ihren breiten, lichten Straßenzügen, mit ihrem Verkehr und Menschengewühl? Es ist schwer, an sie zu glauben, blickt man diese enge, engste Gasse, diese finstere Stiege hinauf." 86 Cloeter knows she is geographically still in the heart of Vienna, but her temporal connections to the city have changed. Her Vienna is a modern Vienna, but in descending into the Tiefe Graben, she can no longer sense where the modernity of Vienna. The city landscape and the time period in which it exists are no longer permanently cemented together. Like the existence of multiple spatial meanings, here multiple temporal assignments exist: plural historical time periods loiter among the stones and pavement.

While we, as analysts of Cloeter's text, can comprehend and appreciate this illegibility of time and space that the author experiences, we are not the only ones to understand what is happening. Cloeter herself recognizes what she is experiencing: "Da gehen wir so und so oft achtlos an einer Gasse vorüber und eines schönen Tages erst ,entdecken‘ wir sie. So wie wir jahrelang an einem Menschen gleichmütig vorübergehen, und einmal fällt ein besonderes Licht auf ihn, ein bedeutsames Wort zeigt ihn von einer

85 Ibid.
86 Ibid. 106-107.
ungewohnten Seite, und er wird uns merkwürdig. Wir werden neugierig, horchen in seine Seele hinein..."  

Like people, whom we overlook daily until occasion changes the way in which we see them, we carelessly walk over the streets, until one day, when our perspective is changed, we really discover the passageways. Cloeter's experience has been just that: the metaphoric and figurative dimness, which drew her into the Wächtergasse, is the "besonderes Licht" that has revealed to Cloeter an unusual perspective into these lanes and their surrounding architecture.

What is this unique perspective that Cloeter now sees? What in this part of the city is so illegible and obscure? Our answer lies in Cloeter's next movements. Having realized the lack of spatial and temporal solidification, Cloeter's curiosity is drawn to an old house. Exploring and describing the physical structure of the house that would never have been accessible if she had not ventured into the house, she realizes "eine eigentümlich, lauschige Verträumtheit nistet zwischen diesen Mauern."  

No words are wasted on a physical description. Cloeter focuses rather on the curious, eavesdropping dreaminess nesting here. This architectural structure is not static, but is, instead, a space of urban cultivation for what goes on or has gone on in it and around it. The perspective Cloeter has gained then, is one that realizes the memories associated with every location through which she walks, and that sees the multiple spatial and temporal appropriations that are inherently connected to these memories.

Where Cloeter would before have been inclined to pass over this seemingly ordinary location, she is drawn into the illegibility of the Wächtergasse and Tiefe Graben and their accompanying streets. This area is not so easily written-off as just another

---

87 Ibid. 106.
88 Ibid. 107.
example of the average Viennese architecture acting out its appropriate spatial role in Viennese modernity. Instead, Cloeter spends the majority of the rest of her article writing of the illegibilities she encounters as she continues her journey.

One of the first obscure memories that Cloeter tries to read and elucidate is that of the *Tiefe Graben*. Walking along the street, Cloeter begins to truly understand why the street is named as it is: it is an old waterway from the medieval period. But at the same time she begins to explain that the street actually used to be a streambed through which the Ottakringerbach once flowed, building „die natürliche Grenze der Stadt Wien,“ she admits the mysteriousness about it.\(^89\) This mysteriousness has kept the everyday Viennese citizen from appreciating the name and the location: „Das klingt uns heute fast nur noch wie eine Märchen ins Ohr. Was für alte, alte Erinnerungen unser Wien doch hat.\(^90\) Cloeter, in her exploration, is able to move beyond the fairytale effect, which the name has on the casual passerby. She can appreciate not only the history of the name, but also this fact: „dieser längst verschwundene Wasserlauf bestimmt noch heute hier das Straßenbild.\(^91\) Just because the Ottakringerbach has disappeared and allowed the *Tiefe Graben* to take its place spatially, this does not mean that the forgotten stream does not still have an effect on the physical layout of Vienna.

Cloeter devotes a similar attentiveness to the history behind the *Renngasse*. No longer is the name of the lane just a passive label. Like the *Tiefe Graben*, there is an obscure mystery surrounding the name. In just looking at the name, Cloeter observes: „deutlich scheint der Name der benachbarten Renngasse zu sprechen. Scheint! Denn man fragt sich doch, ob die Tradition recht hat, die hartnäckig behauptet, diese Gasse

---

\(^89\) Ibid. 107.
\(^90\) Ibid. 107.

47
habe ihren Namen von den sogenannten Scharlachrinnenn, die hier abgehalten worden sein." While many Viennese, especially the stubborn ones unwillingly to look beyond the usual meaning ascribed to the street, believe the name to derive from the days of the festive Sharlachrinnen, Cloeter senses the obscurity in the name. The use of the word "scheint," as opposed to the word "sein", distinctly indicates the presence of illegibility—what the name actually means is not known, leaving the Viennese to wonder about it. Through her own exploration and research into the obscure name, she reveals the derivation to be from a completely different source: it was a Probetauf used by the horse handlers for the animals they were trying to sell at the nearby Roßmarkt during the 13th century.

Dismissing the surface meaning and appearance and digging deeper into the myriad stories of forgotten space, Cloeter turns back to the Tiefen Graben, and recounts how the street, in addition to determining the spatial layout of the city, also participated in Vienna’s musical development. This memory, however, is a comical one, rarely included in a history of Viennese music. In the Tiefen Graben area, there existed a police-type force, the Rumorwache, that had the duty “vor allem für die Ruhe und Sicherheit in den Straßen während der Nacht zu sorgen.” Officially, this street and its Gebiet were safe and peaceful during the night, but behind this formal statement lies an obscurity, which Cloeter perceives (notice again the appearance of “scheint”): “Damit scheint es nicht immer am besten bestellt gewesen zu sein in der guten, alten Zeit. Raufszenen, Schlägereien waren auch in der Mitte der Stadt durchaus nichts Seltenes, und mit der

91 Ibid. 108.
92 Ibid. 108-109.
93 For the flaneur, what a city appears to be ("scheint") is more important than what it really is ("sein")—what something seems to be is his very passion.
Rumorwache Schabernack zu treiben, harmlosen oder bäsen, scheint eine beliebte Sache gewesen zu sein.\textsuperscript{96} Many attempts, both harmless and malicious, were made to disturb the stillness of the night, including a rather comical effort by "der würdige Vater Haydn.\textsuperscript{97} His musical performance was never meant to be a typical masterpiece, but rather a cacophonic symphony:

Haydn wies seinen Genossen, jedem in geraumer Entfernung von dem andern, ihre Standorte an; die Pauke wurde gar oben auf der (112) Hohen Brücke aufgepflanzt, und auf ein gegebenes Zeichen sollte jeder ein beliebiges Musikstück beginnen, jeder ein anderes. Das gab denn freilich ein ganz höllisches Konzert. In schauderhaftem Mißklang winselften die Geigen, ächtzen die Oboen, schrillten die Querpfefen, und von oben herab dröhnte mächtig der Paukenwirbel, alles in unmittelbarer Nähe des Rumorhauses, hart vor der Nase des Gesetzes. Türen und Fenster der umliegenden Häuser flogen auf und, aus dem ersten Schlaf geschreckt, machten Hinz und Kunz ihrem Zorne durch Schimpfen und Fluchen weidlich Lust.\textsuperscript{98}

Haydn and his accomplices managed, through meshing a variety of beloved songs together, to upset the traditional expectations for guarded silence and safety.

Here is a memory associated with a famous Viennese visitor and the forerunner to the revered \textit{Polizeiwache}, which completely upsets the expectations of an historical event/time we might have had only given the dry facts that the \textit{Tiefe Graben} was

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. 109.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. 111.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid. 111.
frequented by Haydn and that nocturnal safety and silence where insured by a police
force.

Realization of the illegible does not stop with the sheer acknowledgement that
ghosts and memories inhabit the city center: Cloeter digs deeper and presents specific
memories for her readers, of which those detailed here are merely a sampling. While the
memories she discerns are interesting in their own right, a deeper analysis of what effect
such an elucidation generates is needed to completely understand the importance of
reviving these memories into the space they occupy. In rejecting the functional and
traditional view of these pathways and domiciles as a means to an end and instead
sensing the vivacious nature of the very places her feet are treading, Cloeter’s is a journey
of making the illegible legible and the obscure clear.

One consequence of Cloeter’s acknowledgment of obscure memories is evident in
her own response to the change that has battered the streets since these scenes were
played out—Cloeter is not only aware of the stories, but can see them played out directly
in front of her. In the same moment in which she concedes: “so gut wie gar nichts ist von
diesen Stück Altwien übrig geblieben,”98 she counters this fading away, this tendency of
the city to be obscure as time progresses, with the assurance: “ich aber sehe noch immer die
spitzbübische Musikantenschar des jungen Haydn vor mir, die große Pause im
nächtlichen Schatten der zierlichen Nepomuk-Kapelle auf der hohen Brücke
geborgen.”99 While the described pieces of old Vienna no longer present physically,
Cloeter still sees them. The obscure has become legible and its reality is manifested in
 Cloeter’s review. Readers of her feuilletons can have similar experiences in venturing to

98 Ibid. 111-112.
99 Ibid. 115.
this part of the city. Having been made aware of memories that swarm around them, they can also see the memories live again.

Similarly, in making herself and her readers aware of what the Tiefe Graben was in the past, Cloeter now understands that traces of history continue inhabiting urban space. Despite this fact: “was Menschenhände schufen, konnten Menschenhände verwischen und willkürlich neu gestalten,” the memories and essence of the events and human movements live on.\textsuperscript{101} The old Ottakringerbach, “der vor so und so viel Jahrhunderten sich hier eigenwillig zur Donau hin seinen Weg gebahnt, herrscht hier unsichtbar noch immer über Menschenwerk. Im Tiefen Grabenzeichnet sich unverrückt sein Lauf.”\textsuperscript{102} Though newer generations of humanity have taken down and built over what past generations created and experienced, the memories of the past are still perceivable for those willing to look beyond the spatial layout of 1910 Vienna.

However, once an obscurity has become legible, it is neither secure nor permanent. Cloeter realizes this fact. Reading and interpreting the city is never easy and often times, never enduring, and Cloeter’s interpretations of memories are no exception. After having walked through the various Gassen, relating the obscure memories she has discovered there, her disillusionment with the Tiefe Graben reveals just how fragile it is. The city, in its tendency to be forever unreadable, and modernity, in its propensity to leave behind the intangible items more resistant to unfettered and carefree modernization, symbolized in the passing of a car, threaten and disperse the memories’ tenuous legibility: “Da saust im vollen Lauf ein elegantes Automobil an mir vorüber, und der

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
ganze Spuk ist in nichts zerstört." The automobile, a sign of modernity, has scattered the apparition of the past that Cloeter has been able to elucidate. The legibility that she has created is lost once again and she only now realizes how these small streets look in a modern reality:

Jetzt erst merke ich so recht, daß die Hohe Brücke ja gar nicht mehr ihren gotischen Spitzbogen hat, daß auf ihrem von der modernsten Technik gespannten Gewölbe ein schnurgerades Geländer aufgesetzt ist, ohne jegliche Bildsäule, ohne Kapellchen. Ich rette mich in meine engste Gasse, steige ihre Stufen empor. Ihre Romantik will mir aber auf einmal recht muffig vorkommen.  

The high bridges have lost the historical architectural and pictorial qualities in modern time and it is from this stifling reality that Cloeter must rescue herself.

Cloeter’s walking narrative, “Durch die engste Gassen von Wien,” describes not only how the illegible space of Vienna is discovered and understood, but also demonstrates how the illegible is redeemed (even if temporarily) and the impact of such redemption. As she forensically perceives the illegibilities—the stories, histories, and forgotten space—filling the streets and lanes that constitute the Innere Stadt, Cloeter salvages history in the form of memories and by retelling them to her readers, tentatively redeems them to become a part of the visible world. What was once ignored, forgotten, and unseen, is no longer so defined—instead, historical memories have once again become a part of the urban experience of Vienna, regardless of their original temporal foundation.

\(^{103}\) Ibid. 115.
\(^{104}\) Ibid. 115-116.