

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann by Karen R. Achberger

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pedagogical goal and intended readership limit the book's value for a broader academic audience.

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KAREN R. ACHBERGER: *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994. 228 pp. \$ 34.95.

Karen R. Achberger's comprehensive monograph on Ingeborg Bachmann is a welcome addition to the South Carolina series on heretofore mostly male modern European and Latin American writers. It transcends the expectations of both the beginning and advanced reader in more than one respect. Achberger convincingly insists on reading Bachmann's entire opus historically and intertextually, firmly situating it in the modernist tradition. While the writer's major poems, radio plays, prose, libretti, and critical writings prior to 1971 receive roughly equal attention, the book is weighted towards *Malina* and the «Death Styles» Cycle (with a work history and critically commented plot summaries for *Der Fall Franza* and *Requiem für Fanny Goldmann* and *Simultan*, Bachmann's last story collection, 1972). Achberger's study reflects the results of former research in demonstrating that Bachmann's philosophical dialogue with Martin Heidegger's existentialism and Ludwig Wittgenstein's language philosophy inform her «new poetic of «inward settings»» as much as her critical adaptation of Brecht's political morality and her unique relationship to music. Achberger enables readers to access Bachmann's allusively ambiguous self-referential writings without deadending the numerous possible paths to her accomplishments in her mythicized public image. Bachmann's much discussed turn to prose with *Das dreißigste Jahr* (1961), Achberger argues, was therefore not a turn away from poetry, but rather a step towards prose, an inclusive step that finds its analytically and poetically motivated transition in the medium of radio plays (*Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* [1952], *The Cicadas* [1955], and *The Good God of Manhattan* [1958]) as well as in her *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (1959–60) on the role of art and the artist in today's society. Achberger's previous scholarly work on Bachmann's libretti for Hans Werner Henze's ballets and operas *Der Idiot*, *Der Prinz von Homburg* (1960), and *Der junge Lord* (1965) has prepared her for the difficult task of balancing a general, well-documented introduction to Bachmann's texts with compelling interpretations of their musical and literary connections. This long-standing interest in her subject culminates in the careful tracing of motifs throughout Bachmann's intricate interweaving of literary and musical traditions, modes, and topoi (especially well done in her analysis of Bachmann's writing under the influence of the oppositional *triumvirat* of Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, and Arnold Schönberg). In Achberger's view, among the most important motifs for any understanding of Bachmann are her constant struggle to direct her utopian poetics towards a language unrestricted by «fatherland and mother tongue» and her contrapuntal insistence on gender-determined and system-endemic «death styles.» These contradictory yet parallel movements in Bachmann's textual compositions, Achberger contends, form a recognizable life-line

from the first collection of poems, *Die gestundete Zeit* (1953), to the only completed novel *Malina* (1971), the story collection *Simultan* (1972), and the story, poetry, and novel fragments discovered after her death in 1973 (*Requiem für Fanny Goldmann, Der Fall Franza, and Eka Kottwitz*).

In addition to her expert explication of Bachmann's musical-textual webs, Achberger sets out to settle a persistent dispute about Bachmann's work. She holds, as the jacket cover emphasizes, that Bachmann's «entire oeuvre is dedicated to the struggle against fascism.» The monograph's author repeatedly draws on Bachmann's own and her characters' expressions that «still today very many people do not die, but are murdered» (*Der Fall Franza*), that «it is the eternal war» (*Malina*) and, of course, that «Fascism is the first thing in the relationship between a man and a woman» (*Gespräche und Interviews*). Hardly anyone today would deny that Bachmann's images of tolerated everyday crimes and murders against women characters and their ability to narrate their side of the story – their memories – are metaphorically linked, if not directly comparable, to the degradation and master-minded extermination of Jews and other minorities in the Third Reich. However, why do Bachmann's metaphors and images refuse to distinguish between fascist ideology, war, «Liebestod,» individual murder, and planned mass murder? Since this complicated link has largely contributed to an understandable misreading of Bachmann's prose, a critical analysis of her essay «Auf das Opfer darf sich keiner berufen» in the context of contemporary events in postwar Germany and Austria, such as the Auschwitz trials, might have shed some light on the affair. But in this case, taking Bachmann's words as assurance for her feminist and politically motivated insurance against «erasing the traces of pain» does not quite do justice to the complexities on both the literary and the political levels. Situating Bachmann's work more firmly in the discourse on history and memory might have opened her «Todesarten» to an even more stimulating investigation, also in the direction of postmodernism, than Achberger already accomplishes. *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann* should fascinate readers interested in the relationship between music and literature as well as Bachmann scholars in search of solid ground mingled with refreshingly new insights. With its extensive endnotes and bibliography, it should become an essential research tool for the English-speaking fan of European women's literature. All in all, this is an indispensable addition to the ever-growing Bachmann scholarship.

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