

CRITICISM

VOLUME

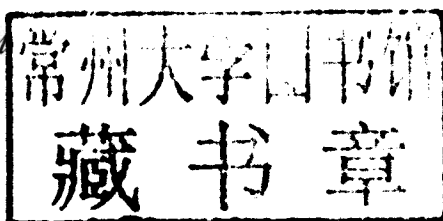
151

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 151

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Editor



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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Approximately three to six authors, works, or topics are included in each volume. An author's first entry in the series generally presents a historical survey of the critical response to the author's work; subsequent entries will focus upon contemporary criticism about the author or criticism of an important poem, group of poems, or book. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from critics who do not write in English whose criticism has been translated. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

Organization of the Book

Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author's name (if applicable).
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is either a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are

printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *PC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *PC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *PC* volume in which their entry appears.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *PC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Ingeborg Bachmann

1926-1973

Austrian poet, short-story writer, novelist, critic, librettist, and playwright.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that she published only two volumes of poetry, Bachmann was one of the best-known Austrian poets of her generation. A member of Gruppe 47, the avant-garde literary group whose members also included novelist Günter Grass and poet Paul Celan, she rose quickly to fame in the early 1950s, gaining prominence for her fragmentary, introspective lyric works. She was popular with avant-gardists for her innovations in poetic form, but her work was equally appealing to older and more conservative audiences, who were compelled by her focus on the importance of ritual and her tendency toward introspection and personal expression. Although best known for her poetry, Bachmann publicly declared her farewell to poetry in 1967 before turning to short fiction and novels. She is also known for the librettos and lyrics she wrote for composer Hans Werner Henze.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on 25 June 1926 in the rural Austrian city of Klagenfurt, near the borders of Italy and Slovenia, Bachmann experienced a childhood that was isolated and idyllic. Although a cosmopolitan figure in later life, she attributed her interest in the “border of speech” to her early years in southern Austria. Bachmann’s idyllic life there ended in 1939, when German forces arrived in Klagenfurt.

After World War II Bachmann studied law and philosophy at Innsbruck and Graz before moving to occupied Vienna to study with Victor Kraft, whose creed was defiantly pro-Austrian and opposed to the German metaphysical philosophical tradition. Under Kraft’s tutelage, Bachmann graduated from the University of Vienna, writing a dissertation on the reception of German metaphysician Martin Heidegger. Her thesis explicitly criticized the venerable philosopher, whom she found objectionable both for his theoretical stance and for his refusal to stand against the Nazi regime.

Bachmann began to write and publish poetry in the early 1950s while working at the Viennese radio station Rot-Weiß-Rot. When Celan brought her to Munich in 1952 to read her poems before Gruppe 47, Bachmann was an

immediate success. Her appearance led to the publication of her first volume, *Die gestundete Zeit* (1953; *On Borrowed Time*), and to worldwide renown. In 1953 Bachmann moved to Rome, where she wrote most of her second and last volume of poems, *Anrufung des Großen Bären* (1956; *Conjuration of the Great Bear*).

In 1962 Bachmann suffered a nervous breakdown following the end of her romantic relationship with Swiss playwright Max Frisch. In the aftermath of the breakup, she was extraordinarily productive, writing more than a hundred poems between 1962 and 1964 that were not published during her lifetime. During this period of emotional distress, she was prescribed pain medications that led to a lifelong addiction.

Although she published a handful of poems in journals during the mid-1960s, Bachmann stopped writing poetry in 1967, turning instead to the composition of short fiction, novels, and essays. Her short fiction has never been as highly praised as her verse, but *Malina* (1971), the first volume of a proposed novel cycle titled *Todesarten* (*Ways of Dying*), was popular with readers and reviewers.

Injured in an apartment fire in Rome that likely started when she fell asleep while smoking a cigarette, Bachmann died in the hospital several days later on 17 October 1973 at the age of forty-seven.

MAJOR WORKS OF POETRY

On Borrowed Time showcases Bachmann’s dual appeal to traditionalists and the avant-garde. Her poems, characterized by a deft fusion of past and present poetic forms and the presentation of emotional themes in classical German, evoke a nostalgia for the past. At the same time, younger audiences found Bachmann’s experiments with form and collage compelling. As Peter Demetz (1970; see Further Reading) observed, Bachmann’s “was clearly a mode that expressed a central moment of intellectual transition,” searching for “a final haven in the landscapes of its intellectual origins” but finding only “crumbling ruins devoid of meaning.”

Written for the most part during Bachmann’s residence in Rome, *Conjuration of the Great Bear* attests to the effects of the Mediterranean landscape, narrating the shift from a chill, northern land haunted by the past to the bright, inspirational setting of Italy. Perhaps Bachmann’s best-known verse, the title poem takes as its governing metaphor the constellation known as the Great Bear. The poem imagines

a dialogue between bear and poet, who speaks to the embodied animal in addition to addressing the figure's metaphorical, mythological, and biblical resonances. The poet summons the bear as an ancient spirit of the earth and sky, compelling him to visit her. The bear's perspective makes clear that the poet's challenge to the cosmos and to history is arrogant and foolish, a lesson inscribed in the relative insignificance of human life and human power.

In the years after the release of *Conjuration of the Great Bear*, Bachmann published only a handful of works in verse form. Her last poem, "Keine Delikatessen" ("No Delicacies"), constitutes a farewell to poetry, expressing her discontent with the genre and demonstrating a rhetorical breakdown that seems to illustrate her fall into silence. The poem presages the shift in her work toward a more general audience and evinces her increasing concern that poetry does not sufficiently act in the world:

I have learned to be considerate
with the words
that exist
(for the lowest class)

hunger
 disgrace
 tears
and
 darkness

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although she was prominent in Viennese and international poetry circles during her lifetime, Bachmann was never a popular poet, and little of her work was available in English translation before the 1970s. As Jo Ann Van Vliet (1985) explained, there was a resurgence of critical interest in Bachmann and her work in the late 1980s, inspired by the publication of her four-volume collected *Werke* (Works) in 1978; the opening of the archive of her papers, poems, and letters in 1981; feminist discussions of her works; and the publication of an English translation of a selection of her poems by Mark Anderson titled *In the Storm of Roses* (1986; see Further Reading). The initial revival of interest in Bachmann subsided and she again settled into relative obscurity until the early 2000s. At this time new editions of her work were published, including an important bilingual edition by Peter Filkins titled *Darkness Spoken* (2006; see Further Reading), which includes the previously unpublished poems written around the time of her breakdown in the early 1960s.

Critics have frequently read Bachmann's work in the context of her philosophical background and interests. Siegfried Mandel (1973) distinguished Bachmann from the other Gruppe 47 writers, describing her lyric sensibility as standing in opposition to her compatriots' fear that romanticism and interiority would lead to sentimentality. Where other writers in the group tended toward a sociolog-

ical approach, he explained, Bachmann wrote with "sincerity, power, and openness of heart." The intimacy of her work is not, Mandel was careful to explain, a form of an anti-intellectualism; rather, her academic training made her familiar with the work of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose assertion of the distinction between language and (according to Mandel) the world led her to define the poet as one "in conflict with language" whose role is to "establish the signification of language and renew language through ritual." Rex Last (1980; see Further Reading) similarly interpreted Bachmann in relation to her philosophical interests and academic work. Quoting her own assertion that the function of poets is to "extend our possibilities in the interplay between the impossible and the possible," Last found Bachmann's metaphysics to be influenced by Heidegger's inquiries into the nature of being and the power of poetic language, and her methodology to be shaped by Wittgenstein's belief that language defines our perception of the world and limits our knowledge of it. Anderson concurred in his introduction to *In the Storm of Roses*, noting that Bachmann "never conceived of philosophy and poetry as mutually exclusive enterprises" but was induced by her ethical concerns to use the "language of the soul," as well as that of science, in her work. William A. Langdon (1986-87) provided a detailed analysis of the relationship between Bachmann's poetry and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922).

Recent scholarship has addressed Bachmann's relationship to history and time with respect to Central Europe's traumatic past and attempts at cultural reconstruction in Austria and Germany after World War II. Van Vliet remarked that although critics have written about the political ramifications of Bachmann's prose works, similar analyses have rarely been applied to her poetic works. Van Vliet criticized this tendency, pointing out that in their meditation on temporality and remembrance, the poems of *On Borrowed Time* address the process of denazification and collective guilt. Of particular import, according to Van Vliet, was Bachmann's use of religious imagery to indict the Catholic Church for its inaction during the Third Reich and for its resistance to the process of denazification after the war. Karen R. Achberger (1991) compared Bachmann to Marxist writer Bertolt Brecht, observing that whereas Brecht's concerns were with the large-scale and social, Bachmann was preoccupied with intimate relationships, demonstrating a particularly acute awareness of the relationship between fascism and heterosexual social norms and power structures. In her analysis of Bachmann's decision in 1967 to move away from verse, Amy Kepple Strawser (1998) focused on shifts in the poet's use of pronouns throughout her career, linking them to the development of Bachmann's subjective female voice. With the emergence of that voice—demonstrated, according to Strawser, by the way in which she used the pronoun "I" in her late poetry—Bachmann turned to prose in order to address the more specific social and political

issues of female identity and violence against women. Áine McMurtry (2012) read the poetic drafts Bachmann wrote during her stay in a Swiss sanitarium in the early 1960s as the expression of an implicitly feminist struggle against patriarchal structures. Pointing to the poems' articulation of affective and physical states, McMurtry asserted that the explicit references to physical and mental agony "rebel" against a masculine cultural regime characterized by "oppressive aesthetic and socio-cultural norms that seek to exclude certain aspects of experience from the public sphere." Reingard Nethersole (1998) concurred with Strawser's analysis of Bachmann's shift away from the lyric mode. Suggesting that the poet realized that lyric, because it aims to produce harmony, is "always on the side of the 'king,'" Nethersole concluded that the goal of the lyric mode is the subordination of feminine power.

Filkins (2004) found more coherence in Bachmann's career than did other critics, arguing that both her prose and her poetry are constructed around the idea of borders, which are depicted as both limits and potential egresses. Throughout Bachmann's career, Filkins contended, a complex consciousness emerges that is defiantly fragmentary yet insistently oriented towards "Das Unsägliche" (the unspeakable). Filkins (2006) added that Bachmann's later, unpublished poems, which were written after and in response to her nervous breakdown, demonstrate a developing understanding of her sick self as a mirror of a diseased society and vice versa. These later works draw a bleak picture of "contemporary men and women locked in the struggle between the diseases of society and the wounds of the private soul, language existing between as both scalpel and sword." Eva B. Revesz (2007) connected Bachmann's move away from poetry with the trauma of the Holocaust. Reading Bachmann's work in the context of critic Theodor Adorno's pronouncement that writing poetry after Auschwitz would be "barbaric," Revesz suggested that the "self-shattering" of Bachmann's "poetic persona" was partly the result of her identification with Celan's experience as a concentration camp survivor and thus can be viewed as a more general reflection of the aftereffects of traumatic experience. Anderson similarly proposed that Bachmann's move away from the poetic form was rooted in a desire for moral and ethical engagement with such issues affecting the world as poverty and oppression, an engagement ill-suited to the intimacy of lyric.

Jenny Ludwig

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Der gute Gott von Manhattan: Hörspiel [The Good God of Manhattan: Radio Play]. Munich: Piper, 1958. (Radio play)

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War Diary: With Letters from Jack Hamesh. Ed. Höller. Trans. Mike Mitchell. London: Seagull, 2011. Print. Trans. of *Kriegstagebuch*.

*Includes "Nachflug" ["Night Flight"].

†The first novel of a proposed novel cycle titled *Todesarten* [Ways of Dying].

‡Includes "Keine Delikatessen" ["No Delicacies"], first published in the journal *Kursbuch* in 1968.

CRITICISM

Siegfried Mandel (essay date 1973)

SOURCE: Mandel, Siegfried. "Poetry: Acts of Memory and Provocation." *Group 47: The Reflected Intellect*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973. 84-144. Print.

[In the following excerpt, Mandel chronicles Bachmann's rapid rise to fame, describing how she won the Gruppe 47 prize in 1953 and, during the next twenty years, several other prizes and professorships. Portraying her as "haunted by the flux and decay of things," Mandel lauds Bachmann for resisting Gruppe 47's distrust of sentimentality and Romantic verse forms and for her "reassertion of the lyric tradition."]

Few poets have risen as meteorically as Ingeborg Bachmann (b. 1926), gaining the tacitly acknowledged title of first lady of Group 47 although some ungallant souls also regarded her as its prima donna. At the May 1952 meeting at Niendorf on the Baltic Sea, the dangers of instant criticism became obvious as interpretations of poetry readings shot wide of the mark and discussions turned into inconclusive polemics. Some thought her poetry to be brittle, but most were impressed with the intensely lyrical and restrained attitude of the twenty-six-year-old Austrian poetess as she read some unpublished selections, among them "**Dunkles zu sagen**" [To speak darkly], a manneristic parade piece conjoining the feeling of a modern poet with that of Orpheus: in the throes of metamorphosis "we both lament" dissolution into nature. Bachmann plays on the words *Saite* and *Seite* (the strings of the lyre and the word side):

Like Orpheus I play
the tune of death upon the lyre-strings of life
.....
But like Orpheus I know
life this side of death.

Of primary interest is the previewing of her manneristic method, the mutability theme, her sense of isolation, the personification of the inanimate, her strong image patterns, and the dark subjective mood so prevalent in her poetry.

Later that year she read at another meeting of the group, but it was in 1953 that she gained its prize, \$500 donated by Rowohlt Publishers and a radio network. As numerous as the microphones were figures from the publishing world, magazine editors, reporters, heads of radio studios, literary agents, and other representatives of the literary marketplace so that it was an auspicious time for the "young, pretty woman" to read. No other poet made any burnt offerings at the sessions, and she made the most of the spotlight and attentive critical focus, eliciting praise for "an astonishing talent" and "a moving power of language." Through the available publicity apparatus at the Mainz meeting from which the encomiums emanated, Bachmann's career was launched, and she was able to sustain it with two slim volumes of poetry in 1953 and 1965, libretti for the composer Hans Werner Henze, and then turning from poetry she wrote radio plays, short stories, and finally a novel in 1971, garnering on the way several prizes of distinction and visiting professorships, including a term at Harvard.

Among Group 47 writers, Bachmann strikes me as having one of the most disciplined minds, subtle and probing, formulating a modern-day gnosticism but often giving way to ecstatic desperation when touching on the subjects of love and language; her existential pathos often becomes the sheer sentimentality she tries to avoid. Her first path was academic—studies of law and philosophy—resulting in a doctoral dissertation on the critical reception of Martin Heidegger's existentialist philosophy. In modern fields of inquiry one finds the greatest morass of verbiage and confusion of thought among philosophers so that the precision of Ludwig Wittgenstein, to whose writing Bachmann fortunately was attracted, wrought a long-overdue revolution. Deliberately seeking isolation, Wittgenstein, a former pupil of Bertrand Russell, taught school in a remote village in Austria and worked out a series of aphorisms in a book called *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), with profound impact upon philosophy and poetics through its inquiry into the necessary relations between "words and things" in language. Judging from Bachmann's essay on the philosopher, she climbed the ladder of his aphorisms and then threw it away as he suggested in *Tractatus*, and turned to poetry. Wittgenstein noted that philosophy is not a theory but an activity of linguistic analysis and logic which clarifies thought yet has a purely tautological character—it can only mirror the world; philosophy, therefore, can neither probe reality nor tell us anything new about it. For the philosopher Wittgenstein, the "*limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" (*Tractatus*, 5.6) and it follows that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (*Tractatus*, 7). The non-didactic poet goes beyond the denial or assertion of facts, which is the essential business of language, and seeks to elucidate feelings through nonlogical metaphor and to change the "limits" of the world. Bachmann made the transition from the logic of philosophy to the existential pathos of man, a bound creature "not completely capable of saying what he suffers," but, said Bachmann in her essay on *Music and Poetry*, one

must respect this anguished human voice for we all live “on this darkling planet” threatened by ever-growing madness.

The remarkable rapidity with which Bachmann’s poetry gained individuality may be attributed in part to her realization that “the facts of literature are accompanied by theory.” She was encouraged by the example of Hugo von Hoffmansthal, who felt that when routinely used abstract words fall apart “in one’s mouth like mouldy mushrooms” one must abandon comfortable simplifications. The poet must seek some unifying principles amid daily fragmentation and seek orientation through art as to one’s actual and potential place in fateful time, using the vantage point of a historical present. Essential to her theory is the idea that the poet is in conflict with language and that out of this conflict should develop a new manner of style, *Gangart*, which houses a new spirit and moral drive and seeks perception rather than aesthetic satisfaction: within given boundaries, the poet must establish the signification of language and renew language through ritual.

By associating ritual with language, Bachmann revives the oldest function of both, that is, to allow man to participate in the re-creation of the universe, the drama of man’s fall, the longing for Eden. “Everything is a question of language,” writes Bachmann, and the poet as *Mitwisser der Schöpfung* has co-knowledge of creation and must engage in a constantly renewing empathy. In her poetry volumes *Die Gestundete Zeit* [*Borrowed time*] (1953) and *Anrufung des grossen Bären* [*Appeal to the Great Bear*] (1956), Bachmann opens her senses to ancient and modern experiential processes through which psychological symbols (Sun-god, Earth-mother) became universal archetypes and accepted mental patterns. Specifically, she found in the zodiacal system, which has maintained a hold on the popular imagination since Babylonian times, an interplay of fact and intuition, science and magic, and mythopoetic accretions. Some of her poetics are strikingly similar to Aristotle’s *De Caelo* in which the stars and constellations are viewed not merely as bodies arranged in order but are possessed of soul and life and activity comparable with that of animals and plants. Bachmann was fascinated by the zodiacal pictorialization of the interpenetrative relationships of everything within time—animals, humans and heroes, gods, objects—as well as the zodiac’s service as a mathematical measuring device of time.

It would be wrong to read astrological symbolism into every poem that Bachmann has written, but on the other hand an interpretation of many of her poems without recourse to a table of constellations with signs, names, meanings, attributes, and color significations is to ignore the coherence of the imagery. In her poetry there are striking resemblances to the facts and metaphors of the astrological system as the sun annually enters the signs of the zodiac, ascends eastward from dawn to its apex at noon, pitiless and splendid, and descends westward below the horizon

into dark night. The figures of wolf, lupines, dogs, fish, sea snakes, dragons and monsters, crabs and dancing scorpions, bear, and others of the constellation lead their double life—cosmic and related to the borrowed time of man. Stars and moon have their symbolic functions as omens—the moon with its oldest significations hovers over such disasters as shipwrecks—and are not to be taken as romantic paraphernalia.

In the title poem, “*Die Gestundete Zeit*,” *Zeit* simultaneously means the measured time of the zodiac—its mathematical and prophetic function—and the idea of borrowed time—a duration of time before humans must pay their destined debt. Within the poem a prophetic warning is heard, “soon you must tie your shoes” (a colloquializing of the biblical “gird your loins”), and later the urgency of time elapsed and not to be denied, “Do not look back. / Tie your shoes,” as the end of human time “becomes visible on the horizon,” the line between the ascent and descent of the sun. Characteristic are the tautological lines which inexorably repeat facts while the names of constellations and stars actualize mythic-cosmic-human relationships. Who is the loved one sinking in the “sand” of time and ready to part from this life “after every embrace”? She seems to be the partner in the eternal replay of the Orpheus-Eurydice drama and at the same time the girl with the “flowing hair” (*Coma Berenices*, the constellation named after the ancient princess who sacrificed her hair to the gods in order to save her husband), assuming one of the many thematic motifs in Bachmann’s poetry.

Once one understands Bachmann’s numinous interchange between constellations and man within the context of time and hears the mythological and biblical tones, one appreciates her art. The poem “*Anrufung des grossen Bären*,” [*Appeal to the Great Bear*] (with echo meanings of “invocation” and “conjuration”) illustrates her orientation as a drama ensues between poet and the bear in its stellar and literal figuration.

Great Bear, come down, shaggy night,
cloudfur beast with the old eyes,
star eyes,
through the underbrush break shimmering
your paws with their claws,
star claws,
wakefully we guard our hearths,
though in your ban, and we mistrust
your tired flanks and the sharp
half-exposed teeth,
old bear.

A pine-cone: your world.
You: its scales.
I prod them, tumble them
from the pines in the Beginning
to the pines at the End,
snort at them, test them in my maw
and seize them with my paws.

Be fearful or be not fearful!
Pay into the jingling purse and give

the blind man a good word
so that he keeps the bear in tow.
And spice the lambs well.

Could be that this bear
tears itself loose, threatens no longer
and chases all cones that from the pines
have dropped, the great, winged ones
which plunged from paradise.

With a display of foolhardy daring and a sense of fear, man challenges the cosmos anthropomorphically only to be again thrown back upon his own, as was Job after God's rhetorical question, "Canst thou guide the bear with her train?" (Job, 38, xxxii). With trepidation, the poet summons the great bear and is warned that just as the bear of the woods toys with cones so the bear of the stars, a concretized primal force, toys with the planetary world until the inevitable apocalypse. The pines are the trees of paradise, the winged fallen cones are angels or symbolically Adam's fall; the blind Tiresias is the prophet priest who propitiates God, gods, constellations, or forces through sacrificial lambs and he is the circusman who thinks he has the bear in tow. If one also sees the "star eyes" as the planets or "the eyes of the Lord" (mentioned in Zechariah, 4, x), one indulges in a luxury allowed by the allusive yet tight structure of the poem. Again, neither man's hope nor despair counts in the workings of a universe in which the bear can change from *Ursa Major* to its original nameless potential force; the world is independent of man's will. Bachmann's existential allegory of the bear is as brilliant as Camus's interpretation of the Sisyphus myth.

Statements of fact and the figurative have the same syntax in Bachmann's poetry, and one readily accepts their reversibility particularly within the elegiac sense of time which is so prevalent as to be obsessive.

And what does your heart already attest?
Between yesterday and tomorrow swings your heart,
soundless and strange,
and what it tolls,
is its fall out of time.

"Fall ab, Herz" [Fall off, heart]

In Bachmann's poems the fall of Icarus-Adam-angel-man-pine cone is identical:

... he approaches the shears of the sun
in the fog, and when it blinds him,
the fog embraces him in his fall.

"Die Brücken"

Sometimes such concepts, personifications, metaphors, and realities combine kaleidoscopically to yield a message, "Botschaft":

From the corpse-warm vestibule of heaven steps the sun.
Not the immortals are there,

but the fallen, we perceive.

No light touches decay. Our godhead,
History, has reserved us a grave
from which there is no arising.

In the poem **"Nachflug" [Nightflight]**, associatively the bombardier too is a plowman who tills the heavens with motors and he is no less destructive than the Ploughstar created by the gods of Babylonian legend to kill Gilgamesh. When the air is rent asunder by the man-made comets, "Sun and earth have not disappeared, / but wander like stars and are unrecognizable." The point-of-view alternately shifts from the pilot above, who concentrates on the cold mechanics of his job, to the people affected by the devastation below. The moral horror of the pilot's dissociation from the effects of his pin-pointings is as coolly rendered as the attempt to pick up everyday routine by people who are in a state of shock—yet, above them also hovers the question, "Whose hands were clean?" One may interpret celestial conjunctions of the zodiac, but who may interpret the man-made plane's lingering silver cloud-strip? "Who dares to remember the night?" Facts, symbols, rhetorical questions are unfamiliarly juxtaposed in a familiar context (a bombing incident) and define Bachmann's *Gangart*, her poetic stance.

As in **"Nachflug,"** several other poems touch on the past and contemporary events in a generalized way.

Where Germany's sky blackens the earth,
its decapitated angel seeks a grave for hate
and hands you the dish of its heart.

.....

Seven years later,
in a house of death,
yesterday's executioners
drain the golden cup.

"Früher Mittag" [Early noon]

No one seems to have learned:

The war is no longer declared
but continued. The outrageous
has become commonplace.

"Alle Tage" [All the days]

For the most part, Bachmann was haunted by the flux and decay of things and the lack of cosmic causality; cyclic stellar conjunctions either will preside over the millennium or the destruction of the world through deluge or fire—"Ahead of the hurricane the sun flees westward, / two thousand years are up and nothing will remain for us" (**"Grosse Landschaft bei Wien," [Great landscape near Vienna]**).

Bachmann is at her best when she gives us her own "Curriculum Vitae," passionate lyric confessions, which must