

transcript

HEIMRAD BÄCKER

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afterword to the english edition by PATRICK GREANEY



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afterword to the english edition

Heimrad Bäcker (1925–2003) began his investigation of National Socialism and the Shoah in the late 1940s, and in 1968 he began to gather materials for *transcript*, which was first published in German in 1986.¹ On *transcript*'s mostly blank pages, Bäcker isolates quotations from historical documents about the Shoah and makes them into enigmatic elements of a code that demands to be deciphered—or, as Bäcker puts it, “a methodical gibberish that replicates a deadly gibberish.”² *transcript* differs from its sources only as much as one kind of gibberish differs from another, and Bäcker makes no claim to have understood or overcome National Socialism and its language. Instead, he uses the methods of concrete and visual poetry to give his source documents “a new effectiveness” for the examination of Nazism.³

In one of Bäcker's notes preserved in the Austrian Literary Archives in Vienna, he claims, “There is no other anthropology of fascist/terrorist systems except the analysis of their language.”⁴ Bäcker is not alone in this conviction, and he is not the only poet to use quotations and documentary methods to pursue this analysis. He does not seem to have known the American poet Charles Reznikoff's 1975 book *Holocaust*, but it offers useful points of comparison with *transcript*: Reznikoff quotes exclusively from the Eichmann trial transcripts and the multivolume *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg*, one of Bäcker's main sources. The German poet Helmut Heißenbüttel uses a similar method to present historical documents in his 1980 poem, “Deutschland 1944,” a one hundred sixty-nine line collage that Bäcker calls “groundbreaking.”⁵ Although Bäcker highlights his debt to Heißenbüttel, he was perhaps just as inspired by historical accounts of Nazism as he was by literature. He dates his study of National Socialism to the publication of the Nuremberg trial transcripts, and he was familiar with Victor Klemperer's historical and autobiographical work *The Language of the Third Reich*, first published in German in 1947. Historian Raul Hilberg's books were also an important resource. Hilberg's later works mirror Bäcker's interest in presenting source texts; in an unpublished letter from 2006, Hilberg writes of his “intellectual affinity” with Bäcker.⁶

Bäcker's focus on the language of National Socialism should be understood in the context of Austrian avant-garde literature. The origins of Austria's postwar avant-garde can be found in the Vienna Group, five writers (Friedrich Achleitner, H. C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener) who collaborated in the 1950s and early 1960s. They created collective and individual works in a wide range of genres and media, from photcollages and cabaret-like performances to dialect poetry and narrative texts. The group's works were politically provocative, because they criticized and disturbed Austrian attempts to create a sense of calm normalcy, in politics and in the arts, after the war. This combination of experimentation and political critique also characterizes *transcript*, which engages with Nazism not merely as an historical matter: in the year of *transcript*'s publication, Kurt Waldheim was elected president of Austria despite accusations that he committed war crimes in World War II.⁷ Waldheim is only the most prominent instance of continuity between the Nazi regime and the postwar Austrian political establishment; his example shows to what degree Nazism was still, in 1986, an urgent political problem.

In the decades that followed the Vienna Group's dissolution (usually dated to member Konrad Bayer's suicide in 1964), Austrian experimental writers transformed the Group's legacy as they developed a distinctive avant-garde tradition, in which Bäcker played the role of mediator and mentor. He was the editor of the Austrian literary journal *neue texte* (1968–1991) and the co-director, along with his wife Margret Bäcker, of a publishing house, edition *neue texte* (1976–1992). The Bäckers published works by authors from the Vienna Group, by Ernst Jandl and Friederike Mayröcker (who were close to the Vienna Group but not part of it), and by younger artists and writers, such as VALIE EXPORT and Reinhard Priessnitz.

Although Bäcker wrote and published poetry and shorter texts from his teens on, it was not until 1985 that his first book appeared. His books include a photographic documentation of Italy's 1974 national referendum on divorce (*REFERENDUM* [1988]), a slim volume of concrete poetry (*SGRA* [1990]), and a selection of his texts and poems (*Gedichte und Texte* [1992]), but he is now best known for *transcript* and its method of presenting quotations from texts about the Shoah. He also used this method in a 1989 radio play based on *transcript* (*Gehen wir wirklich in den Tod?* [1989]) and in two

other books (*EPITAPH* [1989] and *nachschrift 2* [1997]). At the time of his death, he was working on *nachschrift 3*, a collection of documentary materials about his *transcript* books, and *landschaft m*, a book of photographs of Mauthausen.

The relation of *transcript* to National Socialism is complicated by the fact that Bäcker was an active member of the Hitler Youth. In a short autobiographical text, Bäcker describes his involvement: “At 16, I was an intern at the Linzer *Tages-Post* in the local news section. When it began to become clear in 1943 that the paper would be closed, I quit and joined the Press and Photography Office of the Hitler Youth’s regional office. I had been active in the Hitler Youth since 1938; last rank: cadre unit leader [*Gefolgschaftsführer*]. At 18, I became a member of the Party. No position in the Party. No activities in which other people would have been hurt.”⁸ In the note to page 97 of *transcript*, Bäcker describes a 1942 book review that he published, as a seventeen-year old, in the *Tages-Post* as evidence of his “dangerous, imbecilic mania for hero worship.”

It would be a mistake to conceive of Bäcker’s works only as confessional attempts to come to terms with his past. They are also a sustained critique of the concepts in his early writings, concepts that were key to National Socialism. In *EPITAPH*, Bäcker quotes his 1942 review, which discusses an adulatory book about Hitler: “This book is a mirror for what can never be expressed, but only experienced in the vision of these images: a piece of the man Adolf Hitler.”⁹ The pathos of Bäcker’s adolescent review relies on two concepts—ineffability and immediacy—that his adult works call into question. To criticize the first notion, *transcript* emphasizes the fact that the destruction of European Jewry was not unspeakable but a program that was spoken about, extensively, by thousands of people, albeit often in code or euphemistically. This stance opposes Bäcker not only to his youthful rhetoric, but also to many literary critics who rely on the notion of ineffability to understand literature about the Shoah.

The counterpart of ineffability in Bäcker’s review is the immediacy of the “vision” of “what can never be expressed.” *transcript* criticizes the belief in this kind of immediate vision by insisting on the mediated, linguistic nature of knowledge, most prominently in its inclusion of a bibliography that embeds *transcript* in a large body of historical texts and documentary

sources. *transcript* does not pretend to offer a complete vision of the Shoah but, rather, an image of the writer's and reader's incomplete knowledge.

Friedrich Achleitner writes in his afterword that *transcript* aims to “convey reality” not through description but through concrete poetry's distancing methods, which are complemented by the distancing effects of the notes and bibliography. They point to the fact that representing the Shoah requires more than one method and more than one work. At every stage, the reader is aware that there is something else to read and something more to learn. The Shoah is transformed from something that readers thought they already understood into something that they have yet to grasp and that *transcript's* apparatus allows them to examine. Beyond the body of the text, there are the endnotes; the endnotes contain coded references to a bibliography; and the bibliography refers to a multitude of sources. In *transcript*, knowledge of the Shoah becomes a project.

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NOTES

- 1 Biographical and bibliographic information on Bäcker is taken from Sabine Zelger, “Heimrad Bäcker,” in Thomas Kraft, ed., *Lexikon der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur seit 1945* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 2003), 1:67–68.
- 2 From Bäcker's introductory remark to the endnotes for this volume.
- 3 Heimrad Bäcker, “Dokumentarische Dichtung,” in Helmut Eisendle, ed., *Österreich lesen: Texte von Artmann bis Zeemann* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1995), 280.
- 4 Heimrad Bäcker papers (214/03, 8/149), Austrian Literary Archive of the Austrian National Library.
- 5 Bäcker, “Dokumentarische Dichtung,” 278.
- 6 Raul Hilberg to Thomas Eder, 10 February 2006, recipient's collection.
- 7 An international commission of historians, convened by the Austrian government at Waldheim's request, concluded that “Waldheim must

have known of the war crimes committed by the unit in which he served from 1942 to the end of the war, German Army Group E. It was responsible for sending thousands of Jews, civilians, Partisans, and Allied commandos to concentration camps, forced labor and death”; Serge Schmemmann, “Inquiry for Austria Declares Waldheim Knew of War Crimes,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1988.

- 8 Bäcker, “Über mich,” *Die Rampe Porträt: Heimrad Bäcker*, eds. Thomas Eder and Klaus Kastberger (Linz: Trauner, 2001), 89.
- 9 Bäcker, *EPITAPH* (Linz: Edition MÄRZ, 1990), 53.