

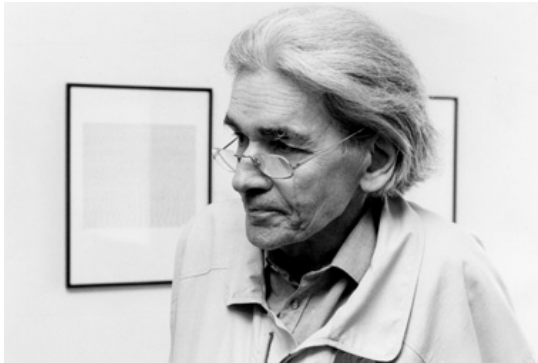
# Tablet

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## Repurposed

### Heimrad Bäcker's 'documentary poems' turn artifacts of evil into the stuff of art

BY JOSHUA COHEN | Feb 4, 2010 7:00 AM



Heimrad Bäcker

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Two subjects that even most conscientious readers know not enough about: concrete poetry and the German-language, postwar literary avant-garde. These subjects reach their dark syzygy in the work of Heimrad Bäcker, an Austrian poet, editor, and publisher of a certain generation whose *transcript*—the lowercase is not just correct but imperative—has recently been translated into English.

We'll begin with the discipline with the least modifiers: concrete poetry is poetry whose appearance has been made integral to meaning; poetry whose typography, not always justified to the left margin, is at least as important to comprehension as word-meaning, rhythm, and rhyme. The best examples are the worst classics from grade-school English: the poem about the word "and" in the shape of an ampersand; the poem about a jug shaped like a jug; the poem about a boy's blue eyes printed in blue font. I've fantasized about writing a positive, even effusive review of a book that would be arranged on the page into the outlines of a toilet or to form the word "NOT!"

Of course, concrete poems also exist *in situ*, or in nature—they can be found, or discovered, and this process of discovery, the founding poets tell us, is the most moral way "to write." This process gets at not what can be made, but *what is*. And so, a stop sign says stop but take that sign off a streetcorner and hang it on a museum wall and the meaning has changed with context. A celebrity's signature is "an autograph," and is worth something; its provenance gives value, and its connotative appearance means more than the denotative content of that appearance, which is, after all, only scribbled with pen. These fetishistic concerns come into play particularly on occasions for which traditional verse seems inadequate: the most moving tribute I've encountered to the victims of 9/11 was hearing their names read over a loudspeaker on a windy anniversary in downtown Manhattan—doomed name after name without pause, the sheer mass and the mass of their different heritages overwhelming; and it's glib but accurate to say that Auschwitz, that deathcamp that has "inspired"—a terrible verb—so much of the most inferior poetry of the 20th century, is itself a sort of concrete poem (which is to say: a poem in concrete, and in wood and wire).

But if, as Theodor Adorno maintained, after Auschwitz poetry was immoral (though he later repented of that statement), what were writers of the 1950s to write? Novels that avoided mentioning anything that happened in occupied Poland? Radio dramas of Nazi apologetics? Tens of millions were dead, cities were razed, and German-language literature was somehow corpse and city at once: a corpus first killed, then looted of its vitals, defiled. Also, it didn't help that many of Germany and Austria's finest writers were Jews. In the wake of that loss it became apparent that no ideal literature could reconstitute culture because it was just such literary idealism that had collaborated in culture's destruction: Hitler was a noted memoirist; Goebbels, a literature Ph.D. from Heidelberg, wrote novels and poetry; and good Nazis were supposed to read Goethe between bouts of Jew-killing under the shade of Goethe's oak tree at Buchenwald.

The 1950s and '60s avant-garde decided to aid that destruction by destroying the destroyers, and what that meant, especially, was giving them their say—again. By changing context one changed content, as Bäcker and the writers published by *neue texte*, the name of the journal he edited and publishing house he led (writers comprising the Vienna Group, including Friedrich Achleitner, H.C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener), "wrote" by quotation and juxtaposition. Bäcker called his technique "System *nachschrift*," literally the system of writing-after, or after-writing, but a word commonly used to mean "postscript." His *transcript* is made only of documents pertaining to the Nazi regime and the Holocaust (other texts, like *nachschrift*, *nachschrift 2*, and *EPITAPH*,



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occasionally have recourse to visual material). At the same time that Günter Grass was trying to write a future for Germany by repoliticizing the novel, at the same time Peter Handke was denouncing Grass's outward approach to politics and was instead writing inward, Bäcker invented a terminus for both: the personal and political. His genre, which would be called *Dokumentarliteratur* (documentary literature), or *dokumentarische dichtung* (documentary poetry), signaled a formal contribution as original as Thomas Bernhard's unbreakable paragraphs, but it is as moral contribution that it remains incomparable.

Here the banality of evil becomes the sublimity of a poem; here Bäcker incriminates by verse:

if jews required to wear the insignia live in an apartment whose owner is not required to wear the insignia, then they are required to have a separate nameplate on the apartment entrance and the insignia immediately next to it  
 if persons not required to wear the insignia live in an apartment whose owner is required to wear the insignia, then they are entitled to a separate nameplate without the insignia  
 the affixation of nameplates and insignia is to be completed in such a way that every doubt is eliminated and so that it is clearly evident that

That is a quotation from an announcement "concerning official assignments," from Vienna's *Jüdischen Nachrichtenblatt* of March 3, 1942. Other pages of *transcript* make more explicit use of concrete, or spatial, properties, such as the excerpts below, which turn the list-poem, that repetitive staple of modern verse, back into the functionally repetitive list, or into something rhetorically between:

### **auschwitz telephones**

no. 18  
 no. 45  
 no. 17  
 no. 33  
 no. 21  
  
 no. 41  
 no. 76  
 no. 16  
 no. 74  
 no. I  
 no. F III/2  
 no. 32  
 no. 62  
  
 no. 315  
 no. 55

\*\*\*

7/1 19 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/3 25 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/4 13 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/5 32 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/6 12 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/7 14 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/8 17 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/10 22 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/11 17 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/12 25 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/13 15 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/14 21 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/15 13 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/18 17 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/19 29 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/20 30 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/21 23 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/22 21 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/23 1 prisoner in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/24 30 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
 7/25 23 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*

7/26 21 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
7/27 21 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
7/28 23 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
7/29 19 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*  
7/31 26 prisoners in hartheim reported as *having died*

Reading this list is arduous but typing it, retyping it for this review, is even worse. If the most moral way to write about the Holocaust is to quote it, perhaps the most moral way to read about it is to copy the quotations, and so Bäcker, like Victor Klemperer, author of *The Language of the Third Reich*, and like America's Charles Reznikoff, who performed a similar palimpsest of testimony with *Holocaust*, might be best understood as a reader who wrote. In my own reading-writing of this passage, I had the following thoughts: do the days skipped, such as July 2 and July 9, represent Sundays, or other "days-off," and what did the executioners do then? Also, why was only one prisoner executed on the 23rd, and who was that singular man? He had a name, certainly, and perhaps a family, etc. This type of questioning leads to the type of writing Bäcker sought to avoid—we ask, and because the dead are dead we can only, but barely, imagine the answers. Only if we flip to the back of the book, because Bäcker never clutters the pages of his poem with notes, do we find some brief jot—a true postscript—that this list of Hartheim prisoners was obtained from prosecutorial documents in the possession of the state attorney in Linz, dated 1948.

Casual appreciations of Bäcker's achievement often forgo the terror while embracing technique: certainly there are a number of websites that compare the quotation method—"appropriation"—to the Web itself, and discourse on the ease with which writers today can ape postmodernity with just a click of the mouse, copying 'n' pasting "poems," or arranging Google results into verse. From the pecia system of the Middle Ages, which broke manuscripts into sections, or peciæ, assigning each to a different scribe, to the highlight and drag I've used to rearrange the very sentence you're reading now, we've lately arrived in the time of the home use version, the no-muss, no-fuss version, of monkish copying; in which one makes a text one's own not through holy transcription but by impulsive download. Bäcker was no mere technician, however, and his almost religious transcription was necessary for reasons of renewal: not so much literary as of the soul. Bäcker, born 1925, dead in 2003, was active in the press and photography office of the Linz *Hitlerjugend*, serving ultimately as a cadre unit leader (*Gefolgschaftsführer*), and joined the Nazi Party as soon as he turned 18. He spent the rest of his life atoning for this, forcing himself to read his moral failure into every sentence he quoted, into every word he excised from primary sources as if they were his own, his primary, flesh.

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