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## "Ich suche ein unschuldiges Land," Reading History in the Poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann

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Leslie Morris, *“Ich suche ein unschuldiges Land,” Reading History in the Poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2001. 124 pages.

In this brief monograph based on her dissertation, Leslie Morris sets out to achieve a series of aims: to contest the alleged divide between Bachmann’s poetry and prose, to counter “the myth of her apolitical poetic voice” (10), to address the presence and absence of history in her poetry, and, finally, to consider how to read Bachmann’s poetic oeuvre in light of historical developments in Germany and Austria in the 1980s and 1990s. In a sense, Morris is also trying to rehabilitate post-war aesthetic modernism from a reductive, binary mode of criticism that separates aesthetics and politics. Following in the tradition of Bachmann scholars such as Kurt Bartsch, Hans Höller, and Bernd Witte, Morris argues for historically grounded readings of Bachmann’s poetry. What distinguishes Morris’s analysis from those of her predecessors is her reading of the poems both as reflections of history and as a shaping or writing of history, a phenomenon she labels “poetic historiography” (17).

After an introduction encompassing the central questions driving her study, a general evaluation of existing scholarship on history and politics in Bachmann’s work, and a summary of the chapters to follow, Morris begins chapter one with a discussion of history in *Die gestundete Zeit*, Bachmann’s first volume of poetry. Here Morris addresses poems (such as “Früher Mittag” and “Alle Tage”) that contain allusions to Germany and Austria’s fascist past. The second chapter focuses on the so-called poetological poems in *Die gestundete Zeit*. For Morris, any division between the historical and the poetological in Bachmann’s poetry is artificial, and she argues that poetic self-reflexivity is itself a response to the political and historical conditions of the post-fascist, Cold War context. In

her third and fourth chapters, Morris offers a cursory treatment of Bachmann's second volume of poetry, *Anrufung des großen Bären*, shifting her focus from references to the historical to Bachmann's search for an unwritten, innocent land. The fourth chapter details how this utopian quest was continually frustrated by the intrusion of history and politics by looking closely at Bachmann's Italian poems. In her final chapter, Morris proposes to redress what she sees as the misreception of Bachmann's early and late poems by refuting the view that the early work is ahistorical and the later poems increasingly symptomatic of a poetic crisis culminating in Bachmann's turn to prose.

Given the vast amount of existing scholarship on Bachmann, Morris is faced with the daunting task of acknowledging the work of those who have gone before her while simultaneously constructing her own independent analysis. On occasion she is able to achieve this balance, but in large part her voice is lost under the mass of references, paraphrases, and citations from other scholars. As a result, Morris's writing is uneven and her examination of individual poems often exhibits a choppy quality, jumping from one critic's perspective to the next intermixed with a few observations of her own. The sequence in which Morris introduces specific poems appears arbitrary, and she is not consistent in justifying her choices. In quoting from poems, Morris practices selective citation, frequently incorporating one stanza or part of a stanza while making references to other parts of the poem without including the text. She also tends to begin excerpts in the middle of a line without indicating that part of the line is absent. For this reason, readers seeking to use Morris's study as a reference should have a volume of Bachmann's collected poetry at hand in order to appreciate the poems in their entirety.

As a research tool for scholars, Morris's monograph is of limited utility. There is no index of any kind and the bibliography contains only one entry published later than 1997. In terms of structure and organization, the text would have benefited from more scrupulous editing, which would also have eliminated the occasionally repetitive rehearsal of key phrases and ideas. As an analysis of the historical and political perspectives in Bachmann's poetry, however, Morris's book does offer some constructive insights.

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