

2000

Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf: Selected Prose and Drama (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Bower, Kathrin M. Review of *Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf: Selected Prose and Drama*, by Patricia Herminhouse. *Colloquia Germanica* 33, no. 3 (200): 313-315.

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PATRICIA A. HERMINGHOUSE (Ed.): *Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf: Selected Prose and Drama*. German Library 94. New York: Continuum, 1998. 324 pp. \$39.50 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

As I read through the selections in *Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf: Selected Prose and Drama* I was reminded of the many associations and connections between the two writers that I had found so profound during my graduate school years. While works by Bachmann and Wolf have been translated and are available in English, this

is the first volume to juxtapose their writings with the express purpose of highlighting the parallels between them. The editor's introduction seeks to situate the oeuvres of both authors in historical and political context and offers justification for placing the two together in one volume. Arguing that Bachmann and Wolf are «the two most important women writers of postwar German literature» (vii), Herminhouse notes that the generation, gender and experiences of fascism they share give rise to productive points of comparison between their lives and works. By outlining what she perceives to be the primary links between the two writers, i.e., a common interest in the problems and potential of language; the evolution of feminist perspectives; political engagement; working through the past; and an emphasis on human freedom, Herminhouse establishes a framework for the reader that is particularly helpful to those unfamiliar with contemporary German literature.

The anthology itself is divided into two parts, the first consisting of four texts by Ingeborg Bachmann («Sightseeing in an Old City,» «Among Murderers and Madmen,» «Word for Word,» and «The Good God of Manhattan») and the second containing six selections by Christa Wolf («The Truth You Can Expect: The Prose of Ingeborg Bachmann,» «June Afternoon,» «Revised Philosophy of a Tomcat,» «Exchanging Glances,» «Self-Experiment,» and an excerpt from «No Place on Earth»). While the task of choosing representative and resonant examples from among the wealth of writings by these two authors is hardly a simple one, I was surprised at the absence of any example of Bachmann's Frankfurt lectures or essays, particularly as a balance to the essay by Wolf included in the volume. A further instance of imbalance is the lack of any excerpt from one of Bachmann's novels or novellas. A selection from «The Case of Franza» could have served as an elaboration of the themes of oppression and memory, surface and depth illustrated in the Viennese stories «Sightseeing» and «Among Murderers» and as an interesting complement to the excerpt from Wolf's «No Place on Earth.» But the question of inclusions and exclusions is the curse of all anthologies, and for those readers who are stimulated by this one to probe further into the works of Bachmann and Wolf, a wealth of parallels await discovery.

All the texts in the collection with one exception have been previously published elsewhere. Given the obvious centrality of language and the self-consciousness with which both writers approach the word in their works, it would have been pertinent in the introduction to include at least some comment on the translations used as well as the editor's reasons for choosing them. Among the selections included there is only one instance where the editor becomes directly involved in the translation process, updating and revising Jan van Heurck's translation of Christa Wolf's essay. Otherwise, aside from a few editorial notes on the translation of titles, all of the other translations appear to have been adopted without comment or correction. This would explain the several, at times glaring, translation errors in the volume, where for example «von der *düsteren* Zeit» in the original version of Bachmann's «Among Murderers and Madmen» is rendered in English as «about the *dismissal* era» (12, emphasis mine); or even more inexplicable in Wolf's «June Afternoon» where black is substituted for blond in the translation of the original «strich ihr langes *blondes* Haar zurück» as «smoothed back her long *black* hair» (127). Such blunders in translation are infrequent, however, as are the occasional awkward constructions where the translator

seems to fall under the sway of German syntax. In the main, the translations are both quite readable and faithful to the sense and language of the original, yet the editor's failure to engage directly with the question of translation remains a notable deficiency.

As a teaching tool and as a comparative introduction for readers unfamiliar with the two authors' works, *Ingeborg Bachmann and Christa Wolf: Selected Prose and Drama* is a welcome addition to texts already available in English. The combination of writings collected in this anthology together with the editor's helpful notes on the origins of some of the allusions and quotations found in the stories should be useful to both students and teachers of German literature in translation and will hopefully inspire some readers to delve more deeply into the works of these two fascinating authors.

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