Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany

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Ingeborg Bachmann

Representation demands to be radical and results from coercion.

—Ingeborg Bachmann, *German Contingencies*

Where Paul Celan points to the technological dimension of public speaking, most notably through his mystification at the loudspeakers’ “censorship” of his Büchner address, Ingeborg Bachmann reacted to the obligatory use of electro-acoustic and radio-transmission technology in public speeches with a much more ambivalent attitude. The Austrian poet once offered a forceful critique of modern mass media, which she believed to be responsible for the condition of contingency that defines modernity: “I would agree with Benjamin, because it is this shrinkage of experience, that arises more and more, through the development of the mass media, through the second-hand life.”¹ Yet her objections did not keep Bachmann from producing audio recordings of works that she recited herself. Bachmann’s long-standing commitment to auditory media is also manifest in her continuing participation and

professional activity in radio broadcasting. After graduating from the University of Vienna, Bachmann worked as a scriptwriter and editor at the Austrian radio station Rot-Weiss-Rot (1951–53) and subsequently as a correspondent for Radio Bremen (1954–55). In addition, she coauthored the radio series Die Radiofamilie (The Radio Family) and wrote and published the radio plays Ein Geschäft mit Träumen (A Business with Dreams, 1952), Die Zikaden (The Cicadas, 1955), and Der gute Gott von Manhattan (The Good God of Manhattan, 1958).

Commentators of her audio plays have praised Bachmann’s skilled and innovative handling of audio technology, maintaining that the author made creative use of sound effects to enhance her narratives with a variety of aural illusions. Despite her attentiveness to the technical potential of the newly developing genre of radio play, however, Bachmann’s 1964 Büchner Prize address, Deutsche Zufälle (German Contingencies), falls short of any obvious aural performativity. Although Bachmann devised an imaginary soundtrack including a variety of sounds—emanating from, for instance, airplanes, church bells, humans, and animals—she delivers her speech in a pointedly nondramatic prosody. Reciting a text that simulates an urban shock experience through a protoexpressionist montage, Bachmann never so much as raises her voice. On the contrary, her diction seems almost impassive.

The recording suggests that Bachmann sought to minimize the amount of life the audio technology would extract from her (voice) to be transmitted to an anonymous, perhaps threatening, public. Contrary to Celan, then, who felt menaced by a sudden breakdown of the electro-acoustic system, Bachmann appears to be discouraged by the very flawlessness of the audio technology, capable of overpowering her cautiously introverted elocution. For, as Bachmann writes in her 1956 essay, “Musik und Dichtung” (Music and Poetry), the former was no doubt superior to the human voice, which, albeit lively and genuine, lacked the infallibility and precision of an acoustic apparatus:

For it is time to forgive the human voice, that voice of a bound creature, not capable of fully saying what it suffers, nor of fully singing what high and low pitches there are to measure. There is nothing but this organ without final precision, without final trustworthiness, with its low volume, the threshold high and low—far from being a device, a sure instrument, a successful apparatus. But there is something of the plainness of youth in it, or the timidity of age, warmth and cold, sweetness and hardness, every virtue of the living. And this distinction to serve hopeless approximation!


The audio technology used to record and transmit her speech is analogous to a vocal organ, but with “final precision” and unforgiving exactitude. As an acoustic device it reveals not only Bachmann’s thoughts and ideas but indeed the very materiality of her living voice in the public sphere. It transmits every quiver and break in her (at least initially) anxious recital, thereby calling attention to the poet’s mortality. Like the phonograph, it is a memento mori.4

However, the primary interest in the voice recording of Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address is not the question of whether or not it serves the “hopeless approximation” of a “bound creature,” as Bachmann contends, nor whether or not it is the site of unadulterated authentic expressivity that provides better, more direct access to her human essence than a written text. Rather, the interest lies in the discrepancy between the innocuous tone of Bachmann’s performance and the confrontational style and calamitous subject matter of her speech. The live recording of Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address provides evidence that Bachmann was a reluctant and by far less prolific and self-assured public orator than, for instance, Buber, who, incidentally and curiously, often refused to be audiotaped, even if his Peace Prize address was as a matter of course broadcast by Hessischer Rundfunk (the public broadcasting station of Hessia).

Yet while Bachmann seems to display what members of the Gruppe 47 had described as a resigned, anxious attitude and awkwardness when reading her poetry, she did take advantage of the Büchner award ceremony, which she clearly understood as a unique opportunity to communicate with West Germany’s public.5 Hence the timidity of Bachmann’s voice is deceptive. The speech is a powerful intervention that experiments with and subverts the role of radio broadcasting. Like the radio play The War of the Worlds, which Orson Welles aired over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network in October of 1938, subjecting its listeners to a simulated news bulletin about a supposed Martian invasion, Bachmann’s 1964 Büchner Prize address challenges the audience with a provocative feature that implies, through a continuing series of manic scenes and lurid fantasies, that the city of Berlin might still be under siege.6 Superimposing an apocalyptic vision of

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6. On the negative impact of Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address, see Weigel, Ingeborg Bachmann, 376 n. 49. See also Anna M. Parkinson, “Taking Breath: The Ethical Stakes of Affect in Ingeborg Bachmann’s Ein Ort für Zufälle,” in Re-acting to Ingeborg Bachmann: New Essays and Performances, ed. Castriona Leathy and Bernadette Cronin (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006), 65–79, here 70; and Elke Schlinsog, Berliner Zufälle: Ingeborg Bachmanns “Todesarten”-Projekt (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005), 109. For a survey and analysis of references to other important historical and political contexts of the speech, such as the Cold War, see Jost Schneider, “Historischer Kontext und politische Implikationen der Büchnerpreisrede Ingeborg Bachmanns,” in Über die Zeit schreiben, vol. 2, Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaftliche Essays zum Werk Ingeborg Bachmanns, ed.
Ingeborg Bachmann's depiction of Berlin thereby undermines the institution of the Büchner Prize, and with it one of the most prestigious institutions of West Germany's literary landscape: the Akademie der deutschen Sprache und Dichtung (Academy of German Language and Poetry). Instead of praising the German literary tradition, or its poster child Büchner, Bachmann stirs up horrors that the German nation had arguably just begun to forget. Yet the discussion, raised by previous commentators, of whether Bachmann really intended her Büchner Prize address as a public speech, or if she instead had resolved to merely present her latest prose, is ultimately irrelevant. Bachmann's hyperbolic rhetoric as well as her use of blame as a hortative device is fully compatible with the noninstrumental, display rhetoric of epideictic speech.\(^7\)

The question, then, is not whether or not the speech is an example of epideictic rhetoric, but rather what kind of an epideictic speech it is, if it so obviously pushes the generic boundaries to new limits. Insofar as it is incoherent and wavering in its assignment of blame—after all it remains ambiguous whether Bachmann blames the medical staff, the military, the population of Berlin, East or West Germany, or herself, an Austrian citizen—German Contingencies fails to construct a politically viable argument or a socially and ethically “appropriate” narrative. Instead it performs, like any classical epideictic speech, the rhetorical self-annihilation of rhetoric by doubling itself metadiscursively in a way that results in a paradox: the rhetorical effect of Bachmann’s speech on her listeners depends on their metadiscursive recognition that the speech produces a projective identification with the speaker as listener. At the same time, the speech stages a battle for mastery between two rivaling voices that in their dialogical interrelation become self-consciously aware of this dual perspective.

Given its hyperexplicitness as well as its thorough rejection of symbolism, most notably its ostensible lack of metaphorical or figurative speech, Bachmann's Büchner Prize address corroborates her decision to abdicate poetry in favor of prose. It is a well-known fact that after the publication of her prose collection Das dreißigste Jahr (The Thirtieth Year) in 1961, she never published another work of poetry. What is more, the speech inaugurates Bachmann’s Todesarten-Projekt (Manners of Death Project), an unfinished novel trilogy the author conceived as a comprehensive

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7. Such is the title of the print version of the speech, first published by Wagenbach in 1965.
8. See, most recently, Schlinsog, Berliner Zufälle, 110–11.
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10. Ingeborg Bachmann, Nachlass: TA1/175, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; my translation. See also Schlinsog, Berliner Zufälle, 16.


record of the suffering that results from the hidden or socially acceptable crimes committed in and by patriarchal society. As Bachmann writes in a preliminary draft of German Contingencies, the prose fragment Sterben für Berlin (Dying for Berlin, 1961–62), “And the threat does not occur during war, in times of naked violence, of dominating survival, but before and after, that is, during peace.” Bachmann effectively considered the patriarchism and chauvinism of postwar society a continuation of National Socialism.

Seen from Bachmann’s perspective, present-day Berlin appears as bleak and amorphous as it was during the area bombings of World War II. Reconfiguring the city’s topography by reimagining its most representative sites, such as Gedächtnis-Kirche, KADEW, Checkpoint Charlie, Krumme Lanke, and Bahnhof Zoo, to name but a few, the speech depicts the perversion and insanity of a society at war while resonating with Bachmann’s sometimes sarcastic, sometimes terrified, but always intellectually elusive investment in a city that, even more so than her home-towns Vienna and Klagenfurt, embodied the perils of National Socialism for her. For Bachmann, who had spent 1963–64 in Berlin with a fellowship from the Ford Foundation, viewed the former capital of Nazi Germany as a site of trauma that made its aesthetic representation impermissible. As Bachmann states in her Büchner Prize address, “The damaging of Berlin, the historical conditions of which are familiar, does not allow for mystification or elevation into a symbol,” unless, Bachmann concedes and reflects cryptically, this representation is radical “and results from coercion” (GC, 279).

Darstellbarkeit

Concluding the first poetologically oriented and introductory section of Bachmann’s speech, the above statement implicitly situates what is to follow within the debate of post-Holocaust art. Although Bachmann neither mentions the genocide of the Jews nor directly links Austria’s National Socialist past with the kind of patriarchal oppression she still sees at work in present-day society, as she does in her novels, both are unambiguously implied in her graphic language and the violent imagery of her speech. Avoiding a sensationalist tone from which one could
detect pleasure in her voice, she represents horrors without belittling the experience of suffering or offering a falsely redemptive solution. Instead, she lets nothing but pure, untainted language do the work of recollection:

We have so many sick here, says the night nurse and fetches the overhanging patients, who are all moist and shaking, back from the balcony. Once again the night nurse looks right through everything, she knows of the balcony thing and applies “the hold” and gives a shot that goes through and through and gets stuck in the mattress so that one can no longer get up. . . . Someone yells that the churches have to go, the patients scream, flee to the corridor, there is water running from the rooms to the corridor, there is blood mixed in, because some have bitten through their tongues, because of the churches. . . . Everyone coughs and hopes and has a thermometer in the armpit, under the tongue, in the rectum, and the needles ten centimeter long in the flesh. (GC, 281–82)

This is Bachmann at her most intense. As in the notoriously violent dream sequence in her novel Malina, Bachmann experiments here with the limits of Darstellbarkeit (representability), an endeavor coinciding temporally and conceptually with her “conscious abdication of poetry in Adorno’s terms,” which one commentator locates in this period.12 Bachmann’s answer to the problematic status of art and poetry in the wake of Nazi barbarism, as it is expressed here, is radical in its consequence: her speech submits and demonstrates that it is indeed possible to represent the horror, provided that this is done under the same or psychologically analogous conditions to those that caused the original dreadful experience. By staging a scene of writing—or rather, speaking—that reveals itself as a psychoanalytical session during which a patient not only (neutrally, that is) articulates “unspeakable” horrors, but actually reexperiences them insofar as she is equally frightened and horrified by the coercive process that generates her speech, Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address performatively reproduces the coercive conditions under which her text has emerged. In ways both unexpected and obvious, the speech thereby purports to be a spontaneous, hysterical utterance instead of a conventional public address.

Bachmann allegorizes the problem of Darstellbarkeit by submitting an argument not for the unspeakability of the Nazi terror, but rather against the alleged unspeakability used to deny a voice to those who were subjected to it. She makes this critique within the paralinguistic dimension of her reading, on the level of her performance. For the speaker’s voice is not only fearful, but stifled and gradually suppressed by the hypnotic voice of an other, a cruel and torturous therapist-figure who emerges as the source of the speaker’s coercion. Indeed, the only way to explain

the emotional detachedness and restrained timbre of Bachmann’s elocution, which stands in such sharp contrast to its macabre content, grotesque language, and accusatory character, is to differentiate between two competing agencies, one situated on the ontic level of Bachmann’s voice, the other on the semantic level of her text. The transcript of the speech represents a trauma text that revolves around Bachmann’s stay at a mental institution in Berlin while also alluding to a prior hospitalization in Klagenfurt. But its delivery exhibits the aural and rhetorical qualities typically associated with hypnosis therapy, signal among them repetitiveness, monotony, overstimulation, and a singsong quality that results from its droning, paratactic syntax: “It is aside from the streetcar, is also in the hour of silence, [there] is a cross in front of it, is a crossing in front of it, it is not so far, but also not so close, is—wrong guess!—a thing also, is not an object, is by day, is also by night, is used, has people inside, has trees around it, can, doesn’t have to, shall, doesn’t have to, is carried, is dropped off . . .” (GC, 279).

To the extent that the first and last sections of the speech are presented under the guise of hypnosis, the middle part can be read as a response uttered under the coercive power of a hypnotist. To be sure, the text, which is an incongruous, hysterical discourse consisting of an incessant stream of uncanny hallucinations and morbid fantasies, is marked by a protohysterical collapse of meaning and coherence on the spatial and temporal planes: Berlin trembles and tumbles, Potsdam folds into the buildings of Tegel, the streets lift by forty-five degrees. At the same time, major historical incidents merge with an apocalyptic “now”: a flood of veterans returning to Berlin at the end of World War I, the assassination of Walther Rathenau in 1922, the hanging of members of the Kreisau circle in 1944 in Plötzensee. Recounting a military intervention from the perspective of an observer in a hospital, Bachmann here alludes to her own witnessing of the arrival of Hitler’s troops in Klagenfurt, an experience that coincided with her sojourn in a hospital. In an oft-cited interview with the German women’s magazine Brigitte, Bachmann described this as an event so traumatic that with it began her memory.13

There was a specific moment which destroyed my childhood. The entry of Hitler’s troops into Klagenfurt. It was something so terrible, that my memory begins with that day: with that early sorrow, whose intensity was perhaps never to be repeated. Naturally, I didn’t understand all this at the time, in the way an adult would understand it. But this enormous brutality, which could be sensed, this screaming, singing and marching—the origin of my fear of death. A whole army intruded on our quite peaceful Carinthia.14

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13. Scholarship remains divided over whether this statement is true. For an overview of the discussion see Weigel, Ingeborg Bachmann, 24.
Bachmann was hospitalized in 1938, at the historical juncture of the Anschluss, because she suffered from diphtheria. It seems likely that the memory of this first, traumatic “fear of death” was triggered again as Bachmann found herself in another hospital in Germany (and in a context that, for reasons that will appear later in their proper sequence, reminded her of Germany’s violent past): in 1963, Bachmann underwent treatment at the Martin Luther Hospital in Berlin. Thus Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address dramatizes her wartime “trauma” by conflating history with an autobiographical memory, except that in this particular literary reiteration, the agency of the aggressor is displaced onto the clinical staff and some unspecified military power (the Allies, perhaps), while scores of other victims are substituted for her own subjectivity. There is no first-person narrator who figures as a stable witness of this military and/or medical assault. Dramatizing an array of incongruous events and perspectives, the speech retains no stable focus or center of agency. Instead it alternates among what appear to be random competing responses to the chaos, including aggression, panic, and blame. The implications of this highly emotional confrontation are at least twofold. First, it reveals the contradictory logic of Bachmann’s childhood trauma while simultaneously objectifying it. Second, it nevertheless compels the audience to think about the nature of this trauma as it extends into their own experience.

The speech’s disjuncture between voice/elocution and language/text, which simultaneously exposes and adulterates Bachmann’s autobiographical experience, conveys a complexity that is structurally analogous to the composite nature of the authorial stances shaping Bachmann’s Todesarten texts. As in Malina (Malina: A Novel) and Das Buch Franza (The Book of Franza), the performance of Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address is divided between two competing subject positions, which can be understood to represent a victimized female patient and a patriarchal therapist figure, respectively. In the novels, these subject positions are negotiated among various narrators and characters. In Malina, the female first-person narrator eventually surrenders her voice to a male narrator who likewise figures as a character in the novel, while in Das Buch Franza the female protagonist occasionally assumes, and arguably merges with, the voice of the male narrator who is telling her story.

In her Büchner Prize address, Bachmann likewise explores the conditions of possibility of female narration and of making audible a voice that is ultimately her therapist’s object of mastery. Representing a tortured body as well as a truly frantic text, Bachmann’s voice is a political site that itself embodies a traumatic experience. The audio recording of Bachmann’s speech can be understood as the literal record of this trauma. For it reveals telling instances of parapraxis—the Freudian mistakes or “slips,” which, according to Freud, “have a meaning and can

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be interpreted.” The following misspeak, for instance, conveys that Bachmann’s perspective may be even more profoundly nihilistic than it would seem judging from the script of the speech itself, suggesting that Bachmann was unconsciously convinced that while things went on (as usual), nothing would transpire ever again: “Es geht weiter. Es wird nichts [instead of “nicht,” emphasis added] mehr vorkommen.” (It goes on. Nothing will [instead of “It will not,” emphasis added] happen again.) Another psychologically revealing slip is the following, oddly performative error: “Die Fußgänger erfangen [instead of “verfangen,” emphasis added] sich . . .” (The pedestrians are caught . . .) Bachmann here literally—aurally—stumbles over an inseparable prefix, a verbal trap that she (the text’s author) has set herself and that could be said to indicate a repressed memory linked to her fear of performing.

Clearly, it is the speaker’s human voice itself—that is, the voice in the sense of the sound produced in her vocal cords rather than in the metaphorical sense of her voice as a function of narration or as a lyrical self—that provides the critical cues for reading Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address, not least because the two rival speakers are resuming their battle here. Enacting the gradual silencing of the patient’s voice through a fictitious therapist, Bachmann’s performance is based on the conceit that the narrative is generated and simultaneously destabilized by her therapist’s intervention. Contrary to Bachmann’s novels, then, which are interspersed with a number of dialogues investing men with the roles of therapists, German Contingencies relegates the latter to the text’s exteriority. Rather than being textually inscribed in the narrative, the therapist is the one who “performs” Bachmann’s text and thereby exercises ultimate control over it. Hence Bachmann’s peculiar delivery and her quiet, monotonous, indeed hypnotizing voice simulate a therapeutic intervention that involves her and, by extension, every member of her audience. The latter must go beyond simply appreciating her speech as a literary experiment and instead recognize it as a speech that aims to affect its listeners. By hearing Bachmann’s voice, the listeners serve as unwitting subjects of a hypnosis experiment in the form of a public speech. It resembles a twofold exercise in auditory experimentation: therapeutic and literary.

The Talking Cure

Simulating a therapy session during which an imaginary psychoanalyst, who is embodied by the speaker’s droning voice, cures an unconscious trauma that the author of the speech shares with her audience, Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address gestures toward the possibility of “talking away” traumatic memories that have been repressed by the German public. Read in the suggestive yet monotonous voice of a hypnotherapist, the text of Bachmann’s speech thus figures as her response

to the hypnosis analysis: it conveys how a patient discharges certain affects and memories that she associates with her trauma. In so doing, Bachmann’s literary experimentation takes a scientifically informed approach to hypnosis theory. It is with great ease and efficiency that Bachmann, a former intern at a neurological clinic, the Nervenheilanstalt Steinhof near Vienna, who had also attended lectures on psychology at the university, engages Sigmund Freud’s and Josef Breuer’s early experimentations with hypnosis therapy. Specifically, her speech builds on Freud’s and Breuer’s observation that their patients tended to relive previous experiences when put under hypnosis, experiences that could be associated with the symptomatic expression of their illnesses. In a lecture they coauthored in 1893, titled “On the Psychic Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena,” Freud and Breuer define the aim of hypnosis as bringing the sources of these memories and emotions to consciousness: “It is necessary to hypnotize the patient and to arouse his memories under hypnosis of the time at which the symptom made its first appearance; when this has been done, it becomes possible to demonstrate the connection in the clearest and most convincing fashion.”17

The first attempts to treat what was then called “hysterical paralysis” with hypnosis therapy originated in Breuer’s work with patient “Anna O.,” whose hysterical symptoms allegedly declined when the patient, under hypnosis, provided her therapist with a precise account of the circumstances under which each symptom had initially emerged.18 Breuer argued that by tracing the final symptom back to the traumatic circumstances of its first occurrence, he was able to cure his patient of an array of hysterical symptoms. In her speech, which is framed as a treatment in which the patient is placed under hypnosis so that she may remember a traumatic event, Bachmann likewise recalls a series of memories and traces them back to the original trauma. The resulting narrative is a racing and disjointed account of events she ostensibly has a hard time remembering: “The fluff, the feathers, everyone lost, it is long ago, it is not long ago. It is a celebration, everyone is invited, people drink and dance, must drink, so as to forget everything, it is—wrong guess!—is today, was yesterday, will be tomorrow, [there] is something in Berlin” (GC, 292).

One way to characterize this passage is through a medical idiom. Bachmann chooses a language of sickness and pain that is also devoid of empathy. This is a rhetoric of hysteria that structurally reproduces the effects of a therapeutic session. Just as in the hypnosis therapy described in Breuer’s and Freud’s article, Bachmann’s account stages a gradual discharge that recapitulates, in reverse chronology but


18. As Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen has pointed out, Breuer never actually used hypnotic induction on his patient Anna O: “In reality, it was not Breuer but Freud himself who, bolstered by the hypnotic experiments of Charcot, Janet and Delboeuf, first used direct hypnosis in order to recover and ‘talk away’ traumatic memories.” Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen, Remembering Anna O.: A Century of Mystification, trans. Kirby Olson (New York: Routledge, 1996), 19 n. 7.
by no means systematically, every occurrence that led to her illness. But does it also claim to eliminate her hysterical symptoms? The speech begins in medias res, with the hospital scene cited above and an apocalyptic scenario of fighter planes crashing through the hospital. After an insistence on adverbs of time that signal immediacy—jetzt (now), dann (then), schon (already)—the narrative gradually slows down to alternate between depictions of the chaos on the streets and in the hospital, and finally illustrates the effect of the war on “die Kinder”—the children of Berlin—whose innocent and lighthearted response to the military intervention not only recalls the romance between the then fifteen-year-old Franza and a British officer described in the Todesarten cycle, but also sharply contradicts the logic of Bachmann’s “primal scene” from her childhood, which she evoked in the Brigitte interview. The text ends on the following significantly less destructive and chaotic note: “No one knows if there is hope, but if there is no hope, then it is not so horrible after all, it dampens itself, it doesn’t have to be hope, it can be less, it is nothing, it is . . . the last airplane has approached, the first one approaches after midnight, everything flies rather high up, not through the room. It was a turmoil, was nothing after all. It will not happen again” (GC, 292–93).

Bachmann’s speech—and, by extension, the hypnotic session that is invoked by it—concludes with a set of conflicting statements. Culminating in the paradoxical assertion that “it was nothing after all” and “will not happen again,” this final paragraph superimposes two fundamental psychological processes on Bachmann’s public address. The first assertion reflects the mental mechanism of Verdrängung (repression), which Freud defined as the function of keeping something out of consciousness and thus inhibiting the development of affect connected with the repressed idea. Unable to integrate the ideas and emotions associated with the traumatic experience into her consciousness, the patient continuously reexperiences the traumatic incident mentally and physically until therapy helps her revisit and cope with the origin of the trauma. The second assertion has two implications. Firstly, it substantiates the (former) presence of a trauma, the occurrence of a traumatic incident, and secondly, it insinuates the possibility that the hypnotic therapy has indeed provided a cure. By stating that “it” will not recur, the patient—or the analyst (in these final sentences, their stances are hard to discern)—confirms that the trauma has successfully been brought to consciousness under psychologically safe conditions. As a result, the patient would be cured, and the audience of Bachmann’s public address would emerge as the witness to a therapeutic session that they, too, require in order to work through their own repressed traumas and memories.

By thus exposing the West German public to a group therapy session that would help them acknowledge their Nazi past, Bachmann’s address portends Alexander

and Margarete Mitscherlich’s *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (The Inability to Mourn), a study diagnosing the German nation with a collective trauma reinforced by government failure to address it seriously: “Official policy remains anchored to nebulous fictions and wishful thinking and has, to this day, failed to make any searching attempt—even if only for the sake of its own political health—to understand the terrifying past and, among other things, the terrifying influence which Nazi promises were able to acquire over the German people.”

Citing these seminal assertions in 1981, Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt added that while some Germans may well have individually, if passively, mourned the downfall of Nazi Germany and Hitler’s death, the German public had yet to build a collective memory of National Socialism. As Kluge and Negt write with regard to what they consider the ongoing “process of irrealisation,” “It is rather the case that people in reality are slaving away *like the dead*, responding to each new fracture, each one of the numerous breaks, as if they were dead, robot-like, while pulling that which is alive back into themselves, into the smallest group, instead of developing an awareness of the losses within the public sphere.”

The Mitscherlichs and Kluge and Negt agree that given the grand, national scope of Germany’s historical trauma, a cure must be achieved collectively. Hence the urgent need for a counter-public sphere that could provide the framework or forum for a collective effort at *Trauerarbeit* (mourning). In a similar vein, Eric L. Santner argues that “mourning, if it is not to become entrapped in the desperate inertia of a double bind, if it is to become integrated into a history, must be witnessed.”

But how could such a large-scale cultural project be integrated into the psychoanalytic process, which is traditionally conceived as a profoundly private act? After all, it is no coincidence that the private sphere—deemed the sphere of emotional intensity—is conceived of as separated from the public sphere, where reason and fact are meant to prevail. Reversing the bifurcation of “public” and “private” to which psychoanalysis had given legitimacy, Kluge and Negt’s concept of the counter-public sphere acknowledges and indeed privileges the conscious and unconscious fantasies of individuals and subaltern subjects.

By using her public speech in Darmstadt and its radio transmission to put herself and the West German citizenry in a state of increased suggestibility and imaginative activity, and by subsequently excavating and talking through what the public has denied and forgotten, Bachmann’s speech gestures toward the possibility of providing a “talking cure” that would effectively operate on a collective basis.
A provocative yet decidedly unironic public address, Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address performs the dialogue between a plurality of patients and a mysterious, all-powerful doctor-figure. Bachmann’s “dialogue” thereby subverts the balance of reciprocity and immediacy that was the marker of Buber’s spirited dialogical encounter with a German audience. In Bachmann’s dialogue, power is manifest and favors the anonymous, patriarchal, Fascist authority embodied in Bachmann’s voice. In this way, Bachmann takes Celan’s response to Buber one step further by acknowledging that the realities of oppression are inherent in the form of public speech itself, which is in turn defined as an inherently false and alienating form of dialogical engagement.

As a public speech, *German Contingencies* thus goes beyond merely scandalizing West Germany’s public sphere: it involves the audience in a psychoanalytical session that could be beneficial to them, provided they observe and cogitate on this “analytical dialogue” while experiencing its effects.\(^{24}\) That is to say, as the listeners attend to this hypnotic narrative, they might themselves feel its gruesome effect either through empathy with the subject of the hypnosis or as subjects under hypnosis in their own right. By posing the question of who or what causes their respective responses, they might activate memories that in turn elicit a chain of associations similar to the ones produced by the text itself. They would then link the medical and military themes, embodied by the syringes and fighter planes, to Nazism and patriarchy, just as they are linked, in *Das Buch Franza*, through the figure of SS-Hauptsturmführer (captain) Dr. Kurt Körner, a participant in the Nazi euthanasia program for the mentally ill by whom Franza demands to be killed with a deadly injection to escape her husband’s tyranny.\(^{25}\)

Thus forced to negotiate their own involvement and role in the process of speaking and listening, the listeners may ponder the question of whether they partake in the coercion by listening or, on the contrary, are themselves coerced by having to listen. There is a contradiction of double coercion in this act of listening, since it is not evident whether the listener is affected by the hypnosis or whether it is her act of listening that forces the speaker to carry on. Thus rendered ambiguous, the speech’s situation creates a self-reflexive moment that justifies the classification of *German Contingencies* as epideictic speech—the rhetorical genre where persuasion is achieved through precisely this kind of self-reflexive, metadiscursive uncertainty. As Richard Lockwood has convincingly argued, epideictic rhetoric “is about the present, about what is happening at the moment, and if what is happening at the

\(^{24}\) See Tasco Horman, who recently articulated the question of whether and how it might “be possible to organize a process of public education so that it resembles the psychoanalytic process of working through.” Tasco Horman, *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.

\(^{25}\) On the detailed references to the euthanasia program in Bachmann’s work, which are based on her reading of Alexander Mitscherlich’s documentation of the Nuremberg trial, see Krick-Aigner, *Ingeborg Bachmann’s Telling Stories*, 134–35.
present, right now, is a speech . . . then epideictic rhetoric must always also be about itself: about its own function or effect.”

It is this moment of self-reflexivity that further links Bachmann’s epideictic speech back to its relatively covert psychoanalytic framework. In Freudian psychotherapy, the term Übertragung (transference) refers to the redirection of a patient’s previous object-relationships onto the analyst, and so, like epideictic rhetoric, transference inheres unique enunciative relations that involve a speaker, a listener, and a referent. And similar to the process by which the listeners of a public speech are to introject the speech and adhere to its contentions, and thereby become ready to consciously act or think differently, the recognition of the transference relationship represents the vital turning point in the analytic situation, as it is by acknowledging and analyzing the fact that she has made a false connection and projected unconscious emotions on the very real person of her analyst that a patient can begin to effect change in her mental life. In the case of Bachmann’s listeners, this might play out as the recognition that they are projecting emotions connected with their own repressed ideas of guilt and victimhood onto the persona of the speaker, who found herself traumatized by the same events.

To pursue the same, fundamental aspiration of thorough self-analysis, Bachmann’s listeners must construct their own postwar (and posttherapy) personae based on their individual moral responsibility for the collective crimes of their culture. But as much as every one of Bachmann’s listeners is implicated in the historical realities at the heart of her address, there is nevertheless no simple way of separating the agents from the victims, and the oppressors from the oppressed. After all, it is the (female) night shift nurse whose syringe thrusts her patients into the same echelon as both the victims of the Nazi euthanasia program and Franza—who ironically desires to share their fate.

Against an essentialist notion of gender and nationality, Bachmann’s scenes of trauma mobilize a pathology of victimhood that includes men and women, Jews, Germans and Austrians, and finally all those who may suffer from the oppressive conditions of past and present societies. Contrary, then, to Buber and Celan, who take a principled and nuanced stance of victimhood in their public speeches, Bachmann eschews straightforward victimhood by conflating different kinds of victimization and by presenting herself more complicatedly as a double agent of coercion and subjection. Given that she avoids the use of the pronominal persons

27. See Weigel on the “synthesis of guilt and victimhood” in Bachmann’s poetry. Weigel, Ingeborg Bachmann, 237.
28. Bachmann’s identification with the victims of the Holocaust and her conflation of different kinds of victimhood are, of course, rather problematic. This is particularly the case in the Franza novel fragment where the protagonist not only identifies herself as belonging to an inferior race and class but effectively compares her own suffering with that of aboriginal Australians, the Papuans, the Incas, and blacks.
“I” and “you,” Bachmann’s listeners have to constantly renegotiate their own shifting positions in relation to her enunciative practice of speaking: it is simply not clear who sends, who receives, and who is the speech’s referent. The challenge is to resolve this intricate enunciative puzzle, which aligns Bachmann’s Büchner Prize address with both psychoanalysis and epideictic speech.

The result is a parable of national trauma, which is simultaneously also a fantasy about the curative power of public speech that echoes the myth of the “talking cure”—the belief, proliferated by the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, that the memories obtained through therapy reflect the true state of a patient’s psyche. Its performative force is not, however, a matter of linguistic meaning, semantic property, or rhetorical impetus, as in Buber’s and Celan’s public speeches, but an effect of its theatrical presentation. Still, Bachmann’s speech substantiates what Lacan and the American narrativists consider “the reconstructive and ‘hermeneutic’ character of memory.” For rather than asserting the factual, historical accuracy of the story obtained under hypnosis, Bachmann’s speech uncovers this very story as a narrative that performs—and through this performance produces—truth. Hence the speech is based on a twofold theatrical operation: the theatricality of her voice mimics the droning voice of a hypnotherapist, whereas the (to some) shocking textual performance dramatizes a range of hysterical symptoms. Given that these very symptoms, represented through a disjointed, incongruous narrative, are compatible with the Adornian dictum of post-Holocaust art, Bachmann’s hysterical speech, itself the expression of a trauma that relates to Nazi torture and abuse, produces the symptoms expected from her and hence truly “exists for the sake of the cure.”

Despite its discordant and surreal rhetoric, *German Contingencies* is a very personal and, at the same time, Bachmann’s most directly political text, for it challenges the psychological—and by extension political and moral—status quo that has been reached in Germany. Its hidden implications are provocative: according to Bachmann, the entire nation suffers from a collective trauma.

30. Ibid., 83.