

Aestheticization and the Shoah: Heimrad Bäcker's transcript

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In 1986 the Austrian editor and poet Heimrad Bäcker published *nachschrift* (*transcript*), which consists almost exclusively of quotations from documents related to the planning and execution of the National Socialist murder of European Jewry. Bäcker's work belongs to a vibrant tradition of postwar avant-garde writing in Austria, and *nachschrift* is also indebted to the international movement of concrete poetry.¹ Eugen Gomringer, one of the founding figures of concrete poetry, praised Bäcker's engagement with the coded language of Nazism in *nachschrift* as a "new chapter" in the development of concrete and visual poetry, but then goes on to say something that reveals the distance that separates Gomringer and many other avant-garde poets from Bäcker's work: "Ungern denkt man an eine Literatur solcher Codes" (One is loath to think of

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1. For a critical account of Bäcker's work in English, see Thomas Eder, "Language Based on a Division of Labor? On the Representation of the Holocaust in Heimrad Bäcker's *nachschrift*," *New German Critique*, no. 93 (2000): 82–86. For a recent theoretical engagement with Bäcker's quotational method, see Henry Pickford, "Heimrad Bäcker's 'System *nachschrift*' and the Philosophy of Quotation," *Modern Austrian Literature* 41, no. 4 (2008): 51–74. For a summary account of Bäcker's life and works, see Sabine Zelger, "Heimrad Bäcker," in *Lexikon der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur seit 1945*, ed. Thomas Kraft (Munich: Nymphenburger, 2003), 67–68; and on Bäcker's role as an editor of the avant-garde, see Thomas Eder, "Heimrad Bäckers *neue texte/edition neue texte*," in *Poesie: konkret, visuell, konzeptuell*, ed. Josef Linschinger (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1998), 113–36.

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a literature made up of such codes).² And it seems that one was and is loath not only to think about but also to write such texts, especially in German, for there are very few examples of avant-garde writing in German that deal explicitly with National Socialism's language, despite the commitment of many experimental authors to mining specialized jargons for their writing.³

The reason for this distance between the avant-garde and the Shoah may be found in the tensions usually grouped under the term *aestheticization*. The avant-garde's foregrounding of form risks being read as a distancing from the content of its works, and this distance is particularly disturbing in texts on the Shoah. The problem of aestheticization in *nachschrift* can be addressed using concepts developed in *Aesthetic Theory*, where Theodor W. Adorno argues that artworks speak for suffering without conceptualizing it and that thought's relation to art occurs by way of a relation to suffering.⁴ But, he adds, "the artwork is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering" (*AT*, 39). Adorno formulates two extremes of this relation to suffering. There are artworks that remain faithful to suffering at the expense of form and thereby make up an "art of complete responsibility" that "terminates in sterility, whose breath can be felt on almost all consistently developed artworks," but works that emphasize form at the expense of suffering can fall into an "absolute irresponsibility" that "degrades art to fun" (*AT*, 39). These extremes coexist in *nachschrift*. The text equates itself, through its documentary intention and its use of quotation, to what Adorno calls "reality at its most extreme and grim" and thereby risks the reproach of sterility (*AT*, 39). But its extremely formalized nature removes it from this reality. Although it would be difficult to argue that *nachschrift's* formal aspect makes it fun, the text could be read, at least in part, as a formalizing neutralization of the suffering that its sources caused or registered.

Bäcker explicitly recognizes aestheticization as a risk in this remark from a text about preserving Mauthausen: "Macht man das historische Objekt

2. Eugen Gomringer, "Wissen Sie etwas von der schwarzen Wand? Zu den beiden Bänden *nachschrift* von Heimrad Bäcker," in *Die Rampe Porträt: Heimrad Bäcker*, ed. Thomas Eder and Klaus Kastberger (Linz: Trauner, 2001), 9. All uncredited translations are mine.

3. On Bäcker's relation to other avant-garde texts on the Shoah, see Klaus Amann, "Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Über Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift*," in *Die Dichter und die Politik: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur nach 1918* (Vienna: Falter/Deuticke, 1992), 223–34.

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 18–19. Hereafter cited as *AT*.

zu einem Element unseres musealen Ordnungssinnes, so wird häufig beschönigend, glättend, ästhetisierend vorgegangen” (If one makes a historical object into an element of our museal sense of order, often this is done in a euphemizing, flattening, aestheticizing way).⁵ Aestheticization appears here in a series of terms that Bäcker surely would not have used to describe his work, yet, despite this intimacy between aestheticization and these other operations, he often emphasizes the formal nature of the texts that he cites; for instance, in a note in *nachschrift* he laconically observes of a list of casualties in Sobibor that its “Kreuzform ist ein Ergebnis der Statistik” (cross form is a result of statistics).⁶ And, in the text on Mauthausen, he presents his aesthetic consideration of lists of the dead as a conscious choice: “Sie ernst nehmend als ästhetisches Phänomen, erschließt sich schnell die metaästhetische Szenerie” (If one takes them seriously as an aesthetic phenomenon, then a meta-aesthetic landscape opens up).⁷ Even if aestheticization is only a means to an end, there is something unsettling about appropriating the aesthetic qualities of texts related to the Shoah, especially the documents that Bäcker focuses on: not only lists of the dead but also accounts of the functioning of gas chambers, reports from experiments conducted in the camps, and the correspondence of Nazi leaders.

Bäcker’s critics have often raised the question of aestheticization in *nachschrift*, but there has not been a developed account of aestheticization’s role in Bäcker’s works. Thomas Rothschild identifies the “peculiar beauty” of Bäcker’s emphasis on the self-referential aspect of his texts over “other functions, including the informative, educational, suggestive, persuasive ones.”⁸ Rothschild poses the question, at the end of an article on Bäcker, of whether Bäcker’s aestheticization has a political effect, and he decides after a few sentences that it does. But his brief investigation of aestheticization’s role includes no detailed attention to Bäcker’s texts. This perfunctory treatment is typical in

5. Heimrad Bäcker, “Mauthausen: Beiträge zur Topografie,” in *Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die Vergangenheit: Denkmale auf dem Gelände ehemaliger Konzentrationslager* (Rehberg-Loccum: Evangelische Akademie Loccum, 1996), 115. See also Bäcker’s comments in the interview “Heimrad Bäcker: ‘Die Wahrheit des Mordens,’” in Eder and Kastberger, *Die Rampe Porträt*, 87.

6. Heimrad Bäcker, *nachschrift* (Graz: Droschl, 1993), 134n33; *transcript*, trans. Patrick Greaney and Vincent Kling (Urbana, IL: Dalkey Archive, forthcoming). Further references to *nachschrift* and *transcript* appear parenthetically in the text.

7. Bäcker, “Mauthausen,” 126. See also the similar remarks of Bäcker on the uses of formalism in “Widerspiegelung,” *Die Rampe: Hefte für Literatur* 3 (1994): 61.

8. Thomas Rothschild, “Ästhetik der Aussparung, Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift* und Hans-Dieter Grabes *Er nannte sich Hohenstein*: Eine Entsprechung,” in *Heimrad Bäcker*, ed. Thomas Eder and Martin Hochleitner (Graz: Droschl, 2002), 280–81.

Bäcker criticism, which has focused almost exclusively on Bäcker's documentary intentions.⁹ One could say of *nachschrift* what Gertrud Koch once said about Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*: "The fact that it is also a work of art is acknowledged only in passing and almost with embarrassment."¹⁰

Although his critics have not focused on *nachschrift*'s aesthetic qualities or on the question of aestheticization, there has been a related debate about whether Bäcker's texts create a false, harmonizing unity among the disparate sources he cites. The linguistic materials that make up *nachschrift* are taken from texts by victims and perpetrators as well as, in a few instances, from sources not immediately related to Nazism or the Shoah; Bäcker's materials include letters, diaries, train schedules, court proceedings, and historical works about the Shoah. Only in Bäcker's work do they gain some sort of unity, because he brings them together under the formal principle of montage. Bäcker's critics have been split in their evaluation of the unity of his text. The result of Bäcker's montage, Robert Cohen claims, is "a unified linguistic domain" that plays down the differences between victims' and perpetrators' speech.¹¹ Other readers have argued that, to the contrary, Bäcker's texts emphasize the jarring differences among the sources cited. Sigrid Weigel insists on the "shock" of encountering victims' writing or recorded speech in *nachschrift*, and Rothschild calls attention to the interruptive force of the differences among the montage materials.¹²

In my reading of *nachschrift*, I first examine the tension in Bäcker's work between his language and the language of his sources—and then turn to the tensions between unity and fragmentation and between systematicity and

9. See also the remarks by Paul Jandl, "Die Nachschrift der *nachschrift*: Zur Rezeption des Unbequemen," in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 76; and by Friedrich Achleitner, "Zu Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift* 1 und 2," in Eder and Kastberger, *Die Rampe Porträt*, 6.

10. Gertrud Koch, "The Aesthetic Transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," *October* 48 (1989): 20.

11. Robert Cohen, "Zu Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift*," *Peter Weiss Jahrbuch* 8 (1999): 148–49. For a critical response to Cohen's reading, see Klaus Amann, "Heimrad Bäcker: Nach Mauthausen," in Eder and Kastberger, *Die Rampe Porträt*, 26n46.

12. Sigrid Weigel, "Zur Dialektik von Dokumentation und Zeugnis in Heimrad Bäckers 'System *nachschrift*,'" in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 258; Rothschild, "Ästhetik der Ausparung," 280. These critics' remarks about fragmentation and unity replay the tensions inherent in montage as it is characterized by Adorno and Ernst Bloch; see Adorno, *AT*, 154; and Bloch, *Die Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 225–28. They also repeat a debate about another documentary work, Alexander Kluge's *Schlachtbeschreibung*; for a comparison of Kluge and Bäcker, see Sabine Zelger, "Wider die Macht des autorisierten Blicks: Die Arbeit am Wissen in Alexander Kluges *Schlachtbeschreibung* und Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift*," *Jahrbuch für die Literatur der Fünfziger Jahre* 3 (2007): 39–64.

the exception. The goal of my reading is an understanding of the place and function of aestheticization in Bäcker's work. I focus on *nachschrift* but also examine a few other Bäcker texts, especially *epitaph* and *nachschrift 2*.

Gibberish

Most of the entries in *nachschrift* isolate their quotations on an otherwise blank page, and each quotation is documented in an endnote. Most of the entries quote between one and three sentences, such as this single sentence that can serve as an introductory example for Bäcker's method: "ich muss, wenn ich die dinge rasch erledigen will, mehr transportzüge bekommen" ("i need more freight trains if i'm going to take care of things quickly") (27). The endnote reveals that the source is a 1943 letter from Heinrich Himmler (134). The sentence's failure to mention the purpose of the required trains is put in relief by the terse, explicit vocabulary of the cropped quotation on the facing page:

- (I) . . .
- (II) . . .
- (III) an der verfolgung und ausrottung
 1. ihre ermordung
 2. ihre konzentration
 3. . . .⁴

- [(I) . . .
- (II) . . .
- (III) in the persecution and eradication
 1. their murder
 2. their concentration
 3. . . .⁴] (26)

The note tells us that these lines are taken from an index of a book on the trials of camp administrators. Bäcker omits some of the items in the index, and he cites the superscript reference 4 without supplying the note to which it refers, thereby explicitly registering the relation of *nachschrift* to a larger, absent body of writing as well as the fact that this link is broken.

These few entries already allow for a summary of Bäcker's method: quotation, documentation, isolation, abbreviation, and, in some cases, modification. Bäcker slightly modifies 43 entries, as in the quotation from the index, in which some terms from the original have been omitted; most of these alterations are indicated as such in the notes. The passages that he distorts the most are from Nazi leaders, as in this pastiche of *Mein Kampf*: "erst wenn

ein volkstum in allen seinen gliedern zu jenem hohen gefühl dereinst und zusammengeschiedet unerschütterlich jede überschäumende kraft vom schicksal. denn die größten umwälzungen auf dieser erde fanatische leidenschaft zum heil der arischen menschheit dereinst das für die letzten und größten auf diesem erdball reife geschlecht ihre krönung hineinbrennt” (only when a nation in all its members to that high sentiment someday forged together unshakable any exuberant force by fate for the greatest revolutionary changes on this earth fanatical passion to the benefit of aryan humanity some day a race ripe for the last and greatest the crown burn into) (92). By putting together short quotations of only a few words, Bäcker turns *Mein Kampf* into what he would call *Kauderwelsch* (gibberish), a key term for understanding the method of *nachschrift*. In a short paragraph that he inserts as an introduction to the endnotes, Bäcker explains his method and describes his most extreme modification of sources as creating a “methodisches Kauderwelsch, das ein Leben kostendes Kauderwelsch reproduziert” (methodical gibberish that reproduces a deadly gibberish) (133). The use of the term *Kauderwelsch*, here and in other Bäcker texts, reveals something essential about his method and about the relation between his texts and his source material.

Kauderwelsch is a term for “an incomprehensible language” or “a means of expression made of several languages” or “a mistake-ridden language.”¹³ This is how the Grimms present *Kauderwelsch*: “Es ist eine allgemeine erscheinung, dasz benachbarte völker, stämme, gaue, städte gegen einander spott üben wegen ihrer sprache, ein volk in der frischen naivetät des selbstgefühls findet die fremde sprache des andern unverständlich, lächerlich, hässlich, wenn nicht sinnlos. . . . Dasselbe ist denn *kauderwelsch*” (It is a universal phenomenon that neighboring peoples, tribes, regions, cities ridicule one another for their language; a people in its cheerful naïveté finds the foreign language of another to be incomprehensible, ridiculous, ugly, and even meaningless . . . in a word, *Kauderwelsch*).¹⁴ Although *Kauderwelsch* is usually a derisory term for the “language of another people,” Bäcker uses it to describe the language both of his source material and of his own text. In the phrase “a deadly gibberish,” he actualizes the distancing force that, according to the Grimms, is inherent in the term, but only after he transforms its xenophobic function to designate the language of his own work as “a methodical gibberish.” Bäcker’s use of the term distances himself from his text while reducing the distance between *nachschrift* and its sources by identifying them both with the same term.

13. Wahrig *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v. “Kauderwelsch,” 732.

14. *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, s.v. “Kauderwelsch,” 11:309.

Bäcker's double use of the term *Kauderwelsch* points to the fact that he conceives of his work differently from others who investigate National Socialist language, such as Victor Klemperer. Although Klemperer, in his *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (*The Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii; A Philologist's Notebook*), thematizes his own occasional use of a few trivial expressions of the language of the Third Reich, he presents his investigation as written from a perspective safely outside it.¹⁵ Even a cursory glance at his study, however, reveals his reliance on the figures and concepts of National Socialist language and thought, most markedly in his discussion of Hitler's rhetoric, which Klemperer describes as *undeutsch* (un-German) and as a *Seuche* (epidemic) that "auf eine bisher von ihr verschonte Sprache eindrang" (penetrated a language which had hitherto been protected from it) (*LTI*, 61; *Language*, 56).¹⁶ According to Klemperer, this disease eventually overcame its host's resistance and became a "spezifisch deutsche Krankheit" (specifically German disease), transforming itself into what Klemperer calls, in a phrase broadcast from deep within LTI territory, "eine wuchernde Entartung deutschen Fleisches" (a rampant degeneration of German flesh) (*LTI*, 61; *Language*, 56). His apotropaic gesture incorporates elements of the National Socialist language that it intends to ward off. There is no better way to show the problems inherent in his attempt to distance and pathologize the language of Nazism than simply to quote his call for its destruction: "Man sollte viele Worte des nazistischen Sprachgebrauchs für lange Zeit, und einige für immer, ins Massengrab legen" (Many words from Nazi linguistic usage should be committed to a mass grave for a very long time, some for ever) (*LTI*, 22; *Language*, 16). Klemperer's insistence on the effectiveness of his linguicide is countered not only by his grotesque choice of the metaphor of a mass grave but also by how, in this metaphor, some of the words are to remain forever buried, while others, merely *scheintot* or seemingly dead, would be able, according to the metaphor's logic, to survive or return, as they already do in Klemperer's text.

There is nothing like this in *nachschrift*, which, Bäcker insists, is "nicht moralisierend, schuld/zuweisend, justifizierend" (not moralizing and does not assign blame or justify).¹⁷ Bäcker does not adopt these distancing gestures and

15. Victor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990), 110, 287; *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii; A Philologist's Notebook* (New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone, 2000), 102, 273. Hereafter cited as *LTI* and *Language*, respectively.

16. *Seuche* (plague) is the term used in *Mein Kampf* to describe the avant-garde; see Andreas Okopenko, *Kindernazi* (Vienna: Ritter, 1999), 67.

17. Heimrad Bäcker, "Über meine Arbeit," in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 253.

does not assume that he can simply bury National Socialist language. He views his examination of National Socialist language as a literary task and does not share the avant-garde dream of a new poetic language. He once did, though, as we can see in a 1973 text titled “konkrete dichtung” (concrete poetry) in which he distinguishes his poetry from gibberish: “neue dichtung dichtet eine neue sprache. sie setzt sich ab vom üblichen kauderwelsch” (new poetry creates a new language. it separates itself from the usual gibberish).¹⁸ But by the time of the publication of *nachschrift*, his position had changed. He no longer wants to make a new language out of the gibberish of Nazism but instead aims simply to change its nature, from murderous to methodical. The original gibberish has not yet been understood and thus cannot yet be overcome or used again. The goal of *nachschrift* is to understand this language; the text is, as one critic has put it, “eine erkennende Mimesis an die Sprache *und* die Tatsache des Holocaust” (a cognitive mimesis of the language *and* the fact of the Holocaust).¹⁹ That is, *nachschrift* aims not to create a new language but to allow its readers to gain some kind of knowledge about the specialized language of National Socialism.

Autobiography

The relation of *nachschrift* to the language of National Socialism is complicated by Bäcker’s involvement as a teenager in the local leadership and press service of the Hitler Youth.²⁰ In a footnote to *nachschrift*, Bäcker refers to a book review (of a biography of Hitler) that he wrote for a Linz newspaper as a seventeen-year-old in 1942. This footnote reveals that the language he aims to document was also, for a time, his language, and that *nachschrift* is, among other things, an autobiographical text.²¹ Bäcker highlights the biographical fact that he wrote texts sympathetic to National Socialism but, contrary to some of his critics, does not limit himself to a psychological admission of guilt or shame or to a work of penance. Detlef Hoffmann has formulated the shortcomings of such psychologizing and moralizing readings of Bäcker’s work: “Christianity with its metaphysical scheme of guilt, penance, and salvation belongs to the

18. Heimrad Bäcker, “konkrete dichtung,” in *Die Künstlervereinigung MAERZ, 1913–1973* (Linz: Künstlervereinigung MAERZ, 1973), 84.

19. Thomas Eder, “Eine arbeitsteilige Sprache? Zur Repräsentation des Holocaust in Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift*,” in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 267.

20. The best account of Bäcker’s youth is in Amann, “Heimrad Bäcker: Nach Mauthausen.”

21. Like many other Austrian avant-garde writers, Bäcker was interested in developing new forms of autobiographical writing; see, e.g., Reinhard Priessnitz’s account of Friederike Mayröcker’s writing in “Summarische Autobiographie,” in *literatur, gesellschaft etc.* (Graz: Droschl, 1999), 41–45.

sources of National Socialist ideology, which never tired of ornamenting itself with talk of guilt, redemption, and the Redeemer.”²² After this disqualification of these concepts, Hoffmann suggests that Bäcker’s presentation, in a note to *epitaph*, of his work as *Aufhebung* (sublation) seems more fruitful than any of these other terms for thinking about *nachschrift*. Bäcker, who held a doctorate in philosophy, would not have used the term without thinking through its implications for his project. Better than the terms *Bewältigung* (coming to terms) or *Aufarbeitung* (working through), *Aufhebung* implies that Bäcker aims to conserve and transform the materials that he draws on in *nachschrift* and in his other works. This is the note from *epitaph*: “[EPITAPH] ist ein Schritt im Prozess der Aufhebung von Sätzen, die der Autor am 27.5.1942 in der Linzer *Tages-Post* schrieb: ‘Wir haben den Führer gesehen!’ Dieses Buch ist ein Spiegel dessen, was nie mit geschriebenem Worte auszudrücken, nur im Anblick dieser Bilder zu erleben ist: Ein Stück vom Menschen Adolf Hitler” ([EPITAPH] is a step in the process of sublating these sentences that the author wrote in the Linz *Tages-Post* on May 27, 1942: “We have seen the Führer!” This book is a mirror for what can never be expressed and only experienced in the vision of these images: a piece of the man Adolf Hitler).²³ The project of *nachschrift* is a sublation not only of the fact that Bäcker published such texts but also of specific concepts in his adolescent book review. The first sublated concept is the pathos of the inexpressible and extralinguistic (“a mirror for what can never be expressed”), which is negated by the emphasis in *nachschrift* on the fact that everything about the Shoah was spoken about in great detail, even the most monstrous things. The destruction of European Jewry was not unspeakable but, as *nachschrift* shows, an eminently describable and described act that was spoken about, extensively, by thousands of people concerned about the precision and even the beauty of their language.

The counterpart of unspeakability in the quotation from this review is the immediacy of the vision that precludes speakability: the sight of Hitler cannot be described, only lived. Bäcker’s work of *Aufhebung* negates the concept of *Anblick* (pure vision) in his book review by emphasizing a number of

22. Detlef Hoffmann, “Der Tod des Todes: Zu Fotografien Heimrad Bäckers,” *Fotogeschichte* 78 (2000): 82.

23. Heimrad Bäcker, *epitaph* (Linz: MÄRZ, 1990), 53. The full text of the review reads: “Dißmann, Wegner ‘Wir sahen den Führer’ (Verlag Frz. Schneider, Berlin-Leipzig)—Aus jeder Zeile dieses schlichten Bändchens leuchten dem Leser das größte Erlebnis unserer Buben und Mädels entgegen, leuchtet die glückhafte Freude: ‘Wir haben den Führer gesehen!’ Dieses Buch ist ein Spiegel dessen, was nie mit geschriebenem Worte auszudrücken, nur im Anblick dieser Bilder zu erleben ist: Ein Stück vom Menschen Adolf Hitler! Heimrad Bäcker” (*Linzer Tages-Post*, May 27, 1942).

forms of mediation and separation, most prominently in the inclusion of a bibliographical apparatus that relates *nachschrift* to a large body of documentary materials. The place of these mediating devices in the work is essential for deciding whether *nachschrift* can be characterized as unified or fragmented.

The presence and role of the apparatus distinguish *nachschrift* from its avant-garde predecessors, from Kurt Schwitters's Merz poems to Helmut Heißenbüttel's "Deutschland 1944."²⁴ The notes, along with the bibliography, shape the reading experience of *nachschrift*. Every quotation is complemented by a note, which includes an abbreviation for the quotation's source that then serves as a guide for looking up the source in the bibliography. There are thus three distinct, mediating layers to *nachschrift*: text, note, and bibliography. Even the moderately conscientious or curious reader must flip back and forth among these three parts, because the quoted passage and often even the note do not give enough information to understand the passage, as in this list of figures:

66 min
 87 min
 106 min
 74 min
 65 min
 65 min
 53 min
 70 min
 65 min
 66 min
 87 min
 65 min (79)

The note explains that the source of this list is a set of documents related to "Unterkühlungsversuche mit tödlichem Ausgang" (hypothermic experiments with fatal results) and lists the source as "IMT XXV/593, 598." Flipping to the bibliography, the reader sees that this abbreviation stands for volume 25 of the

24. For a critical account of the differences between Bäcker and Heißenbüttel, see Amann, "Monumenta Germaniae Historica," 228–31; and Klaus Ramm, "Nachgeschrieben, nachgesprochen, nachgehört: Heimrad Bäckers Hörstück 'Gehen wir wirklich in den Tod?'" in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 36–37. For Ferdinand Schmatz, it is Bäcker's bibliography that distinguishes his work from other avant-garde authors working with montage ("Der Sprach-Archäologe," in *Literaturlandschaft Österreich: Wie sie einander sehen, wie die Kritik sie sieht; 39 prominente Autoren*, ed. Michael Cerha [Vienna: Brandstätter, 1995], 70). One critic claims that Bäcker's work, without the notes, would remain "in the realm of the purely formal" (Andreas Hapkemeyer, "Heimrad Bäcker: Konkreter Text und historische Referenz," in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 56).

International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (136). Without the footnotes and the bibliography, the list would be indecipherable.

Another example of this kind of separation can be found in a quotation that appears near the end of Bäcker's volume of selected texts and poems (and again in *nachschrift 2*):

- *1
 *2
 5) **1
 **2
 6) **1
 7) *
 8) *
 **2
 zu 7)
 *1
 *2

 5)
 6)
 7)
 8) der satz hieß ursprünglich:

The text consists of nothing but ordering and referring signs and the final, incomplete, amendatory sentence, which would read in English, “the sentence originally stated.”²⁵ The note for this text reveals the source to be, again, the Nuremberg trials; the sense of incompleteness already present at first glance is intensified by the knowledge of what might have been left out.

The body of Bäcker's texts refutes the topos of unspeakability, and his use of notes impedes an immediate “vision” of his text. Anthony Grafton remarks that footnotes “detract from the illusion of veracity and immediacy . . . since they continually interrupt the single story told by an omniscient narrator.”²⁶ For Susan Stewart, the footnote “depicts a voice splitting itself,” a

25. This poem can be found in Heimrad Bäcker, *Gedichte und Texte* (Berlin: Rainer, 1992), 141; and in Bäcker, *nachschrift 2* (Graz: Droschl, 1997), 225.

26. Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 69.

voice that offers (in the body of the text) and withholds something (by referring beyond itself to something that remains unsaid in the body and often also in the note).²⁷ The apparatus of *nachschrift* contributes to what Viktor Shklovsky identifies as a key task of literary language; it “make[s] perception long and ‘laborious’” by requiring the reader to turn to notes and to a bibliography and, even then, failing to give all the information necessary to understand some of the quotations.²⁸ Thus *nachschrift* initiates a process not only “long and ‘laborious’” but interminable. Klaus Kastberger identifies this dilatory aspect of *nachschrift* as a necessity for understanding the Holocaust, “slowing down the events, magnifying details and thereby making them intractably difficult.”²⁹

The note’s presence shows that verification is necessary and thereby reveals the possible fallibility of the main text—or, at the very least, its dependence on other texts. The notes not only give “glimpses of all ‘that has been left out,’” as Stewart has it, but also demonstrate *that* so much has been left out.³⁰ When Bäcker writes in a text titled “Über meine Arbeit” (“About My Work”) of “Literatur als eine Möglichkeit, auch scheinbar nichtliterarische Elemente zur Literatur zu erklären” (literature as a possibility of declaring seemingly unliterary elements to be literature), he may also be talking about incorporating, within the form of his literary texts, the footnote, the action of verification, and thus this general division of the text and relation to an outside. For Bäcker, this separation is primarily a formal problem and a formal opportunity: “Es liegen Schriftzeugnisse vor, die Form freigeben: des Buchstabens, der Ziffer, der Lautverbindung, der Satzkürzel, der Zeilenlänge, Zeilenanordnung, der Additionszeichen, der Anmerkung a), b), c), der hochgestellten Ziffer 3” (There are written records that liberate form: the form of the letter, of numerals, of sound sequences, of abbreviations, of line length, of vertical format, of addition signs, of the note a), b), c), of the superscript number 3).³¹ This is a list of essentially incomplete elements that either belong to a larger unit or refer beyond themselves and that Bäcker’s texts aim to make into literature.

In *nachschrift* the notes complement the entries but do not fully explain them; often the reader is left with few details and little context, even in the

27. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 74.

28. Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1990), 6, 10.

29. Klaus Kastberger, “Stumme Zeugenschaft: Zu Heimrad Bäckers schwerer Kunst,” in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 72.

30. Stewart, *Nonsense*, 74–75.

31. Bäcker, “Über meine Arbeit,” 253.

notes. Instead of the mystical pairing of unspeakability and immediate vision that determines Bäcker's 1942 book review, *nachschrift* insists on the speakability of the facts that it presents and on the mediated nature of the representation that it offers.

Typewriting

Bäcker's use of notes bears witness to the kinds of separation that characterize bureaucratic language, of which Bäcker cites an extreme example in *nachschrift 2*: "wenn der blockschreiber irrümlicherweise eine nummer mit dem vermerk *verstorben* versieht, kann solch ein fehler später einfach durch die exekution des nummerträgers korrigiert werden" (if the block record keeper mistakenly adds the annotation "deceased" to a number, such an error can be subsequently corrected simply by executing the bearer of the number).³² In a reading of this passage, Thomas Eder describes the passage's "radical transvaluation of the concept 'simply'" and emphasizes how this quotation shows the separation inherent in and necessary for bureaucratic regimes, in which "the record keeper" writes for writing's sake and is removed from the actions that he writes about. The entry shows the "prioritization of the semantic discourse system over the real reference [the death of a human being]."³³ The accuracy of the bureaucratic record is "simply" more important than human life. At first glance, it seems that Bäcker's focus on the language of National Socialism ignores the more crucial historical investigation of National Socialism, but the inclusion of this quotation in *nachschrift 2* implies that language, for Bäcker, is the crucial element to be investigated in any literary engagement with the Shoah. In the theoretical text "Dokumentarische Dichtung" ("Documentary Literature") Bäcker writes: "Thema ist eine Sprache, die mit ihren Zeichen auch Globocniks Abrechnung der 'Aktion Reinhard' (Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka) zur Verfügung steht. Thema ist nicht diese Abrechnung oder die 'Aktion Reinhard,' sondern eine Sprache, die imstande ist, Aktion und Abrechnung zu präsentieren" (It is a question of a language that with its signs was available to Globocnik's planning of the "Reinhard Operation" [Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka]. It is a question not of this planning or the "Reinhard Operation," but of the language that is able to present this operation and planning).³⁴ This distinction is important: his focus is not the Shoah but the language of its planning. This focus appears in Bäcker's explicit intention, expressed in the

32. Bäcker, *nachschrift 2*, 124. None of the entries in *nachschrift 2* has a final period.

33. Eder, "Eine arbeitsteilige Sprache?" 266.

34. Heimrad Bäcker, "Dokumentarische Dichtung," in *Österreich lesen: Texte von Artmann bis Zeemann* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1995), 279.

notes, to make *nachschrift* a systematic work of quotation: “jeder Abschnitt von *nachschrift* ist Zitat, was Phantasie und Phantastik scheinen könnte, ist überprüfbares Dokument” (every section of *transcript* is a quotation; what might appear to be a product of the imagination or fantasy is a verifiable document) (133).

Although not all the entries in *nachschrift* are taken from bureaucratic documents, this type of language receives special attention, because every other type of language in *nachschrift* emerges only in relation to it.³⁵ Even the most intimate documents cited in *nachschrift* were produced in response to bureaucratic imperatives, such as these quotations from a collection of final letters from prisoners condemned to death: “meine leiche befindet sich diesseits der schule beim straßenwärterhaus, wo albegno ist, diesseits der brücke. ihr könnt sofort mich holen kommen”; “dies ist mein letzter brief, und ich lasse dich wissen, daß ich am 1. september um sechs uhr erschossen worden bin” (you will find my body right before the school, it’s by the street watchman’s house, where albegno is, before the bridge. you can come and pick me up right away; this is my last letter, and i’m letting you know that i was shot on september 1st at six o’clock) (114–15). What seems most characteristic and stunning about these letters is the certainty of death and the simple reporting of this certainty, which creates utterances unimaginable under other circumstances.³⁶ Although these entries are marked by the specificity of being victims’ speech, they are also an extension of the bureaucratic mechanism that demanded their production.³⁷

Writing occupies a key position in any understanding of bureaucracy. A recent history of bureaucracy in Germany quotes texts from the nineteenth century that register a hope for a quick end to the new forms of governance derided as *Schreibmaschinerie* (typewriting), which instituted, according to the nineteenth-century economist Friedrich List, a new “world”: “Eine von dem Volke ausgeschiedene . . . Beamtenwelt, unbekannt mit den Bedürfnissen des Volkes und den Verhältnissen des bürgerlichen Lebens, in endlosem Formenwesen kreisend, behauptet das Monopol der öffentlichen Verwaltung, ihre Formenlehre und Kastenvorurteile zur höchsten Staatsweisheit erhebend” (A world of bureaucrats . . . separated from the people, unfamiliar with

35. On the place of bureaucracy and bureaucratic language in Austrian literature and on Bäcker’s use of the language of bureaucracy, see Sabine Zelger, *Das ist alles viel komplizierter, Herr Sektionschef! Bürokratie—literarische Reflexionen aus Österreich* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2009).

36. For a reading of this type of document in *nachschrift*, see Weigel, “Zur Dialektik,” 258.

37. Cohen writes similarly of victims’ language in *nachschrift* as a “Spiegelbild” (reflection) of the perpetrators’ speech (“Zu Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift*,” 142).

the needs of the people and the ways of civic life, circling about in endless formal issues, is claiming a monopoly on public administration and raising its formal doctrines and caste prejudices to the highest principles of the state).³⁸ Because of civil servants' putative separation from the people and identification with "formalities," bureaucracy came under fire during the Nazi era. Hans Mommsen documents some of these conflicts, which are especially visible in a letter he quotes in which Martin Bormann insists that the careful and proper fulfillment of duties is not enough for a National Socialist bureaucrat:

Zweifellos kann auch ein Beamter, der dem Nationalsozialismus mit Vorbehalt gegenübertritt oder ihn innerlich ablehnt, Aktenvorgänge, deren Erledigung an bestimmte, fest vorgeschriebene Richtlinien gebunden ist, bearbeiten. Wenn der Staat sich mit einer solchen Haltung eines Beamten aber abfinden wollte, würde er der Beamtenschaft und ihrem Ansehen im Volk einen sehr schlechten Dienst erweisen. Der Staat muß vielmehr darauf hinwirken, daß seine Beamten ausnahmslos aus innerer Überzeugung die nat.-soz. Weltanschauung vertreten.

[I have no doubt that a bureaucrat who has reservations about National Socialism or rejects it on the inside can process files following precise, prescribed guidelines. But if the state puts up with such an attitude in a bureaucrat, it would be doing a disservice to the members of the bureaucracy and their perception by the people. The state must instead work toward ensuring that its bureaucrats advocate the National Socialist worldview out of an inner conviction.]³⁹

For Bormann and a tradition that came before him, bureaucrats are suspect, because their work is political yet separable from "inner conviction." In this complaint, the ideal state form is clear *ex negativo*: a political system intimately connected with the people and unconcerned with formalities, one whose most concise articulation can be found in the Reichstag's 1942 resolution that released Hitler "from every juridical regulation."⁴⁰

38. Bernd Wunder, *Geschichte der Bürokratie in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 7–8.

39. Hans Mommsen, *Beamtentum im dritten Reich, mit ausgewählten Quellen zur nationalsozialistischen Beamtenpolitik* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1966), 198–99. Bormann was intervening in a debate about whether a bureaucrat's veteran status should count in an evaluation of his political standing.

40. Cited in Wunder, *Geschichte*, 144.

Handwriting

Bäcker's montage of bureaucratic language cannot be read as a call to replace bureaucracy and its language with a government closer to the people and run according to inner convictions. To see what his stance is, I now turn to the handwritten entries in *nachschrift*. Some are not quotations, yet Bäcker claims, in his remarks prefacing the notes, that "every section of *nachschrift* is a quotation." If this remark is to be taken literally, then Bäcker seems to give us a choice for considering every entry in his book: either an entry is a quotation, or it is somehow not part of *nachschrift*. Since these handwritten entries are not marked as quotations and nothing about them makes them seem to be quotations, they could be read as authorial intrusions into a text otherwise made up only of cited texts; in other words, they seem to represent the author's presence in a text in which he is otherwise absent. For this reason, Christina Weiss reads them as "personal commentary."⁴¹ In any case, they represent anomalies in Bäcker's text, which presents itself as highly formalized and systematic, and as such they deserve special attention in any reading of *nachschrift*.

One handwritten entry is repeated fifty-two times on one page, the simple sentence "der schreiber schreibt" (the scribe/writer/record keeper writes). This is an odd entry, for three reasons: because it is not documented and thus not verifiable, because it has no explicit relation to the Shoah, and because it is in Bäcker's hand. In its oddity, this entry calls out for an interpretation that relates it to the rest of the work and accounts for its exceptional status.

Running through "der schreiber schreibt" is a tension between impersonality and expressiveness. The entry can be read as insisting on the mechanically mimetic aspect of Bäcker's work of transcription. The use of the definite article means that the term *schreiber* can refer either to the record keepers whom Bäcker cites or to the record keeper he is. In the term *schreiber*, Bäcker the writer coincides with the writers whom he quotes, and not for the first time, because, he, too, wrote in their language as a teenager, and because, in almost all of the entries in *nachschrift*, he does not go beyond writing in the language of National Socialism as he quotes it. The sentence's quasi-tautological nature also emphasizes writing's mechanical nature, the text's purely mimetic aspect, and Bäcker's subsumption into the impersonal role of record keeper. Yet, as handwritten, the entry seems to emphasize Bäcker's status as an individual writer with his own style and thus to exempt him from the charge of *Schreibmaschinerie*. This aspect of the handwritten entry leads Weiss to find this

41. Christina Weiss, "Sprachnarben: Zu Texten Heimrad Bäckers in Kontinuum der Konkreten Poesie," in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 272.

page “expressive” and to claim that it “allows the emotion of the writer to be expressed.”⁴²

To resolve this tension between impersonality and expressiveness, we can look at how the sentence is written. Its partial illegibility and the fact that the entry overwrites itself seem to intensify the handwriting’s individualizing force, but it also can be read as signs of the conflict that arises within a dictating system that, by forcing the scribe to write and to do nothing else, pushes his writing to the point of a frantic illegibility (or to extreme distraction, which could also lead to careless writing). The overwriting thus emblemizes the tensions in *nachschrift* between quoted and quoting language; it shows the potential for difference between these words in their original contexts and in their transcription, even if this potential appears only in the form of a wavering, wobbling distortion. Although this is the only entry that contains this type of overwriting, all the entries are, in a way, written over and written again. The overwritteness is a sign of conflicts and not their resolution. These aspects show how the entry, despite appearing at first glance to be anomalous, can be read as indicative of tensions that characterize the entire work.

A rhetorical reading of the entry can also contribute to an understanding of its place in the system of *nachschrift*. The phrase “der schreiber schreibt” repeats a root while varying the part of speech and is therefore an example of *figura etymologica*. Heinrich Lausberg’s brief note on this figure only remarks that it serves to “intensify semantic force”; in this case, that would mean intensifying the writtenness or textuality of this text.⁴³ A more detailed analysis of this figure can be found in Jean Paul’s brief discussion of “der witzige Zirkel” (the witty circle) in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik (School of Aesthetics)*:

Dieser Teil des unbildlichen oder Reflexion-Witzes besteht darin, daß eine Idee sich selber sich entgegengesetzt und nachher doch mit ihrem Nicht-Ich den Frieden der Ähnlichkeit stiftet, nicht der Gleichheit. . . . Er ist so leicht, daß man nichts dazu braucht als einigen—Willen dazu: z.B. “die kritische Feile feilen—sich vom Erholen erholen—die Bastille einkertern—der Dieb an Dieben.” Außer der Kürze erfreuet daran noch, daß der Geist . . . dieselbe Idee, z.B. “das Erholen,” zum zweiten Male, aber als ihre eigene Widersacherin vor sich stehen und sich durch die Gleichheit genötigt sieht, einige Ähnlichkeit zwischen ihr selber auszukundschaften. Der Scheinkrieg erzwingt einen Scheinfrieden.⁴⁴

42. Ibid.

43. Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich: Huber, 1963), sec. 281.

44. Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (Munich: Hanser, 1963), 179. Wolfram Groddeck refers to this Jean Paul passage in *Reden über Rhetorik* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1995), 138.

[In this form of nonfigurative or reflective wit an idea first opposes itself then makes a peace of similarity, but not of equality, with its nonself. . . . It is so easy that it need only be willed: “to file the critical file,” “to recover from recovering,” “to imprison the Bastille,” “to set a thief to catch a thief.” Aside from its brevity this form pleases, because the mind, which must always move on, sees the same idea, such as “recover,” appear before it a second time as its own contrary and is forced by the equality to discover some similarity between them. The show of war forces a show of peace.]⁴⁵

The repetition of an idea as its own opposite or counterpart forces the recognition of a difference among apparent equals and, then, of a similarity that spans difference. Jean Paul’s reading of the figure emphasizes how the apparent tautology of phrases such as “der schreiber schreibt” actually reveals a number of conflicts. The writer, despite appearing in Bäcker’s handwritten entry only as a producer of writing, a mere *Schreibkraft* or *Schreibseele*, is distanced from his writing by the very fact of the sentence’s emphasis on the link of writing to writer. If the tie were secure, there would be no need to insist on it. The tension or “war” between them is frozen in the form of the statement and its apparent peace, its *Scheinfrieden*. This sentence suspends a number of tensions in Bäcker’s work: the conflict between formal unity and fragmentation; the tension within Bäcker’s biography; and the conflict between identity and difference inherent in the act of quotation.

Far from offering an exterior position, a privileged vantage point from which to examine tensions in Bäcker’s work, the entry “der schreiber schreibt” is nothing less than a crystallization of the conflicted work as a whole. But another anomalous aspect, the fact that it is not a quotation, does seem to set it and a few other entries outside the documentation and verification system that Bäcker insists on in the notes. Even Bäcker’s best readers leave these entries aside when they praise *nachschrift* as a work characterized by “discipline” and “absolute documentation” (Weigel), as “strictly documented” (Amann), and as moving away from literary invention to pure quotation (Schmatz).⁴⁶ In addition to the anomalies represented by handwritten, undocumented entries, Bäcker’s notation system is also irregular. Cohen remarks that “Bäcker’s notes sometimes contain more, sometimes less information; but this variety is not determined by any academic systematicity.”⁴⁷ Cohen’s remark belongs to his cri-

45. Jean Paul, *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter’s “School of Aesthetics,”* trans. Margaret Hale (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 127.

46. Weigel, “Zur Dialektik,” 260; Amann, “Monumenta Germaniae Historica,” 224; Ferdinand Schmatz, “Dieses droht immer,” in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 254.

47. Cohen, “Zu Heimrad Bäckers *nachschrift*,” 147.

tique of Bäcker's failure to differentiate among the types of texts he cites, especially in *nachschrift* 2, but it is important for another reason: it points to the unsystematic aspect of *nachschrift*, even in the "new, corrected edition" of 1993.⁴⁸ One entry, for instance, contains a list of abbreviations for concentration camps, and the footnote does not list a source (38), and the epigraph is not documented. I mention these not as a criticism of *nachschrift* but as a challenge posed by the work to interpretations that insist on its absolute systematicity and seamless documentation.⁴⁹

In this text, the principle of documentation is subsumed under another, broader principle. As I observed above, the notes' importance lies not just in their documentary function but also in their opening up of *nachschrift* to other texts. The notes' referring force remains intact even when the reference is incomplete, as the superscript 4 in the text cited above showed. When the text's apparent anomalies are taken seriously and read together with the notes' intertextualizing force, it becomes clear that *nachschrift* can better be characterized in terms of absolute incompleteness, and not absolute documentation. Far from filling in the gaps left by quotation and montage, the note *incompletes* the text, and this incompleteness becomes a central formal element in Bäcker's works.

Thus, instead of functioning as an expressive element outside a system defined in terms of documentation and verifiability, the undocumented, handwritten entries activate another form of reference to something missing. Especially because of Bäcker's insistence on documentation and verifiability, these entries seem to require a reference, call out for one, and are thus incomplete in a way that exceeds the status of expressive elements, which they would probably function as in another work that insists less on verifiability. The entry "der schreiber schreibt" remains undocumented; the tensions it creates remain unresolved. It can thus be read allegorically as a sign of the incompleteness at the heart of Bäcker's work.

48. Amann also points out that Bäcker's is "keine fertige Methode" (no ready-made method); rather, it depends on a "Vorgang des Suchens, des Herantastens und des Ausprobierens" (process of searching, tentative approaches, and trial and error) ("Heimrad Bäcker: Nach Mauthausen," 24).

49. There is a particularly striking instance of incompleteness in *nachschrift*: in the first two editions, a footnote (for page 41) lists the source simply as "Zitat" (quotation) (134). Bäcker included this entry although he could no longer locate its source. He eventually found the source and included it in a personal copy of *nachschrift* along with a few other corrections for future editions; this copy can be found in his papers at the Österreichisches Literaturarchiv der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (cataloged as 214/03, 5/149). The few corrections include page number corrections for some footnotes as well as a few layout corrections. That he maintained this list of corrections testifies to his desire to complete and correct the documentation; that he included a list in *nachschrift* without a bibliographic source testifies to his desire to keep it open for future correction. The material seems to have mattered more to him, at least in this case, than its documentation.

The work of transcription can be endlessly continued. This is why Bäcker writes that the work of sublation will be complete only when he dies. The essential incompleteness of *nachschrift* may explain Bäcker's expansion of the project into a multivolume, multigenre, and multimedia work that includes another book made up only of quotations (*nachschrift 2*), a book with photographs and quotations (*epitaph*), photography, a radio play (*gehen wir wirklich in den tod?* [*are we really going to our deaths?*]), a stage version of *nachschrift* (also titled *epitaph*), and political and documentary work on the maintenance of Mauthausen. At the time of his death, he was at work on *nachschrift 3*, which would have been a collection of materials about his *nachschrift* project and its method, and *landschaft m* (*landscape m*), a book of photographs of Mauthausen.⁵⁰

Elegance

The conflict between unity and fragmentation in Bäcker's text finds a tentative resolution in the principle of incompleteness. The term *unity* loses the sense of an organic harmony, because *nachschrift*'s unity is created by incompleteness, and fragmentation is no longer the opposite of unity, because its shocks are complemented by the work's more systematic openness. This conceptual shift in interpreting Bäcker's work allows for a new approach to the function of aestheticization in *nachschrift*.

The first step in determining this function is to recognize the awareness of aestheticization in *nachschrift* and not just in its critics' reproaches. Since Bäcker's engagement with his material is limited to repetition, it makes sense that his transcription also cites the National Socialist will to aestheticize. Thought of in this way, aestheticization is no longer a danger to be kept at bay but an aspect of National Socialism that Bäcker repeats. In remarks from 1973 Bäcker notes that he does not aestheticize his materials in the act of appropriation but takes a whole as he finds it, including its aesthetic qualities: "es wird nicht nachträglich ein bedeutungskomplex ästhetisiert, sondern ein einheitliches wird gesucht und dargetan" (a meaningful complexity is not aestheticized after the fact, but something unified is sought out and displayed).⁵¹ And the "something unified" of Nazism includes its aesthetic and aestheticizing aspects. In several entries, he shows how Nazi officials thought of the bureaucratic and technical organization of genocide as a work of art, as in this passage that he cites from a letter by Himmler: "sehen sie doch zu, ob sie nicht

50. Thomas Eder, interview with the author, Vienna, July 5, 2007.

51. Bäcker, "konkrete dichtung," 86.

einen mann bekommen, der in einer genialen und künstlerischen weise dieses ganze leistungssystem in allen lagern entwickelt" (see to it that you find someone who can develop this whole incentive system in all of the camps in an ingenious and artistic way) (40). Himmler's "artistic" consideration of the very operations of mass murder is echoed in *nachschrift 2* by this quotation from Adolf Eichmann: "teilweise kamen täglich 10.000 einheiten angefahren. das tempo bestimmte nicht ich; ich konnte nur eines machen, ich konnte es in so eleganten bahnen wie nur möglich fließen lassen" (sometimes 10,000 units arrived daily. i didn't determine the tempo; i could only do one thing: i could channel it as elegantly as possible).⁵²

For the perpetrators, the Holocaust had an aesthetic aspect as it was conceived and carried out. Bäcker's interest in the language of the Shoah leads him to take account of its aesthetic aspect and the self-understanding of those who wrote and spoke it. This inclusion of aestheticizing passages leaves its traces on *nachschrift* and makes it, in some places, an aestheticizing text.

I claimed above that it would be difficult for even a moderately conscientious reader to read *nachschrift* without flipping back and forth to the bibliographical apparatus and thereby interrupting the reading experience. However, it would be possible to read *nachschrift* without paying attention to the apparatus. It is possible to imagine a blasé reader for whom the notes and bibliography do not interrupt the harmonic, flowing text: a reader who, in other words, would pay attention only to the pages' careful, calm arrangement of even the most violent texts according to a few formal principles. But this division of the reading experience into two hypothetical readers ignores the close relation between the aestheticizing and mediated aspects of Bäcker's text. The aestheticizing and conscientious readers cannot be so easily distinguished; they are simultaneous stances that the work enables. The careless reader surfaces as another possibility of reading for the critical reader, as an uncomfortable feeling when confronted with a work by an author who can quote these texts with what seems like such equanimity.

This apparent, uncanny calm emerges in the absence of affects and metaphors conventionally associated with the Shoah. Bäcker presents his work as negating "das formulierte Entsetzen der Gedenktage" (the formulaic dismay of days of remembrance), Weigel notes Bäcker's negation of affect in his renunciation of the topos of unspeakability and the pathos-laden chatter that accompanies it, and Klaus Zeyringer presents *nachschrift* as a "demetaphorization of

52. Bäcker, *nachschrift 2*, 55.

the Holocaust.”⁵³ It is tempting simply to reverse Bäcker’s phrase and claim that his work replaces a *formuliertes Entsetzen* (formulaic dismay) with *Entsetzen über Formuliertes* (dismay at formulations), but *nachschrift* does much less than that. It does not allow us the luxury of *Entsetzen*, unless this term is taken to mean an *ent-setzen* in which every familiar affective position is taken from us.

The equanimity effect in *nachschrift* is due in part to the apparent indifference of many of Bäcker’s sources to the deaths and suffering that they cause or manage. Bäcker does little to counter this indifference, and, in fact, sometimes the work’s formal unity intensifies the neutralization of suffering that Adorno identifies as an effect of form. Sometimes it does the opposite: especially in the passages quoted from victims, Bäcker’s selective quotation intensifies the relation to suffering that may not have been as prominent in the source text.

To determine more precisely the relation of form and suffering in *nachschrift*, we should look at the origins of the text’s formal vocabulary in concrete poetry. In his text on Bäcker, Gomringer presents concrete poetry as an affirmation of industrialized postwar culture and as a forgetting of the war: “Wir hatten nicht mit der frischen Vergangenheit, die wir als abgeschlossen betrachteten, nicht mit dem Nationalsozialismus, nicht mit seiner schrecklichen Sprache gerechnet. In unserer pragmatischen Euphorie spielten Coca Cola und ping pong die Rolle von neuen Wegmarken” (We hadn’t reckoned with the recent past, which we considered to be a closed chapter; we hadn’t reckoned with National Socialism and its terrible language. In our pragmatic euphoria, Coca-Cola and Ping-Pong were the new landmarks). Because of other concrete poets’ focus on postwar commodities and leisure time at the expense of attention to the “closed chapter” of Nazism, *nachschrift* appears “strange” to Gomringer: “Es wurde trotz der befremdlichen Herkunft aufgenommen” (It was accepted despite its strange origins).⁵⁴ This “strangeness” leads Gomringer to take what seems like a contradictory position vis-à-vis *nachschrift*. He identifies *nachschrift* as a “new chapter” in the development of concrete poetry and then seems to take this back by calling it an *Einzelwerk* or unicum and thus cutting it off from the past and future of concrete poetry. Gomringer’s text thus presents *nachschrift* as a disturbing outsider, despite its use of concrete poetry’s methods and despite Friedrich Achleitner’s often-quoted claim that it is a “Hauptwerk der konkreten Poesie” (canonical work

53. Bäcker, “Dokumentarische Dichtung,” 280; Weigel, “Zur Dialektik,” 256; Klaus Zeyringer, *Österreichische Literatur, 1945–1998: Überblicke, Einschnitte, Wegmarken* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1999), 211.

54. Gomringer, “Wissen Sie etwas von der schwarzen Wand?” 9.

of concrete poetry) (132).⁵⁵ There is something about *nachschrift* that makes Gomringer want to protect concrete poetry's formal vocabulary and that causes him to express his unease in the sentence that I quoted earlier ("Ungern denkt man an eine Literatur solcher Codes" [One is loath to think of a literature made up of such codes]).

Gomringer's identification of *nachschrift*'s strangeness is mirrored within *nachschrift* by the tension between the formal vocabulary of concrete poetry and the subject matter. The point is not that concrete poetry cannot be used to present the Shoah but that it, like all art forms, can neutralize suffering even as it gives voice to it and that concrete poetry's foregrounding of form can intensify this neutralization.

White Space

One of concrete poetry's central formal characteristics is its explicit inclusion of the white space of the page in the composition of its works. Franz Mon (and many others) credit Stéphane Mallarmé with the modern discovery of the white page: "Mit Mallarmés 'Un Coup de dés' ist in die Literatur ein Phänomen zurückgekehrt, das ihr völlig entschwunden schien: die Fläche als konstitutives Element des Textes" (Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés" reintroduced to literature a phenomenon that had seemed to be completely lost: the surface as a constitutive element of the text).⁵⁶ For Mallarmé, the spacing plays a seemingly contradictory role in "Un coup de dés"; he writes in the poem's preface that the spacing allows for a unified "simultaneous vision of the page" while it also "separates" groups of words and "intervenes every time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws."⁵⁷ His readers have argued that the white space's dividing force is not limited to separating images from one another but also intervenes in words and images to preclude any poetic element's identity with itself. Because of this division, every image is at once more and less than an image, and for this reason, Jacques Derrida writes, in his reading of Mallarmé in *Dissemination*, that the intervening white space calls into question "the very possibility of thematic criticism."⁵⁸ The white space would thus

55. Weigel, too, claims that *nachschrift* should not be read as concrete poetry ("Zur Dialektik," 257). On the relation of *nachschrift* to concrete poetry, see Weiss, "Sprachnarben."

56. Franz Mon, "Zur Poesie der Fläche," in *Essays* (Berlin: Janus, 1994), 77. See the discussion of this text in Thomas Eder, "'Poesie der Fläche' und Fläche der Poesie: Zwei gegenläufige Tendenzen in Heimrad Bäcker's Zeitschrift und Edition," in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 48–49.

57. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 121.

58. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 245.

increase what Adorno calls the irresponsibility of the artwork, because it emphasizes the work's writtenness at the expense of its ability to serve as an "echo of suffering" or indeed as an echo or representation of anything. "While Mallarmé was pretending to describe 'something,'" Derrida writes, "he was *in addition* describing the operation of writing."⁵⁹ This insistence on Mallarmé's "re-marking" of the "very textuality of the text" is useful for thinking about *nachschrift*'s emphasis on how the bureaucratic writing apparatus made the Shoah possible.

The white space also plays a role in deciding the extent to which unity or fragmentation determines the text. Besides allowing for a simultaneous vision of the page, the white space contributes to the uniformity that Cohen has criticized and that Adorno and others have identified as the unity that montage creates despite itself.⁶⁰ But the white space also highlights the text's formal constructedness, and the distance that separates the text's entries contributes to the other side of montage, to the fragmentation and incompleteness that the notes and bibliographical apparatus emphasize.

To summarize the reading of the white space in *nachschrift*, then: it unifies and divides the text, and it emphasizes the textual aspect of the work and what it documents. This reading posits the white space as an empty, contentless unification and fragmentation of a full, meaningful text. But the white space is more complex than that, because the text and the white space relate to each other as foreground and background. These quotations were chosen from a larger text corpus that appears negatively as white space.⁶¹ This negative marking of omissions points once again to the work's incompleteness, to its leaving aside of other texts and contexts as well as to the possibility of continuing the project with other quotations. "The 'blanks' . . . assume importance and are what is immediately striking," Mallarmé writes in the preface to "Un coup de dés," and the same can be said about the blanks in Bäcker's *nachschrift*.⁶² The blanks are "striking" because of how they function in different, even contradictory ways in Bäcker's text: as full of other possible quotations and as a blankness that simultaneously contributes to and undercuts the text's harmony and identity with itself.

My central question is no longer "Is *nachschrift* aestheticizing?" but "How does it deal with aestheticization?" Himmler and Eichmann view their

59. *Ibid.*, 253.

60. See n. 12.

61. For a discussion of the blank page as full, see Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde main, ou le travail de la citation* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 391–92; for a similar discussion of the blank canvas as full, see Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 83.

62. Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, 121.

task of genocide as, at least partly, aesthetic, and Bäcker emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of the texts that he quotes. Bäcker does not attempt to retreat from this aspect of the Shoah or to act as if he could somehow counter it with an anti-aesthetic that would distance his work from its sources or that would allow him, like Gomringer, to view recent history and his involvement with National Socialism as a “closed chapter.” Rather, *nachschrift* emphasizes its close relation to its sources; it mimetically transcribes National Socialist texts, including their aesthetic pretensions to “elegance” and to form.⁶³ Of course, the text does not *only* repeat its sources and their aestheticizing. It also contains an analytic aspect and aims, through distancing effects, to provoke a critical engagement with National Socialist language, but Bäcker’s critics have until now emphasized these distancing devices at the expense of the more troubling question of aestheticization, which would require coming to terms with his text’s intimacy with its sources and especially with their aesthetic intentions. Koch’s remarks on *Shoah* are once again relevant here: “Without question, the film also contributes significant material to the necessary political and historical debates. But the fascination it exerts, its melancholy beauty, is an aesthetic quality that we cannot afford to suppress.”⁶⁴

The language of National Socialism, *nachschrift* reveals, cannot be quarantined—or placed in a mass grave. For Bäcker, National Socialism was an enduring problem not confined to the past but indelibly present in the language, culture, and politics of postwar Austria—and inseparable from the traditions, aesthetic and otherwise, that it emerged from and that, according to Bäcker, continued to reign relatively unperturbed.⁶⁵ The two aspects of *nachschrift*—analytic and aesthetic—form just one of the tensions that run through Bäcker’s text, whose essential incompleteness includes these tensions’ nonresolution. Bäcker’s text presents us with the dilemma of coming to terms with National Socialism’s language and complicates this task by refusing to regard this language as something dead and buried.

63. On National Socialist politics as a work of art and as the creation of form, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le mythe nazi* (Paris: Aube, 1991), 48–49, 64–71.

64. Koch, “Aesthetic Transformation,” 24.

65. Bäcker’s use of postwar right-wing print materials in other works points to his engagement with the living legacy of Nazism. One such project, titled *EXPATRIATION*, consists of a series of montaged photographs of a poster by the extreme Right group Verband Österreichischer Kameradschaften in which the group protests the *Demontage* (dismantling) of the Austrian army. The series is reproduced in Eder and Hochleitner, *Heimrad Bäcker*, 62–67. The election of Kurt 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.

