

ADAM FAGIN

Reading the History of the Future in the Work of Heimrad Bäcker

According to Patrick Greaney, translator of Heimrad Bäcker's *Seascape* (Ugly Duckling Presse) and *transcript* (Dalkey Archive, with Vincent Kling), Bäcker's work investigates the phenomenon of National Socialism as it reflects it back into the present linguistic moment through a "quotational" practice. In these two books, the reader encounters a violent and jarring juxtaposition of plundered historical documents (bureaucratic memos, unsourced testimonies, journal entries, secondary sources, etc.) arranged into a literary-historical no-man's land that brushes against the grain of language, time, and the archive. *Seascape*, for example, is made up entirely of daily entries appropriated from a German U-boat captain's log during World War II. These entries describe the mundane: the weather, coordinates, atmospheric conditions. Within this quotidian drift, we encounter the silent image at the heart of the work:

Sighted lifeboat of the Norwegian motor tanker *John P. Pedersen* drifting under sail. Three survivors were lying exhausted under a tarpaulin and only showed themselves as the U-boat was moving away again. They stated that their ship had been torpedoed 28 days before. I turned down their request to be taken aboard, provisioned the boat with food and water and gave them the course and distance to the Icelandic coast. Boat and crew were in a state that, in view of the prevailing weather, offered hardly any prospects of rescue. (8)

As Charles Bernstein says in his afterword to the text, "After Writing," this entry shows that "the U-boat captain gives them provision and points to the coast of Iceland, knowing full well that they will perish." This cruelty is not merely the result of the captain's decision; it is a structured occurrence of violence. His response to the tanker must be seen in the context of the war, a set of conditions brought about by the plagues of nationalism, racism, and Germany's imperial ambitions. The captain's decision to neglect the fate of the

tanker's crew is therefore cultural and historical as well as personal. In his technique of appropriating the captain's log and reproducing it, Bäcker, however, refuses to simplify this atrocity to the merely explainable. He does not offer an image of history reducible to a theoretical framework or concept. Instead, the reader him- or herself must connect the fragments that make up the text.

Documentary literature such as this work, writes Bäcker, "renders visible what the document already contains as description, report, statistics," opening up the language, "expos[ing] it to reflection by using it just as it was used, but with literary intent" (Bäcker, "Documentary Poetry [An Essay]"). The work, then, as Bäcker writes, enters a "relational structure" with the present in which the language reveals its historical and political frameworks. "Its linguistic husks are undone," Bäcker writes, "the event . . . is revealed; its stance is defined and its structure becomes visible" (Bäcker, "Documentary Poetry [An Essay]"). In other words, the language of history enters a conversation with our present moment, becoming a site of ongoing investigation by the reader.

Bäcker joined the Nazi Party in 1943 and was active in the Hitler Youth (Greaney 91). As Greaney writes, Bäcker dedicated much of his artistic life to an examination of Nazi language (91). In *transcript*, we find direct quotations, some of which Bäcker has lightly manipulated, from those who both orchestrated and were victims of the Final Solution. In most cases, as the language of survivors is mingled with that of the Shoah's perpetrators, it is impossible to know its exact source. This creates an unstable linguistic atmosphere in which this language refuses to resolve into historical narrative. In this way, Bäcker's book of quotations, as Charles Bernstein says, "confronts, without summarizing or representing, the Systematic Extermination of the European Jews . . . Bäcker's source texts . . . are sampled, fragmented, constellated" (Bernstein, "After Writing"). They do not present us with a master narrative of World War II, of the Shoah or the cultural and political conditions that created this atrocity, but extend the reader's historical knowledge and understanding to the breaking point, pressing it into generative collapse. This shows, as Bernstein writes, "[n]arrative . . . under erasure, but ineradicable" (Bernstein, "This Picture Intentionally Left Blank"). It is a refusal to resolve the problems of its history. In Bäcker's work, historical fact is transformed into the unresolvable, inescapable condition of the present that pushes readers to investigate the many properties and contexts of his appropriated language.

Transcript accomplishes this in part with its unusual formal properties, which allow us to gather into our reading not only the body

of the work but endnotes and bibliography, as well, which we must work through in a process that "impedes every immediate vision" (97). Greaney writes:

The notes, along with the bibliography, shape the reading experience of *transcript*. They make up one of three distinct, mediating layers in *transcript*: text, note, and bibliography. Even the moderately conscientious or curious reader must flip back and forth among these three parts of the work, because the quoted passage and often even the note do not give enough information to understand it. (96)

We therefore follow "the path laid out by the note, verifying references, and reflecting on the text's relation to an outside" (97). Here is a fragment of an entry:

because she was loitering in the prater
because he tried to enter the race track at freudena
because he entered alpine cabins and stayed overnight
because she left vienna without permission and spent over a month in eisenerz
because she left vienna without official permission and went to mariazell
because she occupied a seat on the city train line
because he constantly violated the curfew
because she repeatedly frequented taverns, cinemas, and theaters . . .

because of conduct friendly to jews
because of conduct friendly to jews
because of conduct friendly to jews
because of conduct friendly to jews (12)

Implied in the repeated "because" is a legal "justification" for the action taken against whomever is under arrest. Here we find a people assigned criminal status based on religious identity. These show that not only were all public spaces and activities off limits but that the ability to flee these spaces was also prohibited; in other words, the total existence of these individuals has been criminalized; all is trespass. With the repeated lines of "because of conduct friendly to the jews," we understand, as well, that these judgments fell not just on Jews but on anyone who risked themselves by recognizing Jewish

personhood. When we flip to the note at the end of the book, we see these lines are taken "From Widerstand (Vienna) . . . Every item is taken from a daily report by the Vienna Gestapo or from a court sentence" (131). We then move to the bibliography, which tells us that Widerstand is from the Archive for the Documentation of the Austrian Resistance and Resistance and Persecution in Vienna, 1934-45: A Documentation (146). As Greaney writes, and as I've quoted above, "his [Bäcker's] use of notes impedes every immediate vision" (97). As readers, we are unable to understand how or why these documents were included in records kept by the Austrian Resistance, but this would seem to place the "offenses" listed above in Austria. We don't know who the "offenders" were or what their fate was. (Were they deported? Released? Did they survive the war? Did they become part of the resistance?) What follows for the reader is question after question; the text offers no answers. The work of reading in *transcript* therefore happens within this tension, not in the body of the text, but between the reading of the text, the notes, and the bibliography. This process of approach and obstruction is our experience of the text, creating a linguistic environment in which fact and event appear, only to vanish as we come near. Bäcker's entries in *transcript* are recursive, a forward movement and interruption in the work that sends us searching in every direction for something to settle the reading experience. But we find only the murderous language of National Socialism, which refuses us entry into past as well as present.

In a fragment that is likely an account of a gas chamber extermination in Belzec, we find the lines: "the dead remain standing, like basalt columns; they couldn't fall to the / ground or bend over" (35). Are these lines self-reflexive? The source texts in Bäcker's work are like these bodies in the gas chamber. They refuse to yield. Placed between the living, whoever was there to record them, and the dead, who have no story to tell, it leaves the reader in role of witness according to Giorgio Agamben's concept of testimony. Agamben does not think that the Shoah is or was unspeakable. For Agamben, testimony "escapes both memory and forgetting" "that which does not have language" (158, 30). The work inhabits and is inhabited by "[w]hat cannot be stated, what cannot be archived," as Agamben says, "the language in which the author succeeds in bearing witness to his incapacity to speak" (161). This incapacity comes to us as fragments of language violently severed from its context, enacting the violence of National Socialism's bureaucratic death machine. The text seems to destroy as it creates, to strangle as it speaks, to bury forever the dead, it allows us, for a second, to witness moving through the language of

their destruction. In this way, as Sabine Zelger writes, Bäcker's work "prevents history's closure" by bringing it into a new relation with the present that is constantly unsettled by the book's labyrinthine structure ("Afterword: A Past Charged with Now-Time"). In this work, Greaney writes, "The Shoah is transformed from something that readers thought they already understood into something that they have yet to grasp and that *transcript's* apparatus allows them to examine" (Greaney, 152). It posits history as present, implicating the reader in the future of a past that is both remembered and forgotten as we make our way through the historical-linguistic territory it unsettles.

WORKS DISCUSSED

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