Walking Through History: Topography and Identity in the Works of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard

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Abstract

The post-war landscape of Europe is unthinkable without the voices of the Austrian writers Ingeborg Bachmann (1926–1973) and Thomas Bernhard (1931–1989). Their work, coming after the devastation wrought by the Second World War and the Holocaust, is rooted in a specifically Austrian context of repression of this traumatic historical legacy. In post-war Austria, discourse on the recent past may have been dominated by silence, but the legacy of this past was all too apparent in the country’s ruined and speedily reconstructed cityscapes.

This book investigates Bachmann’s and Bernhard’s treatment of two fundamental aspects of the Austrian historical legacy: the trauma of the war and the desire to return to an ideal homeland, known as ‘Haus Österreich’. Following a methodology based on Freud and Benjamin, this comparative study demonstrates that the confrontation with Austria’s troubled history occurs through the protagonists’ ambivalent encounter with the landscape or cityscape that they inhabit, travel or return to. The book demonstrates the centrality of topography on both thematic and structural levels in the authors’ prose works, as a mode of confronting the past and making sense of the present.

Cite this
Bachmann’s literary work focuses on themes like personal boundaries, establishment of the truth, and philosophy of language, the latter in the tradition of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Many of her prose works represent the struggles of women to survive and to find a voice in post-war society. Bachmann was also in the vanguard of Austrian women writers who discovered in their private lives the political realities from which they attempted to achieve emancipation. Bachmann’s writings and those of Barbara Frischmuth, Brigitte Schwaiger and Anna Mitgutsch were widely published in Germany. After Bergmann’s death in 1973 Austrian writers such as Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek continued the tradition of Austrian literature in Germany.[9]. This book investigates Bachmann’s and Bernhard’s treatment of two fundamental aspects of the Austrian historical legacy: the trauma of the war and the desire to return to an ideal homeland, known as ‘Haus Österreich’. Following a methodology based on Freud and Benjamin, this comparative study demonstrates that the confrontation with Austria’s troubled history occurs through the protagonists’ ambivalent encounter with the landscape or cityscape that they inhabit, travel or return to. The book demonstrates the centrality of topography on both thematic and structural levels in the authors’ prose works.