Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature
ISSN: 2732-4605
Global Talent Academy

Between Liebestod and Gegenzeit: Bachmann's Radio Plays as a Feminist Rewriting of Celan's Poetics

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Received: 22/03/2025
Accepted: 28/06/2025
Published: 01/07/2025

Volume: 6 Issue: 4

How to cite this paper: Sun, X. (2025). Between Liebestod and Gegenzeit: Bachmann's Radio Plays as a Feminist Rewriting of Celan's Poetics. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, *6*(4), 54-63
DOI: https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v6i4.376

Abstract

Ingeborg Bachmann's (1926-1973) literary trajectory has often been examined through her poetic and intellectual exchanges with Paul Celan (1920-1970).[1] While scholarship has extensively explored their intertextual relationship in poetry, correspondence, and *Malina*, her radio plays remain critically understudied. This oversight obscures a key phase in her literary evolution, particularly concerning her transformation of Celan's poetics. This article argues that these plays provide a crucial but overlooked space where Bachmann's engagement with Celan did not fade but evolved. This study challenges the assumption that Bachmann distanced herself from Celan's influence after their romance ended. It argues that her radio plays reconfigure rather than reject his poetics.[2] While themes of trauma, rupture, and memory persist, they are reshaped within a new formal and ideological framework. *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* (1952) and *Die Zikaden* (1955) continue to resonate with Celan's concerns about postwar amnesia and the limitations of language as testimony. However, *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* (1958) signifies a shift: rather than moving beyond Celan's influence, Bachmann channels it toward a feminist critique of systemic violence and power structures. Her radio plays create a transitional space where Celan's presence lingers but is actively reinterpreted. Their correspondence is often marked by miscommunication, foreshadowing the fragmented dialogues and disrupted speech found in these works.[3] By highlighting her radio plays as a crucial element in studies of her literary evolution, this article reconsiders Bachmann's relationship with Celan as a process of active reworking rather than rejection, broadening the scope of existing scholarship beyond poetry and *Malina.*

Keywords: Intertextuality, Existential Philosophy, Gendered Violence, Memory Studies, Postwar Literature, Trauma Theory, Hörspiel Genre

1. Introduction

Ingeborg Bachmann wrote three radio plays in her lifetime: *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* (1952), *Die Zikaden* (1955), and *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* (1958). The *Hörspiel* genre flourished in postwar German-speaking Europe and provided a critical platform for literary voices at a time when theaters, libraries, and publishing houses were in ruins.[4] Additionally, the war left many soldiers injured or blinded, making radio an essential means of cultural and intellectual engagement. By the 1950s, radio broadcasts had become a dominant form of mass communication, allowing authors like Bachmann to reach a broad audience.

After completing her doctorate at the University of Vienna in 1950, Bachmann worked as a scriptwriter and editor at the radio station *Sender Rot-Weiß-Rot* (1951–1953).[5] This experience not only familiarized her with the medium but also enabled her to explore its artistic possibilities. Her radio plays reflect both the formal constraints of the genre and her evolving intellectual concerns. They explore the existential anxieties of postwar Austria, especially the nation's struggle with historical responsibility. At the same time, they broaden the thematic concerns of her poetry, such as time, love, and collective memory, into a new narrative form.

Bachmann's first two radio plays, *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* and *Die Zikaden*, critique the Austrian public's postwar disengagement from historical responsibility and their tendency toward escapism and ideological inertia. These themes resonate with her poetry and bear strong affinities with Paul Celan's poetics.[6] However, *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* signals a crucial shift. Here, Bachmann goes beyond historical critique and directly questions gender dynamics, integrating feminist concerns that would become increasingly central in her later works. While her critique of ideological passivity aligns with Celan's poetic stance, her engagement with feminist discourse represents a significant expansion and reconfiguration of his influence, marking a shift in her literary and political vision.

Scholarship on Ingeborg Bachmann has long focused on her intertextual relationship with Celan and Max Frisch.[7] Her poetic craft has often been examined through a biographical lens, leading to extensive studies of intertextuality between her, Celan, and Frisch. However, her radio plays remain critically understudied, often mentioned only in passing. This oversight has obscured a crucial phase in her literary evolution. Since Bachmann met Frisch in 1958, after completing her three radio plays, these works are primarily shaped by her engagement with Celan rather than Frisch's influence.[8]

While many scholars suggest that Bachmann moved away from Celan's poetics after 1956, this study argues that her engagement with his themes, such as trauma, rupture, and memory, did not cease but instead transformed, especially in her radio plays. Rather than rejecting Celan's influence, Bachmann reconfigures his concerns within a new formal and ideological framework. *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* and *Die Zikaden* continue to engage with Celan's poetics of historical trauma and ideological passivity. However, *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* marks a critical shift: instead of moving away from Celan's influence, Bachmann redirects it toward a feminist critique of systemic violence, love, and power.

The radio play genre offered Bachmann a unique literary form through which to negotiate these tensions. As a medium reliant on disembodied voices, fragmented dialogue, and sonic effects, *Hörspiel* allowed her to explore silence, miscommunication, and linguistic rupture. These are also the themes central to Celan's poetry. At the same time, her radio plays diverge from his mode of expression by shifting the focus from historical trauma to gendered violence and ideological control. Their correspondence, often filled with misunderstanding, reflects this shift: what in Celan's work remains a meditation on Holocaust trauma becomes a critique of love as war in Bachmann's plays. She expanded the eternal war motif in her poetic practice to her radio plays. She transformed the conflicts among nations into wars between the two sexes, exposing the ideological structures that sustain systematic violence against women.

This study reevaluates Celan's presence in Bachmann's radio plays, not only as a direct influence on her "January 20th" moment but also as a lingering poetic tension that she ultimately transforms.[9] Her radio work functions as a transitional space where she reimagines Celan's poetic concerns into dramatic form. Their correspondence, marked by miscommunication and interpretive failure, foreshadows the fragmented dialogues and broken speech that pervade these works. Contrary to the common scholarly view that Bachmann distanced herself from Celan's influence after their romance ended, this article shows she remained engaged with his ideas and reworked them into a broader critique of power, gender, and language. Ultimately, this paper argues that Bachmann's radio plays not only reflect but also fundamentally reshape Celan's poetics by transforming themes of trauma and silence into a feminist critique of love, violence, and power.

By foregrounding Bachmann's radio plays as a key site of transformation, this study expands existing scholarship on her engagement with Celan, demonstrating that her literary evolution was neither linear nor absolute. Instead, these works reveal how influence, resistance, and reinvention operate simultaneously, uncovering a Bachmann who does not merely move beyond Celan but actively reshapes his legacy within her emerging vision.

2. A Deal in Dreams: The Price of Forgetting

The 1950s witnessed a surge in literary works that provided readers with a temporary escape from reality. Bachmann, however, rejected this trend. Her writing offers neither comfort nor retreat. Instead, it confronts readers with unwavering directness. She argues that active remembrance is the only way to prevent history from repeating itself. In *A Deal in Dreams* (Ein Geschäft mit Träumen, 1952), Bachmann explores the theme of repressed history through a surreal narrative that reveals the psychological state of the Austrian postwar public, characterized by confusion, loss, and a longing for escape. The play critiques a society that seeks solace in dreams while clinging to the comforting numbness of reality. Against this backdrop, Bachmann poses a crucial question: How can one reclaim one's soul in a world built on denial?

2.1. Dream One: The Futility of Escape

The protagonist, Lorenz, is an unremarkable office worker who, beneath his routine existence, harbors suppressed passions and unfulfilled desires. One day, he stumbles upon a peculiar shop that sells dreams. This concept blurs the lines between fantasy and commerce, escapism and self-destruction. The storekeeper offers him a deal: he can experience three dreams, each revealing a different aspect of his subconscious: fear, fantasy, and longing. These surreal sequences unveil not only Lorenz's anxieties but also the hidden dangers present in postwar Austrian society, particularly its reluctance to confront the past.

Lorenz's first dream depicts a relentless chase, as he and a colleague endlessly flee from their superior, never escaping an oppressive, cyclical reality:

> LAURENZ: Das Herz durch den Tunnel. Das Herz zuerst. [The heart through the tunnel. The heart first.]
> MANDL: Wir müssen uns vor die Lokomotive werfen. [We must throw ourselves in front of the locomotive.]
> ANNA: Laurenz, Sie müssen die Lokomotive aufhalten. [Laurenz, you must stop the locomotive.] (Bachmann, 1978, p. 196; translations mine)

This scenario highlights the inescapability of Austria's wartime ideological structures, suggesting that historical amnesia and denial merely perpetuate oppression. Bachmann emphasizes that historical trauma cannot be escaped. The only way to achieve authentic societal renewal is to address it directly.

2.2. Dream Two: The Seduction of Power

In the second dream, Lorenz undergoes a disturbing transformation. He becomes the superior he once feared, now wielding absolute power over others. In a moment of unchecked authority, he declares his desire to wage war on a global scale:

> LAUTSPRECHER: Wie wir soeben vom Laurenz & Laurenz Transglobe Konzern erfahren, hat seine Hoheit, Generaldirektor Minister Doktor Laurenz, den Krieg erklärt. [As we have just learned from the Laurenz & Laurenz Transglobe corporation, His Highness, General Director Minister Doctor Laurenz, has declared war.] (Bachmann, 1978, p. 204; translation mine)

Here, Laurenz embraces the very ideological violence he previously sought to evade. Bachmann explores a profound contradiction: even the most unremarkable individuals harbor hidden desires for domination. The dream indicates that the power structures that enabled fascism haven't been eliminated; instead, they remain in the minds of ordinary citizens, ready to emerge when the chance arises. This sequence underscores Bachmann's warning against Austria's postwar amnesia: forgetting history risks its reemergence in new forms.

2.3. Dream Three: The Illusion of Love

In the third and most intimate dream, Lorenz feels deeply in love with his colleague, Anna, who represents longing, intimacy, and emotional connection. Anna also appears in his two other dreams, where they are being chased by their superior, and she reappears in the second dream as his secretary. However, the third dream is distinct from the previous ones because it is not defined by fear or violence but by desire and attachment. At the beginning of the dream, Anna was about to board the ship "Securitas." Laurenz desperately tried to call her back by reminding her of her responsibilities and warning her about the approaching storm on the horizon:

> LAURENZ: Anna, du hast keinen Paß bei dir. […] Hörst du mich? Anna, du kannst nicht einfach auf das Schiff laufen. Du hast eine Menge von Formalitäten zu erledigen. Anna! [Anna, you don't have your passport. […] Do you hear me? Anna, you can't just board the ship. You have lots of formalities to complete. Anna!] (Bachmann, 1978, p. 206; translation mine)

However, Anna was only laughing at him, responding mockingly:

> ANNA: Du bist es, Laurenz, du rufst mich! Matrosen, seht ihr den kleinen dicken Punkt am Ufer, diesen kleinen grauen Punkt, der wie eine Träne im Sand zittert? Die Träne will, daß ich abspringe und zurückkomme. [Sailors, do you see the small fat dot on the shore, that little gray dot trembling like a tear in the sand? The tearing dot asks me to jump and go back to shore.] (Bachmann, 1978, p. 208; translation mine)

However, as Anna sank to the bottom of the sea, she acknowledged Laurenz's warning and finally returned his love:

> ANNA: Ich werde dich lieben um deiner Treue willen, und ich werde dir treu sein um deiner Liebe willen. [I will love you for your loyalty and be loyal to you for your love.] (Bachmann, 1978, p. 212; translation mine)

However, just as Laurenz begins to embrace love, Anna disappears, exposing the fleeting and illusory nature of his dreams. Love, like escape and power, is commodified in the dream shop. It is turned into a transaction rather than a genuine human connection.

This moment reflects Bachmann's concerns about love as an existential crisis, which are later explored further in *Der gute Gott von Manhattan*. Anna's disappearance reinforces the play's central message: no dream, whether of power, escape, or love, can replace reality.

2.4. Postwar Amnesia and the Plagiarism Scandal

Between 1950 and 1952, Celan faced accusations of plagiarism from Claire Goll, the widow of poet Ivan Goll—an ordeal that profoundly affected him.[10] Although the claims were later retracted, the scandal revealed the underlying antisemitism and collective forgetfulness that continued to influence postwar German and Austrian intellectual circles. Bachmann, who publicly supported Celan, recognized these accusations as symptomatic of broader societal unwillingness to confront historical complicity.

Wolfgang Emmerich emphasizes that postwar democracy did not eliminate ingrained complicity and denial. Similarly, Bachmann's play symbolically critiques Austria's cultural propensity for escapism and denial. *A Deal in Dreams* reflects these concerns: Lorenz's journey through dreams symbolizes Austria's reluctance to confront its past. The dream shop represents an emblem of collective escapism. It provides fantasies and a way to forget, perpetuating a cycle of historical repetition. Through Lorenz's unsuccessful attempt to reclaim his soul, Bachmann warns that unresolved historical trauma does not simply disappear. It resurfaces, distorts, and affects new generations in unexpected ways.

2.5. Conclusion: The Price of Dreams

Ein Geschäft mit Träumen thus exposes the fragility of memory within a society eager to forget. Lorenz's surreal journey critiques postwar Austria's collective choice of historical suppression over remembrance. His dreams illustrate the futility of escape, the allure of authoritarian power, and the illusory nature of love. They reveal the deep roots of denial within personal and national consciousness. The play's message is unequivocal: imagining a future free from historical reckoning is equivalent to selling one's soul. Bachmann emphasizes the importance of confronting painful truths by explicitly linking her narrative to contemporary historical contexts, such as the plagiarism scandal involving Celan. Thus, *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* emerges as both an aesthetic and political intervention, urging its audience toward a challenging yet essential historical confrontation, where remembering becomes a vital act of ethical survival.

3. *The Cicadas*—Exile, Illusion, and the Limits of Redemption

In *The Cicadas* (*Die Zikaden*, 1955), Bachmann continues her critical examination of postwar escapism. She shifts her focus from internal psychological states to external landscapes that symbolize both voluntary and enforced exile. Bachmann creates two islands in the play. One is a vast sanctuary for those fleeing reality, while the other, ironically named "The Land of Redemption," serves as a prison island designated for exiles.

3.1. The Robinson Crusoe Motif and the Nature of Exile

The narrative begins with a prisoner escaping the smaller island and swimming determinedly toward the larger one. There, he meets Robinson, a man exiled by his own inertia rather than external constraints. During their conversation, the prisoner gradually encourages Robinson to confront his suppressed desire to return, revealing the fragile illusion on which his detachment rests.

Bachmann's deliberate invocation of the Robinson Crusoe motif emphasizes themes of exile and isolation in both her and Celan's works. However, unlike Defoe's heroic survivor, Bachmann's Robinson embodies stagnation and withdrawal, representing a psychological exile rather than one of physical necessity. Robinson initially expresses his detachment from his past life, indicating existential inertia and doubt:

> ROBINSON: Hier ist eine Insel. Und ich habe das Vergessen gesucht. [Here is an island. And I sought forgetfulness.] (Bachmann, 1992, p. 58; translation mine)

This statement captures Robinson's conscious retreat into psychological exile, emphasizing his resistance to facing the past. His wife's repeated appeals for him to return, conveyed through letters, emphasize Robinson's self-imposed estrangement and denial of reality. Like Defoe's hero, he lives in a world of self-sufficiency. Yet, unlike Defoe's hero, his experience is not a tale of heroic survival. Instead, it illustrates stagnation.

3.2. The Prisoner as a Catalyst for Confrontation

The prisoner's arrival disrupts the fragile balance of the island. The cicadas' song fails to entice him, and he does not accept Robinson's explanation for his exile. Instead, he compels Robinson to confront his buried longing for home, stripping away the layers of self-deception that have left him stuck. The prisoner continuously questions Robinson's story, directly challenging his attempts to escape reality: "DER GEFANGENE: Sie sind von Natur aus misstrauisch? [Are you suspicious by nature?] (Bachmann, 1992, p. 54; translation mine)"

This subtle yet probing question encourages Robinson to reflect, highlighting the prisoner's crucial role. As he stands on the verge of deciding, his wife arrives, offering him a clear path forward. Ultimately, he leaves with her, breaking the cycle of passive detachment. His choice represents a moment of possibility, a rare instance in Bachmann's work where exile does not culminate in entrapment or dissolution, but in reunion.

3.3. Bachmann and Celan: Letters as a Call to Return

Robinson's wife's letters embody emotional pressure, representing an external force challenging his self-imposed isolation:

> ERZÄHLER (describing wife's letters): ... die Briefe schöne, lustige Marken, und wenn man sie gegen das Licht hielte, könnte man sie lesen. [... the letters had beautiful, cheerful stamps, and if held against the light, one could read them.] (Bachmann, 1992, p. 52; translation mine)

These letters represent the emotional plea for Robinson's return, challenging his resistance with persistent reminders of his past life. Robinson's wife's letters strongly resonate with Bachmann's own correspondence with Celan, particularly her repeated metaphor of wanting to "build a ship" to rescue him from his poetic and existential isolation (Bachmann & Celan, 2010, p. 15). Just as Robinson withdraws into self-constructed exile, Celan retreats into linguistic and psychological solitude. Bachmann recognized it as a form of isolation but felt increasingly powerless to breach it. In *The Cicadas*, Bachmann indirectly voices the sorrow and futility inherent in trying to rescue those who refuse to acknowledge their entrapment or the possibility of return.

3.4. The Cicadas as Allegory: The Danger of Surrendering to Illusion

At the conclusion of the play, Bachmann reveals that the cicadas were once human. Over time, they abandoned their need to eat, drink, and care for one another, choosing to sing endlessly until they lost all traces of their humanity. The cicadas symbolize forgetting and the erasure of memory, with their song vividly depicted by Bachmann:

> Denn die Zikaden waren einmal Menschen. Sie hörten auf zu essen, zu trinken und zu lieben, um immerfort singen zu können. [For the cicadas were once human. They ceased to eat, drink, and love, in order to sing endlessly.] (Bachmann, 1992, p. 96; translation mine)

This vivid metaphor highlights Bachmann's criticism of escapism as a harmful way of self-erasure. Choosing eternal songs over engaging with reality causes these figures to lose their human qualities entirely. Bachmann issues a clear warning against falling into ideological detachment, conforming politically, or retreating psychologically, as these are forms of existential erasure rather than true liberation.

This allegory directly echoes Bachmann's perception of Celan's poetic isolation as a form of self-erasure. It resembles a self-constructed "island" from which no return seemed possible. For Bachmann, Celan himself had created such an island. Like Robinson, he had built a world from which he could no longer return or be reached. The play's final lines carry an unspoken sorrow: those who surrender to forgetting may find no path back. Thus, the play carries an autobiographical undertone. Though Robinson ultimately chooses to return, Celan, at least in Bachmann's reality, never did. *The Cicadas* can be read as an expression of her realization that she could not "rescue" Celan because he did not wish to be rescued. The island of forgetting was not just a metaphor for her social realities. For Bachmann, it was the language fence that Celan had constructed for himself.

3.5. Conclusion: The Limits of Redemption

Where *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen* critiques escapism as a temporary illusion, *The Cicadas* depicts the profound danger when escape becomes permanent. Robinson, symbolizing individuals caught between detachment and return, epitomizes the precarious threshold between illusion and reality. The prisoner's presence, reminiscent of a ghostly intrusion from the repressed past, compels Robinson to confront the fundamental truth about his escape. He realized that forgetting does not equate to healing, nor does escape guarantee survival.

Ultimately, Bachmann portrays exile not as redemption, but as a dangerous illusion, emphasizing the need to confront historical and psychological truths in order to achieve genuine reconciliation and self-awareness.

4. *The Good God of Manhattan*—Love, Power, and the Destruction of Utopian Desire

The Good God of Manhattan (*Der gute Gott von Manhattan*, 1957) remains the most celebrated of Ingeborg Bachmann's three radio plays. Broadcast in 1958, it won the prestigious War Blind Radio Play Prize, marking a significant moment in Bachmann's literary career. Unlike her previous radio plays, which critique escapism through dreams (*A Deal in Dreams*) or voluntary exile (*The Cicadas*), *The Good God of Manhattan* presents love itself as an escape, one that ultimately proves unsustainable. In this work, Bachmann directly engages with feminist thought, enhancing her critique of postwar society by intertwining war and gender relations to suggest that the conflicts between men and women reflect broader ideological and social struggles.

The play unfolds as a courtroom drama in which the Good God is on trial for orchestrating the murder of Jennifer, an American woman caught in an intense love affair with Jan, a European man. Through flashbacks narrated by the Good God, the audience witnesses their relationship evolve from fleeting attraction to all-consuming passion. However, the Good God, an enforcer of social order, perceives their love as a threat. To him, passion undermines rationality, stability, and the consumerist structure of New York City. He arranges Jennifer's assassination with the help of his agents, the squirrels Billie and Frankie. However, Jan is not present in the hotel room when the bomb detonates. He survives and is last seen fleeing Manhattan, leaving Jennifer's body behind, unburied.

Unlike Bachmann's earlier protagonists, who try to escape through dreams or exile, Jennifer and Jan seek to escape into each other. However, their love proves untenable, revealing that even the closest human connections are still subject to the pressures of social order. The play ultimately critiques the modern world's inability to sustain love, especially within a patriarchal and consumerist society.

4.1. Rewriting the Liebestod Motif: Love and Death in a Patriarchal Society

Bachmann critically reconfigures the classical *Liebestod* motif, which traditionally depicts lovers united in death as a transcendental act. In a critical scene featuring a Central Park puppet show, Billie and Frankie stage five famous tragic love stories (Orpheus and Eurydice, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Abelard and Héloïse, and Francesca and Paolo), reinforcing the ultimate fulfillment of love in mutual death. Bachmann, however, introduces a critical reversal: only Jennifer dies. This reversal of the *Liebestod* highlights the patriarchal structure of modern love, where women are sacrificed while men are reintegrated into society.

The Good God affirms this imbalance, stating that Jan has been "saved" and will return to a "normal" life (Bachmann, 1999, p. 204). Jan's survival echoes Goethe's *Faust*: "Er war gerettet, die Erde hat ihn wieder" [He was saved; the Earth has him back again] (Goethe, 1887, p.472; translation mine).[11] Like *Faust*, Jan is rescued from the potential destruction of his "love death" with Jennifer, symbolizing his inability to reciprocate Jennifer's absolute devotion. His survival signals that he could never reciprocate Jennifer's dedication or follow her into total annihilation. Bachmann thereby reveals modern love as inherently gendered, with women disproportionately bearing the cost of emotional intensity and vulnerability.

Jan's hesitation and growing detachment symbolize postwar society's effort to erase history. Jennifer is presented as the sacrificial figure whose passion conflicts with societal rationalism and capitalist expectations. The ambiguity persists whether Jan's abandonment is a deliberate betrayal or a sign of structural masculinity, highlighting men's general inability in patriarchal society to embrace reciprocal emotional vulnerability fully. Bachmann leaves this tension unresolved, emphasizing the widespread and possibly unconscious influence of gendered power dynamics. As Karen Achberger notes, Bachmann seems to suggest that "the heterosexual love relationship proves fatal to women in contemporary society" (Achberger, 1995, p. 42). This modernized *Liebestod* is no longer a mutual sacrifice but a gendered tragedy. In the modern love story, only the woman is

expendable. Bachmann's reinterpretation of the *Liebestod* reveals a grim reality: in contemporary society, women remain bound to love, consumed by their emotional intensity, while men are connected to external structures and societal norms.

4.2. Love, Language, and Power: Jennifer as Jan's Shadow

Bachmann reinforces Jennifer's subjugation through symbolic naming. Jan's name is interwoven with Jennifer's, suggesting that her existence is defined through him. This recalls Bertolt Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Szechuan* (*The Good Person of Szechuan*), where the protagonist is split into male and female halves.[12] Similarly, Jennifer is an extension of Jan rather than an independent individual.

In *The Good God of Manhattan*, Jennifer is portrayed as an extension of Jan rather than an independent individual. In a crucial palm-reading scene, Jennifer's absent lifelines starkly contrast with Jan's robust future, foreshadowing her predetermined expendability within patriarchal society. Jan's hesitancy and growing detachment mirror postwar societies' attempts at historical erasure, positioning Jennifer as the sacrificial figure whose passion cannot fit within societal rationalism and capitalist logic.

Jennifer becomes increasingly devoted as their relationship deepens, while Jan remains uncertain. He tells her he is dismantling the person he once was, transforming into someone who never existed. His desire to dissolve into love reflects the attempts of postwar German-speaking societies to erase their historical traumas. Bachmann portrays love as a potential remedy for alienation. However, within a capitalist and patriarchal system, women alone face the consequences of this idealism.

The Squirrels and the Mechanisms of Social Control

Billie and Frankie, the Good God's agents, serve a dual purpose: they promote the lovers' isolation while orchestrating their destruction. They arrange hotel rooms for Jan and Jennifer on increasingly higher floors, urging them to "tell no one" (Bachmann, 1999, p. 279). The phrase "Sag es niemand" is a Goethean allusion, paraphrased from his poem "Selige Sehnsucht" ("Blessed Longing"), which evokes secrecy, intimacy, and inevitable tragedy.

The squirrels' manipulation of the lovers also reflects Plato's *Phaedrus*, where love's highest form defies earthly constraints.[13] However, in Bachmann's version, the world does not accommodate such love, leading to Jennifer's elimination. Achberger notes how these squirrel interludes function as Brechtian alienation devices, critically exposing Jennifer's destruction as a repetitive cultural phenomenon (Achberger, 1995, p. 40). This highlights Bachmann's broader critique: modern consumerist and patriarchal society systematically destroys genuine emotional intimacy in favor of conformity and economic stability.

Beyond their literary significance, squirrels in this play also symbolize the contradictions of urban environments. They embody the anonymity and alienation found in modern cities, where emotional fulfillment is sought yet remains unattainable. New York, portrayed as a hub of advanced capitalism and technology, reflects Bachmann's concerns regarding Europe's postwar trajectory. Her 1955 visit to the U.S. exposed her to a wave of advertisements and consumerist messages. These themes later surfaced in her poem "Reklame" (Advertisement) (1956). As a proponent of rational order, the Good God embodies the forces obstructing genuine emotional connections in favor of economic and social conformity.

4.3. Countertime and the Collapse of Temporal Order

In *The Good God of Manhattan*, Bachmann employs a symbolic progression through hotel floors to illustrate the escalating intensity and isolation of Jan and Jennifer's love. As they ascend, their relationship increasingly detaches from external reality, culminating symbolically on the 57th floor, which corresponds to the year the play was completed (1957). Karen Achberger highlights the deliberate significance of these numbers: the seventh floor suggests mystical perfection, the thirtieth floor signals existential crisis and reckoning, paralleling Bachmann's contemporaneous short story "The Thirtieth Year" (1956), while the fifty-seventh floor marks an ultimate boundary beyond conventional temporality (Achberger, 1995, p. 39). Here, Jan tells Jennifer, "I am with you and against everything else. The counter clock-time begins" (Bachmann, 1999, p. 317). Jan's declaration signifies a profound existential rupture and suspension of ordinary chronological progression.

This concept of *Gegenzeit* resonates explicitly with Heidegger's distinction between linear chronological time (*das gewöhnliche Zeitverständnis*) and authentic temporality (*eigentliche Zeit*). Heidegger suggests that genuine temporal experience arises from existential ruptures—moments when past, present, and future converge into a unified awareness. Bachmann initially aligns with this Heideggerian idea, portraying Jan and Jennifer's love as a bold challenge to linear historical and temporal frameworks. However, she also complicates Heidegger's framework by highlighting the impossibility of permanently sustaining such moments within a society structured by rationality, consumerism, and patriarchal control. Therefore, Bachmann critiques time as a mechanism of historical and ideological enforcement, determining who may remain and who must vanish.

At the same time, *Gegenzeit* also reflects Wittgenstein's engagement with language and temporality in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Wittgenstein challenges the concept of a single, objective sense of time, instead proposing that time only acquires meaning within specific linguistic and experiential contexts. Jan and Jennifer's retreat into counter-time illustrates their effort to create a private, insulated reality beyond the logic of the external world. This kind of *Lebensform* (a form of life) exists entirely outside of history. However, this private language of love cannot be maintained. Just as language collapses without shared meaning, their love too deteriorates without societal recognition or context. As Wittgenstein argues, a language without shared meaning ceases to function. Jan and Jennifer's attempt to inhabit an isolated temporality, detached from external validation, mirrors Wittgenstein's concept of a private language: ultimately unsustainable due to a lack of shared reference points.

Bachmann consistently engages with temporality as oppressive in her broader oeuvre. For example, in her later work, *Malina*, time explicitly functions as an erasure mechanism targeting women. Similarly, Jennifer's annihilation in *The Good God of Manhattan* restores patriarchal and historical continuity. Her death signifies not just tragedy but an ideological inevitability. It emphasizes that efforts at temporal and existential defiance remain futile within existing power structures. Thus, Bachmann's idea of *Gegenzeit* reveals both the utopian hope and the ultimate impossibility of actual temporal rupture. It shows that in a system demanding continuous rationality and patriarchal order, love—especially female desire—is violently suppressed. In *The Good God of Manhattan*, Jennifer's death is not just a tragic ending but a necessary act that restores the balance of history. Ultimately, time itself becomes a controlling force that erases women.

4.4. Beyond Celan: Bachmann's Radical Rewriting of Love and Time

In *The Good God of Manhattan*, time is not merely suspended but actively erased. For Bachmann, love ceases to offer transcendence. Instead, it turns into a disruptive force that demands violent neutralization. This marks a significant departure from Paul Celan's poetics, which primarily explores linguistic rupture, historical trauma, and the impossibility of memory and speech. While Celan's poetry resides within the ruins of language and memory, Bachmann explicitly extends these concerns into feminist critique, confronting gendered violence and power structures. Her play depicts love itself as yet another battleground, where women do not just fade into silence but are systematically erased by historical and ideological frameworks.

Bachmann's treatment of Celan's themes signifies not rejection, but transformation. Celan mourns the constraints of language in articulating loss. Bachmann dramatizes the tangible repercussions of silencing that loss. Jennifer's violent annihilation is not accidental but essential within a patriarchal and consumerist social order. Thus, Bachmann extends Celan's concerns into realms he never thoroughly explored: gender, intimate relationships, and structural violence. She transforms his poetic rupture into an explicitly feminist interrogation of power. *Gegenzeit*, therefore, offers no lasting salvation. It denotes a fragile threshold. It represents a fleeting moment of defiance before the inevitable reintegration into history. Where Celan laments language's inadequacy, Bachmann grieves the impossibility of sustaining love against structures of control and erasure.

4.5. Conclusion: Transforming Celan's Poetics—Love, Power, and the Limits of Memory

The Good God of Manhattan exemplifies Bachmann's most direct feminist rewriting of Celan's poetics, moving beyond his explorations of linguistic rupture and historical trauma into explicit critiques of gendered violence, intimacy, and erasure. Bachmann reveals love as another critical site where power dynamics determine who survives and who must vanish. Similarly to Bachmann's earlier protagonists, Jennifer's fate reveals society's intolerance of utopian longing. The story shows that in patriarchal modernity, only men are guaranteed survival and reintegration into history, while women remain expendable, silenced memories.

Bachmann's reinterpretation of the *Liebestod* motif explicitly critiques patriarchal structures that govern memory and historical continuity. Unlike classical tragedy, where lovers mutually transcend in death, only the woman dies here. This modern fate emphasizes the gendered asymmetry underlying societal norms. The trial of the Good God reinforces this, highlighting modern justice as complicit in historical and gendered violence rather than an impartial arbiter.

Autobiographical resonances further enrich Bachmann's feminist transformation of Celan's poetics. The play's composition coincided with Bachmann's personal and professional crossroads in 1958, a moment marked by her emotional rupture with Celan and public recognition of her literary achievements. Bachmann's subsequent connection with Max Frisch was not merely a personal substitution. Instead, it signified a shift from private emotional suffering to public intellectual acknowledgment, redefining her relationship with Celan from one of intimate involvement to one of public advocacy.

Thus, *The Good God of Manhattan* is not merely a critique of modern alienation, but a crucial turning point in Bachmann's personal and artistic trajectory. By the time of *Malina*, Bachmann fully embraced a vision of love as conflict, profoundly reframing her approach to memory, power, and gendered violence. While Celan's poetry grapples with language's insufficiency, Bachmann's drama actively confronts its violent consequences.

Bachmann's final radio play serves as both a warning and a lament. It illustrates not only consumerist alienation but also what is lost in history, memory, and the intimate spaces between individuals. If modernity has severed humanity's ability to love, then loving in defiance of its limitations becomes a radical, albeit doomed, act. For all his meditations on language and loss, Celan never explored love in quite this way. Bachmann takes his poetics of rupture and extends them into a realm that Celan left unspoken, namely the private, the intimate, and the irreconcilable tensions between men and women in a world shaped by history's wounds.

5. Conclusion: Transforming Celan's Poetics in Bachmann's Radio Plays

Ingeborg Bachmann's radio plays critically engage with postwar Europe's socio-political and existential anxieties, confronting collective trauma, historical amnesia, and consumerist alienation. Deeply embedded within their historical moment, these plays resist forgetting by exposing the structural and ideological mechanisms that enforce historical and emotional erasure. Bachmann's visit to the United States in 1955, coinciding with concerns about urban violence and capitalist expansion, significantly shaped her critique of modernity, as evident in her poem "Reklame" (1956) and explicitly dramatized in *The Good God of Manhattan*, where love is systematically undermined and destroyed within a consumerist framework.

Rather than representing a departure from Paul Celan's poetics, Bachmann's radio plays transform and expand upon his central concerns—trauma, linguistic rupture, and memory — into a distinctly feminist critique. Each play explores different modes of escape: the commodified illusions of *Ein Geschäft mit Träumen*, the existential exile of *Die Zikaden*, and the utopian

yet doomed resistance of love as *Gegenzeit* in *Der gute Gott von Manhattan*. These narratives illustrate the impossibility of genuinely escaping from history and ideological control, echoing Celan's fractured language while expanding it into new realms of gender and power.

Bachmann's reconfiguration of the *Liebestod* motif in *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* marks a profound feminist reinterpretation, critiquing patriarchal violence and gendered oppression. Jennifer's isolated death highlights a broader cultural reality where female desire and existence are systematically sacrificed to maintain male continuity and social order. Moreover, her contemporary adaptation of the *Liebestod* motif signifies a decline in the capacity to love, suggesting that modernization and consumerism undermine our humanity. *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* serves not only as a warning about the destructive effects of consumerism on individualism and utopian love but also highlights the irony of the world's focus on the promised rewards of the German *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle).[14] Bachmann reminds her audience of what was repressed and forgotten during the economic revival. Similar to Jennifer, who was metaphorically bombarded to death by her consumption of love, modern citizens in post-war society are overwhelmed by materialism, leading them to forget what truly matters. In this light, Bachmann does not merely echo Celan's themes; she reworks them into a powerful critique of gendered violence, consumerist alienation, and historical amnesia, highlighting the gendered aspects of memory and forgetting.

Ultimately, Bachmann's radio plays demonstrate that language alone cannot protect memory from erasure; remembrance must be actively sustained, embodied, and enacted through critical engagement and feminist critique. By reframing Celan's poetic legacy within her innovative feminist vision, Bachmann's plays compel contemporary readers to recognize that history remains profoundly intertwined with gendered power dynamics, consumerist ideologies, and the intimate violences of everyday life. Her works do not depart from Celan; instead, they radically transform his poetics, emphasizing that love, memory, and language must continually challenge structures that aim to silence them. By viewing love, memory, and language as fields of ongoing power struggles, Bachmann calls on us to oppose the silence imposed by history, not through nostalgia, but through relentless, tangible resistance.

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Endnotes

[1] Paul Celan (1920–1970) was a Jewish poet who wrote in German. He was born in Czernowitz, Bukovina, a historically contested region that has been under Austrian, Romanian, Soviet, and later Nazi control. The Holocaust had a profound impact on his life: his parents were deported to Michalowska, a Nazi labor camp, where they perished in 1942. As a survivor, Celan carried the burden of this trauma into his poetry, creating a hermetic and cryptic aesthetic while continually seeking new forms of expression.

[2] Scholarly discourse often divides Bachmann's creative output into two distinct phases: the lyrical brilliance of her early poetry and the enigmatic depths of her later prose. The 1961 publication of her novel *The Thirtieth Year* (*Das dreißigste Jahr*) marked this transition. It signaled not a departure from her poetic roots but a transformation—an evolution of form rather than vision. Though her prose maintained the luminous cadence of her poetry, critics often perceived it as opaque, arguing that its complex plots often dissolved into fantasy and appeared disconnected from reality.

[3] See: Badiou, Bertrand, and Barbara Wiedemann. "'Let Us Find the Words': The Correspondence between Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan." In *Herzzeit: Ingeborg Bachmann, Paul Celan, Der Briefwechsel: Mit den Briefwechseln zwischen Paul Celan und Max Frisch sowie zwischen Ingeborg Bachmann und Gisèle Celan-Lestrange*, edited by Bertrand Badiou et al., 215–23. Suhrkamp, 2008.

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[4] The *Hörspiel* genre thrived in post-war German-speaking Europe and offered a vital platform for literary voices at a time when theaters, libraries, and publishing houses were in ruins.

See Karen Achberger, *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

Also, refer to Ingeborg Bachmann's *Three Radio Plays*. Translated by Lilian Friedberg. (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1999).

[5] Ibid 3

[6] Celan's linguistic density, elliptical syntax, and haunting imagery resisted straightforward interpretation, often leading critics to label his work as "hermetic" or "coded." Celan rejected claims that his poetry was impenetrable, famously asserting that he had never written a single line that did not relate to his existence. Like his survival, his language became a battleground, a space where words carried the weight of historical violence and the urgency of remembrance.

For information on Celan's poetics, please see Marjorie Perloff's "Sound Scraps, Vision Spaces: Paul Celan's Poetic Practice," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 177–201.

[7] Recent studies, including those by Bertrand Badiou, Hans Höller, Andrea Stoll, Barbara Wiedemann, Gernot Wimmer, Madlen Reimer, Jiangxin Wang, Marjorie Perloff, Alice Bolterauer, and Helmut Böttiger, have expanded this discourse.

[8] See: Ingeborg Bachmann and Max Frisch: *Wir haben es nicht gut gemacht* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022).

Also see Storks, Bettina: *Ingeborg Bachmann und Max Frisch: Die Poesie der Liebe* (Munich: Pocket Book, 2022).

[9] Ingeborg Bachmann referred to Paul Celan as her "January 20th" in a letter dated September 25, 1951. In this unsent letter, she discusses the return of a ring he had given her and explores the complexities of their relationship. Bachmann refers to Celan as her "January 20th," signifying profound personal and historical significance. January 20, 1942, marks the date of the Wannsee Conference, during which Nazi officials formalized their plans for the Final Solution.

For Celan, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, this date represents an indelible wound, symbolizing the systematic destruction of his people. By invoking this day, Bachmann acknowledges not only Celan's trauma but also the irreversible rupture that history imposed on their relationship. The phrase suggests that Celan embodies a historical and emotional turning point in her life—an unhealed wound and an inescapable presence.

For more information on January 20th, please refer to Celan's "Meridian Speech."

See: Paul Celan, "The Meridian Speech," in *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, ed. and trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), [37-55].

[10] The controversy surrounding Paul Celan and the estate of Ivan Goll, orchestrated by Claire Goll, remains one of the most distressing episodes in Celan's life, significantly contributing to his sense of persecution and alienation within the literary world. In the late 1950s, Claire Goll, the widow of French German poet Ivan Goll, accused Celan of plagiarizing her late husband's poetry. The accusations arose after Celan translated Ivan Goll's French poetry into German, a project in which he was deeply involved, and where his poetic language resonated. Claire Goll, attempting to solidify her control over her husband's literary legacy, launched a public and legal attack against Celan, asserting that his work contained direct borrowings from Goll's poetry without proper acknowledgment.

Claire Goll's allegations intensified in 1960 when she sent letters to prominent German literary figures and publishers, falsely claiming that Celan had built his reputation on literary theft. These accusations, despite lacking substantial evidence, gained traction in certain circles, worsening Celan's fragile mental state and reinforcing his lifelong struggles with post-Holocaust trauma and anti-Semitic undercurrents in German literary criticism. The accusations tapped into latent prejudices against Celan's Jewish identity, as some critics eagerly entertained the notion of a Jewish poet "stealing" from a deceased German poet.

Ingeborg Bachmann was among those who publicly and privately supported Celan during this crisis. She encouraged her then-partner Max Frisch to use his influence to defend Celan, although Frisch, who felt personal jealousy towards Celan, was reluctant in his advocacy. Bachmann's letters from this period reflect her growing frustration with Celan's increasing paranoia but also her deep empathy for his suffering. She continued to champion his work in literary circles, advocating for his poetic integrity despite Celan's rising mistrust and emotional volatility.

This incident not only deepened Celan's isolation but also contributed to his declining mental health, reinforcing his belief that he was perpetually under attack. It fueled the themes of betrayal, exile, and persecution that pervaded his later poetry. His increasing alienation would ultimately play a role in his tragic suicide in 1970.

See: John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

[11] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie Zweiter Teil*, in Goethe's *Werke*, vol. 15 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1887), 472.

[12] Bertolt Brecht completed this play in 1941, and it was first performed in 1943. This was when Brecht was in exile, living in the US. The play is set in the Chinese city of Sichuan. In this work, Brecht explores the relationship between true love and love as a commodity in modern society.

[13] Plato's *Phaedrus* is a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, who appears in several other dialogues by Plato. It explores themes such as erotic love and the art of rhetoric. In Plato's story, the cicadas were once humans, and Bachmann draws on this idea for her radio play *The Cicadas*. Additionally, the cicadas served as informants for the Muses, similar to Billie and Frankie in *The Good God of Manhattan*. See Plato. (2005). *Phaedrus* (C. Rowe, Trans.).

[14] The *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle) refers to the rapid economic recovery and growth in West Germany following World War II, spanning from the late 1940s to the 1960s. This period was characterized by industrial revitalization, low unemployment rates, improved living standards, and increased integration into the global economy. See Crew (1998) for a detailed historical analysis.