

# Deathstyles, Lovestyles

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*To live till you die/is to live long enough*

**Lao Tzu/Ursula K. Le Guin**

## **A Living Language**

Glancing over Sylvia Plath's home in Chalcot Square, a stone's throw from my counselling practice, I think of her poem *Daddy*, where patriarchy and fascism sensationally join hands. Plath's dad wasn't a Nazi, unlike the father of Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973), who joined the Austrian Nazi party. Bachmann was a poet and translator who also wrote radio plays, literary essays, opera libretti for Hans Werner Henze (who set some of her poems to music), and short stories. She lectured all over Europe and collected a great number of literary prizes. Her childhood ended at twelve, when the Nazis invaded Klagenfurt, Carinthia, near the Slovenian border, in April 1938. She divided that time between digging trenches and reading a heady mix: Thomas Mann, Karl Marx, and Rilke. Here's her poem *In the Storm of Roses*:

*Wherever we turn in the storm of roses,  
the night is lit up by thorns, and the thunder  
of leaves, once so quiet within the bushes,  
rumbling at our heels.*

At twenty, with the war over and the Austrian authorities busy covering up their enthusiastic involvement with Hitler, this quiet, aloof woman with a soft gaze and very red lips went to Vienna university to study philosophy. She had one ambition only: to bring down that fashionable pseudo-phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger.

Hannah Arendt's razor-sharp intelligence famously went on vacation for a while, gripped as she was in transference for the ponderous professor. I can't help thinking that despite the pull of his curious jargon of authenticity, Heidegger must have been resistible.

Unlike Arendt, Bachmann was unimpressed, voicing in her dissertation dismay at the failure of the abstract *Existenz* philosophy peddled by a Black Forest rustic gent in plus-fours to convey what she called any real 'feeling about life'.

Anyone entranced by Heidegger's elaborated sophistry may wish to elect an antidote. My own was and still is Walter Benjamin (a genuine if highly unorthodox theologian, rather than a closeted one, and a revolutionary rather than reactionary thinker).

Bachmann's own antidote was Wittgenstein, a powerful ally in her search for what she called a 'living language'. She drew inspiration from Wittgenstein's notion of language as a living entity, "not the ideal and inaccessible realm of meaning" as Merve Emre puts it, "but an everyday practice, something to be worked at diligently ... in the company of others."

In her radio essay of the early 1950s on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, she asserts the importance of speaking and writing with uncanny precision, away from sibylline pseudo-existential pronouncements; of travelling the uneven terrain of uncertainties, misgivings, and misinterpretations and make the speaking subject come to life through a breathing language. To my mind, this is reminiscent of Sartre and de Beauvoir's joint philosophical/political project.

As a man, I am treading on thin ice here, for it is hard to find a writer more scathing of the parasitism and manipulations of men over women than Bachmann. Take for example her novel *Malina*, successfully adapted to the screen by Werner Schroeter in 1991 with a script by Elfriede Jelinek and with Isabelle Huppert in the leading role. In that novel, she unequivocally calls men's manipulation over women 'murder'.

*It was murder* is how the novel ends, after the heroine, a writer, vanishes (her disappearance eerily resembling the author's own death), leaving behind her the men who may be accountable for her death. Some of these men are real, but one of them is a male alter ego. This ambivalence makes Bachmann's feminism less straightforward and more alert perhaps to the ambiguities and uncertainties found in psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic investigations. In a dialogue taking place in a dream, the 'I' of the novel speaks with Malina, a rational, military man:

*Malina: So you'll never again say: War and Peace.*

*Me ["I"]: Never again. It's always war. Here there is always violence. Here there is always struggle. It is the eternal war.*

Both the novel and the film convey to startling effect, in the words of Sara Lennox, “what women lose when they try to accommodate themselves to the categories of male subjectivity.” They are bleak in their enigmatic, irresistibly ‘European’ way of depicting life and death.

It would be wrong, however, to think of the world she describes as merely European or ‘Austrian’. The darkness is not specific to geocultural spaces or people unmoved by philistine pragmatism, positive psychology, post-traumatic ‘growth’, rosy existential relatedness or serviceable ‘pluralism’. *This time the place is not Vienna*, we read in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of *Malina*. *It is a place called Everywhere and Nowhere. The Time is not today. In fact, the time no longer exists at all . . .*

Bachmann reminds us that there are many layers to iniquity; criminality is overt expression of a desire to destroy that is latent and pervasive in our own civilized interactions. “There no blood flows – she writes – but rather the slaughter is granted a place within the morals and customs of a society whose fragile nerves quake.”

All the same, I would argue that it is inaccurate to think of Bachmann’s militant denunciation of men’s latent and overt violence over women as precursor of a contemporary brand of conservative feminism eager to join forces with right-wing populism and a pervasive hatred of sex rather than sexism. Bachmann’s rich and turbulent existence testifies of a fierce, luxuriant intelligence at odds with the lionized puritanism of our day.

Bachmann had several lovers, men she loved deeply and with whom she had complex, resonant relationships, including the playwright Max Frisch and later Paul Celan, Romanian poet and Holocaust survivor whose poem *Corona*, addressed at Bachmann, I once brazenly adapted to music. My own version, reasonably loyal to the original and rebaptized *It is Time*, went something like this:

*From a hazelnut I shell out a chip of time*

*Then time rushes back inside ...*

*It is time.*

*We look at each other*

*We exchange dark words*

*We love each other like wine in seashells,*

*Like the sea in the moon's blood ray.  
Sitting by the window we kiss  
People look up from the street  
It is time they knew!  
It is time for the stones to bloom.  
It is time.*

In response to Celan's poem, Bachmann wrote, in a letter dated June 24, 1949: "I tell myself again and again that 'Corona' is the most beautiful of your poems: perfect anticipation of a moment in which everything turns to marble and remains so forever." Sometime later, in her own book of poems, *Borrowed Time*, she titles one of her poems with the line from Celan's poem: *We exchange dark words*, fashioning herself, in a gender reversal, as Orpheus and casting Celan as Eurydice: ". . . I don't belong to you. /Both of us mourn now. /But like Orpheus I know life on the side of death/and the deepening blue/of your forever closed eye."

Their correspondence, published in 2012, charts the joys and upheavals of a relationship which lasted many years and survived several breakups. To my mind, it constitutes an invaluable document of love, poetry and philosophy in the twentieth century, and a more inspiring one than the fated exchange between Arendt and Heidegger.

Her novel *Malina* was part of her *Todesarten-Projekt* – 'Ways of Death' or 'Deathstyles' – a conception at the opposite pole, I feel, of the hubristic stance implied in so-called 'being-towards-death'. In her writings, death remains alien, unfathomable, and unconquerable, rather than something which can be ontologically annexed by the human subject. It remains startling, particularly (but not only) when the circumstances of one's demise are precipitous: Bachmann died at forty-seven, accidentally setting herself on fire after falling asleep smoking.

### **'Being' is the place where nothing ever happens**

Ann Quin (1936-1973) was one of the greatest British novelists you never heard of. A daring experimentalist born on St Patrick's Day of all days, she had a keen ear for the Irish and European avant-garde – her undomesticated, sensual prose sounding even more European now that this sceptred isle sails away from the continent on a nativist vessel.

The author of three startling novels (the first two of which I read while lying in bed with Covid in the very early days of 2021), all of them set in Brighton, she won the £40 reward in a literary

competition set up by J.G. Ballard in 1968 for *Ambit* magazine for the best poetry or short story written under the influence of drugs. As you'd expect, most entrants presented work written under the spell of marijuana, LSD, etc. Not Ann Quin. Her brilliant *Triptychs*, a scratchy, spinning delirium charting the errant ride of a man hunted by his exes through the American desert, was written under the influence of the contraceptive pill.

My first impression after reading her first novel *Berg* was of a vertiginous script for Hitchcock written by Joyce. The seaside town where the protagonist ('a man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb ... intending to kill his father') went to stay, is Brighton of the late 1950s, early 1960s.

This is a town I've learned to tolerate and at times almost like, for reasons I won't bedevil you with, one of them being Quin's rare breed of writing and disquieting sense of ambience. Partly thanks to her, I suspend my bigoted view of this town as a smug Republic of Middle-class Hippiedom, with its whiny buskers, groomed beards, and fat gulls.

Ann Quin's Brighton is a riveting version of hell: so invigorating and off-colour you'd never want to go to heaven, for heaven (like 'Being', whatever that is) is the place where nothing ever happens. Her version of hell is decisively in black & white, with the protagonist booking a room in the same hotel where his father and father's mistress are lodging and where he plans his father's murder. Brighton in winter. I shudder with secret joy as I copy these words, Quin's very own words:

*By the water's edge he watched some children digging holes. By a breakwater he smoked into spray and fog that gradually swept the whole Front and shore into obscurity, even the pier could not be seen. The children's voices muffled by the sea, and a few gulls – limp flags – hovered over the breakwater.*

Her second novel, *Three*, weirder and lusher than the average consolatory pap normally going under the name of fiction, hints at a love-triangle so enigmatic and disturbing, so profoundly ambivalent that it'll make most solemn polyamorous persons out there, or any believer in the saving power of transparency, quiver with fear in their hippy chic garb. The novel is untimely in upholding the destabilizing power of the secret as opposed to puritanical 'honesty'.

I am reminded (tangentially, incorrectly) of Jacques Derrida's *Languages of the Unsayable*: keeping the secret implies that vital thing he calls 'auto-affection'. To have a secret, "I must tell it to myself," I must hear myself speak. I must also "frame a representation of the secret".

This makes the secret shareable and “in order to keep the secret (or the promise), I must necessarily not keep the secret (I must violate the promise).” In this way, Derrida goes on to say, “I possess the secret and do not possess it. ... A secret is necessarily shared.”

The love-triangle in *Three* is twisted, painful, and tragic. The novel begins in tragedy, with the disappearance at sea – possibly suicide, possibly murder – of the young woman who lived for a while as a guest in the home of a bickering couple. The very same death of Quin, at 37, who drowned herself off Brighton’s Palace Pier. The last entry in the protagonist’s diary, voyeuristically read by the couple, reads:

*Today the first signs of sharpness in the air. The mist rises up from the ground lying in thin frost. The boat is ready, as planned. And all that’s necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change.*

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The strange gift of illness or affliction is that it may render the skin-ego more permeable to the injustice and suffering of the world – and to its overwhelming beauty. I don’t know of a better way to experience this (especially, but not only, in quarantine) than literature.

I did not choose these two authors. They found me, at a time of heightened vulnerability.

The urgency, magnificence, and outspokenness of these two writers touches me deeply. Their daring and experimentalism electrify me. Both write outside the dictates of convention and tradition. Both have vital things to say about love and death, about relationships and gender. Their writing is deeply existential, at a time when ‘existential’ has become yet another tired cliché.

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