

LIEDER VON EINER INSEL (SONGS OF AN ISLAND)

Ingeborg Bachmann

Analysis by Chiara Cernicchiaro

Lyric

Ingeborg Bachmann's "Lieder von einer Insel" ("Songs of an Island"), a lyric from the collection *Anrufung des großen Bären* (1956), imagines a volcanic eruption on the island of Ischia. Blending myth, memory, and natural imagery, Bachmann transforms the island's subterranean fire into a symbol of destruction and rebirth, where poetic, erotic, and spiritual forces converge in cyclical renewal.

Year of Publication	1954
Publication Place	Stuttgart
Editor	Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt
Entity	Ischia Island
Collection	Anrufung des Großen Bären
Magazine	Jahresring 54. Ein Schnitt Literatur und Kunst der Gegenwart

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcano Ischia Island

REAL EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.729995, 13.894229
Base/Complex	Phlegraean Volcanic District
Typology	Caldera

Anthropization Level



Volcano

LITERARY EVENT

Time Unspecified

Location Campania Italy

Coordinates 40.729995, 13.894229

Volcano Name Ischia Island

Base/Complex Phlegraean Volcanic District

Volcanic Risk Ref. Referenced

Typology Caldera

Anthropization Level Houses Sea Coast

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name Poetic Self

Reactions Awareness Fascination Wonder Unease Fatalism

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords

“Asche” ‘Ashes’ (Bachmann, Line 2; My Trans.)

“Krater” ‘Craters’ (Line 3; My Trans.)

“Feuer” ‘Fire’ (Line 82; My Trans.)

“Erde” ‘Earth’ (Line 82; My Trans.)

“Strom” ‘Stream’ (Line 86; My Trans.)

Metaphors

“Mond dem Vulkan” ‘moon to the volcano’ (Bachmann, line 48; my trans.)

“Asche erkalteter Krater” ‘ashes from cooled craters’ (lines 5-6; my trans.)

“Fruchtbarkeit den Gärten” ‘fertility to the gardens’ (line 47; my trans.)

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Locus Amoenus Deities Fire Death Fireworks

Syntax	Parataxis, Unconventional Position
Punctuation	Multiple Exl, Multiple Commas, Multiple Stops, Ellipsis
Phonetics/Prosody	Relevance of language rhythm, Relevance of word accent

Es ist Feuer unter der Erde: evoked eruptions in Bachmann's *Lieder von einer Insel*

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1. Introduction

The object of this work is a famous lyric by the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann: *Lieder von einer Insel* (Songs of an island). In this poetical text, the author refers to an Italian volcanic island, Ischia, imagining a completely fictional eruption.

2. The island of Ischia

The island of Ischia is located in the Gulf of Naples and emerged as a result of volcanic activity that began over 150,000 years ago (Selva *et al.*). Ischia is part of the Phlegraean archipelago and was formed through multiple volcanic phases. Around 55,000 years ago, explosive eruptions including the green tuff eruption of Mount Epomeo shaped the island. After periods of quiescence, volcanic activity resumed and continued until 1302 AD. Today, Ischia still shows secondary volcanic activity through hot springs, fumaroles and thermal sands. Its geology is today marked by faults and fractures; earthquakes and landslides are also frequent.

In the 20th century, Ischia became a destination for artists and intellectuals attracted by its natural and mediterranean sublime beauty. Among them, the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann was deeply inspired by the island's landscapes and cultural reality.

3. Bachmann and her *erstgeborenes Land*

Ingeborg Bachmann was born in 1926 in Klagenfurt, in Carinthia, and died in her Roman apartment after a fire in 1973. She was a member of the Group 47 and one of the most significant voices in German-language literature after World War II. In her compositions, she weaves deep philosophical and existential reflection, exploring themes such as grief, loss, memory and her personal experience. Faced with the unbearable prospect of living among Nazi executioners, Bachmann chose to flee to Italy, perceiving it as a political alternative to living with the legacy of German and Austrian fascism (Paumgarten 58). A recurring theme in her poetics is her bond with Italy, especially the south of Italy, which she defines as her *erstgeborenes Land*, her primeval and chosen land (Miglio 28). During her short life, she travelled to Naples, Calabria, Ischia, Rome, Apulia and Lucania, looking for a new homeland where she could find a precapitalistic and archaic society (Cernicchiaro 133).

The south of Italy described by Bachmann is very different from the one dear to the Classicism of the German authors who went to Italy on a *Grand Tour*, looking for traces of the Greek and Roman antiquity. The Italian sceneries described by Bachmann are “sublime”, marked by apocalyptic earthquakes, a chthonic world, the fire of volcanoes and elements that mingle in a cycle of creativity and destruction (Paumgarten 60).

4. Linguistic and thematic analysis of “*Lieder von einer Insel*”

Between August and September 1953, the Austrian poetess spent some time on the island of Ischia, invited by the composer Hans Werner Henze, with whom she would have a professional and emotional relationship. The volcanic island, with its inhabitants and traditions, inspired Bachmann to write the lyric entitled *Lieder von einer Insel* (Songs of an Island), first published in the collection

Anrufung des Großen Bären (Invocation to the Ursa Major) in 1956. In this very symbolic and evocative poem, Ingeborg Bachmann expresses a mystical and sensual vision of rebirth, memory, and cyclical return, set on the volcanic island of Ischia. Through powerful images of nature, such as sea, fire and lava, and religious references, such as Christian traditions, the poet weaves together universal and personal themes of love, death, and resurrection. Although the name “Ischia” never appears explicitly in the lyric, it is possible to identify the profile of the island from the very first lines of the poem, building on the poetess’ own experience:

Schattenfrüchte fallen von den Wänden,
Mondlicht tüncht das Haus, und Asche
erkalteter Krater trägt der Meerwind herein
(Bachmann, lines 1-3)

Shadow fruits fall from the walls,
moonlight white washes the house, and ash
from cooled craters is carried in by the sea wind.
(my trans.)

The landscape the reader is immediately drawn into is nocturnal, dark, and unsettling. From a linguistic perspective, the choice of the occasional compound “*Schattenfrüchte*” ‘shadow fruits’ (line 1; my trans.) as the opening word of the poem is particularly striking and evocative: the moonlight does not reveal the fruits themselves, but rather projects their shadows onto the walls of the island’s houses. As Miglio observes (66), Bachmann evokes elements associated with the chthonic realm, linked to the underworld, the world of shadows. The word *Schattenfrüchte* sets the tone for the entire poem and offers a key to its interpretation.

In the very first stanza of the poem, the volcanic element is also introduced: The sea wind carries the ashes of cooled craters. According to Miglio (66), the craters carry a double meaning: they refer both to the now dormant volcanic activity of Ischia and metaphorically to urns in which the ashes of the dead are placed. It is not difficult to imagine that Bachmann observed the small volcanic vents on the slopes of Mount Epomeo, for instance Arso, Rotaro, Vatoliere, Molara, Cava delle Nocelle, Monte Trippodi, and Montagnone/Maschiata (Bongiorno).

According to Corrado (309-310), the volcano is the true central element of this poem and holds all of its parts together. In the following verses, the poet refers to the lives of the island’s inhabitants and their intimate connection with Christian beliefs – such as processions and feasts for patron saints – as well as more ancient rituals, as seen in the next *Lied*, where the figure of the volcano returns:

Honig und Nüsse den Kindern,
volle Netze den Fischern,
Fruchtbarkeit den Gärten,
Mond dem Vulkan, Mond dem Vulkan!
(Bachmann, lines 45-48)

Honey and nuts to the children,
full nets to the fishermen,
fertility to the gardens,
moon to the volcano, moon to the volcano!
(my trans.)

For the purposes of the present analysis, particular significance lies in the final two verses of the aforementioned *Lied*. With the expression “fertility to the gardens”, Bachmann once again evokes what Miglio defines as a “telluric dimension of fertility” (70). This expression seems to allude to a

generative force rooted in the earthly and chthonic sphere, in which the Earth itself emerges as an active principle of life and regeneration: it is the soil that receives and nourishes the seeds, the internal heat that shapes new lands and ensures their fecundity.

The final verse also features a rhetorical figure, an epanadiplosis, through the repetition of the phrase “moon to the volcano”. As Miglio (71) further points out, the moon and the volcano take on an ambivalent symbolic value, as they simultaneously embody both masculine and feminine qualities. They suggest a form of fertility that is not so much sexual as cultural, expressed through poetic language and musical sound. Life on the surface is thus deeply connected to and nourished by the subterranean energies of the Earth.

In the following *Lied*, there is once again a clear reference to Ischia’s volcanic activity:

auf dunklen Flößen
entfernt sich die Prozession und räumt
der Vorwelt die Zeit ein
[...]
den Orgien des Winds und der Lust
des Bergs, wo ein frommer
Stern sich verirrt, ihm auf die Brust
schlägt und zerstääbt
(Bachmann, lines 51-60)

On dark rafts,
the procession recedes and grants
the ancient world the time.
[...]
to the orgies of wind and to the lust
of the mountain, where a pious
star loses its way,
strikes against his chest, and bursts into dust.
(my trans.)

The previously described procession reemerges and introduces “a highly cohesive and strongly eroticized metaphorical field” (Corrado 312-313), in which the volcanic theme is conveyed through two central rhetorical figures. The geological reference is to Mount Epomeo, the horst formed on the island of Ischia as a result of underlying volcanic activity. This natural element is accompanied by a personification: the volcano, depicted at the peak of pleasure, is part of an island symbolically charged with orgasmic energy (*ibid.*). The volcano has fully come back to life, and the poetic self (the island itself) announces to the mainland that this activity has been reawakened, as “the craters do not rest”:

Jetzt seid standhaft, törichte Heilige,
sagt dem Festland, dass die Krater nicht ruhn!
Heiliger Rochus, der du gelitten hast,
o der du gelitten hast, heiliger Franz.
(Bachmann, lines 61-64)

Now be steadfast, foolish saints,
tell the mainland that the craters do not rest!
Saint Roch, you who have suffered,
oh you who have suffered, Saint Francis.
(my trans.)

In the final stanza, the volcano is now fully awakened:

Es ist Feuer unter der Erde,

und das Feuer ist rein.

Es ist Feuer unter der Erde

und flüssiger Stein.

Es ist ein Strom unter der Erde,

der strömt in uns ein.

Es ist Strom unter der Erde,

der sengt das Gebein.

Es kommt ein großes Feuer,

es kommt ein Strom über die Erde.

Wir werden Zeugen sein.

(Bachmann, lines 82-92)

There is fire beneath the earth,
and the fire is pure.

There is fire beneath the earth
and molten stone.

There is a stream beneath the earth,
that flows into us.

There is a stream beneath the earth,
that scorches the bones.

A great fire is coming,
a current is coming over the earth.

We shall be witnesses.

(my trans.)

The fire is felt beneath the earth; it melts the stone and flows within us, purifying our bones. From a rhythmic perspective, the stanza is structured in couplets: the first two focus on fire, and the third and fourth on the lava flow (Corrado 316). According to Corrado (316-317), the final verse bears witness to a great palingenesis: the awakened fire of the volcano erases everything the poetic self has witnessed on the island, such as love, rituals, and celebration.

In this poem, there is a predominance of linguistic elements that carry strong symbolic and mystical connotations. Among them, there are several compounds such as “Schattenfrüchte” ‘shadow fruits’ (Bachmann, line 1; my trans.), “Mondlicht” ‘moonlight’ (line 2; my trans.), “Mastendienst” ‘main mast’ (line 11; my trans.), “Richtstätten” ‘gallows’ (line 12; my trans.) and “Abendmesse” ‘evening mass’ (line 40; my trans.) and adjectives such as “sterblich” ‘mortal’ (line 10; my trans.), “gesalbt” ‘anointed’ (line 20; my trans.), “dunkel” ‘dark’ (line 51; my trans.), “schlemmend” ‘feasting/indulging’ (line 55; my trans.), “fiebernd” ‘feverish’ (line 56; my trans.). At the same time, there are also references to life on the island, depicted through nouns related to food, such as “Trauben” ‘grapes’ (line 22; my trans.), “Wein” ‘wine’ (line 23; my trans.), “Honig und Nüsse” ‘honey and nuts’ (line 45; my trans.), “Brot” ‘bread’ (line 73; my trans.), “Fische” ‘fish’ (line 56; my trans.), or nouns related to everyday objects, such as “Fässer” ‘barrels’ (line 18; my trans.), “Tisch” ‘table’ (line 39; my trans.), “Netze” ‘nets’ (line 46; my trans.), “Glas” ‘glass’ (line 72; my trans.), “Messer” ‘knife’ (line 75; my trans.). This double semantic level effectively conveys the poetess’ intention, as she evokes personal and communal memories, projecting them onto a more complex interpretation of the Mediterranean, rich in cultural, historical, and traditional references.

It is then not surprising to observe that the narration continuously shifts between the first person singular and the first person plural, such as in the following verses: “dein Fleisch besinnt sich auf meins” ‘your flesh remembers mine’ (line 6; my trans.), “bis die Abendmesse beginnt, halt ich dich an der Hand” ‘until evening mass begins, I hold your hand’ (lines 40-41; my trans.) and “Wir kommen auf gesalbten Sohlen zum Strand” ‘we come to the beach on anointed soles’ (lines 20-21; my trans.), “Wir haben Einfalt gelernt, wir singen im Chor der Zikaden, wir essen und trinken” ‘we have learned

simplicity, we sing in the choir of cicadas, we eat and drink’ (lines 35-37; my trans.), linguistically expressing a shared experience of space and time. Although a foreigner, upon arriving in Ischia, Ingeborg Bachmann was able to connect with the island’s deep and hidden mystery. She thus became a witness to its most ancient, primordial history, intertwining it with her own testimony of more recent events marked by the trauma of the Second World War (Miglio 75).

Regarding the syntax of the poem, it is characterized by frequent simple sentences: “Schattenfrüchte fallen von den Wänden, Mondlicht tüncht das Haus, und Asche erkalteter Krater trägt der Meerwind herein” ‘Shadow fruits fall from the walls, moonlight whitewashes the house, and ash from cooled craters is carried in by the sea breeze’ (Bachmann, lines 1-3; my trans.), “Morgen rollen die Fässer sonntäglichen Wellen entgegen, wir kommen auf gesalbten Sohlen zum Strand, waschen die Trauben und stampfen die Ernte zu Wein, morgen am Strand” ‘Tomorrow the barrels will roll towards the Sunday waves, we come on anointed soles to the shore, wash the grapes and stamp the harvest into wine, tomorrow on the shore.’ (lines 18-24; my trans.), and by frequent parataxis, often asyndetic. The poem also contains several non-sentential utterances, which therefore do not include a finite verb in the main clause, such as invocations “Honig und Nüsse den Kindern, volle Netze den Fischern, Fruchtbarkeit den Gärten, Mond dem Vulkan, Mond dem Vulkan!” ‘Honey and nuts to the children, full nets to the fishermen, fertility to the gardens, moon to the volcano, moon to the volcano!’ (lines 45-48; my trans.), among which there are also invocations to saints “Heiliger Antonius, der du gelitten hast, heiliger Leonhard, der du gelitten hast, heiliger Vitus, der du gelitten hast” ‘Saint Anthony, you who have suffered, Saint Leonard, you who have suffered, Saint Vitus, you who have suffered’ (lines 30-32; my trans.). All of these elements show features that recall spoken language. They give the text a rhythmic and urgent tone, creating an impression of immediacy similar to everyday speech. However, this is not actual spoken language, but rather a poetic construction that imitates some of its traits for stylistic purposes. The result is a solemn and ritual-like language that combines the directness of speech with strong lyrical symbolism.

Conclusion

In her lyric “Lieder von einer Insel”, Ingeborg Bachmann transforms the volcanic island of Ischia into a symbolic landscape, where natural forces and her personal history are strongly connected. The poem uses a combination of imagery, myth, and memory to create a particular lyrical space characterised both destruction and renewal. Through the volcanic metaphor, Bachmann conveys a vision of subterranean, fecund, and poetic images. The employment of ritual language, evocative compounds, and rhythmic parataxis gives rise to a lyrical voice that is intimate, and yet collective. The poetess draws on both personal experience and memory of the post war society, establishing a link between the island’s ancient, elemental power, her trauma and her spiritual exile.

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