‘EIN EINZIGES MAL WAR DIE WELT IN ROT’: FUTURITY, FAILURE, AND THE MATRIXIAL IN INGEBORG BACHMANN’S ‘EIN SCHRITT NACH GOMORRHA’

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ABSTRACT

This article reads Ingeborg Bachmann’s short story ‘Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha’ (1961), about the encounter between two women, in the light of recent theory concerning temporality, futurity, and failure, especially the work of Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam. Such a queer reading supplements and extends existing readings of the story as documenting a failed attempt to break free of patriarchal power relations. Seeing the text as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ in its depiction of lesbian desire and in its assessment of the possibilities of escape or transformation means overlooking the significance of the failure itself, and the ways in which such failure might be instructively perverse. The very failure of the text to lend itself to easy or unproblematic readings is also noteworthy. This analysis suggests that the text is not only ‘literary’ but itself ‘theoretical’. Bachmann’s story charts the ambivalences and oscillations inherent in a female subject’s negotiation with the Symbolic Order, and bears comparison with Bracha L. Ettinger’s theorisation of the ‘matrixial’. In particular, the text highlights the failure of the matrixial to emerge, combining a queer challenge to ideals of success and normality with a materialist-feminist emphasis on the female body.

Mit Hilfe von neuen Theorien über Zeitlichkeit, Zukünftigkeit, und Misserfolg, insbesondere von Lee Edelman und Judith Halberstam, untersucht dieser Aufsatz Ingeborg Bachmanns Kurzgeschichte ‘Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha’ (1961), die die Begegnung zweier Frauen darstellt. Diese Queer Lesart ergänzt und erweitert existierende Deutungen der Kurzgeschichte als die eines misslungenen Versuchs, sich von patriarchalischen Machtverhältnissen zu befreien. Indem der Text entweder als ‘positiv’ oder ‘negativ’ in Hinsicht auf die Darstellung lesbischen Begehrens und der möglichen Auswege oder Transformationen angesehen wird, wird die Signifikanz des Misserfolgs selbst, und auch die womöglich aufschlussreich perversen Qualitäten solch eines Misserfolgs, übersehen. Zudem ist es bemerkenswert, dass der Text keine einfache oder unproblematische Lesart zulässt. Die vorliegende Analyse legt nahe, dass der Text nicht nur ‘literarische’, sondern auch ‘theoretische’ Merkmale aufweist. Bachmanns Kurzgeschichte verfolgt die Ambivalenzen und Schwankungen des mit der symbolischen Ordnung verhandelnden weiblichen Subjekts, und kann mit Bracha L. Ettingers Theorie des ‘Matrixial’ verglichen werden. Insbesondere wird im Text die Tatsache, dass die ‘Matrixial’ sich nicht entwickelt, hervorgehoben, was nicht nur eine Queer Infragestellung der Ideale von Erfolg und Normalität, sondern auch eine materialistisch-feministische Betonung auf den weiblichen Körper darstellt.

INTRODUCTION

Ingeborg Bachmann’s short story ‘Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha’, published as part of the collection *Das dreißigste Jahr* in 1961, evokes an encounter between Charlotte, a married concert pianist, and Mara, a young student of music who attempts to seduce her. The story has justifiably been read as signalling the desire to move away from patriarchal norms, and as involving – at points, at least – the affirmation of a specifically feminine consciousness. Karen Achberger, who pays close attention to the Biblical allusions in the story, indeed argues for a reading of the text as a ‘weibliche Schöpfungsgeschichte’ that rewrites dominant narratives to offer a female counter-myth.[[1]](#endnote-1)

However, the story also seems to suggest that escape from patriarchy is impossible, as the logic of hierarchy is too firmly embedded in women’s psyches for change to occur.[[2]](#endnote-2) Charlotte attempts to imagine a new life with a female partner, but can only conceive of this possible relationship in terms of hierarchy and domination, with herself as the ‘masculine’ partner. As Karin Bauer notes: ‘Charlotte’s imagined relationship with Mara leads merely to a reversal of gender roles, because of the paradoxical fact that Charlotte can only envision her break from patriarchal society in patriarchal terms’.[[3]](#endnote-3) While Achberger points to the female counter-myth suggested here, and to the ambiguities and ambivalences in the story, she nevertheless also stresses Charlotte’s failure clearly to visualise an alternative future; only a ‘vage Vision’ materialises.[[4]](#endnote-4) The title of Bachmann’s story may imply movement towards something, but the text charts a failure fully to depart from current arrangements; ‘the story undermines its own brief utopian sentiments and ends with the same images with which it began’.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Yet the story does offer a critique of heterosexuality that is striking for its time, and at least suggests that a ‘step’ away may be possible. This vexing, inconclusive text at once implies that a way out must be found and withholds a ‘solution’, leading to frustration on the part of some critics. Dinah Dodds observes, for example: ‘[Bachmann] seems to offer a solution with one hand, a relationship between two women. But with the other hand she retracts her solution, pointing out that as long as we remain caught up in the activity of creating unequal partnerships, there can be no solution’.[[6]](#endnote-6) The very fact of there being ‘no solution’ on offer here deserves more attention, I suggest, especially given recent developments in queer theory concerning futurity and failure. A reading of the work that pays attention to the text’s handling of failure yields insights into the very nature of the unsuccessfulness that the text documents.

I argue, with Bauer, that the story ‘questions and undermines the very possibility of utopian thought and idealistic fantasy’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Further, I link this reading to the insights of recent queer theory to suggest that the text’s (revelation of) failure has profound consequences for the social order. As will become clear, failure may constitute a gesture that is ‘appropriately perverse’.[[8]](#endnote-8) The text itself, in its ambivalence and contradictoriness, is perverse. Describing the story as a depiction of ‘weibliche Verwirring’, Peter Beicken notes: ‘Wie bei den anderen Texten aus *Das dreißigste Jahr* ist hier der Charakter des erzählerischen Gedankenexperiments, der Prosa-Reflexion und des Nachdenkens über den Grenzfall, der in jedem Fall steckt, zu beachten’.[[9]](#endnote-9) In particular, Bachmann’s confusing thought experiment challenges and extends the Lacanian idea of the Symbolic Order, which it exposes as a contested and ever-redefined space. It echoes Bracha L. Ettinger’s theorisation of the ‘matrixial’, which involves rethinking psychoanalytic theory, with its reliance on the phallic and on a model of repression based on the castration complex, to explore ‘the transgressive encounter between I and non-I grounded in the maternal womb/intra-uterine complex’.[[10]](#endnote-10) This is, then, a paradigm founded on the bodily reality of the womb. A matrixial model of subjectivity rejects the logic of domination and subjugation to which Charlotte in the story remains bound, and involves ‘an encounter between I and [...] non-I neither rejected nor assimilated’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

At the same time, the matrixial does not exist outside of the phallic, denoting, instead, a ‘supplementary co-shaping-not-quite-logic’ that may shift, rather than overturn, the Symbolic.[[12]](#endnote-12) As Griselda Pollock explains, ‘[Ettinger] moves beyond the phallic oppositions: masculine/feminine, phallic/other, to open space for what co-exists with/beside a phallic logic’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Bachmann’s story performs a similar gesture, also exposing how the matrixial is constantly under threat and how the female body is a site of both potentiality and constraint. The text thus combines a queer challenge to dominant social arrangements with an emphasis on female bodily specificity that is materialist-feminist in impulse, and itself constitutes an instance of the matrixial, as I will argue in conclusion.

DESIRE, FANTASY, FAILURE

To what extent is Bachmann’s a ‘queer’ text, though? If ‘queer’ connotes non-normative (for example, ‘same-sex’ or ‘lesbian’) desire, then Bachmann’s story seems not to fit the definition. While the story involves an encounter between two women in which desire is at issue, the relationship between the two women in the story is based ‘not on mutual affection or respect, or even erotic attraction, but on an abstract idea’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Bauer refers to ‘a brief fantasy of power’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Desire in the text is muted and ambivalent, as here: ‘[Charlotte] spürte den Druck von Martas harten Fingern und erwiderte ihn, ohne zu wissen warum und ohne es zu wünschen’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Yet heteronormativity – indeed heterosexuality – is challenged; Charlotte’s husband does not understand her body, a fact that is the basis of their marriage (a term that is itself subjected to scrutiny): ‘Ihre gute Ehe – das, was sie so nannte – gründete sich geradezu darauf, daß er von ihrem Körper nichts verstand’ (130). Mara, on the other hand, seems to possess knowledge about Charlotte, though Charlotte resists acknowledging this (130), a detail to which I will return.

In its challenge to marriage and its affirmation of a female form of pleasure that has historically been suppressed, the text echoes feminist and queer theories. In the course of the story, Charlotte achieves a perspective on her life that makes current arrangements seem absurd, laughable: ‘Sie wußte im Augenblick überhaupt nicht, warum sie je mit Männern gewesen war und warum sie einen geheiratet hatte. Es war zu absurd’ (126). While same-sex desire is termed impossible, even mad (119, 116, 117), there is also the suggestion that ‘other’ forms of desire could emerge: ‘es gab eine unbetretene Zone’, since ‘das kleine System von Zärtlichkeiten, das man ausgebildet hatte und überlieferte, [war nicht alles] an Möglichkeit’ (128, 129). Charlotte’s rewriting of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty also suggests a challenge to current gender relations, premised as these are on binarism – a binarism that Charlotte has internalised and that leads her to perceive Mara as being of the same ‘Stoff’ (117) – and on patriarchal power relations: ‘Komm, Schlaf, komm, tausend Jahre, damit ich geweckt werde von einer anderen Hand. Komm, daß ich erwache, wenn dies nicht mehr gilt – Mann and Frau. Wenn dies einmal zu Ende ist! (125). This challenge to binarism echoes queer theory, which points up the shifting and overlapping nature of the categories of male and female, the constructedness of both gender and sex, and the complex relationships that may exist between sex, gender, and desire.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Yet the absence of ‘desire’, and of sex, in the story, might still hamper a reading of the work concerned to stress alternative orientations and affects. In her reading of the text, Bauer stresses ‘fantasy’. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis, she argues that in Charlotte’s fantasy, ‘female identity is sacrificed as a constitutive effect of a male-identified drive to power’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Indeed, Mara is arguably not even a separate character in her own right, instead constituting a facet of Charlotte’s own personality. For Ricarda Schmidt: ‘die Befreiung liegt für Charlotte in der Auslagerung ihres weiblichen, als negativ empfundenen Ichs in eine andere Person; dieses negative Selbst kann sie jedoch nicht lieben’.[[19]](#endnote-19) And for Madeleine Marti, Mara ‘dient [...] als Projektionsfläche von Charlottes Phantasien’.[[20]](#endnote-20) This very failure of Charlotte and the story to imagine a nuanced (same-sex) ‘other’ is instructive, pointing up the lack of models of alterity available to both protagonist and narrator; or the failure of a matrixial mode to emerge and prove viable, as will be discussed later.

Can this failure be read as queer? In recent years, the body of thought known as ‘queer theory’ has been preoccupied with the related issues of time and the future, failure, and death. Judith Halberstam, notably, suggests that queer time ‘is [...] about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing’.[[21]](#endnote-21) It thereby disrupts normative narratives of time, constituting a challenge to such accounts and suggesting alternative ways of being. The refusal of queerness to conform to dominant logics can be linked to Halberstam’s later discussion of failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, she argues: ‘Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well’; indeed, under certain circumstances, failing ‘may [...] offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world [than “success”]’.[[22]](#endnote-22) This argument bears comparison with the influential *No Future*, in which Lee Edelman similarly links queerness with the failure to reproduce and with negativity. Arguing that ‘*queerness* names [...] the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism’, he suggests that queers consider embracing the ‘ascription of negativity to the queer’ – not because any good is likely to come of it, but because this act involves challenging ‘value as defined by the social, and thus [...] the very value of the social itself’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Edelman also aligns queer with the death drive, suggesting that both involve dissolution and disturbance: ‘As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such’.[[24]](#endnote-24) In its emphasis on temporality, failure, and death, Bachmann’s story is queer in Halberstam’s and Edelman’s sense.

SPACE AND TIME IN ‘EIN SCHRITT’

According to Halberstam, ‘Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction’.[[25]](#endnote-25) In Bachmann’s text, Mara leads Charlotte out of the latter’s apartment, suggesting that her hostess has spent too much time in the kitchen that evening. To underline the symbolic nature of this act, which involves liberation from domesticity, she proposes: ‘Gehen wir weg, weit weg’ (112). Charlotte herself experiences relief upon leaving the apartment, which, as later emerges, has been furnished and decorated in accordance with her husband Franz’s wishes and tastes: ‘Es war kein Stück von ihr in dieser Wohnung’ (112, 123). Bachmann’s story thus queers domestic space, in line with Halberstam’s observations concerning the organisation of homes along gendered lines.[[26]](#endnote-26) It reveals the gendered nature of households, and the internalisation of dominant, masculine norms:

Jetzt lebte sie in der hellen Ordnung, die Franz gehörte, und verließe sie Franz, so ginge sie in eine andere Ordnung, in alte geschweifte Möbel oder in Bauernmöbel oder in eine Rüstungssammlung, in eine Ordnung jedenfalls, die nicht die ihre war – das würde sich nie ändern. Genau genommen wußte sie auch schon nicht mehr, was sie für sich wollte, weil da nichts mehr zu wollen war (123).

Franz determines their life together (‘Er bestimmte’, 124), to the point that Charlotte does not know any more how to desire. Charlotte’s movement out of her apartment is marked as deviant and possibly shameful: ‘sie hatte sich unerlaubt aus ihrer Welt entfernt und fürchtete, entdeckt und gesehen zu werden von jemand, der sie kannte’ (113). Mara’s destruction of items in the apartment signals the disruption of the usual domestic order (120-1). ‘“Unsere Wohnung” konnte das nicht mehr sein, wenn sie jetzt wirklich aufschloß’ (116; compare 118), reflects Charlotte, before opening the door. And later, she performs an act of desecration: ‘Sie lästerte “unseren Tisch”’ (124). And yet, Charlotte cannot imagine a house that is not shaped by the wishes of one partner, having, as already mentioned, internalised masculine values to the point of being unable to envisage alternative models: ‘Wenn sie Mara lieben könnte, wäre sie nicht mehr in dieser Stadt, in dem Land, bei einem Mann, in einer Sprache zu Hause, sondern bei sich – und dem Mädchen würde sie das Haus richten. Ein neues Haus. Sie mußte dann die Wahl treffen für das Haus, für die Gezeiten, für die Sprache’ (128).

Halberstam suggests: ‘we [...] pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity’, instead privileging the ‘middle-class logic of reproductive temporality’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Adolescence is viewed as a ‘dangerous and unruly’ period that culminates in ‘a desired process of maturation’.[[28]](#endnote-28) In the story, Charlotte and Franz have no children, a fact that perhaps renders Charlotte more susceptible to the attractions of Mara, who is repeatedly marked as girlish, and therefore unruly, not yet fixed by the logic of the prevailing social order. In other ways, too, the story suggests a challenge to dominant notions of causality and chronology, charting a unique, one-off encounter: ‘ein einziges Mal war die Welt in Rot’ (110), the narrator reflects, inspired by the red tones that infuse the room in the apartment where the story begins, with red suggesting here danger, lust, and destruction; and, as I shall later suggest, the matrixial, or womb-like. Later, the red lights in the bar are likened to traffic lights awaiting ‘das grüne Licht des Morgens’; they stand, then, for a temporary, nocturnal suspension of normality (113). Red also stands for the sedimentation of new norms: the red of the bar makes the earlier red, that of the apartment, fade from memory, and subsumes the red of Mara’s hair and skirt (113). A new normality establishes and reasserts itself, if only for a brief period.

There are repeated references to time in the text; Charlotte’s watch and the alarm clock she sets signal her awareness of the dominant logic of temporality, or the straight time, that governs her marriage and the social order in general. She feels the urge to look at her watch and so send a signal to Mara (119). Yet there are references to belatedness that suggest a disruption to the usual flow of time: ‘Der Augenblick war vertan [...] Es war zu spät (111); Charlotte misses the moment when she might have ejected her guest, or made an appropriate response to a comment about Franz, thereby rendering herself out of kilter with ordinary arrangements. Instead, she finds herself caught up in a night that seems outside of time. In the bar, ‘der Wein ging nicht aus [...]. Die Zeit ging nicht aus; diese Blicke, diese Hände, sie gingen nicht aus’ (115). Time here is linked to gaze and touch, significant from a matrixial perspective, as will later become clear. The potentially unending quality of this night is underlined: ‘[Charlotte] dachte, daß diese Nacht kein Ende nehmen werde, daß diese Nacht ja erst im Anfang war und womöglich ohne Ende’ (116). Mara’s presence might always linger, she fears, causing her to reflect eternally on her responsibility for it: ‘Vielleicht blieb Mara jetzt für immer da, immer, immer, immer, und sie selber würde nun für immer nachdenken müssen, was sie getan oder gesagt habe, um schuld daran zu sein, daß Mara da war und dablieb’ (116-7). This speculation as to a persistent presence can be linked to Ettinger’s notion of the matrixial as co-existent with the phallic, as I will later argue. Indeed, in the story, time itself seems to be destroyed: ‘Die Zeit hängt in Fetzen an mir’ (128). The usual temporal logic is suspended. The reflection ‘Zeit ist keine Bedenkzeit’ (136) implies a conception of time premised not on rationality and voluntarism, but on process and dynamism.

The assertion towards the end of the story, ‘Charlotte [wußte], daß es zu spät war zu allem’ (136), apparently signals a shutting-off of the possibilities raised by Mara’s presence – unless we see belatedness in the story as itself connoting other possibilities, ones that reside outside of dominant arrangements. ‘Alles’ (the title of another short story in the collection, about a father’s desire to bring up his child apart from dominant norms)[[29]](#endnote-29) could spell here ‘the social order’, for which Charlotte is now ‘too late’ – though the subsequent reference to the alarm clock that Charlotte sets suggests a resumption of routine, and implies that Charlotte will fulfil her wifely duties as earlier laid out: ‘morgen früh Franz abholen, den Wecker stellen, frisch sein, ausgeschlafen sein, einen erfreuten Eindruck machen’ (111). Nonetheless, the text hints constantly at what might be – and not only by means of Charlotte’s imaginings of an alternative life, which ultimately falter owing to phallic logic that dominates her psyche. Achberger notes the use of the subjunctive throughout the text,[[30]](#endnote-30) as here: ‘Sie hielten einander an den Händen und gingen noch rascher, als verfolgte sie jemand. Mara fing zu laufen an, und zuletzt liefen sie wie zwei Schulmädchen, als gäbe es keine andere Gangart’ (113). For a moment, then, it is ‘as if’ there is no other possible way to proceed. The image of the schoolgirl suggests a pre-adult freedom, and the speed at which the women walk implies a possibly hostile pursuer (‘als verfolgte sie jemand’) but also a quickening of the usual, adult pace, a freedom from restrictions.

Charlotte imagines Mara miraculously disappearing, ‘dann würde morgen alles nur wie ein Spuk erscheinen, es würde wie nie gewesen sein’ (118). Such moments lend weight to the idea of the text as ‘about’ fantasy; as recounting a dream or dream-like state. The story escapes logic. Like Mara, it refuses to be ‘vernünftig’ (118). It is not clear, for example, why Charlotte holds a party in Franz’s absence, or why she invited Mara, assuming Mara’s claim that she did so is correct. When asked about her reasons, Charlotte responds evasively, ‘Ich lade viele Menschen ein’, words Mara counters with the charge ‘Du lügst’ (118). Charlotte does indeed lie a little later, telling Mara she has booked the cleaner for six, when she is in fact booked for nine – another moment that demonstrates the importance of time in the text (119). Nor it is made explicit how the women are connected, on a ‘realistic’ or social level, though we can surmise that Mara is a student of Franz’s (132). Mara is, then, at least in part a ghost, a figure of fantasy. The very notion of social identity is unstable here. Mara’s protestation or accusation ‘Du mußt anders sein. Du mußt. Oder du lügst!’ (120) functions as a challenge to dominant ideas of the self, and insists on a necessary, hidden otherness.

FAILURE AND DEATH

Like Halberstam and Edelman, Bachmann’s text stresses failure and death over ‘success’ and the reproductive imperative. The encounter with Mara spells the death of Franz, whom Charlotte now mourns: ‘Sie betrauerte Franz wie einen Toten’ (125). Charlotte is at one point linked to the figure of Bluebeard, and so rendered murderous (135). The women themselves seem ‘dead’: ‘Ich bin tot, sagte Mara. Ich kann nicht mehr. Tot, so tot bin ich’ (135). This fatal deathliness is stressed towards the end of the story: ‘Sie waren beide tot und hatten etwas getötet’ (136). The ending of the story can be linked to queer notions of failure and negativity; there is no possibility of success here, given current arrangements. The lack of characterisation – of identity – in the story can similarly be connected to Edelman’s assertion that ‘queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Indeed, Mara claims, with defiant perversity: ‘aus mir wird nichts’ (132). She is interested in nothing but ‘Lieben’, a reflection that leads Charlotte to wonder if most others, the mainstream, those ‘in den Büros, den Fabriken und den Universitäten’, are self-deceiving (133).[[32]](#endnote-32) Mara thus represents a challenge to the acceptance of the Symbolic Order, practising a queer refusal to invest in its reality and recalling Edelman: ‘the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in *it*, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself’.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Charlotte herself seems at points to resist this reality, too, as in her challenge to binarism and to the suppression of feminine consciousness, and as when: ‘Ihre Gefühle, ihre Gedanken sprangen aus dem gewohnten Gleis, rasten ohne Bahn ins Freie. Sie ließ ihren Gefühlen und Gedanken freien Lauf. She war frei’ (121). In her assertion of her own consciousness against her socialisation and the limits imposed by gender norms, too, there appears an affirmation of another, more authentic way of existing: ‘Es sollte zu gelten anfangen, was sie dachte und meinte, und nicht mehr gelten sollte, was man sie angehalten hatte zu denken und was man ihr erlaubt hatte zu leben’ (123)*.* And yet, as already suggested and as Bauer spells out, ‘Charlotte [...] cannot destabilize the construction of subjectivity and social hierarchy to a point at which she would be able to visualize herself as standing and acting outside present parameters of gendered, patriarchal consciousness’.[[34]](#endnote-34) For Charlotte, for example, the idea of a lesbian sexual encounter is unsayable: ‘Noch nie hatte sie...’ (117). In Bachmann’s context, such ideas were taboo,[[35]](#endnote-35) and the story itself points that up: ‘Dafür sind noch keine Worte da’ (121-22).

And yet, the Symbolic Order is unsettled here, if not overturned. If queer embodies ‘[the social order’s] traumatic encounter with its own inescapable failure’,[[36]](#endnote-36) then the story highlights that traumatic failure. In the bar, Charlotte experiences a vision of destruction and precariousness: ‘Alles wollte in die Tiefe, lärmumschlungen tiefer, lustlos tiefer’ (114). The story points to the possibility of collapse and disorder, not least through its title, and the reference to Gomorrah. When Charlotte washes her face, at the same time wiping away ‘das viele Lächeln, die Aufmerksamkeit, das angestrengte die Augen-überall-haben’, she is shedding her acceptable social persona, also referred to when she lists to herself her wifely duties, already noted: ‘morgen früh Franz abholen, den Wecker stellen, frisch sein, ausgeschlafen sein, einen erfreuten Eindruck machen’ (111). Listed thus, such acts acquire a mechanical air; wifeliness is a form of performance. Marriage is an institution that involves the suppression of personality and individuality (126). The text exposes this suppression, especially as it is practised through language and representation.

REPRESENTATION, THE SYMBOLIC, THE MATRIXIAL

For Christa Gürtler, ‘die Struktur von Dominanz und Unterwerfung’ characteristic of heterosexual relations simply carries over to the relationship between Charlotte and Mara, ‘weil neue Bilder und die Sprache dafür fehlen’, a reading justified by the story’s concern with representation itself.[[37]](#endnote-37) Holger Pausch asserts comparably: ‘Die neue Sprache, die notwendig wäre, um den Ausbruch zu vollziehen, existiert nicht’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Charlotte reflects explicitly on language, experienced as falsifying and imprisoning: ‘Immer hatte sie diese Sprache verabscheut, jeden Stempel, der ihr aufgedrückt wurde und den sie jemand aufdrücken mußte – den Mordversuch an der Wirklichkeit’ (131). In its gendered forms, language is especially repugnant, and Charlotte dreams of a new realm in which the old language would not apply. New images are needed, a new cultural imaginary (134).

Bachmann’s story is allusive and abstract, refusing naturalist or realist logic.[[39]](#endnote-39) The reference to Charlotte and Mara as ‘die Frau’ und ‘das Mädchen’ highlights their emblematic quality (110). The individual figures are not as important as the general questions being explored, a fact hinted at towards the beginning of the story: ‘Mehr als das Mädchen selbst, sah [Charlotte] alle diese unstimmigen vielen Rottöne im Raum’ (110). Charlotte herself points to the importance of ideas, and their defining quality: ‘Wir haben immer von unseren Ideen gelebt’ (128). There are allusions here to the Biblical stories of the destruction of Gomorrah and of Eve, as well as to the fairy tales Sleeping Beauty and Bluebeard (127, 125, 135). There are also references to what we might see as Jungian archetypes, as when Charlotte reflects on the power and persistence of imagery: ‘Das Bild der Jägerin, der großen Mutter und der großen Hure, der Samariterin, des Lockvogels aus der Tiefe und der unter die Sterne Versetzten’ (134). Discussing the allusive quality of the narration, Bauer argues that critics such as Achberger and Dodds are too keen to applaud the story’s quest for utopian potential and so overlook ‘the subversive and ironic quality of Bachmann’s narrative, and, especially, of the allusions and biblical references’. Bauer herself argues that ‘the narrator has difficulty telling this story without resorting to clichés’.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Since the story charts the failure of current representational forms and norms to allow for the expression and enactment of ‘other’ ways of desiring and being, this observation is valid: the narrative is struggling with itself in its attempt to find a way out of the imprisoning language in which it is of necessity written. Later in the collection, Bachmann’s Undine in fact departs from narrative, entering a realm of unintelligibility – or the pre-Symbolic, to read the story in Lacanian terms.[[41]](#endnote-41) In this way, both texts can be linked to Lacan-inspired French feminism. For Luce Irigaray, for example, ‘woman’s desire has [...] been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks’,[[42]](#endnote-42) an argument that echoes the unsayable quality of (same-sex) female desire in Bachmann. Irigaray notes also the ‘madness’ of women’s speech, when measured against Western norms of rationality, unity, and mastery: ‘Hers are contradictory words, someone mad from the standpoint of reason’.[[43]](#endnote-43) Mara’s rejection of reason, and what Charlotte sees the ‘madness’ of same-sex desire, can be connected to Irigaray’s challenge to the Symbolic Order as currently configured.

Madeleine Marti notes the importance of the non-verbal in the story, particularly of touch and the gaze.[[44]](#endnote-44) For example, Charlotte looks at Mara dancing ‘um endlich ihren Blicken eine unverkennbare Richtung geben zu können’ (114): in order, then, to orient herself. For Irigaray, ‘Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking’.[[45]](#endnote-45) In the story, though, Charlotte enjoys looking at women (132) – but this enjoyment can be seen as suspect, connoting as it does distance and control. At the beginning of Bachmann’s text, Mara’s eyes are described as ‘zwei feuchte, dunkle, betrunkene Objekte’ (110), suggesting the possibility not of mutuality but of mastery (compare 117). The ambivalence inherent in Charlotte’s gaze recalls Ettinger: ‘The gaze is the most slippery of all the objects on which the subject depends in the field of desire’.[[46]](#endnote-46) In fact, in Bachmann’s story, the whole body remains constrained, conditioned by culture: ‘Sie suchte [...] in ihren Händen nach einem Instinkt [...] Sie blieb ohne Anweisung’ (119); ‘Wie soll das geschehen, wenn man sich nicht verlassen kann auf Haut und Geruch’ (126). Bachmann does not then posit a realm of eroticism outside of the Symbolic Order.[[47]](#endnote-47) The ‘unbetretene Zone’ to which Charlotte refers is inaccessible, though its presence is felt when she perceives that Mara knows her somehow:

An einer Bewegung des Mädchens, das im Halbschlaf seine Hand nach ihr ausstreckte, mit den Fingern ihr Knie umklammerte, ihre Kniekehle streifte, prüfte und betastete, spürte sie, daß dieses Geschöpf etwas von ihr wußte, was niemand gewußt hatte, sie selber nicht, weil sie ja auf Hinweise angewiesen war. Charlotte lehnte sich zitternd und erschrocken zurück und versteifte sich. Sie wehrte sich gegen den neuen Hinweis (130).

This reference to a hidden knowledge recalls the matrixial: ‘a knowledge with the other and in the other, and the other’s knowledge with-in me, which can only be reached by some kind of non-defensive self-relinquishment’.[[48]](#endnote-48) Charlotte refuses such ‘non-defensive self-relinquishment’, leaning back and stiffening in an effort to assert her separateness. Shortly afterwards, she questions her rejection of Mara, only then to resolve: ‘Nein, erst wenn sich alles hinter sich würfe, alles verbrennte hinter sich, konnte sie eintreten bei sich selber’ (131). Thus Charlotte insists on separation and individuation.

Mara’s knowledge of Charlotte is corporeal in nature, and expressed through touch. Discussing Freud’s notion of the uncanny, Ettinger argues that the matrixial phantasy and complex differ from the phallic, being informed by ‘*touching*, *hearing*, *voice*, and *moving*’ – rather than, or more than, by curiosity, mastery, and the gaze – and ‘relationally affected’.[[49]](#endnote-49) In *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Ettinger is more broadly concerned to demonstrate how in psychoanalysis, the womb ‘as a female bodily specificity’, and the womb phantasy, have been denied, as already suggested. Not, she adds, that Freud denied the denial of the womb: ‘On the contrary, he insisted on *the importance of such a denial*, on its necessity! The magnitude of the denial gives us the measure for what is at stake *for the male* person. For the (universal neutral) child (who happens to have a penis) the idea that the womb belongs to the woman would be a catastrophic blow to narcissism’.[[50]](#endnote-50) What is at stake here is nothing less than the entire foundation of psychoanalysis, and, indeed of culture, premised as it is on an entrenched denial of female bodily specificity and natality. Yet the matrixial is not distinct from the phallic, as Pollock explains. Ettinger refers instead to ‘a psychic symbolic zone where *traces* of the feminine’s *failure* in the phallic discourse [...] *make sense*’.[[51]](#endnote-51) Bachmann’s story explores – indeed constitutes – such a zone, demonstrating as it does both the persistence and potential of the matrixial and its failure fully to emerge, as Charlotte recoils bodily from it: a materialist-feminist exposure on the text’s part of the way the corporeal, the psychic, and the cultural intertwine to define and maintain social arrangements. Ricarda Schmidt associates the many references to red in the story with the experience of being in the womb,[[52]](#endnote-52) a reading we could link to ideas of the pre-Oedipal or pre-natal. ‘Ein einziges Mal war die Welt in Rot’, notes the narrator, pointing up the singularity of this instance of the matrixial, condemned to short-livedness, to failure, by the operations of the Symbolic in its present form.

CONCLUSION

Bachmann’s story charts the oscillations and contradictions of a female subject’s negotiation with the Symbolic Order, also revealing the fragile grounds on which this order is constructed. A reading of the text that is at once suspicious of the narration, *pace* Bauer, and attentive to it, seems appropriate. While imagery itself is subjected to deconstruction here, it nonetheless features saliently and evocatively. The allusions in the text serve both to counter dominant narratives and reaffirm them as useful, or unavoidable, resources. The story concerns story-telling itself, and in particular ‘the ultimate challenge facing the woman writer – to re-create reality out of the truth of her own experience and language’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Yet in eschewing notions of a specifically feminine or matrixial mode of discourse that could unproblematically exist outside of or beyond the patriarchal or phallic, the text is appropriately, queerly perverse. It combines a queer challenge to dominant ideals of success and normality and a feminist-materialist affirmation of bodily femaleness, of the matrixial. The meaning of the text relates to the slipperiness of meaning itself; the story disturbs and haunts the Symbolic, from within. Ettinger suggests that a matrixial art ‘reconnects with an enlarged symbolic in which the feminine (neither male nor female) is fully active and informing knowledge in the ethical realm’.[[54]](#endnote-54) Bachmann’s story not only highlights the workings of the Symbolic, it constitutes in itself an instance of the matrixial, making sense of feminine failure.

1. Karen Achberger, ‘Bachmann und die Bibel: “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha” als weibliche Schöpfungsgeschichte’, in *Der dunkle Schatten, dem ich schon seit Anfang folge: Ingeborg Bachmann – Vorschläge zu einer neuen Lektüre des Werks*, ed. Hans Höller, Vienna and Munich 1982, pp. 97-110 (p. 97). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dinah Dodds, ‘The Lesbian Relationship in Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha”’, *Monatshefte*, 72/4 (1980), 431-8 (437); Christa Gürtler, *Schreiben Frauen anders? Untersuchungen zu Ingeborg Bachmann und Barbara Frischmuth*, Stuttgart 1983, p. 156; Ritta Jo Horsley, ‘Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha”: A Feminist Appreciation and Critique’, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik*, 10 (1980), 277-93 (278); Madeleine Marti, *Hinterlegte Botschaften: Die Darstellung lesbischer Frauen in der deutschsprachigen Literatur seit 1945*, Stuttgart 1991, p. 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire: Fantasy and Disaster in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *A Step Towards Gomorrah*’, in *Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture*, ed. Christoph Lorey and John L. Plews, Rochester, NJ 1998, pp. 222-33 (p. 226). Elizabeth Boa, too, makes plain:‘Rather than offering a way out lesbianism [in the story] may merely mimic the structure of dominance and subjection in compulsory heterosexuality’. ‘Reading Ingeborg Bachmann’, in *Postwar Women’s Writing in German*, ed. Chris Weedon, Providence and Oxford 1997, pp. 269-89 (p. 279). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Karen Achberger, ‘Bachmann und die Bibel’, p. 109. Compare also Karen Achberger, *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann*, Columbia 1995, p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire’, p. 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dinah Dodds, ‘The Lesbian Relationship’, 438; compare Ritta Jo Horsley, ‘Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha”’, 279. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire’, p. 232. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC and London 2004, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Beicken, *Ingeborg Bachmann*, Munich 1988, pp. 177-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘Matrixial Trans-subjectivity’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2-3) (2006), 218-22 (218). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Griselda Pollock’s explanatory term. ‘Introduction: Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?’ in Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Minneapolis and London 2006, pp. 1-38 (p. 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ritta Jo Horsley, ‘Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha”’, 287 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire’, p. 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha’, in *Das dreißigste Jahr*, Munich 1978, pp. 110-36 (p. 115). Further references to be given in the body of the article. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See here Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, ‘Introduction’, in *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 1-17 (p. 1): ‘“queer” names or describes identities and practices that foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexual desire’. See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London 2002, p. 12: Butler challenges the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire’, p. 232. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ricarda Schmidt, *Westdeutsche Frauenliteratur in den 70er Jahren*, Frankfurt/Main 1982, p. 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Madeleine Marti, *Hinterlegte Botschaften*, p. 96 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York and London 2005, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, NC and London 2011, pp. 3, 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Lee Edelman, *No Future*, pp. 3, 4, and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Lee Edelman, *No Future*, p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 8. See also Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, NC 2006, p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Alles’, in *Das dreißigste Jahr*, p. 61-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Karen Achberger, ‘Bachmann und die Bibel’, p. 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Lee Edelman, *No Future*, p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Compare ‘Undine geht’, in which the narrator takes leave of human society, which she does not understand, with its ‘Grenzen und Politik und Zeitungen und Banken und Börse und Handel und dies immerfort’ (p. 180). Undine can comparably be read as standing at the edge of the Symbolic Order, ready to depart. ‘Undine geht’, *Das dreißigste Jahr*, pp. 176-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Lee Edelman, *No Future*, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire’, p. 222. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Compare Ritta Jo Horsley, ‘Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha”’, p. 293, and Madeleine Marti, *Hinterlegte Botschaften*, p. 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Lee Edelman, *No Future*, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Christa Gürtler, *Schreiben Frauen anders?*, p. 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Holger Pausch, *Ingeborg Bachmann*, Berlin 1975, p. 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Compare Karen Achberger, *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann*, p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Karin Bauer, ‘That Obscure Object of Desire’, p. 226. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Undine geht’. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Luce Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which is Not One’, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, Ithaca, NY, 1985 , pp. 23-33 (p. 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Luce Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which is Not One’, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Madeleine Marti, *Hinterlegte Botschaften*, pp. 101-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Luce Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which is Not One’, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Compare Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘Matrixial Trans-subjectivity’, 222. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, pp. 54-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ricarda Schmidt, *Westdeutsche Frauenliteratur in den 70er Jahren*, p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ritta Jo Horsley, ‘Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha”’, p. 286. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘Matrixial Trans-subjectivity’, 218. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)