# Gender, Cultural Memory, and the Representation of Queerness in Ingeborg Bachmann's Narrative "A Step Towards Gomorrah"

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## I

In 1956 and 1957 Ingeborg Bachmann drafted the narratives that are contained in her 1961 short story collection *The Thirtieth Year.*[1] Among these narratives is "A Step Towards Gomorrah," a text that addresses the issue of gendered power dynamics in heterosexual marriage. In addition, the text is one of the few in German-language literature of the postwar period between 1945 and the early 1960s to treat the representation of lesbian relationships.[2] Compared to many of Bachmann's other prose works, "Gomorrah" has received as yet limited critical attention. While some scholars showed an interest in the text in the 1980s, detailed analyses are scarce in more recent scholarship.[3] For the most part, the narrative is discussed relatively briefly in the context of broader assessments of Bachmann's œuvre.[4] In the following pages, I want to suggest an interpretation of "Gomorrah" that explores the text's questioning of a culturally produced, fixed binary gender opposition, as well as of genre conventions. The text achieves this questioning by reflecting on the representation of a lesbian relationship. I will draw on recent queer theory to highlight what I deem the very progressive quality of a text produced in the repressive cultural climate of 1950s Austria.

## II

The limited critical interest "Gomorrah" has received in recent years might be explained by the fact that Bachmann's text seems not to fulfill the expectations of a majority of feminist scholars in the 1980s.[5] Many critics had hoped to be able to extract from the text the outlines of a female or feminist utopia, the suggestion of a radical alternative to the patriarchal structures of Western society, or the representation of a new image of women capable of questioning traditional notions of femininity. However, even those critics who detect in Bachmann's narrative elements of a new way of constructing femininity eventually conclude that the text is ambivalent on the level of form as well as content, and does not represent a complete aesthetic or ideological break with established patriarchal structures. For instance, Karen Achberger, who reads the narrative as a female myth of creation, states towards the end of her analysis that the protagonist does not yet possess any clear counter-images to the patriarchal order of society (109).

For most scholars in the 1980s, Bachmann's text seems to have been a source of frustrated hopes—hopes the text itself helped conjure up (Horsley, Dodds). On the one hand, the text thematizes homosexuality, but on the other hand, the protagonist, Charlotte—whose marriage to Franz is limiting in many regards—does not fully embrace the lesbian relationship the character Mara proposes to her as a clear alternative to marriage. On the one hand, the text criticizes the "language of men" (117 and 127; *Werke* 2: 198 and 208); however, on the other hand, no "new" language based on a non-patriarchal paradigm is developed by the narrative or by its characters. In these and other regards, Bachmann's text disappoints socio-politically motivated hopes for the construction of a feminist or, alternatively, lesbian counter-universe to the patriarchal Western society Charlotte and Mara inhabit.

However, in my opinion, the disappointment of such hopes need not mean that feminists have to reject Bachmann's narrative. Rather, I want to argue that the text is able to critique traditional gender roles and power relations in patriarchally structured societies despite and in part even due to the fact that a lesbian relationship between Charlotte and Mara and a "new" language remain unreal-

ized. In 1998 Karin Bauer already suggested a reading of "Gomorrah" that interprets the text as "a fantasy of power that fails both to act upon homoerotic desire and to engage in constructive change" (225); she does not conclude, however, that the text lacks critical potential, but rather states:

> In Bachmann's text, gender identification exposes itself as a repressive, rather than subversive, process of negotiation and makes visible the social, cultural, and institutional limitations imposed upon fantasy. Charlotte's male-identified performance perpetuates deep-seated misogynist perceptions and ideologies, and exposes both fantasy's complicity with mimetic reproduction and the repressive function of gender identification. Far from erecting a feminine utopia, *A Step Towards Gomorrah* questions and undermines the very possibility of utopian thought and idealistic fantasy. (232)

Bauer's analysis opens up new possibilities for interpreting Bachmann's text, because she no longer reads the text in search of a feminine utopia, but rather locates the text's critical capacities on a new level: according to Bauer, Charlotte's identification with male gender roles makes legible not only the power dynamics at work in patriarchal societies, but also explains why and how these power dynamics are perpetuated.

In my reading of "A Step Towards Gomorrah," I take my cue from Bauer's interpretation, but I suggest at the same time that the text's critical potential may extend beyond a critique of gendered power dynamics. By disallowing the representation of a successful lesbian relationship, I argue, Bachmann's text points to particular deficiencies in the cultural memory bank of Western patriarchal societies. This cultural memory bank does not contain templates for either a completely alternative type of narrative that would allow for the depiction of unconventional and in many regards truly unheard-of events, or for the representation of unconventional and in many regards unheard-of relationships themselves. I argue that the traditional novella as narrative structure, as well as representations of traditional marriage, are so firmly embedded in Western cultural memory that a deviation from established literary conventions, as well as from established gender conventions, is exceedingly

difficult. In fact, breaking down established gender representations may in part be so hard precisely due to the difficulty of reconfiguring established literary conventions. Marti (46-47) reminds us that Bachmann is well aware of this very fact by pointing to an oft-quoted statement Bachmann made in 1971 with reference to her novel *Malina*:

> For me, this is one of the oldest, even if almost completely buried memories: that I have always known that I have to write this book—even very early, while I was still writing poetry. That I have always looked for this protagonist. *That I have always known the protagonist would be male. That I can only narrate from a male position. But I have often asked myself why. I didn't understand, not even in the short stories, why I so often had to use the male I. It was like finding my own person—not to deny the female I, but nevertheless to place the emphasis on the male I. . . .* (*Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden* 99-100; translation and emphasis mine)

In light of this statement, "Gomorrah" can be understood as an early attempt on the part of Bachmann to carve out a literary space for a female voice—i.e., Charlotte's. Charlotte's example makes clear that masculine components in this voice cannot be cast off, because in a patriarchal society, it may indeed be just these components that allow for a female voice to be audible in literature in the first place. At the same time, Bachmann's reflection on *Malina* also opens up a different perspective on the presence of masculine elements in a female character: while the integration of masculine elements into a female voice may originally have been born out of necessity (to make an otherwise suppressed woman's voice audible), it may be precisely this mixing of gender elements that helps question a purely binary construction of gender and points instead towards a multiplicity of gender identities.

As Bauer has shown, Bachmann's text demonstrates that a complete avoidance of the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies would be a difficult feat. I want to take this thought a step further by arguing that the text deliberately avoids the depiction of a lesbian relationship, as well as the creation of a traditional novella structure, and that it does so for the following reason: rather than falling into the

trap of reproducing entrenched literary and gender structures, the text refuses to comply with a ubiquitous demand for cultural reproduction and reification of existing structures. Since no alternative structures exist, and since a "new" language—a new paradigm that could allow for the representation of a lesbian relationship outside of traditional dichotomies of power—is lacking, it is preferable to avoid the depiction of a lesbian relationship altogether and to make visible the reasons for such an avoidance. From this perspective, I argue that the ultimate refusal of Bachmann's text to depict a lesbian relationship is not so much "a capitulation to the 1950s taboo around representing lesbians, and a reinforcement of the cultural invisibility of lesbianism,"[6] but rather a refusal to depict a lesbian relationship in a manner that would not represent a true alternative to traditional heterosexual marriage. This refusal takes on a subversive meaning in the sexually repressive and largely anti-feminist climate of German-speaking societies after 1945 and prior to 1968, a climate in which the representation of lesbian relationships would more likely unwittingly reproduce the structure of power dynamics within traditional marriages.[7]

As Bauer has pointed out, the dangers inherent in the reproduction of patriarchal gender roles are demonstrated by Bachmann's text via the representation of Charlotte, who envisions herself in a powerful and male-identified role vis-à-vis a weaker Mara. In light of recent developments in queer theory, it becomes possible to read this reproduction of gender roles as potentially always multiply coded. The reproduction of gender roles could then be understood in not exclusively repressive terms with regard to women, but also in terms of the critical potential to undermine traditional models of gender. Judith Halberstam, in *Female Masculinities*, argues as follows:

> Within a lesbian context, female masculinity has been situated as the place where patriarchy goes to work on the female psyche and reproduces misogyny within femaleness. There have been to date remarkably few studies or theories about the inevitable effects of a fully articulated female masculinity on a seemingly fortified male masculinity. Sometimes female masculinity coincides with the excesses of male supremacy, and sometimes it codifies a unique form of social rebellion;

> often female masculinity is the sign of sexual alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation; sometimes female masculinity marks the place of pathology, and every now and then it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities. (9)

In this landmark study Halberstam wants to "produce a model of female masculinity that remarks on its multiple forms but also calls for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies" (9). She continues that "[s]uch affirmations begin not by subverting masculine power or taking up a position against masculine power but by turning a blind eye to conventional masculinities and refusing to engage." Thus, it becomes possible for a "rebellion" to constitute itself "not in opposition to the law but through indifference to the law."

I want to argue that Bachmann's text stages exactly the kind of rebellion Halberstam describes. First, "Gomorrah" does not reproduce a conventional literary form, that of the novella; second, the text ultimately refuses to represent a lesbian relationship structured in any way differently from a traditional marriage. This avoidance strategy on the part of the text may be captured best by Mara's statement towards the end of the narrative: "'Nothing,' said Mara. 'I don't want anything. I won't fall into the trap. . . . [N]othing interests me" (128). Here the text—as well as the character Mara—refuses to fall into the trap of trying to subvert patriarchal structures on the level of form or content by means of engaging with them, i.e. "being interested" in them, thus potentially becoming entangled in the reproduction of traditional gender roles. Instead, the text chooses to ignore such structures, thus disappointing both more traditional-minded critics such as Namowicz, who views the text as an aesthetic and poetological failure, and feminist critics in the 1980s, who were hoping to see in the text positive representations of lesbianism and feminist ideals.[8]

Mara, who has traditionally been seen as the weaker of the two women characters in Bachmann's text, may thus indeed be stronger than Charlotte:[9] Charlotte, a successful pianist, is older than Mara, a piano student in Vienna on a stipend (Bachmann 128). Charlotte represents a generation of women still very much mired in the tra-

ditional gender dichotomies that dominated Western society in the 1950s in general and especially in immediate postwar Austria.[10] In contrast, Mara is a member of a younger generation of women, and thus the text represents her as a figure that can more easily ignore existing conventions: it is Mara who proposes to Charlotte a lesbian relationship; it is Mara who ignores gender conventions in a bar she and Charlotte visit; and it is Mara who does not want to "fall into the trap."[11]

To play with Halberstam's terminology a bit, to the extent that an *un*-self-conscious affirmation of *traditional* gender taxonomies is represented as problematic in Bachmann's text, this affirmation is represented through the figure of Charlotte. The text hints at the potential to rise above problematic forms of gender-role reproduction once Charlotte begins to develop a self-consciousness with regard to gendered performances in relationships. However, it seems to me that its greatest critical potential resides in Mara's refusal to enter into a lesbian relationship structured according to traditional models of power distribution (with Charlotte performing a masculine role, Mara a subordinate, feminine one). It seems only logical, then, that on the level of genre Bachmann's narrative has to refuse to reproduce traditional literary forms.[12] On the following pages I support my theses by means of a close reading not only of a number of passages from the body of Bachmann's narrative, but also a discussion of the possible implications of its title.

## III

Critics have generally understood the German preposition "nach" in the title of Bachmann's "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" as a signifier for a goal-oriented movement through space towards a particular place. The English translation of the title as "A Step *Towards* Gomorrah" also testifies to the fact that this reading is the most common one. Similarly, "nach Gomorrha" has usually been interpreted as a metaphor for Charlotte's approach to the idea of a lesbian relationship. In my reading of the text, the narrative's title is more polyvalent, supporting from its very start the claim that the text opens itself up to the possibility of multiple readings, and in particular to a reading that understands the narrative as a rejection

of a never-ending engagement (and thus ultimately unproductive entanglement) in both traditional literary forms and traditional gender structures.

The title's "nach" can be read in at least two additional ways: it can be understood as a temporal, rather than spatial, signifier, and it can also be read as a marker that refers to a "beyond." Thus, the title can be understood not merely as describing a movement towards Gomorrah, but likewise as an allusion to that which—both in temporal and in spatial terms—is located behind and beyond Gomorrah.

The term "Gomorrah" likewise is not a signifier with a fixed meaning. Rather, on the one hand, the name "Gomorrah" evokes the specter of homosexuality—a sexuality that violates existing norms and whose survival, therefore, cannot be countenanced. On the other hand, "Gomorrah" also refers to the place of that which is old and has become unproductive, a place to be destroyed because it is characterized by modes of behavior for which there is no room in the present.[13]

Beyond Gomorrah, one finds "devastation" and "emptiness"—terms Bachmann's text uses to describe the scene after a party in an apartment Charlotte shares with her husband, Franz, who during the time of the story is out of town but is expected to return the following morning (105). The only guest who stays after the party ends is Mara, who over the course of the remainder of the night proposes a lesbian relationship to Charlotte. If "Gomorrah" is read as a marker of homosexuality—or, specifically, of female homosexuality, if Sodom is read as a marker of male homosexuality—then the text can be said to take a step towards Gomorrah, i.e. towards a lesbian relationship. However, if "Gomorrah" signifies that which should be destroyed because it remains stuck in lifeless tradition, then the text can be said to describe a step away from Gomorrah, towards "devastation" and "emptiness."[14] Seen from this perspective, what is to be destroyed in the narrative would appear to be not homosexuality and homosexual relationships, but rather traditional hierarchical structures—the types of structures dominant in a patriarchal and heterosexually organized society.[15]

The destruction of a traditional order would have to be followed by the construction of a new and radically different order, so that the

"devastation" and "emptiness" that spread beyond Gomorrah, both in spatial and in temporal terms, can be overcome productively. The traditional order that is offered up to potential forces of destruction in the text is the order associated with traditional gender roles and a traditional distribution of power along gendered lines. Once Charlotte begins to contemplate a lesbian relationship, it becomes possible for her to diagnose and analyze the unequal distribution of power within her marriage. In addition, she tries to imagine the destruction of the male position of power vis-à-vis women. Charlotte is unable, however, to fill the "emptiness" that spreads after and beyond the imagined destruction of traditional order with a radically new order; she is ultimately unable to think outside the framework of hierarchical power structures.[16] In the end Charlotte is merely able to imagine herself as a woman within a lesbian relationship playing the very role her husband plays in her marriage, while Mara is assigned the role of the weak woman who subordinates herself. According to this reading, by switching her traditional female role for the role of a traditional male, Charlotte re-erects the traditional patriarchal order instead of leaving it in a state of "devastation" and trying to replace it with a new kind of order.

The narrative's title, however, also hints at a way out of the dilemma the text describes through the example of Charlotte. If "nach Gomorrha" is read as "beyond Gomorrah," and if it is understood neither exclusively in spatial nor temporal terms, but also on a more abstract level, "beyond Gomorrah" can be interpreted as a phrase that points towards a time and space in which the signifier "Gomorrah" no longer matters—a time and space in which engagement with traditional, "old" tropes is no longer necessary. Thus, from its very beginning Bachmann's text opens itself up to a reading that views "indifference to the law" (Halberstam 9) of the father and the laws of patriarchy as feminism's best bet to leave behind the very structures that have seemed so firmly entrenched in Western cultural memory that they reassert themselves continuously. This reassertion takes place even—or as Bachmann's text seems to argue, perhaps especially—in situations in which one actively tries to modify or erase these traditional structures.

Bachmann's text demonstrates very clearly the consequences of Charlotte's attempts to modify her role as a woman: by imagining

a reproduction of traditional male-female gender roles in a lesbian relationship, she remains entangled in patriarchal structures. As Bauer has shown most recently, this very fact, however, gives the text an opportunity to formulate its critique of traditional gender roles. Charlotte's identification with a male role does not begin with her fantasizing about a lesbian relationship with Mara; rather, in an "un-self-conscious" manner, this identification is present from the outset of the narrative.

After the other party guests have left the apartment Charlotte shares with Franz, Charlotte studies Mara's appearance in detail and in a fairly uninhibited manner. She notices that the lighting in the living room, the furniture and books, as well as Mara's clothing and hair, all contribute to a spreading of "all these many *clashing* red tones in the room" (106, my emphasis), and the text goes on to state: "Just for a moment everything was as it could never be again—just for once the world was in red" (106). At this point—in the text's very first paragraph—the narrative sets in motion dynamics that begin to establish a pattern that becomes relevant for later interactions between Charlotte and Mara. Mara is described as though she were one piece of furniture among many in an apartment whose *Herrin* is Charlotte—as long as the true *Hausherr*, the "master of the house," Franz, is out of town. Charlotte's gaze has a masculine connotation in this passage, and Mara appears to this gaze as an object.[17] The opening sequence of the text thus foreshadows the "masculine" position of power Charlotte will seek to construct for herself vis-à-vis Mara later on.

Charlotte perceives the shades of red that dominate the room as "clashing," that is, they seem to connote different and possibly contradictory concepts: the color red can signify temptation, seduction, love, passion, life, or hell. Red is likewise a color that signals a warning. Before Charlotte's and Mara's eyes meet for the first time, these "clashes" can coexist and create "the world . . . in red"; however, soon "[t]he girl's eyes became part of [the world in red], two moist, dark, drunken *objects* that met the woman's eyes" (106, my emphasis). Charlotte now tries to eliminate all "clashes" by defining the color red exclusively according to its negative connotations. The "object" Mara is now viewed as a potential seductress whose "moist, dark" eyes, as the potentially sexual implication of the adjectives makes

clear, are seen by Charlotte as threatening. Of course, Charlotte does not admit this to herself but rather acts as though she were simply mildly annoyed by Mara's continued presence.[18] The fact that she actually views Mara as a seductive threat is underscored by her interior monologue:

> *She's going to tell me a story.* Why me? She is staying because she wants to talk to me. She has no money or can't settle down in Vienna, *comes from down south, a Slovene, half Slovene, from the border, anyhow from down south, her name sounds like that too, Mara.* There must be something, a request, a story, some story with which she wants to cheat me out of my sleep. Of course she must be alone too much in Vienna or she has got mixed up in some affair or other. *I must ask Franz about this girl tomorrow.* (106, my emphases)

Charlotte, who pretends to be merely irritated, tries to assign to Mara an identity of foreignness, of an exotic other, by calling her a "Slovene," without, however, knowing whether Mara really is from Slovenia. In accordance with this lack of actual knowledge, Charlotte begins to modify and weaken her original thought: Mara turns into a "half Slovene," possibly coming at least from a border region, but "anyhow" at least "from down south." Mara is exoticized because she is perceived by Charlotte as a temptation and as a threat from the outset. But of course, the threat Charlotte feels is only heightened by her attempts to exoticize Mara. Therefore, in order to neutralize or at least reduce the degree of threat Mara now represents, Charlotte attempts to scale back, step by step, the exoticization she herself created, without, however, shifting her thought model completely: the feeling of threat that has been concretized in the process of exoticization needs to be minimally upheld. Thus, the lingering feeling of a threat serves to constitute a warning to resist any temptation that might be represented by the object Charlotte herself has constructed.[19] The fact that she is already identifying with "masculine" patterns of thought is also underscored by the sentence "I must ask Franz about this girl tomorrow." "Today," however, Franz is out of town; but Charlotte can at least try to mimic his manner of reasoning. In a final attempt to defuse Mara's seductive potential, Charlotte now calls her a "girl" ("Mädchen")—a term that can describe

a harmless child, but that in the context of Charlotte's thoughts retains also the image of the "*Kindfrau*," the "child-woman," an archetypal incarnation of the seductive female.

The passage quoted above is relevant for another reason as well: Charlotte expects that Mara is "going to tell me a story." At the very least, Charlotte surmises, Mara is probably "mixed up in some affair"—quite literally "in irgendeine Geschichte geraten" 'entangled in a story,' as the German original states it (*Werke* 2: 188). This expectation of Charlotte's, as Gerhard Neumann has also pointed out (66), is not fulfilled:[20] the text very deliberately disappoints not only the expectations of one of its protagonists, but likewise the genre expectations of readers, who have come to think the novella—and to an extent also its younger cousin, the short story—will present them with an "unerhörte Begebenheit," an unheard-of event, as well as with the events set in motion by the original event in the narrated world, and with a neat conclusion to this string of events. I argue that Bachmann's text presents an event that is so very unheard-of that any attempt to integrate it into a traditional narrative structure must fail, and since a new paradigm for a narrative cannot be discovered by the text, any narrative that might otherwise have resulted from the unheard-of event must remain literally unheard-of, i.e. untold. The story of a new kind of relationship free from conventional gender hierarchies cannot be told because narrative structures that could carry it do not exist. Any already available cultural form in which one might attempt to present such a story would immediately turn it into the same old story—a story of gender hierarchies and oppression. In the end, Charlotte is unable to invent a discourse that might allow her to envision a relationship with Mara outside of a traditional paradigm of gendered power relations. Rather than submitting to the pressure of literary tradition and cultural memory, the text decides not to tell a story at all: a lesbian relationship is not established between the protagonists, and the story and its characters simply "tumbled down into sleep" (132). To put it in Halberstam's terms, the text "refuse[s] to engage" (9) with the rules exemplified by a traditional patriarchal and heterosexist literary canon.

The "unheard-of event" that stands at the outset of Bachmann's text is "unheard-of" in a number of ways. First it is, as in the tradi-

tional meaning of the term, new and unusual in the given context and would as such be able to set in motion an interesting narrative. Second, Bachmann's "unheard-of event" is "unerhört" in the sense of "impertinent": Mara, a young student Charlotte barely seems to know, dares to propose to the older, married, and professionally established Charlotte a lesbian relationship—audacious behavior that can be interpreted as "unerhört." Third, in 1950s Austrian bourgeois culture, the text's events are "unheard-of" in the sense that they seem to call for the representation of something traditionally marginalized and not represented, that is, something quite literally "ungehört," i.e. a lesbian relationship. In the social and political context that surrounds the protagonists, this concept is so unheard-of that, after Mara tries to kiss her, Charlotte states: "'That's madness, you're mad' . . . 'how can you possibly . . .?'" (112). Charlotte's remark suggests that the attempt to create something radically outside of the dominant paradigm—in this case a lesbian relationship—must be viewed as insanity by the established order. In the end, the text abandons its "insane" pursuit. The text cannot represent that for which it calls at its own outset. Representing a lesbian relationship would turn the object of representation into something assimilated to the very structures that had marginalized it in the first place. By not representing a lesbian relationship—by not making such a relationship heard, as it were—the text obstinately insists upon situating the lesbian relationship completely outside of any paradigm established by a literary tradition that is patriarchal in nature. As long as no "new" paradigm has been constructed, therefore, and to retain the possibility that representations of lesbian relationships might have subversive potential once they can occur within a new paradigm, the text opts not to represent such a relationship at all. The greatest subversive potential of Bachmann's text thus might be located in what it does not represent, i.e. in what remains "unheard-of," or untold: it refuses to engage in a futile attempt to represent that which might be truly different within those patriarchal structures that continuously call for the ever-same construction of gendered power hierarchies.

Bachmann's text goes to great lengths to illustrate the dangers of continued entanglement in traditional models of gendered power distribution. After depicting Charlotte's mimesis of masculine pat-

terns of thought at the outset of the narrative, the text continues to show instances of performances of masculinity on Charlotte's part. In spite of—as well as because of—Charlotte's attempt to mount a "masculine" resistance to her own construct of Mara as a seductress, Charlotte cannot resist Mara's temptation when she says "'. . . Come on. Let's go away, far away'" (107). Mara's formulation could be taken to evoke a space beyond Gomorrah—a space not defined by the order of patriarchy. Thus, Mara's character becomes potentially aligned with the idea of resistance to an "old" paradigm. On a concrete level, Mara's formulation turns out to refer to a bar, and Charlotte allows herself to be led away to this place: she barely resists the temptation Mara and her words represent. Within the "gaping jaws of red" to which Mara "held open the door" (108), Charlotte succumbs to further temptations:

> [Charlotte] didn't for a moment have the feeling that Mara was dancing for the sake of dancing, or that she wanted to dance with anybody here or to stay here or to enjoy herself. *Because she kept looking across and was obviously performing her dance only so that Charlotte should watch.* She drew her arms through the air and her body through space as though through water, she was swimming and *displaying herself,* and Charlotte, finally compelled to give her gaze an unmistakable direction, followed her every movement. (109-10, my emphases)

The narrator presents these observations from Charlotte's perspective. Charlotte views herself as conquered, because she assigns to Mara the role of the seductive woman who literally stages a dance and presents herself as an object. Projecting the image of the seductress onto Mara allows Charlotte "finally" to succumb to her interest in Mara without having to take responsibility for her feelings: Charlotte can view them as having been generated by a temptress to lead her into a sort of hell, red and smoke-filled (108). Once again, then, Charlotte mimics masculine patterns of thought and psychological strategies.

Later, after Charlotte and Mara have returned to the apartment and after Mara, who tries in vain to make Charlotte open up to her, has fallen asleep, Charlotte tries to picture what a relationship with Mara might look like. She imagines that it would be possible

to "subjugate" Mara (119), that a "change of shift" (130) will occur, that "now she could take over the world" (130), and Charlotte terms Mara her "prey" (130). The vocabulary Charlotte uses makes clear that she is able to envision a relationship with Mara only as an inverted mirror image of her own marriage—as what she literally terms a "Gegenbild," a "counter-picture" to her marriage—and that she desires "to construct it myself" (130).[21] Of course, this inverted mirror-image reflects the very structures of power that bind Charlotte in a subordinate role in her marriage, and she now wishes to subordinate Mara to herself in much the same manner. In the end Charlotte is unable to imagine concretely a feminine utopia, a radically new order completely divorced from the structures of traditional patriarchal societies.

Interestingly, not even the critical analysis of marriage—an analysis that provides the impetus for Charlotte's desire to erect a "Gegenbild" 'alternative' to traditional marriage—takes place outside the parameters of "masculine" thought:

> [Charlotte] had become just as much of a habit with [Franz] as another woman would have done, and, wiser than Charlotte, he had long ago recognized marriage as a state that is stronger than the individuals who enter it, and which therefore also leaves more of a mark upon their partnership than they could have marked or even changed the marriage. *However a marriage is conducted—it cannot be conducted arbitrarily, inventively, it cannot tolerate innovation or change, because to enter into marriage already means to enter into its form.* (121, my emphases)

Charlotte's critical reflections on the institution of marriage are thus reflections in a dual sense: she does not merely reflect upon the narrow limits of the institution; her thoughts betray the very opinion Franz has formed of marriage—the text states quite explicitly that it is "he," Franz, who has recognized marriage as a state that shapes the individuals who enter it more that these individuals are able to shape the institution of marriage. Thus, Charlotte's thoughts at this point are a reflection of the gendered power relations she has internalized, and hence reproduces in her interactions with and thoughts about Mara.

The last sentence of the above quotation is an observation made in the present tense—it is a statement that could have been made by a narrative voice switching into an omniscient mode or by a voice to which Charlotte seems to ascribe a similar degree of authority, namely the male voice of Franz. The text thus makes clear that the female protagonist's attempts to reflect upon and analyze the institution of marriage are constantly subject to the dangers of slippage: almost imperceptibly, Charlotte's own voice slips into a different mode and is eventually replaced by an auctorial male voice. Bachmann's text seems to say that a non-patriarchal narrative cannot be presented under the circumstances that dominate the story. A true, i.e. radically different "Gegenbild" 'alternative' to the representation of traditional heterosexual relationships cannot be sketched out, and a story that would be able to perform a radical break with entrenched patriarchal conventions must remain "unheard-of" and thus untold.

Later on, the text describes Charlotte's reactions to the sleeping Mara:

> Charlotte bent over Mara *who, now that she was asleep, was no longer a danger*, kissed her on the eyebrows that stood beautifully curved and festive in the pallid face, kissed the hand that hung down from the chair, and then, very furtively, shyly she bent down over *the mouth from which the lipstick had disappeared in the course of the night.* (122-23, my emphases)

The previously threatening and seductive red of Mara's lips has disappeared; her lips now look pale, and she is asleep; thus, Mara ceases to be a "danger." The lack of clarity Charlotte had repeatedly criticized in Mara's manner of speaking —"I can't make out what she's talking about" (117), "'You're talking too vaguely for me'" (117)—is replaced by the silent clarity of the image of the clear, "beautifully curved" brows in Mara's pale face. The description of Mara almost resembles that of a corpse. With Mara submerged in a death-like sleep, it is no longer dangerous for Charlotte to eroticize her, because that which seemed confusing and "vague" about her and which, from Charlotte's perspective, had constituted the dangerous part of her femininity, is now absent. Once Charlotte has thus defused the threat she ascribes to Mara, it is no longer dangerous to

turn her body into an object of desire. Again assuming a masculine position, Charlotte kisses Mara's hand as a male suitor would.

Charlotte's eroticization of Mara is inextricably linked to her fantasies of power and domination over her. Her desire has little to do with sexual desire for Mara as an individual. On the contrary, Charlotte's desire has a more abstract, formalist quality to it: she seeks to bind Mara into a structure that allows her to live out her fantasy of power—a fantasy thoroughly structured by traditional patriarchal gender hierarchies:[22] "I don't want Mara because I want her mouth, her sex—my own. Nothing of the sort. I want my creature; and I shall create it for myself. We have always lived on our ideas, and this is my idea" (123). Ironically, of course, the idea Charlotte describes is not really her idea at all; rather, it is the very same idea that has structured power relations in patriarchal societies for centuries. Thus, even when Charlotte tries to be her own as well as somebody else's master, she ultimately remains enslaved to the paradigms of patriarchy.[23]

When Mara enters a state of "Halbschlaf" (*Werke* 2: 207), literally a "half-slumber," a state of dozing, the dangerous femininity that Charlotte feels Mara exudes and that was arrested when Mara was asleep is set free again: Mara reaches for Charlotte's knee, and Charlotte senses in herself a physical reaction she immediately wants to reject: Charlotte is unable to open up to the new kind of erotic relationship at which the "new suggestion" of Mara's touch might hint (126). Unable and unwilling to cede control or to think outside the paradigm of controller and controlled, Charlotte addresses Mara in a harsh voice: "'Leave me alone,' . . . 'Stop that. At once'" (126). In this short sequence of words, Charlotte quite literally removes herself from a direct interaction with Mara: she replaces the reflexive pronoun "me" with the demonstrative pronoun "that." Threatened with even a minimal loss of control, Charlotte reacts with a hyperperformance of masculinity vis-à-vis Mara.

Again, Charlotte's strong reaction to Mara's touch also marks a generational difference between the protagonists. Charlotte is firmly embedded in the repressive social climate of 1950s Austria. This climate does not allow for anything but a fixed assignment of power positions: if Charlotte is in a powerful position vis-à-vis Mara, then this powerful position must not only be gendered masculine, it must

likewise be static. Mara, as a younger character, apparently feels less bound by the conventions of fixed, gendered power relations. Thus, she has no qualms about temporarily exchanging a passive and submissive role for an active role: she makes her sexual desires known to Charlotte by touching her. Charlotte is clearly uncomfortable with such a fluid power dynamic and with such unstable notions of gendered identity. She is unable to allow for shifting power differentials, and for a more playful approach to power within relationships. This passage of Bachmann's text, then, again underscores the difficulties in thinking about gender outside of strict dichotomies. At the same time, though, the text points to a notion of sexual and gender fluidity and, quite literally, power "play," that defied the conventions of the 1950s.

In spite of her overall identification with a male role, Charlotte's performance of masculinity is not—to vary Halberstam's use of the term "self-conscious" again—purely "un-self-conscious," but it does contain elements of an awareness that traditional gendered dichotomies are limited and limiting, and that in fact the performance and constant reproduction of feminine and masculine roles alike is, in the long run, unproductive. Charlotte does not know how to leave behind these roles, but she tries to point to a time and space in which categories like male and female will have lost their validity: "She was unredeemable and nobody should have the effrontery to redeem her, to know the millennium in which the red-blossoming rods that had grown inseparably entangled would spring apart and leave the path open. Come, sleep, come, thousand years, that I may be awoken by another hand. Come, let me awake when this is no longer valid—man and woman. When this has come to an end!" (120). Charlotte does not want to be "redeemed" by any prince, nor by anybody else; rather, she wants the clashing shades of red—the ones standing for passion, love, temptation, hell, and so forth—recalled in the "redblossoming rods" to disentangle by themselves, creating a path to a place and time where traditional images of love and gender will have been divested of their meaning and power.

Later on in the text, however, the idea of an unheard-of place and time where gender no longer matters becomes mingled again with a traditional discourse on power and domination: "[Charlotte] would teach Mara to speak, slowly, exactly and not . . . permit any

clouding by the common language" (127). Ironically, of course, the very idea that Mara should not speak for herself, but rather be taught by Charlotte represents "the common" and the usual: a fixed power differential in a relationship. Thus, even when Charlotte tries to contemplate a space or a language outside of patriarchal structures, her thoughts ultimately remain so bound to these structures that she reproduces them unwittingly and inadvertently.

In its use of the term "ein Unerhörtes" 'something unheard-of,' the text creates, as indicated above, an implicit link between narrative and gender. For a German audience, the term "unerhört," in the context of literature, always carries with it an association with the traditional novella. Bachmann's text deliberately folds this association into its reflection on gender relations. In this manner, the text is able to emphasize again the link between the difficulty of shedding traditional notions of gender and traditional narrative forms: "Charlotte looked down at Mara; she admired in her *something unheard of*, all the hope she had cast upon this figure. All she had to do now was to know how to carry this unheard of element into every slightest act, into the new day, every day" (127, my emphasis). Charlotte senses that a paradigm for a new kind of relationship does not yet exist; such a relationship is "something unheard of." The problem is that any attempt Charlotte makes at articulating this "unheard of" lets it slip back into the realm of the "old" language, the only language that exists, and the very language that ensures the survival of patriarchal structures. Thus, when Charlotte addresses Mara following her insight that Mara might represent something unheard-of, she does so with two imperatives: "'Come. Listen to me,' she said, shaking Mara by the shoulder. 'I must know all about you. I want to know what you want. . .'" (128). The form and content of the imperatives signal that that which Charlotte wants to be something new and heretofore unheard-of will be suffused again with the old hierarchies. Charlotte wishes: "Let [Mara] stand up to the test! Let her understand at last!" (128). Again ironically, Charlotte's wish for something unheard-of is couched in an appeal to a higher power that remains unnamed, and this wish embraces the call for the assistance of traditional authorities while ostensibly disavowing them. It is a further irony that Mara indeed does understand, albeit not in the manner Charlotte envisioned. Rather, Mara senses that

Charlotte's vision of a relationship with her reproduces the structures of traditional heterosexual marriage, and Mara simply states: "'Nothing,' . . . 'I don't want anything. I won't fall into the trap'" (128).

As I argued earlier, this refusal on the part of Mara to enter into a relationship that remains entangled in patriarchal structures marks the most subversive point in the text. Even though later on Mara is willing to submit to Charlotte and thus ultimately does not sustain this "indifference to the law" (Halberstam 9), this moment of resistance in the text is quite powerful, not least because it disappoints not only Charlotte's hopes, but likewise any hopes the readers might have had for a successful construction and literary representation of a lesbian relationship. The "story" Charlotte thought Mara would tell is not told; rather, Mara states: "'[N]othing interests me'" (128). Mara does not want to repeat the same old stories—stories structured by traditional hierarchies. She does not want to fall into such a trap and states unequivocally, "I won't fall into the trap."

In the end, the text itself arrives at the same conclusion: since it cannot tell the story of a lesbian relationship outside of established patriarchal parameters, it refuses to tell the story of a lesbian relationship altogether. Even though Mara opens up the possibility for the creation of a lesbian relationship on the content level by giving up her resistance to subordinating herself to Charlotte, this possibility is not pursued in the text. Instead, Charlotte sinks into a dream-like state, and Mara finally states: "'No, no more, . . . I'm dead. . . '" (131). The potential to realize "something unheard-of" has been inadvertently lost by the protagonists, but the text lets go of the opportunity to represent a relationship between Charlotte and Mara quite deliberately. Bachmann's text shows that any such representation would not make audible "something unheard-of," but would rather, given the absence of a language free of the structures of patriarchy, slip into the unwitting reproduction of a story heard already entirely too often—a story of domination, subordination, and power differentials.

## IV

Bachmann's text makes visible the fact that Charlotte, due to her mimesis of masculine patterns of thought, remains bound to

the concept of traditional gender roles. In addition, Charlotte's behavior makes her participate actively in the affirmation and reproduction of patriarchal power relations. In this manner, she aids in the subordination of her own sex. The perpetuated cultural heritage of the subordination of women in postwar Austria becomes the only cultural memory available to the sexes, and the persistence of fixed power differentials in gender relations thus reinscribes itself perpetually in the present. The presence of fixed power differentials is the very Gomorrah from the narrative's title that deserves destruction. However, such a destruction, the text seems to say, cannot really be achieved, because the mere attempt to destroy it would require a continued engagement with it. Instead, a step has to be taken into a space beyond Gomorrah—a space where the cultural memory of patriarchal institutions like marriage and family is not so much deconstructed as ignored and eventually forgotten; an "indifference to the law" of patriarchy might eventually spell freedom from this law.

Charlotte's partially fascinated and partially horrified glimpse of the possibility of leaving behind old established orders turns her, like Lot's wife in the book of Genesis, into a pillar of salt: staring at the scene of "devastation" and destruction creates a paralysis that makes the creation of a radically different and new kind of order impossible. Charlotte remains entangled in the old order and is, in the end, not capable of entering into a new paradigm of reasoning. However, the text itself points towards such a new paradigm. It points to the possibility of a role-play in relationships that could make entrenched positions of power fluid. Such role-play might allow for the mold of binaries to be broken, so that multiply-coded gender identities could emerge. Thus, Bachmann's text overcomes the conditions of its production in the 1950s and presents progressive ideas that, in part, seem to anticipate insights of queer theory in the 1990s.

"Worüber man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" 'That which one cannot speak about one has to be silent about'—Bachmann interprets this closing sentence of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* as the quintessence of a Wittgensteinian belief that philosophy can point to "the unspeakable" by stating clearly that which can be said (*Werke* 4: 12-23, esp.

12-13 and 20). Bachmann's literary text achieves something similar. It rises above the literary and social conventions of its time in order to draw the outlines of "the unspeakable" about gender, power, and queer identities. Bachmann's text points the way to the *terra incognita* beyond Gomorrah not by formulating a utopia, but rather by not saying what it recognizes as something that cannot yet be said: "ein Unerhörtes."

## Notes

1 All translated quotations from the text will be taken from the translation cited at the end of this essay. The German original can be found in volume 2 of Bachmann's *Werke*, also cited there. Information about her work on the short story volume can be found on page 605 of the German edition.

2 Madeleine Marti provides a detailed history of the representation of lesbians in postwar German-language literature; for more specific comments on Bachmann's text, see Marti 96.

3 See Horsley, Dodds, Achberger's "Bachmann," Namowicz, Barta, and Neumann.

4 See, for instance, the brief but useful discussions in Bartsch 122-24, Schneider 112-26, and Achberger's *Understanding* 78-85. Exceptions to the trend to pay less attention to "Gomorrah" are Marti (92-109) and Bauer's detailed 1998 reading of Bachmann's text; another reading is offered in Luca.

5 In contrast to many feminist critics, Namowicz views the "Gomorrah" narrative as a text that, in his opinion, fails because it is marred by its own inability to address successfully the poetological contradictions it produces (100).

6 The formulation is taken from Walker 191-92. She argues that the hesitancy of some pulp novelists to depict lesbian sex scenes in pulp novels may be explained by "the wish to avoid the voyeuristic imperative of pulp," rather than by an impulse to submit to established taboos (192). In Ger-

man-speaking countries, positive representations of lesbian relationships were—especially in the mainstream media and in high- or even middlebrow literature—few and far between after 1945. For a detailed discussion of the representation of lesbian relationships in German-language literature of the 1950s and 1960s, see Marti, especially 36-134.

7 Marti provides a detailed account of the break in the continued literary representation and cultural presence of lesbianism that was caused by German fascism. She likewise describes the rather difficult attempts to reconnect, after 1945, with the culturally progressive traditions of the Weimar Republic (42-51).

8 Namowicz views the text's implicit reflection on the novella genre as unsuccessful (94-5 and 100).

9 An exception is Bauer, who views Mara as a character with particular strengths (228).

10 For a detailed discussion of Bachmann's engagement with the socio-political and historical contexts that surrounded her, see Albrecht.

11 I thus understand Mara's unwillingness to "fall into the trap" along the same lines as Halberstam reads Frankie Addams' remark "Well, I don't care" in Carson McCullers' narrative *The Member of the Wedding* (Halberstam 5-9).

12 In 1990 Gerhard Neumann, in the context of reflections on women's writing in postwar German-language literature, already noted that both Bachmann's text and Christa Wolf's *Selbstversuch* demonstrate very clearly "diesen Übergang von der Novelle zur Kurzgeschichte im Zeichen weiblichen Schreibens, diesen Tatbestand einer Umwertung und Umorientierung von Erzählstrategien durch einen Wechsel von Identitätskonzept und Problemperspektive . . .; und zwar in ihrer inhaltlichen und formalen Struktur einerseits; in ihrer metapoetischen Reflexion andererseits" (63). Neumann is especially interested in the dialectic of body and discourse and a "Leerstelle" 'gap' (63) that becomes visible between the two after a paradigm shift occurs with regard to the construction of gendered identities.

13 See Genesis 18:16-33 and 19:1-29. For a detailed discussion of the biblical references in Bachmann's text, see Achberger's "Bachmann und die Bibel."

14 Achberger (1982) takes the text's description of devastation and desolation to be a reference to Isaiah 1:7-9 ("Bachmann" 98).

15 This reading is also supported by the fact that later on in the text, Mara smashes several dishes in Charlotte and Franz's apartment (115-16). The apartment has been decorated primarily in accordance with Franz's taste, and Charlotte feels liberated by the breaking of the dishes: "She was free. Nothing seemed to her impossible any more" (116). For Charlotte the second scene of devastation in the text is thus a symbolic devastation of the fetters of patriarchy.

16 This fact has been pointed out repeatedly by critics; see, for instance, Horsley, Dodds, Achberger ("Bachmann"), and Bauer.

17 Achberger reads this passage slightly differently: she views Mara as "tatsächlich ein Teil von Charlottens Wesen" and argues: "Die Identität und Zusammengehörigkeit der beiden [weiblichen Figuren] stehen von Anfang an fest. Mara erscheint Charlotte nicht als eigenständige Person, sondern als Teil ihres Wohnzimmers, das zu diesem Zeitpunkt von 'Rottönen' durchsetzt scheint. Zu diesen 'Rottönen' in Charlottens Wohnung, die zugleich ihren psychischen Raum darstellt, gehören Maras Haar und Rock" (Achberger, "Bachmann" 103-04).

18 The text further states that Charlotte feels that what remains after the end of the party is the "death red" of Mara's skirt, "for which the big drums should have been beaten" (106). Mara's presence thus anticipates the battle cry against patriarchy sounded later in the text, as well as the symbolic death and resignation at the text's end—a death whose color has been changed from revolutionary red to resigned and neutral white: "They undressed and lay down side by side—two beautiful sleepers with white shoulder-straps and close-fitting white slips. They were both dead and had killed something. . . . The red skirt lay crumpled and insignificant by the bed" (132).

19 An alternative reading of this passage is offered in Luca 53-4.

20 In contrast to Namowicz, Neumann views the text's non-fulfillment of genre expectations not as a failure, but as quite deliberate and successful, illustrating "das Auseinanderklaffen von Körper und Sprache" and pointing up "die 'Gegenstandslosigkeit' der Diskursinstanz 'ich' . . .; und zwar, indem eine Liebesgeschichte—das große Identitätsparadigma der klassischen Novelle schlechthin—'gegen den Strich,' gegen die Rollenfestschreibung, gegen die Zeichenqualität der Dinge, gegen die Instanz verantwortbarer Rede 'erzählt' wird" (67). I fully agree with Neumann's observations at the same time that I am interested in viewing these observations from a different angle, specifically from the queer angle opened up by the multiplicity of gender positions present in Bachmann's text.

21 Critics have pointed out this fact—as well as Charlotte's general entanglement in patriarchal structures—repeatedly; see, for instance, Dodds 434, Horsley 287 and Bauer 229. While Dodds and Horsley tend to be critical of the text for this depiction of Charlotte, Bauer locates the text's critical potential in precisely this entanglement in the manner discussed earlier.

22 For an extended argument about the traditional gendered structure of Charlotte's fantasy, see Bauer's essay *in toto*. My assessment of Charlotte's desire differs from Bauer's in that I do not think it lacks an erotic quality (Bauer 229-30). To my mind it is the lure of power itself that allows Charlotte to suffuse her reflections with an erotic quality. An eroticism not tinged with power differentials is not imaginable to Charlotte: when she tries to view Mara's body outside of such power structures, she find herself "without instructions . . . in her feelings" (Bachmann 114).

23 Again in this context see Bauer (227-32), who analyzes the reasons for Charlotte's inability to disentangle herself from the strictures of patriarchal paradigms with reference especially to Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*) and Teresa de Lauretis (*The Practice of Love*).

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