

“She couldn’t simply write a letter.”

Scenes of Reading in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *The Book of Franza*

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*This article contends that Ingeborg Bachmann’s *The Book of Franza* anticipates and significantly advances feminist critiques of writing and authorship by exposing and effectively deconstructing scenes of reading as the site where discursive power is exercised and significations are enforced by using “her” as a universal signifier. But it also performs a refusal to impart to the reader a subject that could be pinned down, identified, and hence objectified. Eluding containment by the patriarchal law, the subject has the chance to come into a law of its own as it vanishes and subsequently returns as a reader with a new type of leverage.*

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We must reconquer the weight of lost reality. We must make ourselves a heart, a mind, a soul as much as is humanly possible. The real, the reality of the painter, is neither in realism nor in abstraction, but in the reconquering of his weight as a human being. It is only from this reconquered position that I believe the painter of the future will gradually come to himself, rediscover his weight, and strengthen it to the utmost reality of the world.

—Alfred Manessier

Ingeborg Bachmann's novel fragment *The Book of Franza [Das Buch Franza]* stages and retraces a vanishing (Bachmann, 1995, 1999)¹. The plot begins with Franza's disappearance. She has left the clinic where she was in treatment, but has failed to return to her husband, Leo Jordan, and their upper-class Viennese home. Franza's departure from her life with Jordan is foreshadowed by her earlier gradual fading from the life of her brother, Martin Ranner, and her abandoning their childhood home in the province of Galicia. Martin muses about the "disappearance" ["Verschwinden" (132)] of his sister while he travels through the darkness of a tunnel, the train lit only by a blue lamp that is incapable of bringing light into the "Coupé"—the compartment, but perhaps also the cut and severance that has occurred:

Eluded as from Galicia, thus also in Vienna eluded him, backed away from him, since she . . . Who had she become, she, her, he probably was only thinking about someone who was no longer her and no longer she. (7–8)

Entwichen wie aus Galicien so auch in Wien ihm entwichen, vor ihm zurückgewichen, seit sie . . . Wer war sie geworden, sie, die, er dachte wohl nur an jemand, der nicht mehr sie war und nicht mehr die. (132)

Although Martin eventually finds his sister back in his home in Galicia, the novel centers on his ultimately fruitless efforts to save Franza, to bring her back. At the end of the third and last part of the narrative of Bachmann's unfinished manuscript, titled "Egyptian Darkness" ["Die Ägyptische Finsternis"], Franza perishes from the wounds of a final act of self-obliteration. As is fitting for a figure whose enigmatic persona is defined by her elusiveness, she dies with a secret on her lips:

She moved her mouth again as if she wanted to say something to him, at last, say what she had not yet been able to say. She didn't want to hold back anything secret, any enigma, but now something remained secret. (142)

Sie bewegte noch den Mund, als wollte sie ihm etwas sagen, zuletzt, was sie ihm noch nicht hatte sagen können. Sie wollte nichts geheimhalten, Enigma, aber nun blieb etwas geheim. (325)

But who is it that “dies” in the novel? How can a literary character disappear from a novel that bears her name? And to what degree is “death” a successful metaphor for such a disappearance? Is not perhaps the more significant disappearance marked by the elision in the early passage just quoted: “since she . . .” The three little dots signal a disappearance, the one after which the person is “no longer her and no longer she.” After this disappearance, all variants of the feminine pronoun cease to refer to this living person, and need to be collected and disposed of like so many discarded clothes.

While Martin’s concerns about Franzia’s acts of disappearance are described with graphic detail—Martin goes from gathering his sister’s clothes at the beginning of the novel fragment to laying a wreath at her grave at the end—they ultimately fail to retrieve her. Franzia’s disappearance within and from the narrative echoes and responds to earlier erasures she suffered when her husband, Jordan, used her as the object of a private case study complementing his research project on the long-term injuries suffered by female concentration-camp inmates. In addition to exploiting his wife as an object of research, Jordan also reduces her to a text only he has the power to read. He “handles” Franzia like a book, “paging” her so forcefully that she feels violated and annihilated—*zerblättert* (208). What is more, Franzia is made to disappear from her husband’s book, as he fails to grant her the status as a coauthor and erases her name from the list of acknowledgements.

This article argues that in *The Book of Franza*, Bachmann anticipates and significantly advances feminist critiques of writing and authorship by exposing and effectively deconstructing scenes of reading as the site where discursive power is exercised and significations are enforced. By illuminating how the female protagonist is objectivized while being, as it were, “read to death,” Bachmann demonstrates that language as a representational system grants some the power and cultural authority to nullify and erase others. For Bachmann, these mechanisms amount to more than a screaming injustice. They constitute an actual crime and, quite literally, a form of murder—hence the general title of her unfinished novel cycle, “Ways of Death” [“Todesarten”]. But Bachmann’s protagonist Franza answers her repeated deletions from life and from her husband’s writing with her own act of disappearance. The latter must be understood as an attempt to withdraw from and elude a signifying apparatus that generates meaning at the expense of her subjecthood and autonomy. The goal of *Franza* in its opposition to oppressive structures of ideological containment is to foreground the problematic of reading “Franza,” and the conventional ways of mobilizing “her” as a universal signifier, a case study, a repository of the “typical.” At the same time, the text enacts how Franza resists and escapes from the prison of a language and the order of literature that obliterates her. As a text that is quintessentially *about* reading, the *Franza* fragment challenges us to reflect on these processes, and to ask how we can counter the biases in reading and resist the destiny that the burden of gender has laid out for us, namely that of being read to death. The first step of such a resistance is to elude, escape, and stop responding to the gendered interpellations of the patriarchal order.

Bachmann’s opposition to the order of representation draws much of its critical purchase from her refusal to impart to the reader a subject that could be pinned down, identified, and hence objectified. The *Franza* fragment in particular circles around the question, not of who and what the exquisitely elusive signifier “Franza” might stand for, but how and whether it might be able to escape the symbolic economy of writing—how, in short, the person it alludes to can cease to function as a signifier altogether. Hence Bachmann’s strong feminist authorship

goes beyond depicting females as the disenfranchised victims of uncomprehending brothers, perverse husbands, and, by extension, an inequitable gender system, or the overwhelmingly male literary canon. Previous commentators have noted that the author's narratives revolve around the conditions of possibility of an *écriture féminine* (Cixous) that would break with the gendering structures and syntax of traditional masculine writing and exist as a corrective to patriarchal discourse. Even more pointedly, however, the *Franza* fragment in particular holds out the possibility of eluding the literary tradition with its conventionally operative gender hierarchies, tout court. This escape occurs in the text's transition from a person who is no longer "she" or "her," no longer to be passively found in the text, to one that has actually ("wirklich," 132) disappeared from the text and into the (active) practice of reading. The notion of a revised understanding of "apostrophe," in the terms laid out by Sabine Gölz in her article in this volume, marks precisely this subversive act of withdrawal from representability with which Bachmann's book begins: a subject responds to a murderous setup by resituating itself out of reach of the destructive apparatus. Once it eludes containment by the patriarchal law, by male tradition, this subject has the chance to come into a law of its own and return as a reader with a new type of leverage. However, literal description alone cannot capture this disappearance "into" and reemergence "from" the practice of reading, it has to be performed to become apparent.

Given these discursive mechanisms—the implied agencies, authorities, and strategic elisions—the key message of the *Franza* fragment is ultimately unwritable and un-representable. Rather, it depends on us readers to interrogate our own role in the process of meaning production, and to return as new, no longer gendered subjects. At the end of my reading, the refusal of representation and signification characterizing Bachmann's own text will emerge as a first, crucial step on the path toward a "new language" as yet inarticulable, and as an active way of reading literature.

Bachmann's subversive authorship finds its first figurative expression in the form of a seemingly pitiful piece of writing, a telegram Franza has wired to her brother. Martin treats the telegram as the final testament to Franza's descent. As far as he is concerned, writing a telegram is "typical" of Franza, as it exemplifies her irrational nature (7). "She couldn't simply write a letter" (7) ["Ein Telegram musste es sein" (131)], he complains about her "communication," of which he isn't even sure "if one could call it [that]" ["Wenn man das eine Mitteilung nennen konnte" (132)]. From Martin's embittered perspective, Franza's telegram is a message in a bottle. While not exactly dialogical, it is—in keeping with Celan's famous reading of Mandelstam's image of the poem—always "underway" (33). In other words, it is unpredictable and enigmatic at best, and fallible and elusive at worst. For Martin, the act of sending a telegram represents everything he despises about his estranged sister. It is an overly dramatic and at the same time feeble attempt to renew a dialogue broken off by *her* arrogance and indifference, but from a safe distance. In his interpretation, it is also a sign of mental illness. Seen through her brother's pathologizing lens, the beginning of the *Franza* fragment casts Franza as a hysteric who is unable to manage emotional distress and ambivalent toward suffering. In the telegram Martin reads—or rather: as Martin reads the telegram—Franza seems to be both asking for and resisting help.

If we accept the text's critical proposition and probe Martin's objectifying and, indeed, pathologizing reading of Franza, we are able to reconsider the question of feminine writing from a sharply different angle. As we watch Martin read and quickly dismiss Franza's telegram as "typical," the problem of writing becomes, to be sure, a problem of reading:

Typical, he told himself, although she had certainly sent him only few telegrams, perhaps this one was even the second, or third in ten years, but typical it had to be, that is how he wanted it in the dark, where he no longer liked the taste of his cigarette, and <he> crushed it/her, typically, in the ashtray, which was jammed. (8)

Typisch, sagte er sich, obwohl sie ihm gewiß nur wenige Telegramme geschickt hatte, vielleicht war das sogar das erste, zweite, oder dritte in zehn Jahren, aber typisch sollte es sein, so wollte er es in der Dunkelheit, in der ihm die Zigarette nicht mehr schmeckte, und <er> zerdrückte sie, typisch, im Aschenbecher, der klemmte. (132)

Admittedly, Martin bears little resemblance to the violently patriarchal and proto-fascist figure of Jordan. As other commentators have argued, Martin is not the enemy but rather serves as a “feminized reflector figure” for Franza, whose voice is at times hard to disentangle from his, subtly suggesting a union (Tabah 102). Yet the problem with Martin is his inability to grasp, let alone appreciate, the material and ideological conditions that beset his sister’s stabs at writing. What he interprets as a hysterical cry for help, an irrational and impulsive (over-) reaction to events she seems unable to control without his intervention, resists such simple definition. While Martin recognizes that her troubling telegram solicits a response, he ultimately does not understand what is needed from him, or rather, he fails to understand that he is precisely not needed, that his sister is not to be saved, given that she has already withdrawn from the order of representation. Martin cannot repeat Jordan’s crime of suppressing Franza’s voice, but he commits a blunder that is equally serious: he misreads his sister’s telegram as the herald of a conciliatory encounter, ignoring the fact that she has long eluded him and already—strategically—escaped.

Franza’s telegram serves as a disruptive and transgressive force that shakes the stability and security of Martin’s world. But the significance of Franza’s telegram lies in the fact that while it temporarily places Franza into the position of the writer, we nevertheless perceive her text through the eyes of her brother, from whose perspective their shared story is often told. Martin embodies a traditional reader who takes the liberty of finding his sister’s writing “typical,” thus placing it within a typology where feminine writing is deemed to be read and “realized” by the masculine, which it prefigures. This kind of reading dispenses

with actually having to cite or decipher the “typical” words. Its function is to expose the problematic nature of Martin’s traditional readership. It is no coincidence that the only word he quotes from Franza’s three-page text is the name of its author: “In the end one word stood there: Franza” (10) [“Zuletzt stand ein Wort allein da. Franza” (135)]. The telegram’s content is deemed of no importance and so it is left unspoken. What is more, Martin’s posture as a reader quietly merges with that of a judge or even analyst: “She must have come to her senses, for the last time she had clearly signed it ‘Your Franziska’ or ‘Your old Franziska’” (10) [“Also war sie wohl zur Vernunft gekommen, denn letztesmal hatte es bestimmt noch geheißen: Deine Franziska. Oder: Deine alte Franziska” (135)]. Martin appreciates Franza’s signature. Her name, without diminutive qualifiers and possessive pronouns, is at once familiar and stripped of its history and relationality. It is as isolated as the person who bears it in the moment of her being read. And yet the signifier “Franza” is fully capable of identifying and essentializing Franza—*his* Franza—exactly the way he remembers her.

As a geologist familiar with the work of Egyptologist James Henry Breasted, Martin feels like Champollion, “the first to shed light on a form of writing” (7) [“der erstmals Helle in eine Schrift brachte” (131)]. Equating Franza’s telegram to a “form of writing” that reclaims the unmediated signifying faculty of ancient hieroglyphs, Martin sets out to illuminate and decode her message. Yet the unique significance of Franza’s “hieroglyphs” as a multidimensional form of communication is lost on Martin. Hieroglyphic writing is, as Derrida reminds us in his reading of Freud, like psychical writing: both are constructed by way of condensations and displacements. They are “marvelous and . . . mysterious” (Freud, quoted in Derrida, 217). Intent on “shedding light” on Franza’s “hieroglyphs,” Martin embodies not only a scholar, but more precisely a Freudian analyst who uses his interpretive skills to get past his analysand’s resistance and interpret her text/dream/message. As such Martin’s act of reading is itself entrapped in a patriarchal structure: psychoanalysis is a phallogocentric tradition.

Martin wants his sister’s identity to be easily contained and controlled, just as he wants the meaning of a text to be closed and complete. His sober and

imposing readerly stance refuses itself to the openness and potentialities of a new kind of female writing, where a simple name evokes and at the same time eludes “her” presence.

It is difficult to miss the irony in Martin’s reaction to Franzia’s writing. Insisting on the directly mimetic power of proper names—“Franza”—to uniquely identify their referent in the world, his assertion conflicts with the elusiveness of Franzia, who remains impalpable throughout the novel. Lacan writes that when a proper name is pronounced, “the statement [of the proper name] is equal to its signification” (Lacan 694). The signifier “Franza” needs no further elaboration, it signifies simply what it says. And yet, it is available to Martin only in the form of a signature, which indicates that the subject of the enunciation has already moved on thereby undoing this type of referential relation. At the same time, Martin does suspect that this readily identifiable person has vanished and that he will no longer be able to summon her: “But who had she become, she, her, he probably only thought of someone who was no longer *she* and no longer word *her*” (8) [“Wer war sie geworden, sie, die, er dachte wohl nur an jemand, der nicht mehr *sie* war und nicht mehr *die*” (132, emphasis mine)]. Martin intuits that his sister, by refusing herself to the interpellation of feminine pronouns, no longer *is* (and perhaps never was)? Martin seems to sense this absence when he suggests that she is calling for help, from him.

In addition to Franzia’s telegram, Martin also grapples with a stack of letters he finds in a drawer at Franzia’s Vienna home, “beginnings of letters . . . that barely got beyond the initial address” (16) [“Briefanfänge . . . die kaum über die Anrede hinausgingen” (145)]:

Dear Martin, I must write to you. Dear Martin, I don’t know where to begin and how to say it. My dearest Martin, it’s so upsetting, I am afraid, I have only you, and that is why I am writing you. Dear Martin, I am in such despair, I must write to you. . . . The end. Different dates, all of them from the last two years, the pages yellowed in part, in part dirty, then a still folded page: Dear Martin,

yesterday in the café as I sat there with those little packages, suddenly I could say nothing. (16)

Lieber Martin, ich muss Dir schreiben. Lieber Martin, ich weiß nicht, wo ich anfangen und wie ich es sagen soll. Mein lieber Martin, es ist so entsetzlich, ich fürchte mich, ich habe ja nur Dich und deswegen schreibe ich dir. Lieber Martin, ich bin so verzweifelt, ich muss Dir schreiben. . . Ende. Verschiedene Daten, alle aus den letzten zwei Jahren, die Blätter teils gelblich, teils schmutzig, dann noch ein gefaltetes Blatt, Lieber Martin, gestern im Espresso, als ich mit all diesen Päckchen dasaß, da konnte ich plötzlich nichts sagen. (145)

Like her telegram, Franza's letters are messages in a bottle, even if the condition of anonymity pertains not to the addressee (all the letters are addressed to Martin) but to the sender herself—the enigmatic “I” who writes so persistently and eloquently of her inability to say, to articulate herself. To the author of these unfinished letters, the meaning of writing is not a given, but depends on some future reading, as she insists that she must write *to him*. And yet her letters are not a stab against futility, but instead an ironic rebuttal of the poetic trope of silence as agency. Franza's silences may speak more than a million words, but given that she fails to send the letters and then disappears before they are found and read, she ultimately withstands being read and brought into the light. Franza's metaphorical and then literal death undergirds her silence and the discourse of erasure and denial that is ubiquitous in the novel.

Franza's telegram, which Martin misinterprets as the articulation of an unrealized, unspeakable dimension of her psyche, likewise withdraws from presence and meaning. The reader is not privy to the intimate thoughts and secret fears Franza allegedly divulges in this telegram, as Martin pays no attention to its contents but instead reads—misreads—its formal features:

All because of this telegram, stop and stop and stop, did she think that he could not read without traffic signs, he was guessing and pondering the riddle and imagining yet another certainty, how many had it been? Held up by those stops. (10)

Alles wegen dieses Telegramms, stop und stop und stop, meinte sie denn, er könne nicht lesen ohne Verkehrszeichen, und er riet und rätselte und bildete sich wieder eine andre Gewissheit ein, die wievielte schon? durch diese stops aufgehalten. (135)

In Martin's reading, the most straightforward—if very consequential—detail of Franza's telegram assumes mysterious significance: she punctures her sentences with “stops” that announce her disappearance. On a pragmatic level, of course, the stops can simply be understood as the customary method of indicating periods in telegrams, a primitive postal form where the common punctuation signs are not available. Clearly, Franza's stops are not a personal affront against Martin's intelligence, as Martin assumes. Their purpose lies rather in assisting Franza's escape from intelligibility. It is true that Franza “couldn't simply write a letter” and that her disappearance “had to be [in] a telegram.” This is because the telegram slows down the reading process, arresting the reader in a sequence of stops. In other words, the stops *are* the message.

Beyond its critique of Franza's perfectly adequate use of postal conventions, Martin's statement reveals that he might indeed not be a very good reader, given his unreflected faith in the ability of the letter to signify as well as his uncritical readerly self-confidence. The following admission is revealing: “He had already arrived at this hypothesis [that the Professor had dug his sister's grave] before he had the least proof in hand” (7) [“Zu dieser Vermutung [dass der Professor, das Fossil, ihm die Schwester zugrunde gerichtet hatte] war er schon gekommen, ehe er den geringsten Beweis in der Hand hatte” (131)]. Martin's single conviction that the telegram bears a clear and simple truth is quickly reinforced when he expresses his conviction “that he had understood Franza's

message” [“Franzas Mitteilung verstanden zu haben”] and further that he “felt certain” (*ibid.*) [“hatte . . . die Gewissheit” (*ibid.*)]. His assertion is ironized by the ensuing suggestion that he “had to . . . imagine once more another *certainty* (how many had it been?)” (10) [“bildete sich wieder eine andre Gewissheit ein, die wievielte schon?” (135)]. As the focal character of the novel’s first part and sections of the other two, Martin’s thoughts provide the lens through which the reader becomes acquainted with the “facts” of the siblings’ past history. The contents of his consciousness are presented in the form of third-person statements expressing Martin’s personal evaluation of past and current events. His views are, however, frequently mediated by a sometimes ironic, sometimes neutral narrator who casts a skeptical eye on Martin’s account. The speculation cited above is certainly characteristic of someone who doesn’t realize that his mode of reading is not just dependent on, but shaped by, the established generic conventions of realism, and the argumentative texture of positivist discourse.

Martin’s certainty about his certainty is certainly ironic, given that it appears in a poetic context that begs a skeptical view of language, viewed as something that allows us to create our own, rather than simply conveying reality. It is a well-known fact that Bachmann found her intellectual home in the philosophy of language, and the work of skeptical thinkers like Nietzsche, Mauthner, Benjamin, and Wittgenstein reverberates strongly in the novel. This is most obviously the case when Martin’s musings are disrupted by a narrative “digression” (9) [“Exkurs” (134)], which occasions a meta-narrative reflection on the constructed nature of the literary text:

When a train travels through the Semmering tunnel, when there is talk that it travels to Vienna, something is named, a city called that, and a place called Galicia, when there is talk about a young man who should be able to identify himself as a certain Martin Ranner, but who could just as well be called Gasparin, if not something completely different, it remains to be seen—if, then . . . (8)

Wenn ein Zug durch den Semmeringtunnel fährt, wenn die Rede davon ist, dass er nach Wien fährt, etwas genannt wird, eine Stadt, die so heißt, und ein Ort, der Galicien heißt, wenn von einem jungen Mann die Rede ist, der sich ausweisen können sollte als ein Martin Ranner, aber ebensogut Gasparin heißen könnte, und man wird sehen, wenn nicht überhaupt noch ganz anders—wenn also . . . (132–133)

In this passage, the authorial narrator calls into question the efficacy of the practice of naming, and the alleged capacity of verisimilitude to mask that it conforms not to the real but to its own arbitrary laws. The intrusion of her external position disrupts the illusion through which we have taken interest in Martin's subjective reality and taken his worries as our own. Challenging the truth of the narrated events, the authorial narrator's interference explicitly shows the representational strategy of mimesis. Martin's empirical world was nothing but the product of a poetic process, revealing the manifold possibilities inherent in nature and reality. Failing to represent "correctly" those "things that are or were the case," Martin's point of view instead shows "things that ought to be the case" (Aristotle 50–51). More specifically, the intruding authorial character announces that the account of Martin's journey is based on "words that allude to and insist that something exists, and that something else does not exist" (8) [“Worte . . . die anspielen und insistieren auf etwas, das es gibt, und auf anderes, das es nicht gibt” (132)]. Specifically, she insists that the descriptive details of the text—such as, for instance, the precise geographical coordinates of Vienna or the correct surname of the protagonist—only allude to, approximate, reality.² That everything may well be otherwise. Barthes would later define this as the "*reality effect*" of realist literature, subjecting the reader to a powerful "*referential illusion*" (Barthes, 1989a, 148, *italics in the original*).

For Bachmann, as for Barthes, the referential illusions of realist fiction are ideologically suspect, but for different reasons. As James Ley summarizes Barthes's critique of realist writing, "Fiction's manipulative techniques need to be

exposed for what they are; the oppressive concept of the author standing behind the work as the guarantor of its meaningfulness needs to be debunked in order to liberate the reader" (188). For Bachmann, the problem of fiction's manipulative play with the possibilities of reality is of added urgency. Her critique in *Franza* exceeds Barthes's call to liberate the reader from an author's authority, as if freeing up space for the reader's own activity of meaning production were sufficient to debunk the operations of ideology. Bachmann's text instead places doubt on the very assumption of literature's claim to truth, regardless of whether the latter is guaranteed by the author or undermined by an unruly reader.³ By shattering the realist illusion—that Martin is the narrator, that Martin is real, that Martin is the name of the person to which the text alludes—the narrative digression poses a serious threat to the reader's assumption of the trustworthiness of any representational claims on the part of writing and reading. It also challenges the notion that there might be a truth behind or *beyond* the realist illusion, a kind of Archimedean point from which to look objectively at *Franza*'s real or textual disappearance, a site, also, that would allow us to substantiate Martin's literal or figurative reading of *Franza*. As the authorial narrator proposes: "For the facts to make the world real—these depend on the unreal in order to be recognized by it" (9) ["Denn die Tatsachen, die die Welt ausmachen—sie brauchen das Nichttatsächliche, um von ihm aus erkannt zu werden" (134)].

This poetological digression at the beginning of *Franza* is by no means the only disruption of Martin's narrative voice in the novel, which takes frequent recourse to modernist compositional techniques. But it is significant that the displacement of Martin's narratorial authority results from nothing other than his sister's telegram. Prompting Martin's trip to Vienna, *Franza*'s telegram leads to an unexpected role reversal. Far from being a sign of weakness, it shapes a constellation of events over which Martin has very little control. The telegram also reveals Martin's burning desire to save his sister. His response to her intervention, then, is to go on a rescue mission, to bring her home. In that way, *Franza*'s telegram triggers the plot of a family drama that tests Martin's loyalty as

her sibling. Well-intentioned as he is, Martin will do whatever necessary to protect Franza from herself, even against her will: “If there was one thing he had to do it was to at least find the person who had sent the SOS to him” (12) [“Wenn er überhaupt noch etwas zu tun hatte, dann war es, und sei’s mit Gewalt und ohne Weiterfragen, die Person wenigstens abzuholen, die ihm ihren SOS-Ruf zukommen hatte lassen” (139)]. But when Martin arrives in Vienna, Franza has eluded his help, she is nowhere to be found. After a confrontation with Jordan’s housekeeper, Martin travels back to Galicia only to find Franza waiting for him at home—at his own residence, to be precise. There, Franza is stretched out at the stove in a position that upends some of the classically feminine painterly poses:

The light was on in the hallway and the door to the kitchen was open a crack. the bench in front of the ceramic tiled stove he could only see last, but first he saw her feet stretched out over the end of the bench, with bright socks, her shoes must have rolled onto the floor under it, the shoes were the saddest part. He remained standing at the door as she sat up, turned around, grabbed hold of the oven’s tiles and remained, slipping and yet grabbing on, half sitting, caught. (23)

Im Gang brannte das Licht, und die Tür zur Stube war auch einen Spalt breit auf, die Bank um den Ofen konnte er erst zuletzt sehen, zuerst aber ihre Füße, die über das Ende der Bank standen, in hellen Strümpfen, die Schuhe mussten auf den Boden darunter gekollert sein, die Schuhe waren das Traurigste. Er blieb an der Tür stehen, und sie richtete sich auf, drehte sich um, klammerte sich an die Ofenkacheln und blieb verrutscht und angekrallt, halb sitzend, hängen. (154)

This figure evidently exceeds conventional depictions of women as maternal bodies, eternal virgins, or sexual temptresses. Centering on the ekphrastic

description of a *tableau vivant*, the passage echoes the numerous conventional depictions of females who attend to the fireplace, heat water on the stove, or rest against the chimney after a day's labor. But the tableau also parodies the trope of



Fig. 1 Jacobus Vrel, *An Old Woman at the Fireplace*, oil on canvas, ca 1550-60, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



Fig. 2 Vincent van Gogh, *Interior with Peasant Woman Sitting near the Fireplace*, chalk on paper, ca 1885, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

the woman at the hearth, as well as the social restrictions circumscribed by domestic female roles, as it draws on the distorted, exaggerated forms of Expressionist art to suggest that the women's place at the hearth is no longer a given, as she is "slipping and yet grabbing on . . . caught." Franza's body is



Fig. 3 Heinrich Campendonk, *Interior (Woman by the Oven)* [*Interieur (Frau am Ofen)*], woodcut, 1918 (dated 1919), Museum of Modern Art, New York

arranged in a bizarre position that seems almost creaturely, as she grabs on to a version of herself that is less dependent on traditional definitions. As a privileged married woman of the Viennese upper class, Franz would not actually perform housework, and given her illness, it is unlikely that her marital duties would have included supervising or directing her servant maid. Franz is not exhausted from mundane domestic chores. What the tableau implies, instead, is that she is shattered by her own existence and by the “weight of lost reality” quoted in the epigraph of this article. Rewriting Franz’s vanishing as a textual performance, the passage stages, indeed captures, a subject who is no longer willing to

perform presence through embodiment. At the same time, it visualizes the textual paradox of a novel that is about an “I” who has vanished, but who is made to return whenever someone reads or looks at “her.”⁴ In the performance as in the visual tableau, the “I” is not represented but rather enforced as a reluctant, interpellated, and yet elusive presence.

The tableau prefigures the remainder of the narrative, which corroborates Franz's disappearance and Martin's inability to prevent her death. But rather than indicting Martin because he is male,⁵ the novel shows the effects of reading on the subject, as well as the systematic metaphoric gendering that both women and men unwittingly perpetuate in their encounters with one another, and with traditional culture. But the feminist contribution of Bachmann's text is subtler and more radical than that. It doesn't simply stop at its critique of a certain kind of—appropriative, colonizing—reading, exemplified but by no means restricted to Martin. What the *Franz* fragment tentatively articulates instead are the terms of resistance and a possible escape from the bounds and biased operations of literature.

Thus, on the first pages of the *Franz* fragment, an unruly writing subject is silhouetted against the power relations that are always at stake in the making and unmaking of (feminine) discourse. We get a glimpse of what her writerly resistance to reading might look like by studying the empty pages of Franz's unsent letters, and more actively and forcefully from her telegram, which is punctuated by an onslaught of stops—commands that function as a powerful antidote to the “rubble of words” [“Wortgeröll”] threatening to crush the narrator's train of thought with the seeming self-evidence of reason “rolling into the light” (9) [“roll[t] heraus ans Licht” (134)]. The stops in Franz's telegram reveal themselves as a performative intervention into the disciplining process of all writing that “wants to travel through the tunnel” (*ibid.*) [“will durch den Tunnel” (*ibid.*)]. Bachmann uses them as a literary-theoretical model that articulates a critique of the controlling effects of literature. The stops function as an emergency brake that would prevent the train's headlong rush into “enlightened” thought. They would also allow Franz's telegram to resist being pulled toward

the end of the tunnel, the place where words are written, spoken, asserted, distinguished, and ultimately, “covered and . . . numbered and divided up” (*ibid.*) [“bedeckt und beziffert und eingeteilt” (*ibid.*)]. For Bachmann, the structures which would prompt the act of emerging from “the tunnel inside of one’s head” (*ibid.*) [“Tunnel . . . im Kopf” (*ibid.*)] are not straightforwardly accessible or available. In the novel, Franza will not arise from her inner darkness restored and in possession of new mental and linguistic powers. Nor will she resurface “enriched” after experiencing the “terrifying silence . . . the thousand darknesses of murderous speech,” as Celan famously asserted in his 1958 Bremen address (34). Bachmann instead insists on that which is lost in the process of molding and shaping the artistic product to match the writer’s mental image of its future relation to being read. Writing proves to be an inherently self-disciplining process. The novel raises the issue of how to write without already being caught in a restrictive literary machinery that sets the terms of any encounter between reader and text? Is the answer perhaps not to be writing at all? Or is there a way to opt out of the representational system of language?

In the staging of Franza’s tableau vivant, the inquiry into the operations of the apparatus and its effects on the passive, disciplined, and self-disciplining subject is transferred from literary to pictorial art. Putting a female body on display, the tableau seems to literalize Cixous’s notion of writing from the female body, as if to ask if the arrangement of her twisted limbs might be used to challenge or counteract the mechanisms by which the subject is usurped by language, which represents in the absence of the signified. The tableau pulls a reluctant Franza into a quasi-visual performance where the subject is both withdrawing and yet present for Martin to view and contemplate. Through the staging of a visual tableau, the scene puts Martin and his act of looking on display, exposing him to the scrutiny of the reader. In that way, it powerfully undercuts the privilege of the beholder whose traditional, safe position is marked by absence, granting him the perspective of a disembodied observer. This in turn provokes a reflection on the nature of our own readerly participation in (Martin’s reading of) Franza’s body/presence, and our response to as it were literal

absence from the text. The text thus not only implicates Martin as a reader of someone who eludes the act of reading. It also conjures and interpellates him as a reader who can bestow significance on Franz's act of resistance by corroborating her vanishing from the text.

It is crucial, then, that Franz's self-portrait presents a distorted visual representation of its subject, not merely to draw attention to the flawed process of representation, but to enact her disappearance from the symbolic order and the rules of language. As a "feminist ekphrasis," Franz's tableau vivant adds another dimension of ideology critique. It recognizes a male tradition of looking, by inviting the reader to observe the male gaze critically and self-consciously (Bergmann Loizeau 122). It is no coincidence that in the scene, faces and heads serve as important dramatic cues. As the body parts that are associated with language and thought, but also physical and mental activities such as kissing and looking, the face and the head are, as Levinas has argued, the most vulnerable parts of the human body (198–201). In Bachmann's text, even the siblings' cautious exchange of gazes highlights the gendered subtext of their relationship. There is a conspicuous imbalance between Martin's recognition of Franz's face and his success at concealing his own. Martin acknowledges that he "still had not said a word, for he had now seen her face after all" ["brachte noch immer kein Wort heraus, weil er jetzt ihr Gesicht doch gesehen hatte"] but at the same time concedes that "he hoped she hadn't noticed anything in his face" (23) ["Er hoffte, sie habe nichts in seinem Gesicht bemerkt" (155)]. While it is not made explicit what exactly he has seen in his sister's face, it is clearly implied in his reaction that her face shows vulnerability and pathos.

Even Martin's empathetic reaction—"He quickly went to her and kissed her on the cheek" ["Er ging schnell zu ihr hin und küsste sie auf die Wange"]—is framed in a critical light when Franz resists his friendly overture: "Before he could kiss her on the other, she turned her head away" (*ibid.*) ["Ehe er sie auf die andre küssen konnte, drehte sie den Kopf weg" (154)]. When Martin first enters the room, Franz is cast in the traditional pose of the woman at the hearth, with her gaze turned away from the observer, as if lost in the routine performance of a

household chore. But as soon as Martin enters, the tableau comes to life as Franza looks at him, offering an invitation to the reader to observe his reaction to the tableau's subject. Martin's immediate response is to kiss his sister on the cheek, as if this might wake her up from her Sleeping Beauty slumber and resolve all her problems, fairy-tale style. But Franza forbids his intervention by "turn[ing] her head away," saying "No. Don't look at me" (*ibid.*) [Nein. Schau mich nicht an"] (155)]. The siblings' interaction literalizes the turning point between Franza's oppression by the apparatus and her escape from it. It may serve as another example for the kind of "turn away" or "aversion" that is at the center of Sabine Gölz's reading of the photograph taken by Aby Warburg at Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico and that has, to Gölz's mind, "not been theorized at all, with the result that vast formations in our poetic geography have remained entirely unreadable" (Gölz 2018 9/tbd.). Franza resembles the subject of Warburg's camera in that she too "is at the receiving end of a given apparatus—addressed, targeted, simultaneously conjured as an image (photographed) and dismissed as a subject" (Gölz 8/tbd.). More crucially, as Franza moves to evade Martin's kiss, she is "faced with and subjected to a representational machinery, *but who does not wield it*" (*Ibid.*, emphasis mine). Franza's turning away epitomizes what Gölz defines as a "different type of subject, one that is not constituted as a 'speaking subject' by that apparatus, one that does not coincide with 'him'" (*Ibid.*). For Martin, Franza's distorted body is quite literally in a state of disarray. He does not know how to read this image of a pathetic female figure, which barely resembles his sister, Franza. Viewed as an example of Gölz's figure of "apostrophe's double," "Franza's" unreadability must be understood not merely as a consequence of her distorted features, or her physical turning away from the observer's gaze, but as a form of resistance to, a deliberate yet spontaneous disappearance from, the signifying apparatus: "The subject that responds by turning away returns *into itself* as empirical living being. It emerges into a world that affords systematically different perceptions. It wakes up into a parallel universe that can no longer communicate with the one it has left behind" (*Ibid.* tbd./9–10).

As a form of disappearance and elision, Franza's turn away from Martin closes a circle that began with Franza's vanishing from Jordan's world, as well as her simultaneous physical and psychological slipping away from Martin's grasp. Her disappearance is now complete as she evokes and inscribes a realm of fundamental unrepresentability that recedes from the viewer's frame of reference and hence in a sense makes the story (of Martin finding and trying to rescue Franza from Jordan, and then herself) obsolete. Yet while Franza turns her face elsewhere, to a place where she could no longer be reached, her gaze is far from embodying that "luminous serenity of the unrepresentable," which Julia Kristeva has found to be emblematic of the faces captured by the Italian Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini (243). The faces of Bellini's Madonnas are, as Kristeva writes, "turned away, intent on something else that draws their gaze to the side, up above, or nowhere in particular" (247). According to Kristeva, the expression of these virginal images suggests a blissful state of *jouissance*—a preverbal, presymbolic, preoedipal realm marked by the primary bond between mother and daughter (248). Franza, who likewise turns toward a beyond (though not a sacred one), fails to attain a place of *jouissance* but instead falls back into a more "typical" female role, when a second kiss from Martin sends her into a hysterical convulsion:

She cried, but it was something more than shared only the tears with crying, she trembled and her body did something with her, something he could not hold down with his arms, in a convulsion whose spasms got stronger and stronger, she trembled and tried to push him away and then grabbed hold of him again as he kept saying, Franza, Franza. (23)

Sie weinte nicht nur, es war noch etwas andres, das von dem Weinen nur die Tränen hatte, sie zitterte und ihr Körper tat etwas mit ihr, was er nicht niederhalten konnte mit den Armen, in einer Konvulsion, in immer stärkeren Zuckungen, sie schlotterte und

wollte ihn wegstoßen und krampfte sich dann wieder an ihn, und er sagte immerzu, aber Franza, Franza. (155)

Invoking a state of, indeed a lapse into, hysterical absence, Franza's turning away is nevertheless an act that resists the dominant conception of reality, even if it remains inarticulable within that order. In a sense, Franza's momentary "aversion" (Götz) represents an act that is more resolute and thoroughgoing than that of Bellini's Madonnas who have already shifted to a place beyond what Viviane Forrester aptly termed "a functional irreality (officially called reality)" (69). Franza remains at the threshold where the tension of her opposition to the dominant "reality" is retained in her turning, as well as in the echo of a single word—"nein"—prefigured and announced in the multiple "stops" of her transgressive telegram.

To conclude, let me suggest that the latter also foreshadow what Barthes, in his seminal essay "The Rustle of Language," would come to define as a kind of non-semantic language "in its utopic state" (1989b, 77). Describing patterns of repetition that reify the words on the paper and, to stay with Barthes's image, "rustle" its textual fabric in a way that is literally *audible*, Barthes envisions an alternative language that "would be enlarged," as Barthes writes, "I should even say *denatured*" to the degree that in it, the sheer materiality of linguistic substance would come to unsettle the proper functioning of its semantic apparatus (*ibid.*). As Martin contemplates the meaning of Franza's telegram, with its cryptic message virtually drowned out by the insistent and penetrating beat of its performative "stops," the narrator ponders the possibility that someone might come to lighten the semantic burden of speech and liberate fiction from the impingement of patriarchy: "Who then will say something and what be pieced together from words—everything that almost exists, and much else that does not" (9) [Wer also wird etwas sagen und was sich zusammensetzen lassen aus Worten—alles was es beinahe gibt, und vieles, was es nicht gibt" (133)]. The answer to this utopian question, she intimates, lies in a language that would resist both, the overbearing tumbling of "rubble words" and the common urge to

“travel through the tunnel” into complacence and unanimity. It might be hidden in the enigmatic, yet clearly audible sound of Franz’s telegram, defined with utmost economy as “the paper that turns over with a rustle” (*ibid.*) [“das Papier [das sich wenden lässt] mit einem Geräusch” (*ibid.*)]. Bachmann knew better than to reach for an authentic and universally available truth through representational language. She instead labored on a new form of writing that would have to start with a performance, a simple gesture, an act of turning (away) from the reader precisely to involve and interpellate her as a free, compassionate, and ethical subject. Unfortunately, her work on the *Franz* manuscript stalled indefinitely in the fall of 1966. As Bachmann explained in a letter to her editor, Otto Best: “I perceive of my manuscript as a helpless allusion to something that remains to be written” (my translation). [“Das Manuscript kommt mir wie eine hilflose Anspielung auf etwas vor, das erst geschrieben werden muss” (Bachmann, 1995, 397)]. Clearly, Bachmann underestimated the power of her burgeoning novel, which raises the question of female writing, and our responsibility toward the practice of reading, in a radically new way—performatively, that is, and experimentally. If we follow Franz’s movement as she withdraws, disappears, and finally ceases to function as a signifier, we, the readers, are called to return from beyond the gendered apparatus of language and literature, and reemerge with a new type of leverage. By adapting such a practice of active, un-gendered reading, we have a chance to come into a law of our own.

¹ Translations are modified where necessary to convey nuances present in the original German.

² On the narrator’s “affinity” with the figure of Franz. See Grimkowski (18–19).

³ In an earlier draft, Bachmann had experimented with the idea of using Malina as the narrator of the novel. It is significant that she abandoned this idea in future versions and also drew a clear distinction between Martin’s narrative voice and that of the neutral narrator. See on this Otto (85) and Grimkowski (14).

⁴ In her Frankfurt Poetic Lectures, Bachmann states that the “I” is alive whenever—and as long as—it speaks: “Es ist das Wunder des Ich, dass es, wo immer es spricht, lebt; es kann nicht sterben—ob es geschlagen ist oder im Zweifel, ohne Glaubwürdigkeit und verstümmelt—dieses Ich ohne Gewähr!” (Bachmann, 1982, 237).

⁵ Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the novel sets Martin up as the straw man representing male chauvinism and sexist hostility. As Sara Lennox observes, Martin is a “sympathetic listener and interlocutor” even if he “mostly fails” his sister (167). Martin never ceases to see himself as Franza’s caregiver, even as he becomes a pawn in her act of disappearance, a readerly witness whose role is to testify to how she eludes him. The novel’s narrative structure is truly anti-essentialist in the sense that it blurs the boundaries between feminine and masculine writing, character-object and narrator-subject, victims and perpetrators.

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