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Abstract

This essay analyzes how Ulla Hahn and Ursula Krechel in their recent poetry and essays have drawn a connection between feminism and their writing. The feminine/feminist outlook they advance is exemplary for their generation of women authors because they have sought to expand the poetic canon by interrogating assumptions made by modernism. A reappraisal of their poetry suggests that interpretations of their work must take account of the feminist poetics of these authors.

Keywords

Ulla Hahn, Ursula Krechel, poetry, essays, connection, feminism, writing, feminine, feminist, generation, women authors, poetic canon, expant, poetic, modernism, feminist poetic

Improved Versions: Feminist Poetics and Recent Work by Ulla Hahn and Ursula Krechel

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In Ulla Hahn's poem "Verbesserte Auflage" ("Improved Version") from *Herz über Kopf* (*Heart above Head*, 1981), Orpheus triumphantly ascends from the underworld while he begins to compose a verse extolling the neck, nose, ears, eyes, hair, and mouth of his wife. Just at that instant a female voice startles him and he drops the lyre. Eurydice, who has begun to sing, preempts his words term for term, except that she lauds Orpheus, rather than he her:

Hals Nase Ohren
die Augen die Haare den Mund
und so weiter wie
will sie ihn preisen allein . . .

Neck nose ears
the eyes the hair the mouth
and so on how
she wants to praise him alone . . . (56)¹

Here the poem seems to suggest that the woman poet deftly appropriates the role of the male versifier, and by re-presenting the traditional beloved-cum-muse figure from her own perspective, she effects a transfer of power.

Eurydice's theft of language, however, proves dubious, for the verse ends with the enigmatic comment, "Ob Orpheus ihr folgte / lassen die Quellen / im Truben" 'As to whether Orpheus followed her / the sources / are vague' (56). This wry epilogue reexamining events from a different perspective epitomizes the paradox central to Ulla Hahn's poetry. Yes, the woman author might choose to tread

in the footsteps of her male counterpart, like Hahn, who works in canonical, rhymed forms and crafted syntax. But if she does, she may simply mouth a bland catalogue of anatomical parts (or enervated traditions) and fall into obscurity when, as the text insinuates, the male bard does not follow her lead and history, his-story, obscures "her-story."

At first blush, Hahn's account of the woman poet (a lyrical subject) as the mimic of a classic Orpheus appears antithetical to the description given by her contemporary Ursula Krechel, who, characterizing the woman writer in biographical terms as fundamentally different from her male obverse, noted, "The woman who begins to write, the woman who defends herself against the pressure exercised on her, who presents herself as a writer, has traveled a different route than the man, who like her / before / beside her enters the literary scene."² This transgressive writer, unlike Hahn's assimilated poet, avoids empty formalism, yet she faces the risk that marginalized, private language, such as the aleatory sequences and colloquial diction Krechel herself plies, will lack broad resonance or even communicative efficacy.

The complementary poetics of Hahn and Krechel exemplified above mirror a divergence in outlook that emerged in the seventies and eighties when feminist thought branched in one direction that sought to lay claim to previously male prerogatives and in another that strove to distinguish the feminine as absolutely and biologically distinct (Serke 17). Their recent works, on the other hand, display a remarkable convergence in attitudes characteristic of the nineties, according to which an appeal for greater symmetry in female-male relations acknowledges gender differences. The prominent role that feminism occupies in their latest verse and essay collections, nonetheless, raises questions about why women poets might find it so essential to articulate their craft, even at a point when they have, or should have, become well established.

Strikingly, the portrayals Hahn and Krechel furnish of female authors share prime assumptions about what the creation of poetry means for women. Both Hahn and Krechel identify the struggle of women authors to gain recognition; both envision an unassailable connection between life and art (which they nonetheless weight somewhat differently); both presume the need to create a poetry that expresses sovereign, indeed universal, content. Moreover, in their mutual reliance on detail as a stylistic feature, Hahn and Krechel employ a literary device which, as Naomi Schor has trend-

chantly observed, belongs “in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women” (4). The fascination Hahn shows in her poetry with the pretty and the attraction the quotidian holds for Krechel consequently reflect their common interest in reshaping the lyric genre to accommodate the feminine.

Contemporary feminist interpretations of poetry have, in fact, proposed that the lyric genre uniquely invites readings that acknowledge issues of gender, since, as Ursula Heukenkamp asserts, it would make sense that if feminine subjectivity exists it should be most evident in the lyric genre.³ A single definition of this feminine perspective, however, has remained elusive, and appropriately so. While Anglo-American research has welcomed diverse feminist readings of poetry (cf. Miller; Keller and Miller; Moi, for example), writers and theorists in the German context have by virtue of their intellectual traditions sought to locate a feminine aesthetic either within texts or in a social-cultural context. Barbara Lersch, who chronicled the major discussions of this issue, cites the pioneering work of Silvia Bovenschen in proposing the existence of a feminine aesthetic, then details subsequent research by Renate Lachmann on metonymy, Elizabeth Lenk on mimesis, and Eva Meyer on semiotics (Cf. also Ecker). The latter three thinkers focus on an inherent capacity of language and form to carry feminist intent, developing what Lersch terms a discursive rather than empirical definition of the feminine element.⁴ Bovenschen, on the other hand, had asserted that the feminine aesthetic resides in a contextualizing process, that is in art’s capacity for shaping, appropriating, subverting, and otherwise re-forming a medium in its dual social and cultural potential.⁵

As practicing poets who also write about literature, Hahn and Krechel have themselves embraced broad conceptions of what poetry can accomplish. Obviously well “versed” in theory, Hahn and Krechel draw on European and American thinkers to identify the dilemmas facing women writers, and they approach the subject in a synoptic manner. Hahn cites Adrienne Rich, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Virginia Woolf, and Margaret Atwood, among others, while Krechel in her essays turns to a group of writers and theorists that includes Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Elisabeth Lenk, Eva Meyer, and Nancy Friday. Their interest in these authorities, cer-

tainly, deserves further study, but what they have gleaned as general principles from their readings presents itself concisely through six texts: in Ulla Hahn's afterword to an anthology of women's verse, *Stechäpfel (Thorn Apples)*, 1992), and her two recent volumes of poetry, *Unerhörte Nähe (Unheard of Proximity)*, 1988), as well as new poems from the final section of *Liebesgedichte (Love Poems)*, 1993), and then in Ursula Krechel's essay "Mit dem Körper des Vaters spielen" ("Playing with the Body of the Father," 1992), together with her poetry collections *Vom Feuer lernen (Learning from Fire)*, 1985) and *Technik des Erwachens (Technique of Awakening)*, 1992).

The fact that these two authors attempt to define the lyric genre with reference to feminist thought reinforces the emphatic connection between literature and politics—perhaps the most enduring dilemma in postwar German poetry.⁶ In addition, the feminine/feminist outlook that Hahn and Krechel advance in their essays and verse is exemplary for women authors of their generation because their work interrogates modernism's gender biases by recognizing perennially overlooked women authors and amending the expectations set by the established canon.⁷ When they recover traditional modes of expression or cultivate plasticity of idiom, Hahn and Krechel engage in a consistent effort to form a lyrical vocabulary that more accurately reflects the real concerns of women in an age when equality remains an unfinished project. Reappraisal of their work as openly feminist, then, counteracts gendered tendencies in previous criticism of Hahn's poetry as cloyingly nostalgic or epigonic (Braun 118-19; Wasung 134) and Krechel's verse as too private and occasionally forced (Braun; Mielke 6; Bormann 15).

Ulla Hahn, born in 1946, is (like Krechel whose year of birth was 1947) part of the sixties generation, yet her name became synonymous with "Neue Innerlichkeit" ("New Inwardness"), which was widely seen as a trend toward private literary content. "New Inwardness" when it first evolved was felt to reflect an attitude that mixed melancholic resignation and bitter disaffection with the social activism that had preoccupied authors around 1968. Hahn's poetry collections, *Herz über Kopf* and *Spielende* (the title translates diversely as *The Playing Woman*, *Those Playing*, and *Game End*, 1983), voiced a new, apparently apolitical credo and pursued the (at the time) unthinkable genre of love poetry. Not surprisingly, her work met with very polarized reactions from literary critics—**exuberant praise from supporters** of her artistry (in particular from

Marcel Reich-Ranicki) and vehement censure from detractors for what was perceived as the apolitical, repressive hazard posed by a return to rhymed verse and tradition (Braun 2-3). Her phenomenal popularity—*Herz über Kopf* had sold 30,000 copies by 1986, according to Braun—only heightened the dispute over Hahn, who subsequently published *Freudenfeuer* (*Bonfire*, 1985), *Unerhörte Nähe* (*Unheard of Proximity*, 1988), the novel *Ein Mann im Haus* (*A Man in the House*, 1991), and *Liebesgedichte* (*Love Poems*, 1993).

Hahn herself in a 1986 interview characterized the labeling of her work as purely private as a two-fold misunderstanding (Kuschel 20-21). First she noted that critics too quickly reduced poems to the images employed. Tellingly she added, “Things are always being divided between the private and public. That, I believe, is absolutely wrong and unproductive. I think that no such division exists, rather that these two poles are constantly connected with each other.”⁸ To conclude this line of thinking, Hahn further remarked that one of the greatest contributions of the women’s movement, in her opinion, was that it had made this connection obvious again.

This link between private experience and public concerns becomes pivotal in Hahn’s subsequent afterword to *Stechäpfel* (*Thorn Apples*, 1992), which provides a history of women’s writing, discusses the relationship between poetry and life, and describes characteristics she identifies as requisite to women’s poetry. The texts Hahn gathers together in the anthology are at once multicultural and historically diverse, consistent with the volume’s subtitle “Poems by Women from Three Thousand Years.” Moreover, Hahn begins her essay by portraying the marginal role of women writers, which she substantiates with a quotation from Virginia Woolf and remarks on the low statistical representation of women in published collections.⁹

While Hahn declares that she rejects an undifferentiated notion of women as a group, dismissing the rubric “Wir-Frauen” ‘we-women’ (368), she does clearly generalize her own understanding of writing and cultivates a sense of feminine solidarity. To Kuschel she had commented, “Literature was an alternative world that I needed again and again in order to move one step further in the real world.”¹⁰ Projecting this notion in *Stechäpfel*, she explains that women as a group write to search for identity, to locate their place in the world, rather than in a feminine utopia (369). A number of Hahn’s recent poems accordingly suggest, albeit with char-

acteristic irony, that women have no barriers among themselves, a concept widely recognized as the product of bold presumptions middle class feminists have made about the universal appeal of women's liberation (Fox-Genovese 11-32). In "Frauen" ("Women") from *Freudenfeuer*, for example, Hahn had already written "Frauen in mittleren Jahren / fühlen sich wieder verwandt / ihren Müttern . . ." 'Women at middle age / feel themselves related again / to their mothers . . .' (85). Likewise, "Moosröschen" ("Moss Rose"), the concluding poem in *Liebesgedichte*, sympathetically describes an elderly, overly frugal woman whose self-sacrificing demeanor results in her withering away after the death of her husband. Ultimately this figure is enshrined, "Die Kinder sargten sie in / Seide ein und Palisander / und warfen ihr Moosröschen hinterher" 'The children coffined her in / silk and rosewood / and threw moss roses after her' (120).

Still for Hahn, families and relationships, especially the sexual liaisons she often delineates, involve vexing tensions between the identity of ambitious women and the demands of the real world. Hahn struggles to resolve these stresses in her essay by insisting on the achievability of an equilibrium between the genders. Taking issue with Adrienne Rich (for viewing tradition as a masculinist system that unremittingly demands compliance) and Hélène Cixous (for making feminine writing the sole property of women), Hahn passionately argues in the afterword to *Stechäpfel* that one should not worry that those who have shaped art in the past (predominantly men) might impose their structures on women writers. Art, she contends, operates in an autonomous, universal space and "Women may forget their gender in this free space with impunity, but are not necessarily compelled to do so; they are able to accept it as self-understood or problematic, just like all other attributes."¹¹ She adds that "weibliche Aesthetik" or the 'feminine aesthetic' exists on the level of content, especially in the choice of perspective, which, as will subsequently be seen, proves basic to her own poetic craft (374). Later, Hahn details three developments in literature that she finds indicative of the changing role of women: an emancipated eroticism, a dissonant clash between old patterns of behavior and contemporary norms, and a cognizance by women of their own darker side (376-78).

Essential for the expression of these themes is perspective, a radical shift in viewpoint that illuminates the contrast between old and new outlooks. Perspective, for instance, shapes the concluding

paragraph to the afterword in *Stechäpfel*. Here Hahn, who had been raised a Catholic, idiosyncratically recasts the parable of the talents from *Matthew* 25:14-30. The biblical narrative Hahn selects tells how a master expelled a servant as worthless for not multiplying money left in his charge.¹² Her version renders this servant contrariwise a paradigm for the future because Hahn insists that differences between the sexes must eventually reach a point where women are quite simply accepted in all aspects of life and, like the servile man, will not need to assert themselves (388).

Yet while she admits that the contemporary world has not achieved this optimistically conceived equality, Hahn removes the “traditional” narrative from context by turning the servant female and labeling passivity a virtue:

Nicht wenige [Frauen] erinnern mitunter an den Mann aus dem Gleichnis Jesu, der sein Talent, das der Herr ihm anvertraut hat, vergrub, um es unversehrt zu halten, anstatt mit seinem Pfunde zu wuchern. Genau das aber müssen Frauen tun.

Not a few women are reminiscent of the man from the parable of Jesus who took his talent, that had been given him by the master, and buried it to keep it safe, rather than committing usury. But women must do precisely that. (388)

The reader must, then, wonder whether she has committed an interpretive slip, blundered into an indefensible misstatement, or created a consummate misreading of the canon.¹³ No textual clues show clearly whether Hahn has missed the point of the parable, retreated to the position that women should act like incompetent underlings, or with high irony sketched an “obedient” posture to be assiduously resisted. Thus Hahn suspends her rewritten parable in permanent interpretive dialogue with the reader.¹⁴ As in “Improved Version,” a sudden, almost imperceptible twist intervenes between the beginning and the anticipated ending.

Hahn’s critics, it should be noted, have underscored not her resistance to canon (as suggested by the interpretive option of misprision), but her glib appropriation of traditional forms and diction. This smooth veneer most certainly exists on the syntactic level here, if only the reader disregards perspective and irresolution as calculated techniques. Braun, for example, commented with respect to Hahn’s poetry that “No word dances out of line, disrupts the

reader's expectation, demands contradiction (117-18).¹⁵ Conversely, sympathetic readers have remarked on her frequent verbal gesture of "als ob," the phrase 'as if,' often introduced in combination with subjunctive mood (Pickerodt 169; Kuschel 13), or the importance of longing, "Sehnsucht," and the carefully delineated moment of happiness, "der punktuelle Glücksaugenblick," Hahn favors as a poetic subject (Kuschel 13). These techniques involve semantic manipulations that give interpretive context, and they are all methods of creating perspectival frames. Examination of Hahn's recent love poetry confirms the frequent use of perspective, sometimes in the form of asymmetrical proportion or radical framing, to depict contemporary gender relations.

Consistent with her description of the genre of love poetry in *Stechäpfel*, Hahn tests assumptions about emancipation and equality against the traditional roles that continue to overtake the individuals she describes. In "Alte Lieder" ("Old Songs"), a composition of nine lines from *Liebesgedichte*, for example, a couple resurrects a song about a maid returning from a well after she has promised herself to a beloved. While the poem commences with a plural imperative, "Komm wir singen das Lied . . ." 'Come, we'll sing the song . . .' the subsequent two stanzas counterpoint the male and female accounts of the events that follow. First a male "du" or 'you' rails on about the girl breaking her promise. Next a female "ich" 'I' complains that the lover has forgotten her. The text, nonetheless, does not evince nostalgia for the past, for the final two lines of this carefully-framed poem grant the woman the last word: "Tja die alten traurigen Lieder / und dass wir sie nur singen" 'Ah yes, the old sad songs / and the fact that we are still singing them' (116). This self-mocking descant marks the contradiction between espoused contemporary standards of equality and historical asymmetries in gender roles, particularly by setting the adjective "alt" 'old' before "traurig" 'sad.' The words *tja* and *nur*, then, complicate this primary meaning, for they hint that although this couple thinks they hold egalitarian values, the pair lacks a genuine capacity for affection and communication.

The selections in "Irrtum" ("Error") the first section of *Unerhörte Nähe* (*Unheard of Proximity*, 1988) similarly describe a relationship doomed by emotional and social asymmetries. The collection itself consists of five parts: "Irrtum" ("Error"), which chronicles a relationship; "So dass" ("So that"), whose poems meditate on the aging process; "Abgetippt" ("Typed out"), or observa-

tions on writing; “Zum Sonntag” (“On the Subject of Sunday”), a series of spiritual reflections; and “Für den, der fragt,” (“For him who asks”), a prose commentary on questions a reader might pose a poet. The volume thus proceeds according to a structure of alternation in which series of intimate verse are followed and framed by analytical passages.

The “error” perpetrated in the first sequence of the collection develops from skewed power relations. The second poem in the cycle, “Wie es anfängt” (“How it begins”), for example, describes a telephone conversation:

Ich nehme bei jedem Klingeln den Hörer ab
 Wenn er sich meldet sag ich Hallo und Gehts gut
 Frage ihn ob er gerne Kartoffeln isst
 und wie er's hält mit der Emanzipation.

I pick up the receiver whenever the phone rings
 When he says who he is I say hello and how are you
 Ask him whether he likes to eat potatoes
 and what he thinks of emancipation. (8)

In the ensuing conversation, the two quickly fall into stereotypic gender roles. The woman associates herself with intimate concern over another's welfare, domestic pleasantries, and nature (“Ich beschimpfe das Wetter” ‘I complain about the weather’). She apparently presumes that gender equity will be compatible with her plans. The man casts himself as the adventurer, proffers advice, and ambiguously validates the woman's very existence with his concluding remark “schön Sie zu hören” ‘nice to hear your voice,’ meanwhile using the formal form of address to keep them on distanced terms. Later, in another poem from the cycle, the woman resorts to self-censorship to preserve the relationship: “Er rief an. Ich hatte ihm fast / die verbotenen Drei Wörter gesagt.” ‘He called. I almost said / the forbidden three words to him’ (15). Words such as “I love you” would establish a connection of language, something both parties avoid.

In this uncertain world, the final line of “Wie es anfängt” offers precarious closure: “Ich putze den Telefonapparat er funkelt durch Tag und Nacht” ‘I clean the telephone it [sic he] sparkles through day and night’ (8). The glint of the phone creates an eerie connection between the woman's sense of self-esteem and the re-

garding eye of the man, for the verb “funkeln” evokes sparkling wit, romantically twinkling stars, and flashing eyes. While the pronoun “I” remains securely attached to the woman, *er*, initially he or the man, now becomes transferred to the nearest grammatical antecedent, the telephone “Apparat.” The man himself becomes a machine—impersonal, cold, and predictable.

Hahn’s calculated manipulation of pronouns in this poem, thus, objectifies the man from the point of view of the woman. This crucial shift in narrative stance—a form of perspective—corresponds closely to a progression described in an earlier text, “Poetischer Vorgang” (“Poetic Process”) from *Freudenfeuer*. “Poetischer Vorgang” describes the metamorphosis of a *du* (‘you’) into an *er* (‘he’) and calls this change a form of betrayal through writing, because substituting *du* for *er* in turn obscures the “you”:

Als ich du sagte
weil er schlechter klang
machte ich dich unsichtbar

When I said you
because he sounded worse
I made you invisible (90)

In the end, the obviously insensitive “he”-“you” fails to notice what has occurred when the speaker writes *der* (a demonstrative pronoun) to denote him, an act which the text concedes renders the person described even more distant.

When Hahn exposes gender asymmetries by shifting pronouns or giving a female protagonist the last word, as she does in “Wie es anfängt” and “Poetischer Vorgang,” she frames the text. This practice draws attention to the constructed nature of her poetry and a preoccupation with how uncontextualized language can lead to skewed proportions or misrepresentations that unmask real world dissonances. The poem “Gibt es eine weibliche Ästhetik” (“Is there a feminine aesthetic”) from her first volume of poetry, *Herz über Kopf* (1981) offers an early example of these misproportions. The poem’s first ten lines picture a man in middle age decline with drooping eyelids, fatty chin, and full hair. Nonetheless, the final two lines of the text conclude he is the most beautiful of men. The feminine perspective—the aesthetic context—exists, but it is disproportionate in relation to the bulk of reality and text.

In her recent collection of poetry, *Liebesgedichte*, Hahn again plays with linguistic convention in “Stillständiges Sonett,” whose title, a neologism, echoes the words “Stillstand” ‘standstill’ or ‘deadlock,’ “ständig” ‘continuous,’ and “stillstehend” ‘motionless,’ ‘stationary,’ or ‘stagnant.’ The poem commences with an overtly decorous profession of love, but the sceptical protagonist deconstructs the synecdoche: “Mein Herz ist bei dir, sagst du. Frag ich: Wo / sind Hand und Fuss?” ‘My heart is with you, you say. I ask: Where / are your hand and foot?’ (109). The sonnet’s second quatrain and first tercet detail the inability of the lovers to connect on physical and emotional levels; the concluding tercet describes a groping of their separate hearts that ends in accidental unity. This unintended reconciliation Hahn solidifies with characteristic poetic wit: “Stolpert meins über deins stolpern stehen still beide” ‘If mine stumbles over yours both stumble stand still’ (109). This wary, somewhat haphazard rapprochement between the sexes derives from a volatile mixture of the unabashedly erotic and the socially dissonant, which the author named as characteristic of women’s poetry in *Stechäpfel*. The third element identified in that essay, the incorporation of a darker psychological aspect, becomes more evident in her novel *Ein Mann im Haus*, which critiques a small town’s facade of sexual propriety, than in her poems.

Throughout her introduction to *Stechäpfel*, Hahn invokes a conception of reality that opens art to reality. Her recent verse, such as “Abgetippt” (Typed Out), the third section of poems from *Unerhörte Nähe*, expresses this connection in terms of how an author processes experiences: “Ich schreib dich ein und aus und um / bis du zerschrieben bist” ‘I write you in and out and around / until you have been written to pieces’ the title poem pronounces (57). A later poem preserves, however, a special status for art. “Eine Rose ist eine Rose” (“A Rose is a Rose”) appropriates Gertrude Stein’s essentialist statement, then comments “Nur ein Kunstwerk / ist schön” ‘Only a work of art / is beautiful’ (60). A final poem, “Meine Damen und Herren” (“Ladies and Gentlemen”), commences with a rhetorical signal of gender distinctions, yet concludes with an affirmation of the universal qualities of art and an allusion to Rilke’s famous sonnet “Archaischer Torso Apollos” (“Archaic Torso of Apollo”), a text Hahn also mentions in the penultimate prose piece in *Unerhörte Nähe*. The anaphoric construction “Das Gedicht meine Dame [mein Herr] . . .” ‘The poem my lady [my gentleman]’ that initiates the first three stanzas unmistakably calls to mind Paul

Celan's famous Büchner Prize acceptance speech, "Der Meridian" ("The Meridian"), which eloquently called for a universal poetry that could remain connected to events of its times.¹⁶

Hahn achieves her own fusion of the universal with the specific by beginning with amusing, seemingly trivial details that occupy the vast majority of lines in the text, then concluding with a succinct, internally rhymed, four-line stanza that clinches her point. The poem begins by announcing that the lyric genre is not utilitarian:¹⁷

Das Gedicht meine Dame ist kein Kölnisch Wasser
für kalte Kompressen auf Herze
ist kein Deo gegen den Angstschweißgeruch

The poem my lady is not eau de cologne
for cold compresses to the heart
is no deodorant for the sweaty smell of angst. (64)

Poems, as it turns out, are also no good for rejuvenating hair color, or building weapons. In fact, poetry's use to men (the term rendered in its gender specific sense, rather than as humanity in general) seems strictly limited, since the second stanza quips that the poem has nothing to do with the gentleman in question.¹⁸ Once these specifics have been passed, however, the text admonishes all its readers with Rilkean gravity to allow themselves to be transformed by art, "lassen Sie sich doch ändern . . ." (64).

Hahn's verse, much of which initially unfolds in the intimate domain of love poetry, thus expresses a feminine aesthetic that becomes manifest in her calculated appropriation of the canon. Perspective, copious editing, rhetorical devices, and unclassical proportions mold a structure of dissonances over which her polished diction spreads. As a result, her approach to poetry is the stylistic antithesis to work by Ursula Krechel, who, in a poem dedicated to Ingeborg Bachmann, "Nachlaß" ("Literary Bequest"), from *Vom Feuer lernen*, wrote "Warum denkst du immer noch in Säulen / und ich in Netzen?" "Why do you still always think in columns / and I in nets?" Classical forms—the columns—remain alien to Krechel, and her art becomes interwoven in a social, political, and personal web.

The author of plays, essays, verse, and fiction, Ursula Krechel established herself as a feminist poet with her first collection of

verse, *Nach Mainz* (*On to Mainz*, 1977), which through its reliance on quotidian details and unaffected conversational tone situated her style within “New Subjectivity” (Mielke 5). Subsequent volumes of lyric—*Verwundbar wie in den besten Zeiten* (*Vulnerable as in the Best of Times*, 1979), *Rohschnitt* (*Raw Cut*, 1983), *Vom Feuer lernen* (*Learning from Fire*, 1985), *Kakaoblau* (*Cocoa Blue*, 1989), and *Technik des Erwachens* (*Technique of Awakening*, 1992)—attest to Krechel’s command of narrative poetry, verse sequences, montage, and heteroglossia. She has won acknowledgment as one of the few German authors to venture into the long poem form (Hartung 74-77) and as a master of minute observations (Stadelmaier), although her critics remark on a lack of direction and a tendency for the language of her poetry to become forced or uncommunicative (Mielke 6; Braun). The central text in her recent collection of essays, *Mit dem Körper des Vaters spielen* (*Playing with the Body of the Father*, 1992) considers how women writers differ from their male counterparts.

The starting point for the essay is a quotation from Roland Barthes that hinges upon the term “mother tongue” and describes the author as “playing with the body of the mother” (63). Krechel adumbrates connections between body and text, citing among other authors Wolfgang Koeppen, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Elias Canetti as representative of her thesis that writers develop through physical and psychological interaction with a maternal figure. Along the way, Krechel reiterates her own conviction that the ingenious writer saves up biographical details for later use (69-70), and she emphasizes the extent to which mother-child bonds may determine the mature sense of self. Midway through the essay, then, Krechel asserts that the woman author must struggle against all that she has been taught.

Women writers, according to Krechel, realize that if they want to be creative they must not be like their mothers (91). This means that they must resist “adaptation, orientation toward other people nearby, excelling in the small, taking care of others instead of standing up for oneself” (92).¹⁹ Affirming Carol Gilligan’s account of female moral development in relationship with others, she vigorously dispenses with the Freudian view of the individual as an isolated entity. Krechel comments, “Unerbittlich, unpersönlich, unabhängig von seinen emotionalen Ursprüngen—so entsteht keine Literatur” ‘Inexorable, impersonal, independent from its emotional origins—no literature develops in this way’ (92). For a brief moment, she seems poised on the verge of rejecting the notion of au-

tonomous art that Hahn embraces. But Krechel continues that the woman author must identify with a father figure in order to achieve a distance from the strictly personal that makes writing possible.

The father who is often absent (unlike the always present mother), Krechel argues, provides the intellectual ideal toward which the future woman author strives—at least as based on her models of Unica Zürn and Bettina Brentano. Krechel does not speculate whether social change might alter this father-daughter equation in the future. Writing, at least today, represents for her a form of freedom—an escape from social constraints—a description comparable in its effects to Hahn’s remark that writing constitutes an alternative to reality (102). Yet Krechel also acknowledges that gender antagonisms have shaped Judeo-Christian culture by privileging monolithic (“phallic”) Logos over feminine multiplicity (105). This circumstance creates a dilemma for the woman writer because to resist the surrounding culture she employs masks (mimicry, camouflage, and satire) as devices for self-preservation. In a description that parallels Hahn’s parable of the hidden talent, now set in the present, Krechel indicates that women authors hide their abilities: “The future woman writer disavows herself, camouflages her intention, in order to protect herself from injury” (103-04).²⁰

Krechel’s essay now concludes that poetry should display four qualities: a preference for multiplicity, an intellectual engagement with “patriarchal” culture, a belief that writing makes freedom possible, and some evidence of how the woman author alternately transgresses against social norms or conceals her talents. Indeed, both *Technik des Erwachens* and *Vom Feuer lernen* provide ample evidence of these traits, above all of the way in which Krechel’s poetry reflects complex, non-linear, “feminine” thinking—a concept variously articulated in terms of nets, webs, and totalities, which correspond to Gilligan’s research on female psychological development. In an essay from her collection *Lesarten (Ways of Reading)*, 1991), Krechel had commented, “Many poets—Gottfried Benn for example—understand their poems as singular, worthy creations left behind in a stroke of luck, as texts relieved of any context, sufficient in and of themselves. Nelly Sachs [by contrast] works on a totality” (144).²¹ Likewise, her own texts do not present themselves as virtuosic compositions.

In Krechel’s most recent collection of verse *Technik des Erwachens*, for example, “Die jungfräuliche Zeugung von Zitaten” (“The virginal procreation of quotations”), depicts a poet who tries

to translate from the Icelandic only to discover that there are at least four possible ways to formulate the truth she wishes to express. After an initial attempt to uncover a handy, usable phrase, she finds herself stymied (89). Four procurers then offer her “well-running quotations,” which, nonetheless, the poet perceives will split reality: “vier Zuhälter für eine Wahrheit / die sich dann gevierteilt niederlegt” ‘four procurers for one truth / which then lays itself down divided into fours’ (90). The poet had in mind a single translation—an absolute correspondence—but words, slippery and multifarious as they are, will not comply with this desire. Language itself yields to polyvalence and withdraws from reach:

Angst vor den Dilettanten der Bewegung
den zagenden Verben, die gehen dahin
biegen

brannte

gebrochen

er/sie/es zog das blutge Fell . . .

Fear of the dilettantes of movement
toward the wavering verbs, they move off
bend

burned

broken

he/she/it tugged the bloody pelt . . . (90)

The stepped-down lines constitute a formal symptom of fragmentation; the pronoun series makes its true antecedents indeterminable; the verb tenses shift. Allusions to a collapsed patriarchy—a question “Und wo ist der Herr?” ‘And where is the master?’, Brünnhilde, and fallen Nordic heroes—punctuate the author’s growing awareness of how indeterminacy overtakes language. At the end the poem leaves the reader with images of Icelandic moss covering over the story or history (depending on the translation of the word *Geschichte*). Krechel’s montage of details, which concludes with the hermetic image of a woman washing her socks, further underscores the impossibility of obtaining a single, articulated meaning.

The conviction that writing involves a selection among multiple, never exclusive, possibilities likewise motivates Krechel’s recourse to poetic tradition, canon, and “patriarchal” models. Re-

viewing Peter Rühmkorf's rhymed verse, for instance, she observes in *Lesarten* that "Dealing with traditional forms only becomes productive when it is not based on want—of willfulness, of fantasy, and the rage to destroy forms—but rather on a selection from an abundance of possibilities" (170).²² And rhyme Krechel does in *Vom Feuer lernen* with a three stanza poem in quatrains, "Was Jeder Weiss" ("What Everyone Knows"), which declares:

wer schreibt, schreibt: wie es einmal war.
Die Milch vereist, die blaue Welt vergreist
was rund und bunt war—eine Wüstenei. Schon
leiden wirs. Die Klassiker sind abgereist.

who writes, just writes: that once upon a time.
The milk is ice, the blue earth nearly dead
the round and colored—desert waste. Already
we grieve. The Classic authors fled. (23)

While the text announces the ostensible absence of classical role models (who are nonetheless present because Krechel mentions them), it inclusively affirms that all writers toil with the intention of simply creating. This simultaneous absence and presence of tradition shapes both *Vom Feuer lernen* and *Technik des Erwachens* since in the two collections Krechel invokes her own canon by dividing the poems into sections introduced with quotations from various poets relevant to her endeavor. This design fosters a dialogue of multiple voices and meanings. Krechel's point is not that poetry today forgets older texts, but rather that when a text evokes them, it creates revised meanings for a contemporary world whose problems, like the environment in "Was jeder weiss," may not have existed at an earlier time.

This dual absence and presence of the literary past parallels the relationship between women authors and father figures described in "Mit dem Körper des Vaters spielen." Krechel explores this relationship biographically in another poem from *Vom Feuer lernen*, "Vater mein Zwilling" 'Father my Twin,' which struggles to retrieve the image of an absent father figure:

Nach einem zerstörten Jahr
endlich entdeckte ich den Vater
. . . weit von der knöchigen Brust
der Mutter entfernt: Vater mein Zwilling.

After a destroyed year
finally I discovered the father
. . . far from the bony breast
of the mother removed: father my twin. (62)

The appearance of the father and the protagonist's childhood reaction to him occupy the remainder of the text. The final line of the poem, however, concludes that the father and child really did not know each other. The patriarch, thus, remains inaccessible, even when he is consciously invoked.

Beyond the unsuccessful attempt to bridge an attenuated father-child bond, and the transposition of this relational structure to the connection between classical and contemporary literature, many of Krechel's poems illustrate her explanation of women's writing as a form of transgression. In "Über das Kryptische" ("On the Cryptic"), a prose poem from *Technik des Erwachens*, a pedestrian zone full of apparently random passersby becomes an occasion for writing a text about "not" writing poetry. "Daß Fußgängerzonen Gedichte verunstalten, darauf beharrt das ungeschriebene Gedicht" 'That pedestrian zones misform poems, on that the unwritten poem insists,' Krechel commences. The author writes about unacceptable subjects (in this instance the common rabble, shopping, and mundane cares) and she pens an unwritten poem. But women poets not only transgress against the norms, they also occupy isolated positions.

"Weisheit" ("Wisdom"), a later piece in this same collection, vehemently protests the marginalization of women. Krechel comments in the third line of this poem's single rhymed quatrain, "im Abseits wird die Frau nicht frau" 'in the margin the woman does not become womaner' (67). In "Nachlaß," again, the protagonist rebelliously claims, "Ich glaub nicht an die Eingeweide von Lehrerinnen / gegürtet mit Richtlinien und Erlassen" 'I do not believe in the entrails of women teachers / belted with principles and ordinances' (39). Certain that this rejection of stricture will succeed, the speaker concludes with an admonition to Ingeborg Bachmann, the author addressed by the text: "Geh du und bleib. / Und brich die Zeile—" 'Go you and stay. / And break the line—' (39). Krechel thus issues an invitation to resist all constraints on the artistic temperament.

Ultimately, of course, the goal of Krechel's poetry becomes freedom irrespective of gender, as exemplified in "Textverderbnis" ("Textual Corruption"), a cycle of seven connected poems from

Technik des Erwachens dedicated to the Chinese dissidents who died in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The sequence examines a range of liberties—freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and individual freedom. The cycle’s opening poem recounts the story of Cain slaying Abel; subsequent sections interpolate quotations from Hannah Arendt, Augustine, Georg Büchner, and Ivan Nagel. In the sixth section, following a long introductory stanza with allusions to Germany’s own history under Hitler, Krechel queries, “Wie kommt Geschichte / zu ihrer Vergangenheit?” ‘How does history / arrive at its past?’ The question necessarily goes unanswered, for no answer exists in absolute terms. Instead, Krechel launches the final, briefer stanza with the following assertion:

Erfindung, Montage sind frei
die Menschheit unfrei, wir Wanderarbeiter
ziehen . . . sehr nah dem Scheitern
sehr nah uns selbst und selbsternannt.

Invention, montage are free
humanity not free, we itinerant workers
move . . . very near to failure
very near to ourselves and self-designated. (53)

The identities of writer and worker mesh, because Krechel selects the pronoun *wir*, and has prefaced *Technik des Erwachens* with a quotation from Francis Ponge that reads, “The poet is a former thinker who has become a poet” (7). The final poem in the “Textverderbnis” sequence delivers the judgment on history into the hands of those who write it, with the skeptical intimation that even this might be controlled: “Historiker setzen den Krieg fort / sie haben den Krieg gewonnen (aber welchen)” ‘Historians continue the war / they have won the war (but which one)’ (54).

Detached from the moment, which possesses a kind of innate authenticity of detail, language (history) becomes mutable. Krechel accordingly shows a greater reluctance than Hahn to make use of tradition for its own sake, since she displays stronger interest in relying on phenomena from the world around her to legitimate her poetry. As she suggests in “Erster Februar” (“February First”) from *Vom Feuer lernen*, particular impressions become eternal in their own way. The protagonist of “Erster Februar” recalls disparate details from a winter afternoon—the glint of street car rails, blue tiles

in a house under construction, and rubble. In a parallel act of collection, she rummages through literature: “ich fotokopierte fremde Gedichte / jetzt sind sie mein bewegliches Eigentum” ‘I photocopied alien poems / now they are my portable property’ (57). Reversing Hölderlin’s assertion that the poets establish what remains, Krechel completes her poem with a question, asking about the vivid impressions with which the day has left her, “Genügt, was nicht genügt, was bleibt?” ‘Is it enough, what isn’t enough, what remains?’

After the Second World War, German poetry struggled to find a new language of expression that would be “enough”—sufficient to express the horrors of the past, adequate to give voice to younger generations of poets. From tentative new beginnings in the early fifties, German poetry measured itself against the standard of international modernism. The dominance of modernist values over the lyric genre was challenged by the political poetry that developed in the mid-sixties. Yet although this politicization of literature markedly changed German verse, many assumptions from the earlier phase persisted: that formally crafted verse is connected to reactionary politics, that poetry requires an explicit, ideological stance because images constitute poor carriers of meaning, that personal or private elements signal a refusal to address social questions, and, finally, that a lack of closure yields a failed text. These entrenched attitudes led to a belated articulation of feminine poetics because they marked stridency as the primary means to express political discontent.

What is noteworthy about these assumptions is not that they are inapplicable—for in some cases the objections ring true—rather that when they are imposed on works by female poets, they exclude many of the most productive categories of women’s poetry. Given the large numbers of accomplished contemporary women authors writing in German today, one might anticipate fundamental change in accounts of the lyric genre. Indeed, what Hahn and Krechel offer in their recent essays and poetry is not muted, apolitical revisionism, but the prospect that women authors are insistently reshaping literature on their own terms. Granted, sufficiency remains a major issue when considering the poetics of Hahn and Krechel since both have been criticized for writing in too private a manner. On the other hand, the two authors establish a relation to readers that differs from the esotericism familiar to the literary canon, for their works are highly accessible rather than obscurely erudite.²³ In addition, Hahn and Krechel explore the full range of their craft, the

former by returning to traditional forms abandoned by mainstream German poetry after the late fifties, and the latter by insistently avoiding closure and relying on tangible detail to carry her meaning.

Judging from their recent essays and poetry collections, Hahn and Krechel would concur with Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who, summarizing research by Nancy Vickers, concluded: "To talk about lyric, one must say something about beauty, something about love and sex, something about Woman and Man and their positionings, something about active agency versus malleability. . . . The foundational cluster [in lyric] concerns voice (and silencing), power (appropriation and transcendence), nature (as opposed to formation and culture), gaze (framing, specularity, fragmentation), and the sources of poetic matter—narratives of romance, of the sublime, scenes of inspiration, the muse as conduit" (71). To read women's poetry in this way acknowledges the subtle interplay between the formal aspects of a text and its larger context, a connection upon which Hahn and Krechel alike insist. Such a reading, finally, presupposes an openness to how gendered poetics shape the lyric genre and suggests that women poets must, indeed, continually reiterate their poetics because they view the lyric genre as always in the process of creating relationships with its audience and thereby changing society.

Notes

1. The translations of "Verbesserte Auflage" and Ursula Krechel's "Erster Februar" are by me and Ingo Seidler; all other translations are mine.

2. "Die Frau, die zu schreiben beginnt, die Frau, die sich gegen den auf sie ausgeübten Druck wehrt, die Frau, die sich als Schriftstellerin öffentlich macht, hat einen anderen Weg zurückgelegt als der Mann, der gleich ihr / vor / neben ihr die literarische Szene betritt" (Krechel, Körper 92).

3. The passage reads: 'If there were a feminine subjectivity that was competing with that of a masculine subjectivity, it would have to express itself most clearly in the lyric.' "Gäbe es eine weibliche, mit der männlichen konkurrierende Subjektivität, so müßte sich diese in der Lyrik am deutlichsten ausprägen" (354).

4. "Dies sind etwa: die Interpretation von 'Weiblichkeit' als diskursivem, statt als empirischem Begriff." (501).

5. “Weibliche Kunstproduktion stellt sich, wie ich glaube, in einem komplizierten Prozess von Neu- oder Zurückeroberung, Aneignung und Aufarbeitung, sowie Vergessen und Subversion dar. In den Arbeiten der Künstlerinnen, die einen Bezug zur Frauenbewegung haben, lassen sich Kunsttraditionen ebenso nachweisen wie der Bruch mit ihnen.” ‘Feminine production of art reveals itself, I believe, in a reworking, as well as forgetting and subversion. In the work of artists who have a connection to the women’s movement, artistic traditions can be identified as well as the break with them’ (73). Bovenschen, it should be noted, refers extensively to the American art historian Lucy Lippard, whose work clearly informs the conception of a feminine aesthetic Bovenschen develops.

6. Cf. Hermann Korte’s observation that postwar German lyric has framed its controversies around questions of the poem’s modernity, understanding of reality, and legitimacy (157).

7. The term canon refers here to works of literature generally incorporated into histories or anthologies and the shared intellectual assumptions upon which these selections are predicated. With respect to German poetry after 1945, Hugo Friedrich with *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* and Gottfried Benn through *Probleme der Lyrik* became particularly respected arbitrators of taste whose influence extended well beyond the early postwar years. While younger authors, such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger with his essay “In Search of the Lost Language” and the anthology *Museum der modernen Poesie* (cf. Schultz), modified the criteria set forth by Friedrich and Benn, the notion of a separate feminine aesthetic did not emerge until the seventies (cf. Demetz 72-79). Canon, to return to the larger topic, presents itself as representing universally shared standards of connoisseurship, but as recent feminist scholarship has demonstrated, cultural and gender biases often tinge this ostensible neutrality; research by Minnich and Russ informs my analysis of Hahn’s and Krechel’s texts in this respect.

8. “Es wird immer getrennt zwischen Privatem und Politischem. Das halte ich für absolut falsch und unfruchtbar. Ich denke, daß es eine solche Trennung überhaupt nicht gibt, sondern daß sich diese beiden Pole pausenlos aufeinander beziehen” (Kuschel 20-21).

9. One of Hahn’s figures states that 15 percent of Japanese free verse is published by women; though the number may appear shockingly small, Rosenkranz estimates the inclusion of women authors in German anthologies at 5-10 percent (133).

10. “Literatur war eine Gegenwelt, die ich brauchte, um immer wieder in der wirklichen Welt einen Schritt weitergehen zu können” (18).

11. “Frauen dürfen ihr Geschlecht in diesem Freiraum ungestraft vergessen, müssen es aber nicht; können es vielmehr so selbstverständlich oder problematisch nehmen wie alle anderen Zuschreibungen auch” (374).

12. Hahn's choice of text is doubly unconventional, for the story in addition follows a complementary parable about wise and foolish maidens that admonishes preparedness. She, then, appears to avoid the more likely female examples at hand.

13. Harold Bloom's definition of misprision would fit this latter possibility: "Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (30).

14. With respect to Hahn's poetry, Rohlf's similarly notes Hahn's interest in prompting the reader to fill in missing details (120).

15. "Kein Wort tanzt aus der Reihe, stört die Leser-Erwartung, fordert zum Widerspruch heraus."

16. Celan repeats the phrase "meine Damen und Herren" 'ladies and gentlemen' intermittently throughout the speech. Toward the conclusion he observes that a poem "... bleibt seiner Daten eingedenk" '... remains mindful of its times' (142).

17. The reference to "Gebrauchsllyrik" or 'utilitarian poetry' (derived from Brecht) reminds readers of poetry from the late sixties, especially the work of R. D. Brinkmann.

18. The German reads, "Das Gedicht mein Herr hat nichts mit Ihnen/zu schaffen."

19. "Anpassung, Ausrichtung auf andere, nahe Menschen, groß im kleinen sein, Fürsorge statt für sich stehen."

20. "Die zukünftige Schriftstellerin verleugnet sich, camouffiert ihre Intention, um sie vor Verletzungen zu schützen."

21. "Viele Lyriker—Gottfried Benn zum Beispiel—verstehen ihre Gedichte als einzelne, im Glücksfall 'hinterlassungsfähige Gebilde', als Texte, die von jedem Kontext abgelöst, sich selbst genug sind. Nelly Sachs arbeitet an einem Ganzen."

22. "Der Umgang mit tradierten Formen wird nur produktiv, wenn ihm nicht Mangel—an Eigensinn, an Phantasie und Wut, Formen zu zertrümmern—zugrunde liegt, sondern eine Wahl aus einer Fülle von Möglichkeiten."

23. Bjorklund, noting this quality in Krechel's collection *Rohschnitt*, described the poems as simultaneously topical, trendy, and intellectual (261).

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