CHAPTER 7

The (M)other's Voice: Representations of Motherhood in Contemporary Swiss Writing by Women

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Introduction

The late 1990s saw the emergence of a new phenomenon in German-language literature by women. Where before, translations of English, American and French novels had traditionally topped the bestseller lists in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, a new generation of writers began to make their voices heard around this time, with novels and short stories that achieved the elusive combination of both critical and commercial

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success. Writing in 1999, the literary critic Volker Hage drew attention to this exciting new wave of writing, enthusiastically declaring: "German literature is back in conversation and back in bookstores."[1] Interestingly, Hage asserted that this trend was led by young female writers, even going so far as to call it a literary "Fräuleinwunder"—a miracle of young ladies (Hage 1999: 245). The idea that new writing by women such as Judith Hermann, Karen Duve and Zoë Jenny was wowing readers and critics alike was not just remarkable; it was apparently downright miraculous.

Despite the condescending overtones of Hage's celebration of this new generation of authors—made all the more obvious by his use of the outdated word "Fräulein," the diminutive form of the German word "Frau," to describe these writers and their wondrous achievements—he was not the only critic to draw attention to this new development in German-language literature by women. A year earlier, Swiss literary critic Beatrice von Matt had highlighted the emergence of a new wave of female writers in German-speaking Switzerland, noting with approval, "A generation of daughters, born in the 1960s, is arriving, insolent, often witty, and self-absorbed in a rather more laid-back manner than their mothers" (Von Matt 1998a: 59). Like Hage, Von Matt noted the literary sensation that was Zoë Jenny (*1974 in Basel), and she seems to have been even more taken by Ruth Schweikert (*1965 in Lörrach). Describing Schweikert's reading of her short story "Christmas" from her collection *Erdnüsse. Totschlagen* (1994) at the annual literary festival in Solothurn—the high point of the Swiss literary calendar—she makes it clear that this was an electrifying debut. It is evident from Von Matt's remarks that she views this era as an exciting time for Swiss literature by women.[2]

Despite the interest in this wave of writing by young women sparked by Hage's and von Matt's comments (see, for example, Strigl 2001; Müller 2004; Caemmerer et al. 2005; Kocher 2005), questions remain about the extent to which their texts represent a new or innovative approach to women's writing. Does this generation of German-language writers present novel perspectives on the topics that have always preoccupied literary women? Do they offer answers to the questions raised by their literary foremothers? This chapter puts this supposedly new style of writing to the test by comparing two of the most prominent novels by Swiss women of

[1] "Die deutsche Literatur ist wieder im Gespräch und im Geschäft" (Hage 1999: 244).

[2] "Schaut man auf die neunziger Jahre, so fallen neue Schreibweisen auf" (Von Matt 1998b: 26).

this era—Zoë Jenny's *Das Blütenstaubzimmer* [1997, translated as *The Pollen Room*, 1998] and Ruth Schweikert's *Augen zu* [1998, untranslated]. It does so by focusing on their presentation of the mother-daughter relationship, a motif that has always played a central role in women's fiction, particularly when it has an autobiographical basis (Klages 1995, 14). It is noteworthy that both texts focus strongly on the relationship between mother and daughter and on the impact that this bond can have on the identity of both.

Taking inspiration from Marianne Hirsch's groundbreaking study *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, published less than a decade before these two novels appeared, this chapter considers the extent to which Jenny and Schweikert break with the traditional depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in literary texts. Hirsch looks back on the portrayal of mothers and daughters in literature by women from the nineteenth century right through the twentieth century. She observes that in nineteenth-century novels, such as those by Jane Austen, Mary Shelley and the Brontës, "mothers tend to be absent, silent, or devalued" (Hirsch 1989, 14). By contrast, many twentieth-century narratives by feminists such as Marguerite Duras and Margaret Atwood feature mothers prominently, but Hirsch points out that these are presented almost exclusively from the point of view of the daughter. This is, she suggests, highly problematic: "To speak for the mother […] is at once to give voice to her discourse *and* to silence and marginalize her" (Hirsch 1989, 16). Literary texts that seek to represent women's experience of the world must, according to Hirsch, give appropriate space to maternal experience and maternal subjectivities, and it is vital that mothers have a voice in their own narratives. Hirsch thus envisions women's writing as "a feminist family romance of mothers *and* daughters, both subjects, speaking to each other and living in familial and communal contexts which enable the subjectivity of each member" (Hirsch 1989, 163, italics in original). It is in contemporary narratives by Black American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker that Hirsch sees a way forward for women's writing. The blending of the voices of mothers and daughters that she witnesses in their work represents for Hirsch a future for women's writing: "The story of female development, both in fiction and theory, needs to be written in the voice of mothers as well as in that of daughters. […] Only in combining both voices, in finding a double voice that would yield a multiple female consciousness, can we begin to envision ways to 'live afresh'" (Hirsch 1989, 161).

Zoë Jenny, The Pollen Room

The Swiss writer Zoë Jenny's debut novel, *The Pollen Room*, was published in 1997 to great critical acclaim.[3] In its first year of publication, it sold over 100,000 copies in Germany and Switzerland, and it was subsequently translated into twenty-four languages. The novel won a number of prestigious literary prizes, including the 3SAT Scholarship at the Ingeborg Bachmann contest in Klagenfurt, the Literary Prize of the Jürgen Ponto Foundation, and the Aspekte Literary Prize, and critics in Switzerland and abroad hailed its author as the "voice of a whole generation" (Reinacher 1997, 89). *The Pollen Room* has been compared to other works that succeed in capturing the mood of an era, most notably to Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (Stocker 2002, 384). The fact that the author of this literary triumph was only twenty-three years old when it was published seems to have added to its aura, and the young, beautiful writer, who had wowed the literary critics with her candid tale, immediately enthralled the public at large. Zoë Jenny became such a celebrity in Switzerland after the appearance of *The Pollen Room* that Daniela Strigl labelled her "the press's most frequently pictured wonder-girl."[4] The success of the novel and the enormous interest in its young author even caused some critics to talk of "the phenomenon of Zoë Jenny" (Reinacher 2003, 52). Jenny herself played down her success: "I don't claim to speak for a whole generation," she says, "but I seem to have hit a nerve with some people."[5]

Jenny's novel concentrates on the plight of Jo, the child of divorced parents who is trying to find herself in the 1990s. In a sense, this is a universal tale of growing up and self-discovery, but here, it is set against a particular social backdrop—Jo's parents were children of the sixties, and Jo grew up in an atmosphere of wild parties, free love and little or no stability. In the first part of the novel, which is not quite thirteen pages long, Jo describes her childhood from the point of view of the child. Jo's parents separate shortly after she starts school, and she stays with her father, who prints books at home by day and leaves Jo alone at night to go and drive a

[3] All quotations from Zoë Jenny's novel refer to the published translation by Michael Hoffmann. All quotations from Ruth Schweikert's *Augen zu* are my own translations; the original German is given in footnotes in each case.

[4] Strigl calls Jenny "das wohl meistporträtierte Wunderfräulein des Blätterwalds" (Strigl 2001, 133).

[5] "Ich erhebe nicht den Anspruch, für eine ganze Generation zu sprechen, […] aber ich scheine bei einigen den Nerv getroffen zu haben" (Jenny, quoted in Henning 1997).

tram. In candid prose, the child Jo tells us how he brings home women who listen to Mick Jagger on the record player, get drunk and fall asleep on her bedroom floor; and she explains how he helps her to go to sleep at night by tracing shapes in the dark with his glowing cigarettes. For all his failings, Jo's father is the more stable influence in her life; Jo's relationship with her mother, Lucy, is a lot less reliable. Lucy takes her daughter to stay with her every Sunday, but then leaves her with a babysitter while she goes out; once in a while, she picks her up from school to act as a decoy on a shoplifting trip to town. The only time that Jo is taken on an outing is when her mother takes her out into the forest to tell her that she has fallen in love with an artist and is leaving for good. The child Jo learns very early that the adults in her life cannot be relied upon, and she reacts by withdrawing into her own world.

The second part of Jenny's novel, and the main part of the narrative, deals with nineteen-year-old Jo, who has followed her mother abroad—we are never told where, although the placenames and climate would suggest that it is Italy—in an attempt to rekindle a relationship with her. However, Jo's mother, Lucy, is just as distant as before, and she refuses to talk about the past or to acknowledge her abandonment of her daughter. While Jo is visiting, Lucy's new husband, Alois, is killed in a car crash, a probable suicide. Lucy has a nervous breakdown and locks herself up in Alois's studio, where she has spread the pollen of countless fresh flowers—this is the pollen room of the title. After days calling out to her mother, Jo eventually breaks the windows of the studio with a shovel to reach her, but Lucy stands up and walks away from the room and refuses to talk about even this incident with her grown-up daughter.

Jo ends up staying two years with her mother, but when she finally accepts that Lucy is not willing or able to offer her the kind of relationship that she wants, she leaves and returns to Switzerland, disappointed and disillusioned. Arriving home again, she finds that her father has moved to the suburbs with his girlfriend, who is seven months pregnant with a baby girl. Anna, her father's girlfriend, picks Jo up from her train in "a real family car, the kind you can go on holiday in" (Jenny 1998, 148). And even the glowing cigarettes of her childhood years are gone, as Jo's father has given up smoking. Jo reacts to this final betrayal with anger. She turns her back on her father's new family and leaves, and the novel closes with Jo sitting alone on a park bench as the first snowflakes fall.

It is not surprising that *The Pollen Room* has often been read as a critique of the 1968 generation and all that it stands for (e.g. Reinacher

2003; Henning 1997; Köhler 1997). The young author reveals the deficits of her parents' generation—their grandiose ideas and their self-obsession that ignores those around them. At the same time, she highlights how in the 1990s, these self-styled radicals have sold their precious ideals for a station-wagon and a house in the suburbs. Yet Zoë Jenny does not criticise overtly, which is perhaps why she rejects this interpretation of her novel. The text points the finger at the 1968 generation, but it does so merely by describing in brutal clarity the point of view of the child who grows up in these circumstances. Father and mother are seen here from a different perspective—from the perspective of their children who have no respect for their empty gestures of revolt and their vanity (Reinacher 1997, 173).

The Pollen Room has been described as "an unsentimental, laconic view of what remains of the institution of the family at the end of this century" (Köhler 1997), and this is not without justification. Zoë Jenny insists that all of her novels are essentially about families and about conflict in families. "It's a fact," she says, "that my generation has the highest ever proportion of children whose parents are divorced. That leaves its mark" (Jenny, quoted in von Selchow 2002, 81). The image of the family that emerges in *The Pollen Room* is a fractured one; Jo's family is split by divorce and emigration and its members are marked by their traumatic experiences. This is particularly evident in the tenuous relationship between Jo and her mother Lucy.

Jo does not go into detail about the effect of her childhood abandonment on her life and relationships. However, there is some evidence in the writing that the trauma of neglect in early life has left its mark on the narrator. When depicting the moment when her mother tells her she is leaving, the child Jo describes how she reacts to this traumatic event by tuning her mother out and focusing instead on the humming and buzzing of the insects and the many sounds of the forest, perhaps in a gesture of self-protection. This reaction is replicated later in the novel; for example, when the teenager Jo is raped after a party, she reacts by focussing on a damp patch on the ceiling and the noises from the apartment above. This downplaying of significant and traumatic events in favour of the trivial is reflected in the writing as well; the separation of her parents, which was no doubt the defining moment of Jo's childhood, is reduced to a sub-clause in the opening paragraph of the narrative, which focuses instead on the details of the new living arrangements (Stocker 2002, 382). The lack of emotional closeness in Jo's early life is reflected in an extremely detached narrative

style. The effects of her early trauma are thus woven into the fabric of the writing.

It is clear that the mother/daughter conflict is central to this narrative. In some measure, *The Pollen Room* can be read as a novel about the search both for a mother and for a lost ideal of motherhood. From early childhood, Jo's mother is an elusive figure in her life, more absent than she is present. Jo hangs onto those memories of childhood where she felt closest to her mother; for example, her mother's rituals as she gets ready to go out for the evening stand out in Jo's mind:

> In the evening she stood in front of the big mirror with her hair up, doing things to her face with little pencils and sponges. I passed her the little tubes and bottles that were on the windowsill, and unscrewed the expensive-looking flower- and drop-shaped stoppers of her scent bottles. The minute the babysitter arrived, she let down her hair so that it fanned out across her back in a sweet-smelling chestnut mass, and vanished into the night. (Jenny 1998, 14)

This moment of feminine interaction creates in the child Jo's mind an image of her mother as a beautiful, mysterious and intangible creature, and when, at the age of nineteen, she leaves her home to go in search of Lucy, it is this fantasy that drives her. On her arrival at Lucy's house, Jo describes her burning need to be a part of Lucy's life: "With the smooth white door in front of me, I thought how from now on Lucy's life would take place before my eyes, and no longer be that great secret, like a hungry beast of prey pitilessly chewing up the ground on which I meant to walk. The time had come for me at last to be an indispensable part of Lucy's life" (Jenny 1998, 70). Jo dreams of shared confidences, of whispered secrets and of the rekindling of a relationship that she and her mother never had.

In a sense, then, the demonisation of the mother figure in this novel is already predetermined by Jo's idealisation of mothering. How can Lucy ever be an acceptable mother to Jo when she can never live up to her daughter's ideal images of motherhood? Jo longs for a very traditional type of nurturing, the very opposite of all that her biological mother believes in and represents. She yearns to be part of a conventional, nuclear family: "I fall into a daydream in which I imagine I'm suddenly much younger, and Mum is in the kitchen making supper for us while I'm finishing my homework" (Jenny 1998, 59). She rejects Lucy, the modern,

emancipated woman, in favour of a return to a very traditional form of mothering.[6]

From the outset, Lucy is marked as the archetypal "bad mother" due to her abandonment of her child in favour of her lover. She is a mother who rejects the role assigned to her by history, biology and society, and she rejects her child in the process. In this reversal of the Demeter/Persephone story, it is the daughter who leaves to go and search for her mother and to regain what was stolen. Lucy is presented as the antithesis of the traditional mother. She is youthful, vibrant and beautiful, sexually potent and a threat to Jo, rather than a loyal champion or a role model. This competition between the two is dramatised at one point. In a moment of generosity, Lucy takes Jo to her favourite place, and Jo takes this as a sign that her mother wants to make a place for her in her life. However, instead of bringing them closer together, the outing serves only to emphasise the estrangement between them: "Spray glittered in the air, thousands of rainbow-coloured droplets breaking in the light, and I was about to call Lucy to come in the water too when I saw her expression. She was scrutinising me like an enemy" (Jenny 1998, 46).

Lucy insists that Jo must call her by her first name and tell everyone that she is her sister and not her mother, denying both her biological relationship to Jo and the generation gap between them. In addition, she rejects their shared history: "She said she was not prepared to discuss the past with me. She felt she had no need to justify this position, and if I had anything I wanted to ask her about, she regretted she wouldn't be able to help me" (Jenny 1998, 52). Whilst Jo gives in to Lucy's demands, she is confused by what she experiences as a further abandonment: "A suspicion rises in me, and I'm suddenly dying to ask her if she's quite sure that it was she who left my father then and got on a plane. Or is there not some completely different version; and is she really sure that I came out of her belly. Because at this moment that seems completely impossible" (Jenny 1998, 58–9).

Many theorists have emphasised the importance of the mother figure—and notably the rejection of the mother—for the constitution of the daughter's identity (Nice 1992, 9). Irigaray put the case as follows: "The bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, must be

[6] It is interesting that when Jo is presented with the possibility of a traditional family with her father, she rejects it. Clearly, Jo's images of the ideal family are focussed on her mother and not her father.

broken so that the daughter can become woman" (Irigaray 1984, 161, quoted and translated in Hirsch 1989, 43). The question then arises: How can the daughter become woman if the bond between mother and daughter never existed to begin with? Seen thus, Jo's longing for a mother can be related to her search for her own identity. And Lucy is seen here as an obstacle in Jo's path, the mother who refuses to be a mother and thus refuses to allow her daughter to take the first steps towards womanhood.

The mother figure is certainly portrayed in a very negative light in this novel. However, we must take into account that everything in the narrative, all the events and happenings, are mediated through Jo, and thus, it is a very one-sided perspective that we are presented with. This novel calls attention to the power of the mother/daughter relationship, yet it does so almost entirely from the point of view of the traumatised daughter. In that sense, this novel does not correspond to the kind of feminist family romance that Marianne Hirsch envisions and that will allow for a new and different articulation of the maternal perspective. Rather, it focuses entirely on the point of view of the daughter and denies that of the mother.

There are some indications in this text that Lucy too has suffered, though these are played down in the narrative. For example, the child Jo describes her mother's return from a night out:

> I was woken up later by her whimpering, and felt my way across to her bed in the dark. She lay under the colourful flower-patterned bedspread, shaken by secret griefs I couldn't understand. All I could see of her face was the little triangle from her mouth to the tip of her nose, all the rest was covered by her white hands. After a while, she drew back the cover, and I crept into her salty warm bed with her. (Jenny 1998, 14–15)

However, whether it is due to Lucy's unwillingness to go back over old territory, or whether it is due to her own hurt and anger at her mother's abandonment of her, the grown-up Jo seems unwilling or unable to see beyond her own pain and understand her mother's side of the story.

This novel does not by any means present the kind of "double voice" that Hirsch calls for, a "voice that would yield a multiple female consciousness" (Hirsch 1989, 161). On the contrary, I would suggest that the power play that is present in the content of the text is re-enacted and inverted in its form. The mother's story is subsumed into that of the daughter, and this is a narrative act that allows the daughter to take control of her mother's voice. Thus, although on the level of the content, Jo

never succeeds in gaining the upper hand in her relationship with her mother, on a formal level, she assumes the position of authority and takes control of her narrative.

Ruth Schweikert, Augen zu

Zoë Jenny's *The Pollen Room* points, albeit vaguely, to the issue of maternal suffering and the difficulties of retaining one's subjectivity as mother; however, the fact that Lucy is denied a voice in the narrative means that Jenny's novel does not really offer any new insights into the maternal perspective. Ruth Schweikert's *Augen zu*, published in 1998, is a far more complex text, both in terms of its polyphonic narrative technique and in the way it envisions motherhood and the potential for maternal subjectivity. The title, *Augen zu* [Close your eyes], alludes to the German expression "Augen zu und durch." This expression would most often be offered as counsel to someone who has to face difficult circumstances, advising them to accept the inevitability of the situation and focus on getting through it. Schweikert's novel foregrounds the roles women play and the challenges they face within families, within society and in narrative; its title implies that the only way a woman can cope with these difficulties is simply to close her eyes and get on with it.

It is noteworthy that Ruth Schweikert has not been identified as closely with the literary "Fräuleinwunder" (Hage 1999) as Zoë Jenny. Schweikert was twenty-nine when she published her first collection of short stories, *Erdnüsse. Totschlagen* (1994), the same collection that captivated Beatrice von Matt. These short stories deal with dysfunctional families, the silent suffering of women and the complexity of mother-daughter relationships, and thus they already introduce the issues that are the focus of her novel *Augen zu*, published four years later. If Schweikert's short story collection drew attention to her talent, her debut novel established her as a leading light on the Swiss literary scene.

Augen zu centres on one day in the life of the protagonist, Aleks Martin Schwarz, who lives in Zurich and is the single mother of two sons, Oliver and Lukas. Aleks's life revolves around her fragile little family, her rather unsuccessful career as an artist and her handsome, French-born lover Raoul Lieben. This particular day, 16th June 1995, is a significant day for Aleks; apart from being her 30th birthday, it is also the day she conceives a child with Raoul—a child that she will lose before its birth—and the day her mother, Doris, takes the drug overdose that will result in her death

two days later. This one day in Aleks's life thus encapsulates the themes and ideas on which the narrative also hinges—the process of coming to motherhood; the loss of identity that seems to go hand in hand with the role of mother; and concerns with growing older, in particular growing older as a woman.

Through a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards and through an unusual, polyphonic narrative perspective, the novel also gives us an insight into the past, present and future of Aleks's family and those connected to her. Thus, we learn that Aleks was born Alexandra Heinrich, in a small town not far from Zurich, referred to in the novel only as "the small town."[7] Her father, Alexander Jakob Heinrich, known to all, even to his wife, as Heinrich, is a diffident academic with high expectations for his children and a Latin proverb for every situation. Her younger brothers, Tom and Andreas, born only eleven months apart, are close enough to be twins, and they let no one into their private world. Aleks's mother, Doris, a German who came to Switzerland after the war, has devoted her life to her husband and her children. As a reward for her years of dedication, Doris is eventually abandoned by her family; Aleks leaves home at eighteen, and both of Doris's sons move in with their girlfriends around the same time that her husband, after thirty years of marriage, leaves her for another woman.

Aleks's upbringing bears all the signs of middle-class conventionality, but Aleks is marked from the outset as unusual. "You're just different, said her father; you have the intellect of a man in a body that's slowly developing into a woman's."[8] In her early teens, Alexandra changes her name to the more masculine-sounding Aleks in silent protest against her emerging femininity. Alexandra/Aleks wages war on her changing body, refusing even to eat for fear of growing into a woman. She hopes to hold off puberty and her physical maturity by sheer force of will: "I don't want to become a woman, Aleks said to herself, so I won't become a woman. I don't want to get my period so I won't get it."[9] Yet Aleks soon finds that will power is not enough and that her development into womanhood is inevitable.

[7] The German version of the novel refers to the town as "die Kleine Stadt" (Schweikert 1998, 61).

[8] "Du bist eben anders, sagte der Vater, du hast den Verstand eines Mannes im langsam sich ausbildenden Körper einer Frau" (Schweikert 1998, 74–75).

[9] "Ich will keine Frau werden, sagte sich Aleks, also werde ich auch keine Frau. Ich will keine Periode kriegen, also kriege ich auch keine" (Schweikert 1998, 125).

Despite the fact that Aleks does not want to grow up to be a woman, she is somehow fascinated by her emerging sexuality and consciously puts herself in dangerous situations to test it out. For example, she often walks alone in the evening along the riverbank, in an area where a rapist is known to prowl for victims (Schweikert 1998, 131). On one occasion during her teenage years, she very deliberately flirts with three middle-aged men; she agrees to a drink with them and even gets into their car. Here, she has her first experience of French kissing, but she loses her nerve when it looks like things might progress further: "So as not to be raped, she threw the car door open at the last minute and ran to the Catholic youth club, where she had spent the evening in lively debate and been picked up a few minutes later, as arranged, by her mother, who just looked at her. Her face glowed with shame, hurt and unacknowledged desire."[10]

Aleks's mother can only look on helplessly as her daughter fights so hard against her sexual identity and the social roles that are bound to it. She is dismayed when one of Aleks's teachers recommends that Aleks sees a psychiatrist and even pays for Aleks's twice-weekly visits to a psychologist in Zurich from her housekeeping money to hide this fact from Aleks's father. In particular, Doris is horrified at Aleks's compulsive self-harming, and she is filled with shame and dread at the scars on Aleks's lower arms from the kitchen knife: "At least put on a long-sleeved pullover, said Doris Heinrich with a helpless tenderness, please! That's all I'm asking, do you hear?"[11]

It is clear that many of Aleks's fears about becoming a woman revolve around her mother and what she perceives as her weakness and subjection. In Hirsch's terms, Aleks expresses the "daughter's anger at the mother who has accepted her powerlessness, who is unable to protect her from a submission to society's gender arrangements" (Hirsch 1989, 165). Aleks has little respect for her mother, whom she depicts almost exclusively in negative terms: she describes her reluctance to look "into the powerless eyes of her own mother […] who was still standing there with her arms

[10] "Um nicht vergewaltigt zu werden, riß sie in letzter Minute die Autotür auf und rannte zum katholischen Jugendhaus, wo sie den Abend mit lebhaften Diskussionen verbracht hatte und Minuten später verabredungsgemäß von der Mutter abgeholt wurde, die sie nur ansah. Ihr Gesicht glühte vor Scham, Verletzung und uneingestandener Lust" (Schweikert 1998, 134).

[11] "Zieh dir wenigstens einen langärmeligen Pullover darüber, sagte Doris Heinrich so hilflos sanft; bitte! Ich bitte dich nur darum, hörst du?" (Schweikert 1998, 127).

hanging down and calling her name."[12] On more than one occasion in the novel, Aleks refers to her mother as being childlike; her eyes are described as "mother's grown-up children's eyes" and her hands as "her small children's hands."[13] Doris does all she can to reach out to her daughter and to smooth her passage into womanhood, but Aleks is unable or unwilling to let her mother inside her private world.

What is particularly fascinating about Schweikert's interrogation of the mother-daughter complex in this novel is that it not only offers us the daughter's perspective on her mother; its shifting narrative perspective also affords us insight into the mother's perspective on her life and on her changing relationship with her grown-up daughter. Thus, we learn that Doris Heinrich has suffered much in her early years and that her childhood trauma has had a profound effect on her later life. Born in the German city of Freiburg in 1931, Doris lost her mother and her brother after the city was bombed in the early hours of the 27th November 1944. A month later, Doris's father decided to overcome his grief by attempting to kill himself and his daughter, without success. After this incident, Doris goes to live with an aunt, and she manages to get work in a hotel in Basle when the war comes to an end. It is here that she meets Aleks's father, Heinrich, and when he asks her to marry him, she doesn't hesitate. However, despite her new start in a new country with her new husband, Doris is still haunted by the ghosts of her past, and her way of coping with her sorrow is to drown it in alcohol. From the early days of her marriage, Doris is a regular drinker, though she does her best to hide this from her husband and her children. When she is finally left alone in the house in her later years, she can devote herself wholeheartedly to the alcoholism that she was barely able to conceal when her children were younger. At the age of sixty-four, she now spends her days cleaning her big, empty house and her evenings drinking herself into oblivion.

Ironically, Doris's drinking serves as a platform for a brief but important connection between mother and daughter. When Aleks, at the age of twelve, finds her mother passed out on the bedroom floor after a bout of drinking, her reaction is to take control of the situation; in a curious

[12] Aleks describes the difficulty "in die kraftlosen Augen der eigenen Mutter zu schauen, die noch immer mit herabhängenden Armen dastand und ihren Namen rief" (Schweikert 1998, 98–99).

[13] Doris's eyes are described as "Mutters erwachsene Kinderaugen" (Schweikert 1998, 49) and her hands as "ihre rechten Kinderhände" (Schweikert 1998, 110).

role-reversal, she takes on the position of mother to her younger brothers, preparing them something to eat and discouraging them from disturbing their mother. As Pia Reinacher remarks, "The perspective has changed. The child seeking protection now steps in to support the maternal figure who has fallen apart."[14] It is paradoxical that Aleks seems to find it easier to accept and acknowledge her mother when she drinks; at one point, we are told, "When her mother had been drinking, Aleks even sometimes found it easy to love her."[15] Doris's alcoholism enables her daughter to see her as a human being, rather than merely as a mother whose sole function is to serve her husband and care for her children.

In this way, *Augen zu* focuses on what it means to be a mother and on how becoming a mother relates to a loss of individual identity. Hirsch comments on this process as follows: "The adult woman who is a mother, in particular, continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right" (Hirsch 1989, 167). Schweikert's novel interrogates the gradual erasure of subjectivity that seems to be inextricably bound to the role of mother through the figures of Doris and Aleks. As far as her children are concerned, Doris Heinrich no longer exists as an individual, but only as "Mameeee," complete with "the hysterical spiky ee-sound of her own childish cries, repeated nigh-on ten thousand times."[16] As a mother, Doris has become estranged even from her own sexuality: "She wore white strappy sandals with narrow high heels and figure-hugging stretch jeans with low-cut, tight-fitting t-shirts; she sat down, crossed one leg over the other, jiggled her feet, and projected outward all of the pent-up sexuality that she probably kept concealed from herself." [17] In the same way, Aleks finds that when she becomes a mother, her identity is also subsumed by that of her sons, and she too experiences a loss of individuality. At one point in the narrative, while she watches her children eat the meal she has prepared for them, she is reminded of her own

[14] "Die Perspektive hat sich verdreht. Das schutzsuchende Kind richtet sich auf über der mütterlichen Instanz, die zusammengebrochen ist" (Reinacher 1998, 2).

[15] "Wenn die Mutter getrunken hatte, war es Aleks früher manchmal beinahe leicht gefallen, sie zu lieben" (Schweikert 1998, 95).

[16] "das hysterisch spitze ii ihres eigenen, wohl zehntausendfach wiederholten Kinderschreis" (Schweikert 1998, 127).

[17] "[Sie] trug […] weiße Riemchensandalen mit dünnen, hohen Absätzen und figurbetonte Stretchjeans, dazu weit ausgeschnittene, enganliegende T-Shirts; sie setzte sich hin, schlug die Bein übereinander, wippte mit den Füßen und stülpte ihre ganze unerlöste Sexualität nach außen, die sie vor sich selber wohl versteckt hielt" (Schweikert 1998, 25).

mother's attempts to convince her brothers to eat dinner, and for a moment, their lives are united. Moreover, Aleks, similar to her mother, resorts to taking prescription drugs "just to be able to keep going and maintain some sense of balance."[18]

However, it should be noted that Schweikert's novel does not stop at describing the way in which a woman can lose her identity through motherhood; it also explores the potential for regaining that identity and for reanimating the position of the mother in discourse. In *Augen zu*, Doris Heinrich ultimately reacts against her abandonment by the husband and children she has sacrificed herself for. While visiting Doris in the house that was once their family home, Heinrich brings his former wife a present of a stained-glass picture of a saint. Doris's reaction to this gift is quite different from what Heinrich was expecting:

> Doris held the stained-glass picture with Saint Martin up to the light, looked at the round bald patch on her husband's scalp and felt an urge to whack the shining, colourful glass picture on his head, just so she wouldn't have to look at his ludicrous vulnerability anymore. Instead, her skinny arms started hitting out. They hit and hit and kept hitting until the glass picture shattered on the floor; her little fists kept on hitting as Heinrich sat paralysed, cowering on the kitchen chair that was described in the furniture-store brochure as contemporary rustic, his hands over his eyes.[19]

Doris's act of violence in breaking the stained-glass picture can be seen as an expression of her anger against her husband and children, who have taken the best years of her life and abandoned her when she needs them most. This gesture can simultaneously be read as an aggressive act of reclaiming a subjectivity that she has been denied in her role as wife and mother. In effect, through this act of rebellion, she re-establishes herself as an individual. Hirsch describes both the inevitability of maternal anger and its problematic consequences: "The projected angry mother of the

[18] "bloß um grundlos ausgeglichen weiterleben zu können" (Schweikert 1998, 29).

[19] "Doris hielt die Wappenscheibe mit dem heiligen Martin ans Licht, blickte auf den in der Mitte kahlen Schädel ihres Ehemannes und wollte ihm bloß, um dessen lächerlich anmutende Verletzbarkeit nicht mehr sehen zu müssen, die leuchtend bunte Wappenscheibe auf den Kopf legen. Statt dessen schlugen ihre dünnen Arme zu. Sie schlugen einfach. Schlugen, bis die Wappenscheibe am Boden zersprang; ihre kleinen Fäuste schlugen weiter, während Heinrich wie gelähmt auf den neuen hölzernen, im Möbel Pfister-Prospekt als modern-rustikal bezeichneten Küchenstuhl hocken blieb, die Hände vor den Augen" (Schweikert 1998, 48).

psychoanalytic narrative, then, would react to the child's so-called inevitable hostility with anger of her own, would feel wronged when, after years of nurturing and care, she is left behind. Should she rebel, however, should she express her own feelings about an enforced and inevitable separation, she would cease to be maternal" (Hirsch 1989, 170).[20] Indeed, Heinrich interprets Doris's act as an expression of madness, and as a result of her outburst, he has her admitted to a psychiatric clinic the same day.

It is significant that Doris's violent outburst facilitates a rapprochement of sorts between mother and daughter, and Aleks can at last learn to see things from her mother's perspective. On the day Doris is taken away to the clinic, Aleks returns home to her mother's house with her two sons. In her mother's kitchen, she prepares a meal for her sons and contemplates the events from her mother's past that have led to this day: "Aleks looked out the kitchen window into the garden and at the withered apricot trees that had long ago grown taller than her, fried the potatoes into rösti, seasoned the meat, ate and suddenly wished she could change places with her mother, wished she could wake up with mother's childish eyes and see her devastated world on the evening of the 27th November 1944."[21] It seems that it is only when Doris rebels against the dictates of her role as mother that Aleks can finally begin to appreciate her as an individual, with a past and an identity of her own.

In a sense, Doris's suicide can also be interpreted as an active, even aggressive attempt to regain her identity. Evidently, it is an act of violence against herself, not dissimilar from Aleks's self-harming, but there are no indications in the text to suggest that her suicide is born of self-loathing or self-pity; paradoxically, Doris's overdose can be interpreted as a final attempt to regain her own subjectivity, to "speak," as it were, as a subject. This idea is compounded by the fact that Doris leaves behind a letter to be read by her family after her death, a letter which finally tells the story of

[20] Hirsch also recognises the problematic nature of discussing maternal anger: "I recognize that, in privileging anger, I represent maternal subjectivity from one, limited vantage point, and one that converges with cultural representations of the maternal. Yet I suspect that such a vantage point is unavoidable since anger may well be what defines subjectivity whenever the subject is denied speech" (Hirsch 1989, 170).

[21] "Aleks sah aus dem Küchenfenster in den Garten, dessen verblühte Aprikosenbäume ihr längst über den Kopf gewachsen waren, briet die Kartoffeln zu Rösti, würzte das Fleisch, aß und wünschte sich plötzlich, mit ihrer Mutter den Blick zu tauschen, mit Mutters erwachsenen Kinderaugen zu erwachen und ihre zerstörte Welt zu sehen am Abend des siebenundzwanzigsten November 1944" (Schweikert 1998, 49).

her loss of her family. Whilst Aleks's brothers are irritated that Doris has chosen this moment to reveal the secrets of her past—"her whole life long she just made vague references and then she leaves us to deal with her shitty misery alone"[22]—Aleks feels only compassion for what her mother has suffered.

Schweikert's novel thus differs significantly from Zoë Jenny's exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, in that it leaves room for the articulation of a "double voice," in line with Marianne Hirsch's definition of what that means (Hirsch 1989, 161). We hear from both daughter and mother in this complex family romance. Although Aleks is undoubtedly the central figure in this novel, narrative authority is not given to one character over the other; neither character is prioritised and neither position is favoured. Aleks and Doris are represented as both mothers and daughters, subjects as daughters and denied subjectivity as mothers. Doris's rebellion against the dictates of her role as mother allows Aleks to approach her as a speaking subject, and mother and daughter can finally speak to each other as subjects in their own right.

It is interesting to note that in one flash-forward, we learn that after the loss of her first child with Raoul, Aleks will go on to conceive and give birth to a healthy baby girl. Only brief mention is made of Aleks's daughter, Jael, born two years after Doris's death and after the central events in the narrative. However, this allusion to Aleks's own daughter is significant, since it suggests a cyclical quality and an open-endedness to the novel. The narrative of mothers and daughters will not end, it suggests, with Doris's death and the end of the relationship between Doris and Aleks; rather, it will continue on into the next generation.

Ruth Schweikert's *Augen zu* demonstrates that the new wave of literature by women that emerged in German-language literature in the 1990s, the so-called "Fräuleinwunder" (Hage 1999), offers some new perspectives on the themes and motifs that had preoccupied women writers for generations. Schweikert's novel concentrates its attention on the subjectivity of women, but it does so without excluding the maternal perspective; rather, it interrogates in a very deliberate way the loss of agency associated with the role of mother and envisions strategies for the reclamation of the mother's subjectivity. It allows for a space where mothers and daughters can speak to each other, and thus answers Marianne Hirsch's

[22] "Ihr Leben lang hat sie bloß geheimnisvolle Andeutungen gemacht, um uns dann mit ihrem beschissenen Elend allein zu lassen" (Schweikert 1998, 118).

call for "a feminist family romance of mothers *and* daughters, both subjects, speaking to each other and living in familial and communal contexts which enable the subjectivity of each member" (Hirsch 1989, 163).

Conclusion

The new generation of young women writers that emerged in the German-speaking world in the late 1990s was celebrated by critics as signalling a break with the past and a new approach to topics that preoccupied women writers of the previous generation. While German critic Volker Hage praised these young women for initiating a "new culture of storytelling,"[23] Swiss critic Beatrice von Matt credited the emerging writers in German-speaking Switzerland with introducing "new ways of writing" (Von Matt 1998a: 59). This chapter has looked in particular at debut novels by two of the writers who are considered to be representative of this new generation of authors, Zoë Jenny and Ruth Schweikert, and it has sought to probe the extent and the ways in which their work offers a new perspective on a topic that has traditionally preoccupied women writers. Both novels foreground the relationship between mother and daughter, which has long been central to women's fiction but which has, according to Marianne Hirsch, always tended to privilege the daughter's perspective over that of the mother. As this analysis has shown, Jenny's novel *The Pollen Room* ultimately falls into this trap; although the text alludes to the personal suffering of the maternal figure, her trauma is subsumed by her daughter's narrative of maternal abandonment. Seen from Hirsch's perspective, this is deeply problematic, since it continues a tradition of consigning mothers to the position of objects within their daughter's narratives. In Schweikert's *Augen zu*, on the other hand, the shifting narrative perspective means that we gain equal insight into the mother's and daughter's view points, allowing us to understand the parallels between their experiences and the rich connections between their interrelated subjectivities. In this way, Schweikert's novel belongs with those contemporary novels identified by Hirsch as offering a way forward for women's writing at the cusp of the twenty-first century.

[23] Hage writes about the advent of "eine neue Erzählkultur" in Germany (Hage 1999: 245).

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