Writing on the Wall: Letters of Rahel Varnhagen*

by Liliane Weissberg

Les mots sont devenus dans les langues humaines ce que la pensée est devenue dans l'esprit des hommes. Ces mots sont devenue comme autant de morts qui enterrrent des morts, et qui souvent même enterrrent des vivants, ou ceux qui auraient le désir de l'être. Aussi l'homme s'enterre-t-il lui-même journallement avec ses propres mots altérés et qui ont perdu tous leurs sens. Aussi enterrre-t-il journallement et continuellement la parole.

Saint-Martin

Ja! Sprache, — ein Rest und ein Anfang.

Rahel Varnhagen,

a note to Saint-Martin**

In a letter to Karl August Varnhagen, Rahel Varnhagen, while describing herself, offers an advice to her husband: "I see, I love truth; am simple, strict, but soft; have no results beforehand in my eye and mind; and am always willing to grasp things innocently. Think therefore only of such a human being; and so, with your other talents and skills, in this large, literary, baked-together-with-lies world, there must be produced things that are worthwhile reading."* Karl August Varnhagen

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1. Letter to Varnhagen, November 17, 1813. Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens für ihre Freunde, II (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1834), p. 145. The collections of Rahel’s letters were reprinted in Rahel-Bibliothek, Gesammelte Werke, eds. Konrad Feilchenfeldt, Uwe Schweikert and Rahel E. Steiner (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1983). This and the following translations are mine.
took this advice quite seriously. His most popular novel, *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens für ihre Freunde*, was written in 1833, shortly after Rahel’s death, and he enlarged the work to a three volume edition in 1834.² The material for this book was indeed taken from life. Varnhagen’s discerning eye selected a few hundred of Rahel’s letters; he cut and changed them into the proper literary form of the epistolary novel, to exhibit Rahel’s proper innocence and truthfulness. He also changed the position of Rahel’s correspondents in a post-mortem socializing process; while stressing her company with famous and aristocratic people, Varnhagen buried those friendships that no longer fit into a popular understanding of social respectability.³ In silencing also any other voices in the *Andenken*, Varnhagen turned Rahel’s letters from a series of dialogues into a monologue, into a seemingly endless self-reflection of an individual attempting to live a “truthful” life, and thus probing the meaning of this phrase. We can only guess the degree of mutilation done to Rahel’s letters — most of them disappeared after the Second World War and only quite recently located in a Polish archive — but less guesswork is necessary in regard to the success of the novel.⁴

Paradoxically, Rahel’s letters celebrate the individual in general through a concept of shared confidence. Rahel was one of the most famous Jewish women of her time in Berlin, who, like Henriette Herz or Dorothea Mendelssohn-Veit, kept her doors open for a social meeting of aristocrats, artists, and assimilating Jews, and her *salon* was regarded as the most intellectually challenging of the group. In contrast to the other women, Rahel started her social gatherings as a very young unmarried woman, while still living in her parents’ home. Her letters, turned by Varnhagen into souvenirs and mementos, offer an idea of the kind of friendship pursued in Rahel’s *salons* in Berlin. It is a model similar to that of Henriette Herz’s “group of virtuous people” who in propagating a secret relationship of minds would be able to sense — and read — each other’s innermost wishes.⁵ In the *Andenken*, Rahel

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² For a publishing history, see Konrad Feilchenfeldt and Rahel E. Steiner, “Rahel Varnhagens ‘Werke’,” *Rahel-Bibliothek*, X, pp. 75-127.

³ Most dramatically, Varnhagen excluded all references to Pauline Wiesel, a close friend of Rahel’s and the lover of Prince Louis Ferdinand. New names, initials, aristocratic titles were also introduced in the references to Rahel’s Jewish friends.

⁴ Most of Rahel’s surviving letters are part of Varnhagen’s collection, stored in the cloister Grüssau during the war, and rediscovered in the Jagellonian library in Cracow in 1977. → Deborah Hertz, “The Varnhagen Collection is in Krakow,” *The American Archivist*, 44 (1981), 223-228.

appears as the Romantic model of inward reflection. She displays a
sensitivity with which she would understand her address to other per-
sons as a continuation of an inner conversation. Rahel finds her place
as a follower of Schleiermacher’s rules for sociability, Geselligkeit; rules
that turned, as Heine would afterwards describe, into the laws of a secret
circle that are lost to the later world: “We, we understood each other by
simple glances, we looked at each other and knew our innermost
concerns — this language of the eyes will soon be lost, and the written
monuments [Schriftmäler] that we leave behind, for example Rahel’s
letters, will be nothing for those who are born after us but indecipher-
able hieroglyphs — I know this, and I think of this with each new per-
son departing, and returning home.”6 Heine’s nostalgic farewell to
silence is Varnhagen’s celebration of Rahel’s eloquence. Both seem to
mourn with Rahel’s death not only the masterful conversationalist, but
also a person much more willing to retreat for the sake of others than
Heine is willing to give up the others of his past. Not only Rahel is
celebrated therefore, but those who have entered Rahel’s salon of let-
ters as well. Her silence as well as her letters offered them the oppor-
tunity to speak, became the mode of their exposition. In Varnhagen’s
book, Rahel emerges as a giving hostess even in the representation of
her letters themselves. She is, in all of that, an example of womanhood,
not the least to Varnhagen’s two fiancées with whom he formed brief
engagements exactly at the periods of publication of two collections of
Rahel’s letters.7

While Varnhagen’s publication was supposed to reveal Rahel’s true
character, Rahel herself seems to have been obsessed with the problem
of writing, and with the question of whether writing could indeed

13-15. A more detailed description of Rahel’s salon is provided in Herbert Scurla,
Rahel Varnhagen. Die grosse Frauenstellung der deutschen Romantik (Berlin GDR 1962, repr.

6. Heinrich Heine, Säkularausgabe, XXI (Berlin, Paris: Akademie Verlag/Editions
Schleiermacher,” in Berlin zwischen 1789 und 1848: Facetten einer Epoche (catalogue to the

7. See Konrad Feilchenfeldt, “Die Anfänge des Kults um Rahel Varnhagen und
seine Kritiker,” Walter Grab and Julius H. Schoeps, eds., Juden im Vormärz und in der
guard to Rahel’s views on women’s emancipation, see Doris Starr Guillotet, “Rachel
Varnhagen und die Frauenfrage in der deutschen Romantik: Eine Untersuchung
ihrer Briefe und Tagebuchnotizen,” Monatshefte, 69 (1977), 391-403. Her impact on
women of her period is described in Kay Goodman, “The Impact of Rahel Varnhagen
on Women in the Nineteenth Century,” in Marianne Burkhard, ed., Gestaltete und ge-
sellende Frauen in der deutschen Literatur, Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Germanistik, 10 (1980),
125-53.
transmit any truthful representation of herself. Although she was proud of some of her letters and eager for their public reading, she reflects in a large number of them on inability to describe her thoughts properly, be it because of an illness, or because of various interruptions when "life" itself entered disturbing and disturbingly into the scene. The very topic seemed not to fit any possible description. There is indeed an uncanny relationship between Varnhagen's success and Rahel's failure.

In Rahel's attempt to write her own "Confessions de J. J. Rahel" in a series of letters, we can find a very peculiar anecdote about writing and truth. Rahel, then a young woman of twenty-two, narrates a story about her younger brother Moritz. The story is addressed to David Veit, a Jewish friend from Berlin who, at this time, is a medical student in Göttingen: "May I tell you a story? — because my letter will turn out to be quite long again. This noon, at the table, Markus subjected the children to a great interrogation [Verhör], because he had found really a great act of mischief [Unart], namely the name Levin scribbled on the wall of my corridor [Flur] upstairs. Röschen said freely and laughingly: 'It was not me;' Ludwig as well: 'Me neither;' only Moritz denied it, namely he said: 'But I don't have a pencil,' and he stuck to this; he answered it a good sixteen or seventeen times to all the questions that were now put to him, coming from all directions [Kreuz und Quere] and sides, forth and back, like a real interrogation, and it was fearsome, with reason, for him; his color spoke against him, but he suppressed even his blushing [Rothwerden], and he stuck quite prettily to his statement: 'But I don't have a pencil.' He finally came quite close to confessing, and although a veil of fun [Flor von Spass] rested on the whole story, they wanted to frighten him to the fullest confession; and so I said: 'Well, he cannot confess it now, it should suffice that he has denied it.' I liked that very much." The story relates a true family affair, a scene at the dinner table concerning the description of a past deed and the establishment of its authorship. Although everybody seems to be convinced of Moritz's guilt, his confession is no confession of his — or any — crime, but indeed a statement about absence. Moritz denies possessing the tool that is necessary for the deed. Without a pencil, Moritz cannot write. For Rahel, this statement is the only proper rejection of the writ-

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9. Letter to David Veit, February 18, 1794. Buch des Andenkens, pp. 67-68. A more complete version of this letter is reprinted in Briefwechsel, pp. 164-181, here 168. Varnhagen does not only cut the letter in his first edition, he also replaces names: Rahel's brother Markus becomes, for example, Theodor, this is Markus's second name (see p. 69).
ten work: “Only Moritz denied it.” Moritz’s confession, however, is not quite related to the crime, for his speech denies the ownership of a pencil, and not the act of writing itself. His statement appears to be independent from what may have been his deed.

Rahel does not, like the other family members, want to frighten the boy into confessing the deed; she tries to save the texture of fun, the narrative itself, by producing a paradoxical ending: if the rejection of the deed would exclude a confession, this rejection would be enough for a happy end. Saving Moritz’s narrative — and the narrative, Geschichte, of this anecdote — Rahel cannot refrain from a speculation on its historical sequence — its Geschichte. If Moritz’s rejection of ownership seems to have established a separation between his words and the deed, Rahel’s conclusion insists on the similar separation for the sake of a narrative structure; she is, indeed, not quite the owner of her words. Rahel is unclear about their origin as well as surprised by their effect, and she does not seem to be as startled by the written word on the wall as by the sound of her own saving and concluding remarks: “As soon as I heard the words, I myself had to laugh dreadfully. (Tell me, how can I laugh about it myself? I must have thought these words, after all, before I said them! O well! the sound! — )”10 Rephrasing the scene, and quoting it to Veit, Rahel is less interested in Moritz’s Unart than in Moritz’s art, his verbal excursions, the strange lie with which he seems to avoid confession in an artistic way: “But I don’t have a pencil.” She is therefore not satisfied with Moritz’s final confessions of the deed, although she is amused by his statement that he wanted first to see if his first answer would hold, “ob’s so geht.” Rahel is carried by her own laughter, and she turns the trick played by a little child into an educational enterprise. Moritz’s words are “pretty” but they can still be improved. While Rahel’s mother, with whom she is not living on very good terms, is lecturing on truth and lies, Rahel is modifying the crime into a lesson, the search for the author into a linguistic exercise. The introduction of French words turns the family affair into a model, a linguistic dance:11 “All together, he denied it prettily; you should have seen it. I have thought a lot on this occasion; also, I tried to soften the interrogation as much as possible, and with all my efforts to hold a thick coat [ein dickes Gewand] over it, they managed anyway to reduce it to a veil [zu Flor zu zerreißen]; because this denial did not please me, because the boy (like a child) was not sure of his case, and because the great crime that one kept moving in his direction frightened him anew


11. Compare Rahel’s description of her dancing lessons during the same period, and her discussion with David Veit on the conditions and effects of the waltz.
every minute, despite the fact that he was taking hold of himself/his word so well [so gut er sich auch fasste], and this fear and embarrassment [Schreck und Verlegenheit] always have a very bad effect on the character, and therefore it was so very painful for me to watch it, I made every effort to transform, as much as possible, this thoughtless interrogation into an exercize of excuses, with public approval: I was, however, the more misunderstood because of this, but it still went on madly, Markus guessed things somewhat. —”

Rahel's laughter may have followed her own thought, but also Röschen's lead. Rahel's attempt to cover the interrogation with her own coat of reflections does not quite work. Her statements become the victims of the interrogation itself, thinning away to exactly that veil — Flor — of irritation previously described as Spass and that has gained now a rather tragic sense. Although the conversation is still described in its veiling function, hiding the deed has no longer become Moritz's task but Rahel's. With her protective measures, the crime has changed places; the interrogation itself has become something from which Moritz should be saved. Rahel tries to turn the legal discourse — Verhör — into a linguistic play that should regain the innocence of conversation. Instead of concerning herself with the questions of origin and authorship, Rahel is now concerned with their effect: these questions may corrupt Mortiz's character. Who then — or what — has committed the crime? Moritz, in his childlike innocence, may have written the word without conceiving that his writing should have a different, less public place. The interrogation itself establishes its moral evaluation, tries to call writing to order by saying where it should not belong.

Rahel's exchange of words tries to come close to Mortiz’s innocence. It is in vain, however, that she attempts to regain it. Her striving for innocence results in further misunderstanding, and while her brother Markus may indeed guess Mortiz's stand, it is Rahel who occupies the wrong place. Her public word should not have received public approval. While Rahel adds further concluding remarks on the matter, her story is still not at an end. Rahel quickly exchanges the position of innocence for that of guilt. Mortiz's blushing — rothwerden — becomes the sign for an innocent heart — ein rothes Herz — that cannot possibly find a place in this world: “— Why does one forbid children so explicitly to deny things and to find excuses [Ausreden] which (unfortunately! but) one needs: because one educates them for the turmoil [Tummel] of the world, and not for a positive heaven that would accurately reward an innocent heart [rothes Herz], and a clean conscience?”

the wall of the corridor above may find a reward in heaven, but it has to switch places to be recognized below. With this word, innocence itself is in need of displacement, a displacement that is necessary not only to gain a reward, but also to make its own recognition possible.

Interrupted by the sudden need to visit somebody, Rahel continues her letter to David Veit later in the day. Afraid of being misunderstood by him as well, she has not yet quite finished — ausgeredet — and takes up the anecdote again: “Now I am starting again with my children. Why does one not teach them to lie [Lügen], to deny things [Lügen], and to find excuses [Ausreden], as a necessary evil, and show it to them at the same time, like other heavy work, which one would leave aside on one’s own, if one did not have to do it, to protect one’s delicate hands — in this way, one would then care for one’s conscience. Terrible moral, at some educated inquisition my Renommée could at least be slowly burned? And this would not even be the worst; it has also here the appearance of foolishness [Thorheit] or stupidity, because it seems that one could not go through with it; in the strictest sense of the words, yes, this I feel as well as anybody else who may hear it; but that one can make it understandable for children, without preaching, and that one can preach it to them, without making it attractive to them, and precisely as it is a sermon to present it to them as useful, but not beautiful, and to do it all with actions, and reluctance, pointed out at the proper place [am rechten Ort], — this I do believe; until you or somebody else may venture properly to prove the opposite to me!”14 The task of preserving the student’s innocence becomes an issue threatening the morality of the teacher. Rahel’s concept may endanger her Renommée not just as her intellectual reputation: she may show herself during that religious interrogation — inquisition — as corrupted, tested by that realm to which preaching also belongs. But the search for a reward returns to the question of ownership. Social recognition becomes a question of epistemology. Where does one find the original places if one, indeed, does not even own the word?

Rahel cannot preach a truth she does not know. Paradoxically, the lie — as Lüge, Lügen, Ausrede — guarantees not just survival, but the survival of innocence. Innocence is for Rahel here no longer washing one’s hands of guilt, but keeping one’s hands pure of hard work. The teacher can only preserve innocence in corrupting it. Not only can the lie be rejected, but the confession of truth as well. And here we feel the true Thorheit of Rahel’s educational program: if Moritz proves his innocence by not understanding the nature of his crime, Rahel can

only save her truth by preaching and unpreaching its moral implications and values.

Moritz’s innocence has become a matter of place, and this place is shifting. Rahel’s lesson, as an anecdote about the search of her own truth offers the memory of how it could have been in a process of veiling and unveiling, and in a process of exchange. The conversation itself has to move on, leave places, provoke misunderstanding to follow its goal. The rules of language already provide the interrogator as well as the person questioned with the Ausrede, the ethical status of which Rahel should and does not want to decide. How should one, for example, understand — and this means place — her laughter? Groping for a theory of her experience, Rahel must rightly be at a loss: she herself cannot explain the origin of her words or laughter, the mechanisms of her play. Her performance itself denies her the masterful position of a teacher. If Moritz’s crime has already been the use of language, Moritz’s answer — which is a refusal to answer — teaches Rahel how to teach. Rahel discusses the interrogation not as a search for an error committed outside language, but turns it into an investigation of language itself. Can language, maybe, tell us what we do not know? Rahel’s questions and answers themselves reject damaging pedagogy in an anarchistic way, a way that resembles nothing else but the psychoanalytic discourse.¹⁵

Rahel, the teacher, is also a woman, a fact that should not be overlooked in her education of her brother, or in the fact that she presents this incident — “May I tell you a story?” — as a seductive offer to her friend David Veit, to provoke his comments, corrections, and further correspondence. Moritz’s letter is not only a text to be discussed, but a pretext for further letters. Are those other letters, then, without any crime?

Rahel’s lesson is indeed part of a lesson. If Rahel and Moritz established and exchanged their roles of student and teacher, Moritz’s lesson for Rahel becomes Rahel’s homework for David Veit. The Jewish student advises Rahel to write to him not only for his own entertainment and information, but for Rahel’s religious, social, individual

¹⁵. For a discussion of the relationship between psychoanalysis and pedagogy, see Shoshana Felman, “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,” Yale French Studies, 65 (1982), 21-44. My use of the notion of a “psychoanalytic discourse” is largely indebted to this essay. In a more general discussion of Rahel’s letters, Kay Goodman described not only the need of a psychoanalytical reading of Rahel’s letters, but also parallels between her theory of writing and Lacan’s concept of language: Kay Goodman, “Poesis and Praxis in Rahel Varnhagen’s Letters,” New German Critique, 27 (1982), 129-139.
emancipation. Here, again, we are dealing with a “family affair.” Her letters are subject to his corrections, his laboriously acquired model of a German text. Moritz has lacked a pencil, but Rahel seems to lack style. Not only her intellectual argument is subjected to Veit’s judgment, her narrative itself becomes a test for social acceptability.

The letter had developed in the 18th century into a highly artistic form with many conventions; if “naturalness” became a desired attribute in writing, it had to follow certain rules. The writing heroines of many epistolaroy novels may confirm for us the fact that women were allowed to use this literary form, even if it was not acceptable for them to write much else.16 The report of family affairs was, indeed, a woman’s realm, and, following a dichotomy of head and heart, the letters could expose the emotions of those women who, as Rahel would claim of herself, lacked the opportunities of the head: the truthfulness of the heart served as an alternative aim for the display of education, Bildung.

Although Rahel often complains of her ignorance, she did receive instruction. Her letters to David Veit are filled with reports about lessons — English, French, waltz dancing — as well as autodidactic attempts to master classical literature and philosophy.17 But Rahel the educational philosopher is a difficult student. She describes her thoughts and feelings in a language full of exclamation marks, peculiar twists, and foreign words; instead of following the guidelines for epistolary decorum and stylistic form, Rahel simulates an oral communication. Her style offers an emancipation quite different from Veit’s assimilation to German literature. Venturing into German and French from her native Yiddish, the languages themselves merge one into the other, and they produce a foreign realm that has to be conquered again and again. Under her self-cut pen, the Latin alphabet itself turns into an anarchistic rabble against her own Prussian patriotism. She writes to

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17. See especially the first volume of the Briefwechsel. Rahel did not only provide the opportunity for others — Fichte, Humbold, Schlegel — to write lectures. Rahel’s account corrects, indeed, Percy Matenko’s belief in Rahel’s complaints, see “Ludwig Tieck and Rahel Varnhagen: A Re-Examination,” Leo Baek Institute Year Book, XX (1975), 225-246. For a discussion of women’s education and reading during this period, see Rolf Engelsing, Der Bürger als Leser (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974). Compared with other bourgeois women of her period, Rahel may have had the advantage of being free to transgress the concepts of “Christian behavior” with her reading, exactly by virtue of her own position as a social and religious outsider.
Fouqué: "I know quite well that I am writing to you things that are worth reading; but my words, and yours! Like exercised soldiers [exer- 
zirte Soldaten] in beautiful uniforms, everything of yours is standing there; and everything of mine, like an unruly mob of rebels with sticks [zusammengelaufene Rebellen mit Knittlen)! — And, I am not changing. Because I cannot change, and I do not understand why."18 Rahel’s early teacher David Veit advises her in reading lists and methods of reading and writing, advises her on the Etikette of answering letters, cutting pens and paper, closing and addressing envelopes. Rahel, in turn, complains that she cannot pay any attention to the way the words are structured and formed while she is trying to grasp their sense.19 Her new knowledge of Etikette does not reform her writing: "How can one know so exactly, so punctually, so thoroughly, so aesthetically I might almost say, what beautiful writing is, and still not change oneself . . .?"20 Her complaints are not followed by her improvements. Veit’s preach- ing and Rahel’s practice diverge because Rahel insists on her own for- mulations and vocabulary: "By the way, sir, I will use the word “thing” [Ding] and “enjoyment” [Genuss] as often as I want. Two charming words! What does it concern you! The enjoyment of every thing at its proper time, is some-thing that is permissible enjoyment, and there- fore a full one, because an enjoyment in itself is already a pleasure, and therefore, the right one is a beautiful thing. There, with your authority! nobody can command me! I am not such a th...g! and you should not have the e...t of forbidding me words!!"21

Rahel’s and David Veit’s correspondence acquires a peculiar nature. David Veit — like Rahel’s later censor Varnhagen — corrects her letters for public readings, but Rahel finds Veit’s handwriting in turn unread- able and sends his letters back for further explanation. She also advises him in the correction of a poem, or in his drafts of letters to his benefac- tors, and asks him — as she would ask later correspondents — to answer her letters in the proper order: question after question.22 The

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19. See Rahel’s letter to David Veit, November 18, 1793, Buch des Andenkens, I, pp. 64-65.
21. Letter to David Veit, November 17, 1794 (the letter was begun on November 15). Briefwechsel II, p. 17.
22. See, for example, Rahel’s letter to David Veit written March 11, 1794 (the letter was begun on March 10), in which Rahel writes again about the tasks of education. Briefwechsel, p. 203. Compare Rahel’s letter to Fouqué, September 14, 1809. Buch des Andenkens, I, p. 441.
roles of teacher and student seem again reversed. It is therefore not surprising that one may have trouble reading in any conventional way about the woman Rahel in her letters. Although she repeatedly states and deplores her social limitations as a woman, Goethe suspected Varnhagen as the woman and Rahel as the man on the occasion of the anonymous public presentation of their opinions on Goethe’s writings. Turning anti-pedagogy into the pedagogy of conversation itself, Rahel seems to derive strength from her weakness, from the fact that if anything would be masterful, it would be the way in which she would put her questions, write about herself while effacing herself as a person. Rahel wonders about her position: “That’s peculiar about me; normally, authors are visited, I am a wretched reader, and the writers are calling on me. — Really, I believe that I understand the art of being silent; with the pen like others skillfully with their mouth! —”

Rahel’s defensive twists on the use of enjoyment — Genuss — seem to provide a successful seduction: further letters, and pleasure for her correspondent. Veit answers Rahel’s resistance by reading her position as that of a teacher whom he is able to accept. He suspects that Rahel’s thoughts may indeed have found an adequate representation in her writing; the absence of art may be an artifice of some sort. If Rahel’s concept of truthfulness centers on the definition of herself as an individual — “I am as unique as the greatest figure [Erscheinung] of this earth!” — Rahel’s search for her origin becomes the establishment of an original language. Veit is willing to accept Rahel’s part in an act of creation, and draws evidence from Rahel’s confession of her action, her deed of writing: “Do you believe that I don’t think about it, when I am writing to you, how you immediately, while reading it, without even wanting to do it, put my periods in place, those that I am turning around? and how you place everything in order? but to be fair to myself: sometimes, I know myself, that they are not correct, but I leave them, as they are, to insert a certain expression, and to give them a

23. Varnhagen had shown a transcript of his and Rahel’s letters to Goethe, before publishing “Über Goethe. Bruchstücke aus Briefen” in July 1812 in Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände. The change of gender roles has often been applied for a description of Rahel’s private life as well. Most of the biographers describe Varnhagen — like Rahel’s earlier male friends — as weak recipients of her intellectual favors; see for example Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen. Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik, (Munich: Piper, 1959). Clara Malraux’s Rahel, ma grande soeur. Un salon Littéraire à Berlin au temps du romantisme (Paris: Ramsay, 1980) provides an exception; both studies are, however, as much studies about their authors as they are about Rahel.


physiognomy, the one which I would like them to have, and to give something in the same way in which I am taking it.”²⁶ Veit, learning from Rahel, regards her style as necessarily displaced, “verrückt.”²⁷ Odd grammatical phrases or orthographic inconsistencies turn for him into the advantage of representing a spontaneity and new insights, giving license to linguistic puns while offering the image of straightforwardness.²⁸

A few months after Moritz’s Untat, Rahel complains to Veit of a similiar crime, as she describes a conversation that seems to consist of misdirected questions and answers whose origin she cannot explain. This conversation itself is now presented to Veit as a confession, a telling tale about Rahel’s character: “In many cases, I am surprisingly calm and patient, and I have also managed to get rid of many of my ways that I could not stand; but in one thing, I have not managed to make any progress, to rid myself of the irresistible passion to answer misdirected [verkehrte] questions — and especially, and nearly always, if they are concerning myself — always with misdirected [verkehrte] answers, even if only by a facial expression, or by a repressed or forced smile, in short, by nothing [durch ein Nichts], but I have to give them. It never occurs to me, and it is also not my pleasure, to make a fool of somebody (as one says), as much as people are blaming me for doing this and are afraid of me, but if somebody — as people are unfailingly doing it at times — runs into my net (mir ins Garn läuft), then it happens, that I wind my thread a bit better around him, just because of the improbability, also, it always seems to me just as impolite to lead him back. I cannot do it, in all seriousness, because I try to be polite; and I still cannot call myself totally unsusceptible [unangefacht] at comical occasions. Is this a crime?”²⁹ In reading Rahel’s letters as honest representations of herself, Veit may have already gone into the trap of their special texture, Rahel’s Garn. This new confession seems to contradict her confessional style. Rahel’s displaced style may be the answer to Veit’s displaced questions.

Questions and answers have again switched places in this interrogation. Rahel does not want to discuss the status of the possibly damaging

²⁸. See Veit’s letter to Rahel, November 11, 1793, Briefwechsel, I, pp. 50-1; and Rahel’s answer to Veit, November 18, 1793, Briefwechsel, I, pp. 58-60.
²⁹. Letter to Veit, December 11, 1794 (the letter was begun on December 10). Buch des Andenkens, I, p. 123; Briefwechsel, II, pp. 34-35. See the continuation of her reflection on herself, Buch des Andenkens, I, p. 125ff.
questions, but the origin of her answers. They insist on and carry on questions without re-direction, and Rahel’s own self appears like the “reverse” question of unknown origin that provokes further excursions into language.

Rahel’s negation, much like Moritz’s, shows the Nichts, the silence as an action, a holding back of information, something that Rahel — like Moritz — knows and does not know. Her crime is represented as a possibly irreparable general flaw of character, with no apparent origin, only the apparent linguistic effect. Like a true analyst, Rahel puts herself again into Moritz’s position, replacing his, however, with that of a nameless generalization, the partner of any conversation in which she could be involved. Thus, with her questions about the questions of a stranger, she probes her own unconscious refusal to speak the “truth.” Moritz’s and Rahel’s points of resistance seem similar from her perspective. Rahel, indeed, repeats the question Moritz was supposed to ask — “Is this a crime?” — and cannot answer either. Fear and shame or embarrassment, Schreck and Verlegenheit, had been what Rahel wanted to prevent in the previous interrogation, as the damaging effect of questions on Moritz’s character. Fear and shame seem to be evoked again, in the second interrogation, this time to find out who she is, and why she acts as she does. And there can be no further result for her than answering the questions shamefully, and with guilt, following the rules of a language that seem to constitute her character itself. How can one find, and ask, the proper questions, those that do not damage but construct and represent? The urge to speak on and the urge to be silent, the urge to represent herself and the whim to lead others and herself astray co-exist and can, indeed, never be separated. Rahel can do nothing else but quote the conversation. Is this then all — and maybe we can now fully understand her Schreck and Verlegenheit — that Rahel can know about herself? Is there no innocence to save and to protect beyond these words?

Rahel may have already been more involved with Moritz’s deed than her previous, playful interrogation made us believe, an involvement hidden by the texture — Garn — of her own narrative. In which way do her answers also speak about herself? Rahel’s play with questions and answers there has shifted the question as to who she is toward the margin — this is exposed by the second, unsatisfactory dialogue — in the same way as Moritz’s Untat — the act of writing “Levin” — has ceased to be an issue in her linguistic exercise. Her reflections on didacticism do not center on what Moritz has been writing, and Rahel in this way seems to return his letters to their marginal position on the wall upstairs. By turning the interrogation into a play, and into a play on truth, Rahel indeed follows Moritz’s trick or crime in her act of re-
direction. Not the word — “Levin” — seems arguable, but its place. Moritz writes it, however, on the wall of the upstairs corridor — Flur — that serves as the boundary of, as well as entrance way to Rahel’s own room, the place of the salons in which she is known to tell her own special truths, the truths of the attic, Dachstubenwahrheiten. We may, already, have gone into Rahel’s trap by having overlooked the fact that Moritz’s writing was, indeed, directed and addressed to her.

Moritz has sent a peculiar letter to his sister; it is nothing else but her name. Rahel, at this time, is also known as “die Levin.” She has acquired the name, which is her father’s first name, as a last name according to Jewish tradition; it is a name that belongs to the interrogating older brother as well as the younger one. The name seems to establish in itself the origin that is so much at stake in the interrogation, replacing the question of the author of the written word with the establishment of the father in the name: in both cases, history is sought after and introduced. The name indicates a family bond between the sender and the recipient of the written word, a certain shared knowledge. Moritz’s message is not only a public advertisement, but has a meaning that does not seem to need any interpretation.

By turning the anecdote into an educational lesson, Rahel herself produces a narrative that avoids any comment on the name. Recording a process of letter writing is quite different from reflecting on the meaning of the written message. The name Levin, however, her name and a name that is not only hers, is also an example of involuntary ownership, the example of a possession from which Rahel will struggle to free herself because it is in no way able to represent her. Signing her letters just with “Rahel,” Rahel does not, for example, like her correspondent’s formality in signing “David Joseph Veit.” The formality of “Levin,” however, consists for Rahel increasingly as a tie to that other, rejected education, represented by the inheritance of her father’s name. Here, then, considering the name, we see a further irony of Rahel’s question, of how one (the innocent child) should know about one’s crime.

The act of writing is also the act of writing the name of authority, the male, the father, the Jewish “origin,” with which Rahel is not, and can never be, quite at ease. Rahel will change her last name to Robert, following the initiative of her brothers, and, upon her baptism shortly before her wedding with Varnhagen, follow the general custom of changing her first name as well. With “Friederike Antonie,” Rahel

30. See, for example, Rahel’s letter to Gustav von Brinckmann, end of May, 1800. Buch des Andenkens, I, p. 436.
replaces her first name with one reminiscent of another father figure, Frederick the Great, who signifies for Rahel the new Germany and Jewish emancipation. Changing her name from Rahel Levin to Rahel Robert to Friederike von Varnhagen has been a symbolic step from the Jewish bourgeoisie to gentile — not quite established — aristocracy. The change of her name seems, indeed, to parallel Rahel’s local changes, her search for placement first dramatized by her move to the attic.

That Rahel’s “true” being cannot be stated once and for all, is not just a matter of social history, as her educational lesson has shown. It provided Rahel, however, with that privileged position on the margin that would make her experience obvious. If Rahel anticipated a psychoanalytic discourse in her attempts to establish herself, she seems already to have been “born” into the position of an analyst. Rahel is a bourgeois non-bourgeois, a Jew critical of Jews, a woman, and even this in an unsatisfactory way: “With the opinion, that I should be a queen (no reigning one) or a mother: I have to experience that I am just nothing. No daughter, no sister, no lover, no woman, not even a citizen.” What she regarded as her “misdirected” fate was her recognition of this negative, or marginal position, a position that in turn could only establish itself in a conversation as a psychoanalytic discourse: “Proper truths of the attic [Dachstuben-Wahrheiten] he [Prince Louis Ferdinand] will hear. Until now, he only knew Mariane, but she is baptized, and a princess, and Frau von Eibenberg, so what does that mean?!” If Moritz’s letters on the wall are an attempt to reveal, to place his sister as well as himself, his answers as well as Rahel’s questions in the later interrogation repeat the rules of Rahel’s salon. While in search of a saving function of language, conversation provided Rahel with a doubtful cure. Maybe one would really have to reinvent language, so that it could serve as a means of emancipation. But Rahel’s search for placement always provokes displacement; the first question seems always already to turn against itself and produce an automatism of language on its own. Rahel’s displaced style, her verrückter Stil, leads her to think about the madness of language itself.

Instead of the search for the author of the name, Rahel poses the search for the origin of language: what makes her write and say these

32. Varnhagen himself changes, avoids Rahel’s name in the Andenken, he writes “unsern Namen [our name]” instead of “den Namen Levin [the name Levin]” in the “reprint” of the letter. Scurla’s biography of Rahel’s life offers the most detailed study of her change of names and places.


contrary words? Which truth can Rahel's turning and returning answers offer? And can Veit, or Varnhagen, or we, ever pose the correct questions? Trying to open her heart, Rahel places these contrary answers beyond any linguistic consciousness: "There exists a play of colors — I will call it such — in our breast, that is so fragile, that, as soon as we want to utter it [sobald wir es aussprechen wollen], it turns into a lie; I see the words, when they have worked themselves out of my heart, as if they are floating in the air; and they form a lie; I am searching for others, and the time passes by; and those, too, would not have been any better! This hesitation prevents me from speaking. — A sensation is beautiful as long as it does not become history/narrative [Geschichte]..."³⁵ David Veit can accept Rahel's language only in explaining it as a new convention. Rahel, on the other hand, relies on Veit's correction to reveal language as a lie, a narrative fiction, as hiding what she is hoping for — an extralinguistic truth. For Rahel, paradoxically, Moritz's denial of his deed has been more satisfactory than a possible confession. This paradox, as a displacement or sprain, Verrenkung, is evoked again in the description of herself as someone who is unable to find any proper place and therefore representation — Darstellung — at all. To describe herself as truth, Rahel has to describe herself as a reverse question: "This week, I invented what a paradox is. A truth, that has not yet found the space to present itself; that forcefully presses into the world, and breaks out with a sprain [mit einer Verrenkung hervorbracht]. Unfortunately, I am like this! — in this, there lies my death. —"³⁶ If skepticism about language may have been at the root of the idea of a non-linguistic, perfect communication called a language of sensibility, Rahel wants to test language, its Geschichte, through the dialogue. Language cannot escape its own narrative/history, but has constantly to be called into presence, be interrupted and exposed. It is constituting a "character" and losing it in its words: "Often, I read in this book; and then I feel, as if I were dead, and somebody else is reading it. —"³⁷ Instead of providing the passageway — Flur — for self-representation, language suffocates the self. Rahel's answer to this discovery is a

³⁵. Letter to her sister Rose, September 14, 1806 (the letter was begun September 13). Buch des Andenkens, I, p. 198.
³⁷. "Aus einem Schreibbuche," December 19, 1805. Buch des Andenkens, I, p. 280. Wilhelm von Humboldt's reaction to Rahel's letters has, for example, been similar to Veit's, reversing Rahel's note: "Ich kenne kein Buch, in welchem so wie in diesem kein Buchstabe ein toter ist. [I don't know any other book in which no letter is a dead letter, like in this one]". See Friedhelm Kemp, "Nachwort." In Rahel Varnhagen, Briefwechsel, I (Munich: Winkler, 1979), p. 398.
peculiar silence of the pen: a frantic attempt to gain life by writing thousands of letters, by producing, as she once formulated, “her life as a text.”

Words, Rahel is copying Saint-Martin, bury the living, and have constantly to be buried by those who are using them. Rahel, commenting on this quotation, does not read Saint-Martin’s vision of death as an end, but a “rest and beginning.” While Varnhagen is writing his Andenken as a Buch of biblical dimensions — Das Buch Rahel, as it was known — Rahel’s own testament displays a mystic belief, an urge to communicate and to avoid any enterrement: “The main thing in regard to my death Varnhagen has promised me upon his honor; namely, to put me without any finery into a cheap coffin, one that has no nailed down lid or a lid that would be in the least difficult to open: the cover of my coffin should be made out of glass, if only the smallest pieces of green glass, and that’s even what I want. The coffin itself will not be buried in the earth, but should be put into a little house — be it ever so tiny — just like the very unimportant little guardhouses they have for buildings, or the like — or a souterrain-room, or another such place rc.”

Rahel’s means of overcoming limitations turn her into an object of exhibit, she is exposed behind glass. Her architectural plans mark her place as a room on the ground floor, too low for respectable living, but an attic room from the perspective of the dead. It resembles, finally, nothing else but a guard house, Wachthäuschen, a building like a corridor, in which one could look out for the traffic of possible signs to come.