

Return to “0”: A Lacanian Reading of Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine Goes”

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None, nothing, nought . . . zero—a basic concept in mathematics, yet it took the Hindus more than two hundred years after the establishment of a standardized system of cardinal numbers to conceive and include the notation “0.” Its function: to denote a *missing* numerical point (Boyer 235).

This note on the history of mathematics, albeit cursory, is instructive, for it underscores an interesting phenomenon: that the notion of *absence* arrives relatively late in human consciousness. Whereas the “discovery” of the mathematical “0” was delayed only by two centuries, recognition of fundamental absence is still met with much psychological resistance elsewhere, particularly on the subject of identity.

As living creatures, we naturally apprehend ourselves and the world from the side of life—each of us as an individual (an “I”) living in the present. The designation of death as the undesirable other logically follows. It is precisely this universal corroboration of the precedence of presence over absence in our consciousness that Bachmann rejects by giving voice to the water-sprite Undine.

As an object of study, Undine has enjoyed a long tradition in German letters and philosophy since, at least, the late eighteenth century. Works by the Schlegel brothers, Goethe and Schelling attest to this fact. Yet, Bachmann’s appropriation of this water-sprite figure constitutes not an inheritance, but rather a break from tradition.¹ Instead of treating the encounter of the elemental spirit (Undine) and the human (Hans) in the traditional manner as a striving for the unification of the spiritual and the corporeal, she writes the entire short story as a monologue by Undine addressed to Hans and highlights the distance between them. The only

voice present in the text is not that of the human but of the other; the monologic discourse in Ingeborg Bachmann's "Undine Goes" lends voice not to life but to the death instinct.

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Immediately noticeable from Undine's discourse is the positing of the human "Hans"—generic and specific man—as an other ("You humans! You monsters! / You monsters named Hans" [171]).² Undine's "[going]" thus refers to her break with Hans and the symbolic order by which he lives.

Her main charge against Hans focuses on his need for stability/security/fixity (of habitat, finances, progeny). In Lacanian terms, this striving indicates the subject's effort to establish an ego-identity. For Lacan, the subject is never a unified being—an unfortunate condition explained by the mirror-stage metaphor whereby the subject-baby, while identifying with a *Gestalt* of his/her body in the mirror-image, also experiences a sense of alienation roused by the discord between an external visual unity and an internal sensory disjunction.³ The inherent contradiction in this primary identificatory process affects him/her for life: due to the instability of his/her ego, the human subject will forever strive for anchorage through anticipating his/her own image in the image of an other as well as through verbal representation. This aptly describes Hans's relationship to "woman."

In Undine's eyes, the two are partners in crime, collaborators in the ego-building project. Through mutual reinforcement, they create a separateness—"you with . . . your joint good-night conversations, those sources of new strength, of the conviction that you are right in your conflicts with the outside world" (174)—until each "individuates" to the extent of feigning a holistic personal identity. Thus, Undine complains of Hans: "You monsters with your phrases, you who seek the phrases of women so that you have all you need, so that the world is round [i.e. complete]" (174).

To cite the last statement as an instance of female subordination in a patriarchal order may prove to be a hasty conclusion. Recall the symbiotic dynamics of intersubjectivity: if Hans is master ("You who make women your mistresses and wives" [174]) and, at the same time, servant ("and let yourselves be made into their husband" [174]), then it would be safe to assume those dual positions for his symbolic counterpart as well. In fact, the co-opting of human woman into the symbolic order renders her an other to Undine.

The point of divergence lies in the issue of reproduction. While acknowledging women's biological and historical involvement in child-bearing, Undine rejects the possibility of pregnancy for herself, saying "I have no children by you [Hans] because I knew no questions, no demands, no caution, no intention, no future and did not know how to occupy a place in another life" (172). This remark can be understood in light of Undine's attitude towards the symbolic.

The three-way relationship between Undine, Hans, and Woman resembles an inverted Oedipal triangle: the appearance of the symbolic Woman of reproductive potential functions as a rival to Undine in seeking union with Hans. Hans's humanness would incline him towards Woman because of the mere possibility of immortality achieved through seminal propagation. In contrast, Undine's spirit harbors no such need; instead of undergoing the Oedipal trauma, she refuses complete accession to the place of Woman-Other in the symbolic. The seemingly brash inversion of the Oedipal triad should be forgiven when one realizes that sexual identity is irrelevant here, for Lacan has declared that there is no essence of Woman (and conversely no essence of Man).⁴ With the power of reproduction, Woman is in a position to satisfy the desire of Hans-mother. In other words, Woman possesses the Lacanian phallus.

The subject is the issue. Even if the common experience of pregnancy is, as Kristeva would have it, akin to the "radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject" (211), the situation demands an *a priori* unified subject of Woman from which to split. More importantly, a pregnancy ensures for Hans progeny—offspring of his flesh, bearer of his name, extension of himself—and thus, immortality.

However, for Undine, this whole notion of personal ego-identity becomes irrelevant. Her lack of demands, caution, intention, or future (172) attests to a *non-lack*: her rejection of the Law of the Father-(Woman), desirelessness. There are no questions in her life, for she possesses an insight—an insight that lifts the veil of the Eleusinian phallus and exposes the myth of the ideal ego. Without such an "ego," how, pray, can she "occupy a place in another life" (172)?

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In opposition to the symbolic, Undine declares the following:

I love the water, its dense transparency, the green in the water and the dumb creatures (I too shall soon be equally dumb), my hair among them, in it, the just water, the indifferent mirror that forbids me to see you differently. The wet frontier between me and me.
 . . . (172)

What she proposes, of course, belongs to the imaginary order: the spontaneous fusion and *jouissance* of a reflexive mirror-stage unity, but without the alienation.

To perceive a binary opposition at this point seems logical: spirit vs. human, the pre-verbal vs. a linguistic culture, the imaginary vs. the symbolic. However, on this issue, Ritta Jo Horsley has already noted a problem. Reading the text in light of French feminist theory, Horsley remarks that:

despite its multiple deconstructions of the traditional material, ["Undine Goes"] never explicitly challenges the dualism that pervades it. . . . The oppositions of culture and nature; rationality and feeling; logical discourse and poetic utterance; social order and ecstasy of freedom; and masculine and feminine are assumed as given. . . . But so long as the underlying dichotomous structure it-self is not questioned, our thinking, like Undine's, will remain caught in the "logic" of these categories, and we will be faced with unacceptable choices. (234)

Interestingly enough, Horsley's remark seems to have been anticipated by Bachmann, for Undine commits to no final choice. Instead, the water sprite repeatedly leaves her water habitat "to rise to the surface again, to walk through a clearing, to see him and to say 'Hans.' To begin at the beginning" (172). This repetition—her oscillation between the imaginary and the symbolic—subverts the seemingly apparent dichotomy and undermines all dualistic interpretations of the text. To understand the situation calls for the introduction of a third order: the real.

According to Lacan, one way to describe the real is that which pokes a hole in the symbolic. Hans's complacent life (as he faithfully strokes his wife's hair, his children's hair, opening the newspaper and looking through the bills or turning up the radio volume [173]) is everywhere interrupted by "the note of anguish, the cry from afar, the ghostly music" which beckons him to "Come! Come! Come just once!" (173). This call (from Undine) to the water, at the same time, exposes the truth about Hans:

You have never been in agreement with yourselves, with all that which is fixed and laid down. You were secretly pleased about every tile that blew away, every intimation of collapse. You enjoyed playing with the thought of fiasco, of flight, of disgrace, of the

loneliness that would have set you free from everything at present existing. (175)

If fixity is a symptom of one's desire to counteract a sense of lack by becoming an object of desire of an other, then Hans's momentary deviation implies a rejection of the possibility of wholeness. Here we are reminded of Undine's rejection of the Law of the Father and thus her refutation of the signification of the (veiled) phallus. The void behind the veil corroborates the death instinct. Therefore, what Lacan calls *manque-à-être* is, in fact, the real situation, and Undine's call is a call to death.

Knowledge is power—this is true even in the case of death. Whereas the wives and children were only able to “show . . . little bits of it at a time,” Undine taught Hans to recognize death and time, making it possible to issue concurrently the commands “Go death! And stand still, time” (176). The places on which Undine has sprinkled water “shall turn *green like graves*. So that finally they shall stay bright” (179 [emphasis added]). Bachmann deliberately subverts the symbolic signification of “green” by associating it with a signifier of death (“graves”). Hence, the true color of life is, in fact, the eternal color of death, as Omar Khayyam wrote in one of his *rubaiyat*: “I sometimes think that never blows so red / The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled.” Death, therefore, signifies not finality but rather totality—the infinite cycle of human existence: “the end that has no end” (177). In effect, death replaces the phallus as the transcendental signifier.

If Hans were to discard materiality and speak the truth:

then all the waters [would overflow] their banks, the rivers [would rise], the water-lilies [would blossom and drown] by hundreds, and the sea [would be] a mighty sigh, [beating, beating and running and rolling] towards the earth, its lips dripping with white foam. (177-78)

Hans's verbal command over Undine's imaginary aquatic space should not present a problem here. Indeed, if one day, by the power of speech, the Borromean ring of the symbolic should coincide with the imaginary and the real, the whole universe would tremble at the miraculous feat.

However, Hans succumbed to the symbolic order and “repented on church benches, before [his] wives, [his] children, [his] public” and brought Undine to the sacrifice (178). The “betrayal,” in fact, underscores the outcome of the contest between the real and reality (read: subjectivity). On the one hand, to privilege reality would mean concealing the truth of the illusory ego. On the other hand, to acknowledge the real—thereby rending the mask of subjectivity—could only lead to a

state of psychosis. In the end, Hans denies that he and Undine are of the same spirit and plays up his (symbolic) humanness to contrast against and to disavow Undine—that other “whose memory is inhuman” (178). The real, once again, becomes impossible.

Impossible, perhaps, but not destroyed. Since Lacan insists that the three Borromean knots are of equal size, equal weight, and enjoy equal relationship to each other, the real and the imaginary necessarily remain as long as the symbolic still operates. Divorce, therefore, is not an option. Nor can one simply exit from one order to enter another. Before Undine finally “goes,” she evokes again the imaginary aquatic realm where the material dissolves (so that she cannot put on the necklace of shells [181]) and entreats Hans—and us, the readers—to “Come, Just once. / Come” (181) to the water. In the face of Hans’s rejection, a desire is created that compels universal response. The general acknowledgement of the haunting allure of the ending to Bachmann’s text reveals our psychological propensity to desire the desire of the other. What might transpire from this mutual reflection? According to Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen:

if Desire “recognizes itself” in another Desire, this happens only to the extent that the latter “reveals” to desire its own nonidentity to itself—or, if you will, it happens because the other’s Desire does not “reveal” anything to Desire; it reveals Desire’s own nothingness. Therefore, this mirror does not reflect anything—and is thus no longer a mirror, but rather a hole, a void, a dizzying, vertiginously distressing escape from all “self-consciousness.” (92)

Recall that Lacan’s real order is that which pokes a hole in the symbolic. Will we recognize our desire or will we resist Undine’s call to death?

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“Undine Goes” contains an interesting twist-in-tone towards the end when the water-sprite reverses her reprimanding discourse to commend Hans: “in spite of everything, your talk was good, your wondering, your zeal and your renunciation of the whole truth, so that the half is spoken, so that light falls on the one half of the world that you just had time to perceive in your zeal” (179). Through the power of speech, Hans proffers explanations of all phenomena, giving a semblance of mastery even though, in effect, the linguistic signifiers—“number games and word games, dream games and love games” (180)—serve only to defer the real. Yet, Undine tells Hans, “. . . you know that you are striving against your silence, and yet you go on striving. That is perhaps to be praised” (179).

In spite of the sacrificial ordeal, she expresses sympathy for Hans's *méconnaissance*.

While recognizing that people live in conscious or unconscious fear of that real other that is death, Lacan insists that the death instinct is, in fact, "the attractive 'zero' around which the subject gravitates" (Lemaire 167). It is perhaps for this reason that we the readers (we, Hans?) are so easily enticed by Undine's lyrical discourse, in spite of the fact that she is the voice of our death instinct. Moreover, by casting her in a subordinate position—as the sacrifice of the symbolic social contract—Bachmann decreases the threat of death. Barely bearing resemblance to the mode of the Grim Reaper, Undine's gestures come across more as "invitations" to join her underwater, with the option to decline.

But, of course, the only alternative to acceptance is for us to misrecognize the call. Hans's effort to "sacrifice" Undine is essentially an attempt to kill death—a futile endeavour. For Undine is the true immortal, the death instinct that will forever partake of our psychological constitution. As much as language defers the real, it is also the only register through which the real can be known. Thus, even when she "goes" underwater, (even when she has declared that "there will be no clearing" [181] where they might meet), "the name is still there, propagating itself underwater, because [she] cannot stop crying it out, Hans, Hans..." (171). We have returned to the beginning of the story. Undine's law—the law of death—will continue to haunt. The end has no end. . . .

Notes

1. For an interesting discussion of the tradition of Undine in German letters and philosophy as well as Bachmann's break from that tradition, see Renate Delphendahl, "Alienation and Self-Discovery in Ingeborg Bachmann's 'Undine geht.'"
2. From here on, all references to Bachmann's "Undine Goes" will be by page number only.
3. See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."
4. See Jacques Lacan, "Dieu et la jouissance de la femme."

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