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## “[W]o das Unnachahmliche das Nachahmbare verschlingt”. Ingeborg Bachmann’s poem ‘Heimweg’ (another vampire lecture)

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“ein Gedicht wird gemacht, ein Gedicht wird geahnt, gebraut, gebaut,  
montiert, auch bei uns” (Bachmann 1978, iv, 182)

**I**ngeborg Bachmann’s poem “Heimweg” was written in 1955, published in *Merkur* in June 1956 and, later that year, included in her anthology *Anrufung des großen Bären*. At first sight, the text proffers a jumbled, but still quite traditional image of the vampire. However, the author seems to be aware of the shape-shifting nature of the monster, as a letter to Hans Werner Henze from New Year’s Eve 1955 reveals:

Gestern ein Gedicht beendet, das den schlichten Titel ‚Heimweg‘ trägt und von einem Vampir handelt, von dem ich Dir schon erzählt habe. D.h. ich habe Dir von einem Wesen erzählt, das man auf der Schulter hat und das immer lacht, wenn man etwas tut, ein Männchen oder ein Tier, weiss Gott. Bei mir ist es etwas anders im Gedicht, denn in unsren balkanesischen [!] Gegenden geht auch die Rede von dem Vampir, der einem das Blut aussaugt, niemand weiß, wie er ausschaut, ich denke, er nimmt die verschiedensten Gestalten an. (Bachmann/Henze 2004, 88–89; emphasis mine)

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1 Die hier vorgestellten Ausführungen sind eine Weiterentwicklung von Gedanken aus meinem Aufsatz „Dämon des Geschlechts“ (Ruthner 1998), aus dem ich als Erasmus-Austauschdozent 2001 in Ljubljana vortragen durfte: ein weiteres *prolegomenon* zu einer geplanten Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte des Vampir(ismu)s (cf. Ruthner 2005), das sich als *work in progress* versteht – läuft doch jede Interpretation von Bachmanns kleinem Vampirgedicht Gefahr, dass sich der/die Interpret/in daran die Zähne ausbeißt. In diesem Sinne danke ich auch Gail Newman (Williams College) für ihr anregendes Lektorat.

Hans Richard Brittnacher (1994, 125) has already pointed out the openness of the vampire trope, its undead existence, so to speak, as a floating signifier (cf. Pütz 1992, 148). In Bachmann's polysemous poem, too, meaning is almost impossible to pin down with the Germanist's stake; however, scrutiny might reveal the emergence of features that herald a (feminist?) re-interpretation of the literary motif in question. According to Sigrid Berka, the vampire here

personifies the danger the poet faces between the paradoxical poles of her existence in writing, between the principle ‚Ich schreibe, also bin ich‘ (from Frankfurter Vorlesungen), and the last sentence from Malina (1971), ‚Es war Mord‘, which can be read as a reference to woman's destruction by man but also to writing as one of the most painful ways of dying (Berka 1997, 538).

Berka's very brief summary can serve as a thematic railing, as it were, for a close reading of the poem that will expose the crucial role of the vampire as tying together different issues. Like many others in the collection, the poem seems to be the attempt to articulate one of those "basic experiences" ("Grunderlebnisse[.], die nicht rationalisierbar seien") that are, according to Bachmann's own doctoral thesis, what poetry is about (Thiem 1972, 202). In this framework, the motifs used are concrete enough – but simultaneously, sufficiently general – to serve as the verbalization of a "Problemkonstante" (Bachmann 1978, iv, 193; cf. Thiem 1972) in Bachmann's oeuvre, or perhaps as its visualization: each poem is a "Schau-Platz" (Beicken 2009) of sorts, with a cryptic, yet allegorical (Garber 2004) set-up and, potentially, a deeper psychological and anthropological dimension (cf. Bothner 1986; Gerisch 1984).

The following analysis not only tries to synthesize the rare existing approaches to the poem, but also to discuss, complement and sharpen them in order to unveil Bachmann's poems as a private mythology in progress: a way of "Reading the Vampire" (Gelder 1994). By and large, "Heimweg" (quoted from Bachmann 1978, i, 103-4), which uses the rather conventional rhyme scheme *x-a-y-a* ("abgeschwächter Kreuzreim", Thiem 1972, 246), confronts the lyrical speaker with four semantic fields:

- 1) with the "way home" / the homecoming towards
- 2) a positively charged, animated nature (e.g. meadow, spring), and

- 3) with the chase / attack by a “vampire in the back” which
- 4) occurs at night, “shadowed by Saturn”.

The vampire in question is a faceless agent, only characterized by its actions, as in a dream (a “traumanalog gestaltete[r] Text”, as Steinhoff [2007, 33] calls it).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, its nocturnal attack on the lyrical speaker definitely shows traits of rape – a fact which is disturbingly juxtaposed to the initially benign fairy-tale-like imagery of ‘nature’ in the poem, as I hope to show.

The title motif of the “way home” is the situation dominating “Heimweg”. It links the text with other poems of the *Anrufung* anthology or the previous one, *Gestundete Zeit*, which is opened by the poem “Ausfahrt” (Bachmann 1978, i, 28).<sup>3</sup> Similar images of departure are the *movens* of poems of the *Bären* anthology: “Das Spiel ist aus” (i: 82), which starts with the lines “Mein lieber Bruder, wann bauen wir uns ein Floß / und fahren den Himmel hinunter?“, or the opening poem of the second section entitled *Landnahme* (i: 98). “Heimweg” is the reciprocal movement to these motifs of departure, although the “way home” does not reach its destination; it is rather an *attempt* that is ultimately aborted by the intervention of the vampire.

Although the mid-1950s, when Bachmann wrote her poems, were a period still under the influence of the *Heimkehrer-Problematik*, i.e. Hitler’s former soldiers coming home from the POW camps of the Allies, the “way home” here seems to refer to a very basic anthropological situation rather than to contemporary history. It seems to bear a more philosophical notion of coming and being (at) home than the concrete Austrian *Heimat* of the time; thus, at least at first sight, Heidegger and existentialist philosophy, Freud’s essay “Das Unheimliche” (1919/1974a), Lukács’s “transzendente Obdachlosigkeit”, or Bachelard’s (1978) notion of the house as a central cultural trope seem to be more evident contexts for its decoding than World War II and its aftermath.<sup>4</sup>

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2 In German, *Vampir* is gendered masculine, but the behavior of the “vampire” in this poem is more ambiguously gendered, as I will discuss below.

3 What also links “Ausfahrt” and “Heimweg” are similar metaphors using the number “1000” in both poems (cf. “tausendäugig”, Bachmann 1978, i: 28; “tausend Köpfe”, i: 104).

4 The only alternative to such a reading of the poem would be its questionable linkage to the biographical situation of Bachmann’s move to Italy at the time and the presumable alienation from Austria or Carinthia this might have caused.

After all, the “Heimweg” does not lead the lyrical speaker to a regular human settlement, like a city, but into a mythologically charged natural space, with the “Wiesenhaus” as a recommended destination that in itself deconstructs the opposition of (pre-existing) *nature* (meadow) and (built) *culture* (house). Hans Höller’s claim that this strange motif serves as “ironisches Bild für das Grab, für die Heimkehr in den kühlen Grund” (1993a, 84) cannot be backed with further evidence from the poem, since the lyrical speaker is instead prevented by the vampire’s (lethal?) intervention from going there. The “Wiesenhaus” rather seems to be a sort of “Horizont des Heils” “für das verfolgte [lyrische] Ich”, as Cassagnau writes (1995, 47) – an interpretation that is based on the utopian implications of ‘pure’ nature in this text embodied not only by the “Wiesenhaus”, but also by images of vegetation (“Schlüsselblume”/“Klee”, or the tenting halms around the talking spring).

Like many of Bachmann’s poems, “Heimweg” is organized along *polarity*, as for instance Thiem (1972, 177ff.) has observed. Here it is the opposition of an almost Romantic (talking and sheltering) nature and what stands against it: the vampire. The lyrical speaker tries to reach the former and is overwhelmed by the latter. Moreover, the opposition of living and writing seems to play an essential role here. The lyrical speaker stands liminally between these two positions, marked by the threshold, which in turn separates another polarity: unity vs ‘alienation’, to use a buzz word of the later postwar period:<sup>5</sup>

Bachmanns Texte bewegen sich im Spannungsfeld zwischen Polen der Trennung, in der sich die Logik der Gegensätze behauptet, und der Einheit, die in der Perspektive der Verschmelzung jegliche Differenz negiert. Im Zentrum beider Denkfiguren stehen Grenzen, in der ersten als unwiderrufliche Trennungslinie, in der letzten als Aufhebung jeder Trennungslinie. Wo die befestigte Grenze Ausschluß, Unvereinbarkeit, Vernichtung des je anderen bewirkt und damit Einheit herstellt, produziert die aufgehobene Grenze Einheit durch Integration und verzehrende Auslöschung des je anderen. (Schäffer 1995, 59; also see Thiem 1972, 18)

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5 To talk about alienation is even more legitimate because of the previous poem’s title ‘Entfremdung’.

Only the utopian retreat into the (lost?) unity of an asexual nature could forestall the vampire’s attack that is yet going to happen at the end of the poem: “Was mich retten könnte, / ist noch nicht verschenkt.” Following the advice of the talkative spring as a “Metapher[.] einer beredsamen Natur” (Weigel 2003, 153): “of pure flesh will die / who does not love it / [and] of intoxication and sadness / recounts only from hearsay.”

This (biblical) motif of the “purity of the flesh” (“Semantik der Reinheit”: Weigel 2003, 151; also see Thiem 1972, 137) connects “Heimweg” with the following poem in the anthology, “Nebelland” (Bachmann 1978, i, 105–106). According to Kurt Bartsch (1988, 71), the author repeatedly thematizes “das Austreten aus dem Geschlecht” (Bachmann 1978, ii, 113) as a desperate wish to extricate herself from passionate (read: destructive) relationships. Also in “Heimweg”, one could say that the lyrical speaker imagines the way out of the tragicomedy of gender and sexuality (as of a disparity in power?), but is then again subjected to these circumstances. It is the image of origin in the poem, namely the spring, which best expresses the utopian desire not to suffer from these conditions any longer in the future, but rather to report on them only (a kind of meta-literary anticipation of Bachmann’s later *Todesarten* project, a cycle of novels that recount the respective downfall of their female protagonists through “love” and history).

Many of the general observations that Hans Höller (1993) and Kurt Bartsch (1988) have established for Bachmann’s poetry are applicable to “Heimweg”: for example, the reversion to heterogeneous (cf. Thiem 1972, 197) myths, fairy tales, biblical motifs and nature as originary image sources, which Bachmann divests of their original context (Bartsch 1988, 63): “in utopischen Bildern und Zeichen [wird] das versammelt, was die Menschen in ihrer bisherigen Geschichte gegen die entfremdete Welt aufgeboten haben: Natur, Kunst, Religion, Volksmärchen und utopische Volksfeste, Liebe, Spiel und Arbeit” (Höller 1993, 55). Complementing this view, Cassagnau (1995, 47) has pointed to the “Sprechweise” of “Heimweg”, “die an den Ton der Ballade [...] erinnert;” the underlying traditions can be located in Post/Romanticism, and in the *naturmagische Lyrik* of the generation before Bachmann, particularly Oskar Loerke (1884–1941) und Wilhelm Lehmann (1882–1968).

But the poem also transcends this heritage. As Höller observes, the Austrian poet's second volume of verse consistently tends to be the first manifestation of an awareness and examination of gender roles:

eine Problematik, die sich [...] auf rationale und emotionale Komponenten des Ich erstreckt, auf die Gestaltung psychoanalytischer Über-Ich-Motive [...], die das gespannte Verhältnis von Trieb und Ich-Instanzen verbalisieren, oder auf die lebensgeschichtliche und menschengeschichtliche Identitätsproblematik, die vor allem in Tier- und Märchenmotiven versinnbildlicht wird. (Höller 1993, 43)

The poems thus contain, continues Höller, "Spuren der Leiden" about the existing divisions of male and female, of „Bewußtsein und ungeschiedener Natureinheit", and of "Denken und Sinnlichkeit" (Höller 1993, 44; see also Beicken 1992, 100). In keeping with these points, any interpretation of "Heimweg" certainly would have to situate its theme of (sexual) violence, which is traditionally stored in the vampire trope, within a later general theme pertinent to Bachmann, namely love as "Krankheit zum Tode" (Peter Hamm), as murder, or even as execution of the loving woman by man-kind (cf. Bartsch 1988, 72; Bothner 1986, 302; Jurgensen 1981, 51). This theme would be embodied by the assault of the vampiric pursuer on the lyrical speaker, which is depicted as a scene of disguised rape on the meadow, on the nightly way home: "Mit der Kraft des Übels, / das mich niederschlug, / weitet seine Schwinge / der Vampir im Flug [...] / deck mir, Nacht, die Augen / mit dem Narrenhut."<sup>6</sup>

Here the motif of the night (cf. Vilain 1993) comes full circle since it occurs at the beginning and the end of the poem; however, it seems to be rather ambiguous. Whereas the "Nacht aus Schlüsselblumen / und verwunschnem Klee" in the first two lines almost evokes the sort of 'enchanted night' of the Romantics,<sup>7</sup> the dark period eventually also seems to refer to

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6 It is possible to see these lines as a counterpart to Bachmann's poem "Das erstgeborene Land" (Bachmann 1978, i, 119–20), where "die Viper mich an[sprang]"; but here the lyrical speaker obviously manages to suck the snake's poison out of the wound ("Preß den Mund auf den Biß!"), since the reported result is: "Da fiel mir Leben zu".

7 There is clear intertextuality with Joseph von Eichendorff's famous poem "Mondnacht", which is also about homecoming and wings spread: „Und meine Seele spannte / Weit ihre Flügel aus, / Flog durch die stillen Lande, / Als flöge sie nach Haus.“

“der wüsten Nacht- und Schreckseite der Welt, die sich über die Menschen fremd hinwegsetzt” (Beicken 1992, 108), their “Bedrängnis” (105) in a word. This is the realm where, last but not least, the vampire dwells.

The desired motion of writing follows the attempted “way home” (back) into the sought unity with nature, but this retreat is in vain: the vampire is quicker, marks the lyrical speaker with its sign and fells them. The Self remains, so to speak, the hapless dupe, when its eyes are covered by the fool’s cap, the “Narrenhut”. This particular motif also corresponds with a poem from Bachmann’s unpublished works (no. 222), entitled *Narrenlieder* (Fool’s Songs), which proceeds with a similar figurativeness (cf. Bachmann/Henze 2004, 503) to verbal counter-aggression:

Heute muss ich fort / und einen roten Hut tragen  
Feuer legen an die Welt [...]  
Heute muss ich fort  
und schreckliche Lieder singen...  
und das[s] keine Liebe ist  
und kein Weg und kein Ziel. (qtd. after Bothner 1986, 315)

“The predatory male remains [...] the obsession, which is insuperable”, writes the psychotherapist Susanne Bothner (ibid.), referring to Bachmann’s despondent nihilism. And for the portrayal of this obsessive moment, the vampire plot in “Heimweg” seems to be the suitable medium of expression.

However, the question arises whether this vampire in the poem can, in fact, be really identified as a man? Or is it just the male article “der” in German that makes us think that way, along with the naïve identification of the lyrical speaker with the female author? What if the monster is just a fantastic cipher for internal psychic processes? If this is indeed the case, then the vampire could, in accordance with Hans Höller (1993), embody parts of the psyche such as the instinctual *id* or patriarchal *superego* (telling the ego ‘what to do’). In any case, this approach identifies the function of motifs, objects, and characters as ‘eversion’ of the lyrical *Ich*, which in Bachmann’s oeuvre becomes a kind of carnival parade<sup>8</sup> (cf. the “Narrenhut”) of

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8 Cf. Bachmann 1978, iv, 219: “Als wäre eine Fastnacht für das Ich veranstaltet, in der es bekennen und täuschen, sich verwandeln und preisgeben kann, dieses Ich, dieses Niemand und Jemand, in seinen Narrenkleidern.”

the fragmented ego. Here what Freud says about the “primitive man” would also be applicable:

Die Geister und Dämonen sind, wie an anderer Stelle angedeutet wurde, nichts als Projektionen seiner Gefühlsregungen; er macht seine Affektbesetzungen zu Personen, bevölkert mit ihnen die Welt und findet nun seine inneren Vorgänge außer seiner wieder, ganz ähnlich wie der geistreiche Paranoiker Schreber [...]. (Freud 1974b, 380)

Thus, again, in the poem the question arises of *who speaks*, and what happens to the lyrical speaker after the vampire’s attack: is s/he dead – or un-dead? This is intrinsically connected with the question of what the vampire really represents. In any case, one can say that s/he/it becomes a universal metaphor of the obstacles that prevent the lyrical speaker from returning to the “Wiesenhäuser”. But which interpretations are left, apart from seeing it as a sort of poetical sneak-preview of the *Todesarten-Projekt* in nuce, or as a cipher for abuse along the lines of Aspöckl’s (2007) interpretation of *Drei Wege zum See* (both of which have the flaw that Bachmann’s vampire is not explicitly male enough), or as an externalized controlling “Ich-Instanz”?

One additional viable way of reading the vampire is as an allegory of (female) writing, or, along the lines of Elisabeth Bronfen (1992), as a symbolical self-sacrifice of the woman writer. This approach has already been brought forward by Dagmar Kann-Coomann (1988), who focuses on “[d]as gefährliche Geschäft” des Schreibens (Bachmann 1978, i, 47): “Schreiben ist [...] eine ambivalente Erfahrung, ermöglicht Leben um den Preis des Lebens [...]” (Kann-Coomann 133). Bachmann thus thematizes in “Heimweg” “die ambivalente Erfahrung des Schreiben-Müssens” (ibid.): “Schreiben ist der Vampir, der kraft des geraubten Lebens zum Flug ansetzt.” (135) Accordingly, the “1000 Köpfe, Freund- und Feindgesicht” would then refer to the pluri-individuality of writing – fiction as putting yourself into somebody else’s shoes and creating a literary character in the process – or even to the *Literaturbetrieb* as a whole, its players, critics, adversaries. Similarly, Hans Höller (1993, 65) has pointed to the notion that “Schreiben wird seit der frühen Lyrik Ingeborg Bachmanns mit Dunkelheit und Tod verknüpft”. Following Foucault, Höller



goes on to state that “Schreiben ist heute an das Opfer gebunden, selbst an das Opfer des Lebens; an das freiwillige Auslöschen, das in den Büchern nicht dargestellt werden soll, da es im Leben des Schriftstellers selbst sich vollzieht” (ibid.)

The reference to Saturn, the planet of melancholia and ill fortune, is probably the most enigmatic line of the poem, to which Walter Fritz’s remark applies: “Man stößt auf Zeilen, zu denen sich kaum ein Zugang findet, die verschlossen bleiben” (Fritz 1995, 29) – perhaps just like the doors of the “Wiesenhau”? Particularly the rather counter-common-sensical “breaking of the ring” mentioned here demands much from a potential analyst of the poem; Kann-Coomann’s (1988, 135) interpretation, for instance, is not convincing: “Glücksgott Saturn, der Herr des goldenen Zeitalters, (...) zerbricht angesichts solchen Fluges den Ring als Symbol seiner Bindung bzw. Verbannung auf die Inseln der Seligen und beansprucht neue Macht.”

Instead, a formula that Bachmann, in her *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (1959-60), used for a particular kind of intertextuality might be applicable: “wo das Unnachahmliche das Nachahmbare verschlingt” (Bachmann 1978, iv, 213), meaning an intertextual linkage, where the semantic transfer is partially switched off or disturbed by a certain combination of elements. In this vein, the vampire in “Heimweg” manages simultaneously to obscure and to display the problem of gender in his hazy masculinity and final attack. The literary bloodsucker not only provides a plot of gender and violence, he acts as a trope of ambivalence and alienation, and ultimately becomes an allegory of writing. The vampire thus reveals as much as ‘he’ obscures (in a cryptically mythological way) Bachmann’s central concern: the (gendered) identity of the writing Self and the lethal obstacles and disasters it experiences – a topic that is later to be discussed much more explicitly in her prose works.

The vampire thus reveals as much as s/he (or it?) covers up, like the night that covers the lyrical speaker’s eyes with a fool’s cap and sends *us* on an uncanny way home into the world we know. The undead is a protean creature, as literature is in the almost unlimited act of its production, reception, and reproduction of meaning, following another remark from Bachmann’s *Vorlesungen*:

So ist die Literatur, obwohl und sogar weil sie ein Sammelsurium von Vergangenen und Vorgefundenem ist, immer das Erhoffte, das Erwünschte, das wir ausstatten aus dem Vorrat nach unserem Verlangen – so ist sie ein nach vorne geöffnetes Reich von unbekanntem Grenzen. (Bachmann 1978, iv, 258).

There might be some validity to the formulation which the well-known Swiss writer Adolf Muschg, being the author of a vampire novel himself,<sup>9</sup> makes regarding the cathartic moment of vampirism and its principle of literary reproduction. It holds true in regard to the liminal<sup>10</sup> bloodsucking creature lurking at the threshold of the “Wiesenhau” in “Heimweg”:

Trivial ist der Vampir nur als literarische Figur. Als reales Bedürfnis überwindet er alle Hüter der Schwelle und holt sich im Dunkeln, was er braucht. Wir selbst wollen's dann nicht gewesen sein. Dafür haben wir ja ihn: als blinden Fleck unserer Wahrnehmung. (Muschg 1994, 439)

Muschg regards the vampire as blind spot of our perception, a sort of ghost image on our retina in the ‘shadow’ of our identity; a mask of the Other that is capable of morphing into almost anything (and then disappears).

It has been the particular merit of female authors from Bachmann onwards to transform that vampire into an allegory of writing, or of writing women, respectively, as can be shown decades down the road, in Elfriede Jelinek's drama *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen* (1987), or in *Blass sei mein Gesicht*, an anthology of short stories by women, edited by the Viennese author Barbara Neuwirth in 1988. However, due to its embodiment of a return of the repressed, the vampire in “Heimweg” might also camouflage the “Katastrophengeschichte” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that will always lurk on the dark side of Austrian writing and prevent an idyllic coming home to nature – as Jelinek's *Kinder der Toten* will do forty years later. The vampire and Saturn, among other possibilities, can thus be seen as attempts to give a name and an appearance to that nameless force of history that is otherwise excluded from the fairy-tale realm of the poem.

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9 Entitled *Das Licht und der Schlüssel. Erziehungsroman eines Vampirs* (1984).

10 On vampirism and liminality, cf. Ruthner 2010.

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