“ON THE VERGE OF HEARING’: EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE POETICS OF LISTENING IN THE HUMAN-NIXIE ENCOUNTER IN GERMAN LITERATURE”

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By

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“ON THE VERGE OF HEARING”: EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE POETICS OF LISTENING IN THE HUMAN-NIXIE ENCOUNTER IN GERMAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines selected texts of German literature in which a human being gains access to knowledge outside human scope by means of an encounter with the water nixie, seen in her mythological variations as siren, water sprite, undine, melusine, nymph, or mermaid. Texts to be considered include Das Nibelungenlied (ca. 1200), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “Der Fischer” (ca. 1779), Franz Kafka’s “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” (1917), Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” (1961), and Johannes Bobrowski’s “Undine” (1964). In each of these texts it is not the eyes that play the central role in the epistemological character of the human-nixie encounter, but the ears. In this project I argue that the human posture of attentive listening that precedes the encounter with the nixie indicates a state of readiness that leads to a moment of extraordinary awareness, in which the epistemological experience is transformational. Further, I suggest that poetry plays a pivotal role in the moment of epiphany, or of transformational knowing, for the reader. By pursuing the hypothesis that audial awareness underlies the moment of epiphany, both on the textual and poetological levels, it is my intention to contribute to the scholarship on the nature of the encounter between the mythical and the human in literature as a figuration of the larger epistemological confrontation between the eye and the ear, particularly with respect to the transformative potential of this encounter and its poetological implications.
This dissertation is dedicated to my Doktorvater, Fr. Ronald Murphy, for inspiring me to work from the heart. I wish to thank Professors Peter Pfeiffer and Mary Helen Dupree for their invaluable guidance and support of my work. To Arthur and Walter, who taught me to listen to the sirens singing, and to my family and friends, thank you. AMDG

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INTRODUCTION

…Und seine Sinne waren wie entzweit:
Indes der Blick ihm wie ein Hund vorauslief,
umkehrte, kam und wieder weit
und wartend an der nächsten Wendung stand,-
blieb sein Gehör wie ein Geruch zurück.
Manchmal erschien es ihm als reichte es
bis an das Gehen jener beiden andern,
die folgen sollten diesen ganzen Aufstieg.


…For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.


When Oedipus learned that he had killed his father and married his mother, he dashed out
his own eyes with his mother’s brooches, torn from her robe as she swung, having just hung
herself. The chorus asks him, “Doer of dreadful deeds, how did you dare so far to do despite to
your own eyes?” (Sophocles, 1327-9). After initially blaming Apollo, Oedipus replies, “But the
hand that struck me was none but my own. Why should I see/ whose vision showed me nothing
sweet to see?” (1335). Prized as the great intellect and riddle-solver, Oedipus lived without
understanding what his eyes showed him. His knowledge of his life and family was illusory, and
when he learned the truth of who he was, Oedipus no longer wished to see. In destroying his
eyesight, Oedipus’ gruesome act is an indictment of his intellect and the sway it held in his life.

A short time later Oedipus goes on,

-with what eyes shall I look upon my people?

No. If there were a means to choke the fountain
of hearing I would not have stayed my hand
from locking up my miserable carcass,
seeing and hearing nothing; it is sweet
to keep our thoughts out of the range of hurt. (1385-90)

The two faculties Oedipus identifies as the sources of knowledge and pain -- sight and hearing -- are the conduits he would remove altogether if he could.

The emphasis on the role of the eyes as the primary organ of the epistemological endeavor has a long history, particularly prominent in the European Enlightenment (Kord 61-78).\(^1\) Listening, as key element in the epistemological process, is often overshadowed in this history.\(^2\) This project will examine selected texts of German literature in which a human being gains access to knowledge outside human scope by means of an encounter with a supernatural being: the water nixie, seen in its mythological variations as water sprite, undine, melusine, selkie, siren, nymph, or mermaid.\(^3\) Texts to be considered include Das Nibelungenlied (ca. 1200), Goethe’s “Der Fischer” (1779), Kafka’s “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” (1917), Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” (1961), and Johannes Bobrowski’s “Undine” (1964). In each of

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1 Albert Borgmann discusses this in terms of the etymology and history of the word “focus”, which as he notes took on a relation to the optical in the writings of Johannes Kepler. *Technology* 197. O’Callahan traces the dominance of the visual in terms of discourses of perception to philosophy’s modern era, in which he refers to the work of Kepler, Newton, Descartes and Berkeley 2.

2 Herder’s argument as to the medial and therefore key role that hearing plays among the senses in the invention and use of human language is an important exception. See *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* 57-62.

3 For a history of nixie figure in world literature see Frenzel *Motive der Weltliteratur. Ein Lexikon dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längsschnitte* 774-788, and for an account of the motif in the Germanic tradition see Grimm *Deutsche Mythologie*, 244, 275-278. For a comprehensive classification of the nixie motif in world mythologies see Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-litterature: a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths* (Sirens Vol. 1 pg. 369; Water Sprites Vol. 2 pg. 31; Marvels Vol. 3 F200-F399; Mermaids, Vol. 5 pg. 371). See also Austern and Nardoditskaya’s history of the siren figure in its different iterations in western and world literature in *Music of the Sirens*, especially Chapter 1, “Sirens in Antiquity and the Middle Ages” by Leofranc Holford-Strevens 16-52.
these texts it is not the eyes that play the central role in the epistemological character of the
human-nixie encounter, but the ears.

In this project I argue that the human posture of attentive listening that precedes the
encounter with the nixie indicates a state of readiness that leads to a moment of extraordinary
awareness, in which the epistemological experience is transformational. I will read these
encounters in each text as figurations for the epistemological confrontation between sight and
hearing. On the poetological level, I read these representations of the encounter between human
and nixie as symbolic of the dialogue between reader and text, which likewise may give rise to a
moment of exceptional awareness for the reader.4

This inquiry takes Albert Borgmann’s elaboration of focal occasions as the primary
theoretical framework for the analysis of the representations of the human-nixie encounter in the
primary texts under consideration. In his 2007 essay, Borgmann elaborates on his notion of a key
condition of the meaningful human life, which he coins the focal occasion. Borgmann defines
this term as a moment in which “the meaning of life comes into focus” and cites a dinner at
home, a campfire in the wilderness or an evening of music as examples. These events will not
always be focal occasions, of course -- Borgmann points out how preparations for the evening
meal may be experienced on a given day as simple drudgery -- but they have the potential to take
on that quality, especially if care is given to one’s larger life circumstances (Technology 209).

4 I define poetological as the level on which the interaction between text, author and reader is thematized. I take
Hans Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach to the aesthetic experience as a point of departure for the scope of
possibility for dialogue at this level, discussed in both Wahrheit und Methode and in his later essays in Ästhetik und
Poetik I: Kunst als Aussage. With Gadamer, I take Aristotle’s theory of anagnorisis as developed in the Poetics as
foundational. Ronald Murphy’s exposition of realization theory, for instance in The Owl, the Raven and the Dove,
serves as a present-day elucidation of Aristotle’s approach to aesthetics. These are the most instructive theoretical
frameworks for my understanding of the potential scope and character of the aesthetic experience, which I will refer
to in this work as the poetological level.
The epistemological question as to the precipitating conditions that underlie the moment of
epiphany that is at the center of my work is informed by Borgmann’s conception of the focal
occasion, but also draws on his work on the concept of focus, focal practices, and attentiveness.

Borgmann’s focus in his 2007 essay is the structural possibility for focal occasions in
human life against the backdrop of cyberspace and our constant interaction with the
technological. The focal occasion is a precondition for the good life in an age of the ubiquity of
technological distraction, as Borgmann argues, and as such has no direct analog to the primary
texts under consideration or to an analysis of literary representations of the human encounter
with the mythological. As a theoretical basis for analyzing the human-nixie encounter in these
texts as representative of the possibility for moments of extraordinary awareness in the course of
human life; however, Borgmann’s calculus promises to shed light on the structural aspects of
these moments that transcend the normal course of the human epistemological experience, and in
particular to make sense of the role of attentive listening as a way of making room for the focal
occasion.

This initial theoretical grounding will be supported by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s
hermeneutic approach to art as initially articulated in Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer
philosophischen Hermeneutik, and further developed in his late essays on aesthetics, specifically
“Dichtung und Mimesis” and “Über den Beitrag der Dichtkunst bei der Suche nach der
Wahrheit”. Gadamer’s hermeneutic of the aesthetic underlies my interpretive approach to
literature, which underscores the constitutive potential of the dialogue between artwork and
audience for the emergence of new meanings for the artwork, and new ways of being for the

5 In Gesammelte Werke: Ästhetik und Poetik I. 70-80; 80-86. See also Ästhetik und Hermeneutik 1-8.
reader. Gadamer’s theory of aesthetics argues that there exists the possibility for the audience to *dwell* \(^6\) with the artwork in a way that is transformational, and that the aesthetic experience is thus not limited to a momentary epiphany. I will make use of this conceptual framework in my exploration of both the moment of epiphany in the texts, and of the possibility for a similar transformation for the reader at the poetological level.

In addition, I will draw on Gadamer’s investigations into poetry with respect to its mimetic function, its inherent relationship to music, as well as the nature of the relationship between poetic language and truth in this project.\(^7\) Gadamer’s development of the potential of poetic language to reveal the truth draw on Heidegger’s discussions of the relationship between art and truth,\(^8\) particularly the way that art discloses the truth (*aletheia*), which for both Heidegger and Gadamer is a revealing of what is (*Unverborgenheit*), and for Gadamer, an openness to what is meant. It is against the backdrop of these theoretical considerations, specifically the notion that poetic language is itself uniquely capable of revealing what is, or the world as it is, in combination with the claim that poetic language in its musicality is able to open up a distinct epistemological avenue, one drawing on the acoustic realm and giving rise to an epistemological experience that is apart from knowledge based on the visual realm, that I will argue that poetry plays a pivotal role in the moment of epiphany, or of transformational knowing, for the reader.

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\(^6\) See *Wahrheit und Methode* and the essays in *Ästhetik und Poetik* for Gadamer’s full elucidation of the experience of the human encounter with art, its dimensions and implications. Gadamer uses different terms for the notion of dwelling or encountering art; among them are *begegnen* or *Begegnung, erleben* and *Seinvorgang*. He also uses the term *erfahren* in his later essays, which extends a slightly different meaning. See the essays in *Ästhetik und Poetik*, which appear after *Wahrheit und Methode*.

\(^7\) Particularly the essays in *Ästhetik und Poetik: Kunst als Aussage*, as noted above.

\(^8\) See “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” and “Die Frage nach der Technik” in particular.
Finally, I will use Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of *addressivity*, as explored in his discussion of speech genres, as a promising theoretical basis for the diachronic analysis of a recurring motif. Addressivity, for Bakhtin the “quality of turning toward someone” (99), is a defining feature of the speech genre, in its different forms, and relies on the assumption that in the complex genres, the addressee is always present. I will draw on this notion to explore the dialogic nature of the literary representations of the human-nixie encounter as an epistemological figuration as it occurs chronologically. Bakhtin’s discussion of addressivity speaks to the diachronic potential of the encounter: it is within this theoretical framework that the notion of the texts turning toward one another, or talking to one another, can be productively illuminated.

In the attempt to trace the epistemological character of the encounter between human being and water nixie in the primary texts under consideration, my work will be informed as appropriate by scholarship from different fields, including literary criticism, philosophy, phenomenology, history, musicology, folklore, and philology. I hope by such a diachronic interdisciplinary examination to verify my hypothesis that the posture of attentive listening that precedes the human-nixie encounter in these texts, seen as figuration of the epistemological confrontation between sight and hearing, is a necessary antecedent to a moment of extraordinary awareness on the both the textual and poetological levels. My methodological approach relies upon a close reading of the primary texts under consideration, the selection of which was based on the criterion of the presence of a transformational epistemological moment within the thematic context of the human-nixie encounter.
Feminist scholarship from within the past forty years has focused on the topos of the human-nixie encounter from the vantage of gender relations. Using Foucauldian and Feminist theories (e.g. by Silvia Bovenschen) regarding the generative power and influence of mythical female figures on the discursive and cultural realms, scholars including Inge Stephan, Susanne Baackmann and Anna Maria Stuby have focused primarily on the gender dynamic. Related scholarship adopts a psychoanalytic approach, proposing a Jungian or Lacanian reading, which reads the nixie figure as symbol of the anima, or suggests the loss of/potential for unity that the encounter between human and mythical water woman represents, respectively. This project acknowledges a debt to this diverse body of scholarship, recognizing the depth of insight that an approach that employs gender as a category of analysis offers, particularly in terms of the semiotic nature of the nixie figure, but departs from these readings by concentrating primarily on the epistemological nature of the encounter and its poetological implications.

Karen Achberger and David Wellbery, among others, have looked closely at the connection between text and the music produced by texts for “Undine Geht” and “Der Fischer”, respectively. Motivated by considerations as to the dynamic of the ear versus the eye in the epistemological nature of the human-nixie encounter, I will focus on the role that the acoustic realm plays in the primary texts. Further, this inquiry will explore the role of poetry itself, both with respect to its form and to the music that is at the center of the lyric. Music plays a key role in the moment of epiphany that flows from these textual and poetological encounters.

Simone de Beauvoir’s explanation of the eternal appeal of the mermaid figure, important to later feminist interpretations, places water as symbol both for woman and for nature, seen in a patriarchal view as equivalent: i.e. both are cyclical yet unpredictable, dangerous, appealing, not controllable. See The Second Sex, 165.
Although this project distinguishes itself from a history of the water nixie motif, which has been extensively treated in secondary literature, in order to ground my analysis of the encounter as a figuration for the larger epistemological confrontation between sight and hearing, this project will draw on philological scholarship that has sought to trace an extensive complement of mythical figures, including the nixie. Jacob Grimm’s nineteenth-century philological treatises *Deutsche Sagen* and *Mythologie*, which deal at length with the origins of the nixie figure in Germanic literature, folktale, and myth, will provide an important frame of reference for my dissertation.

A close reading of the encounter between nixie and human being as represented in the primary texts under consideration forms the focus of this work. The first textual instance of the encounter between human and water nymph or nixie is found in the *Iliad*, which features several varieties of water nymphs. The most noteworthy passage of these is perhaps the scene in which Thetis, daughter of Nereus the ocean God and mother of Achilles, rises with her nereid sisters from the ocean to comfort Achilles after Patroclus is slain (Homer, 376-377). It is noteworthy

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10 See for instance Frenzel 774-788, and for an account of the motif in the Germanic tradition see Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* 244; 275-278. For a comprehensive index of the nixie motif in world mythologies see Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature; a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths* (Volumes and pages listed in footnote # 3 above). See also Holford-Strevens, “Sirens in Antiquity and the Middle Ages” in Austern and Nardoditskaya’s *Music of the Sirens* 16-52. See also Anna Maria Stuby, *Liebe, Tod und Wasserfrau* for one feminist interpretation or Inge Stephan’s *Musen & Medusen: Mythos und Geschlecht in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Andreas Kraß’s recent study: *Meerjungfrauen: Geschichten einer unmöglichen Liebe* is also a well-documented history of the motif in Germanic literature.

11 I will also refer to the foundational work of folklore scholar Stith Thompson, whose writings seek to exhaustively document the origins of myths, including those in which the nixie figure is present

12 Although the scenes between Thetis and Achilles are thought to represent the first textual encounters between human being and water nymph, I did not consider these scenes for use in this project, for the reasons mentioned in the text above. Further, because my inquiry is interested in the posture of human listening as antecedent to the moment of extraordinary awareness, these passages were not as productive as the passage in the *Odyssey* between Odysseus and the sirens as a foundational text, in terms of the epistemological character of the encounter.
that Thetis possesses and shares foresight: she refers many times to Achilles’ life as short-lived and to his fate not to return to his homeland after the war. Thus the passages with Thetis reveal an epistemological character that, as with the other primary texts I will consider, and as often characterizes the human/ nixie encounter, goes beyond the bounds of human knowledge. In the case of Thetis and Achilles the transference of extraordinary knowledge is of a different character, because Achilles, as Thetis’ son, knows and has known more about his fate than humans are generally in a position to do, and from a very young age, given the family relationship. In both passages in which Achilles calls to Thetis, she responds to him as her son. The prophesy of his early death was not unknown to him. A moment of transformational knowledge for Achilles is not explicit in these passages: in any case it is not available to the reader of the *Iliad*.

The first scene between human being and siren, the scene with the sirens in Homer’s *Odyssey*, will provide a starting point for my analysis of the epistemological nature of the human-nixie encounter, and specifically for the question of the role of the eye versus the ear in the moment of extraordinary awareness. The sirens in the *Odyssey* are powerfully echoed in the human-nixie encounters in the primary texts I will consider, and their role as common referent is an important one in any inquiry about the nixie figure in German literature.

In order to ground my analysis of these textual encounters in their common literary and mythological background, I will briefly touch on the history of the nixie figure in German

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13 See Harvey on Naiads, Nymphs in Greek myth or Grimm *Mythologie* on roots of Germanic *Nixe* tradition 244; 275-278. In the history of the various water nymph figures, nymphs and sirens are not considered identical. The scenes with Thetis do not provide the potentially transformational epistemological character that is at the center of this inquiry; however it is important to note the primacy of the *Iliad* as the first textual instance with a mythological water woman in Western literature.

14 See Chapter 1 in “Music of the Sirens” for a comprehensive discussion of classical and medieval histories of the siren and mermaid figures, “Sirens in Antiquity and the Middle Ages” by Leofranc Holford-Strevens 16-52.
literature. Not all human-nixie encounters in German literature, of course, have a clear epistemological character. What I will discuss as the epistemological moment accompanies each of the nixie traditions in at least one major work, and is generally recurrent in the various works that articulate the tradition in literature. The human-nixie encounter in German literature is not of a homogenous nature, but the epistemological character of the encounter is a salient feature that emerges from the varied traditions and one that I read as a unifying thread. My own scholarly interest in this project is in the human/ water nixie encounter as an exemplary site for the larger epistemological thematic with respect to the dynamic between sight and hearing, but it is important to note that the water nixie figure itself, and particularly the moment of encounter, is characterized by the epistemological.

The water nixie has had an enduring presence in Germanic literature, which represents a salient strand in the larger context of western literature in which the mythological water woman in her various forms appear. Most often traced to medieval texts which in turn reflect much older mythologies, the water nixie is generally considered to have first appeared in Germanic literature in the 13th-century Middle High German (MHG) Das Nibelungenlied (Lionarons “The Otherworld” 168). The passage in which Hagen interacts with the water nixies bathing in the

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15 See for instance Grimm, Kinder- und Hausmärchen, (Nos. 79, 181), which feature malevolent nixies absent any clear epistemological interest. There are textual examples in every tradition: siren, melusine, undine, etc…that do not appear connected to the epistemological, but because there are also examples from every tradition that do have that character, I consider it a unifying thread.

16 Typically the literary origins or a definitive older source of the nixie figure in the Nibelungenlied, hereafter cited as NBL, have eluded scholars. Lionarons has argued that the Icelandic sagas and the Edda contain references to possible early relatives of the mythical water woman or prophetess, generally, but that the figure comes from “no discernible tradition” “The Otherworld” 168. One notable example from the early medieval period is the figure of Grendel’s mother in the second battle sequence of the heroic Beowulf (98-113). She is referred to in Anglo Saxon as a nicor and mere-wīf, among other designations. Ulrich von Zatzikhoven’s Lanzelet features mermaids, or fairies from the sea (meerfiene), and has been dated approximately to 1195-1200, very close to the first appearance of the NBL.
Danube provides an ideal textual example of the epistemological nature of the human-nixie encounter. A close reading of the relevant passages in Das Nibelungenlied will provide a foundation for the analysis of the other principal primary texts, and is an important backdrop to a much later medieval text about a mythical water woman who, as motif, influences German literature into the modern age, Thüring von Ringoltingen’s *Melusine*.

The legendary surrounding the Melusine figure has its roots in medieval France but became widespread in Europe through the popular German chapbook. The *Roman de Mélusine* was first written by Jean d’Arras ca. 1382, as the “noble history” (*Le Noble Hystoire de Lusignan*) of the founding matriarch of the powerful Lusignan dynasty, based on oral tradition. The story was later written in verse, in a more historicized version by La Coudrette (Couldrette) after May of 1400, and subsequently brought into the German literary tradition by Thüring von Ringoltingen in ca. 1456.

The plot in the three main versions is essentially similar: Melusine, the daughter of a union between fairy and mortal man, meets Raymondin of Poitou in a forest, near a fountain. Raymond is taken to the fountain by his horse while he sleeps. Melusine wakes him by speaking to him, but rides off shortly after. He falls in love at first sight, pursues her and asks her to marry him. She agrees on one condition: that he leave her alone and never try to see her on Saturdays. When Raymond violates their agreement one Saturday, looking through the keyhole to see her bathing, he discovers that she has transformed into a half-woman/half-serpent. She forgives him.

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17 It is Ringoltingen’s version that the chapbook, *Melusine*, is based on in ca. 1484, which became popular in Germany, Russia and Scandinavia, securing the influence of the first German Melusine iteration. See Pairet 191.
18 See Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France* 33.
19 Coudrette attributes his version to two Latin sources, not to d’Arras’ French version. See Ana Pairet 191-92.
20 Cf. the Lady of the Lake and Arthurian mythologies, for instance in Malory’s *Le Mort D’Arthur*. 
the transgression, but later flies from the castle forever when he calls her “serpent” in a disagreement.21

Melusine will go on to have a rich history in German literature: her tale or versions of it will be told by among others Hans Sachs, Martin Luther, Goethe, Ludwig Tieck, Achim von Arnim, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Theodore Fontane, and Wilhelm Raabe. Although Ringoltingen’s *Melusine* is not one of the primary texts I consider, the nature of the encounter between water nixie and mortal man in this late medieval work is critical for understanding later works which feature either the melusine or related figures.

The 16th century saw the birth of a related motif, the figure of the Undine. The significant name *Undine*, from Latin “little wave”, was coined and first explored by renaissance doctor, alchemist and philosopher Phillippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus, who in his treatise elaborates on the four elements that make up the world and the spirits that embody them, or elementals.22 In Paracelsus’ account, the Undine is the elemental that represents water, and is always found near a pool or stream. It is Paracelsus’ work that influenced poets and writers who would take up the undine theme in the eighteenth and

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21 Differing versions appearing relatively soon after the seminal texts place Melusine as the founding mother of Germanic, Luxembourghian, and other aristocratic or royal European lineage. See Grimms’ “Herr Peter Dimringer von Staufenberg”. *Deutsche Sagen*, No. 522, 591, often attributed as a founding mythology behind the Melusine legend and thought to be especially influential for Paracelsus; however d’Arras’ text is prior to any of these accounts. See also Maddox and Sturm Maddox 1-12; 137-165, or Claudia Steinkämper 81-87. In the variations, Melusine may become a dragon or mermaid when she transforms, but the common elements of her fairy/human lineage, her role as supernatural builder and protector of the family homestead/dynasty, and the taboo/transgression, always connected to water, are retained. See Maddox and Sturm-Maddox 1-12; 165-185.

nineteenth centuries, including Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, who wrote the popular early 19th-century German romantic fairy tale *Undine* (1811).

In Fouqué’s version, Undine is the adoptive daughter of a poor fisherman and his wife, who live near a pond in the middle of a forest. A visiting knight seeking shelter from the storm stays with the fisherman and his wife and subsequently falls in love with Undine. When they marry, Undine confides that she has gained a soul, for she was originally a water spirit, and it is only through marriage to a mortal man that she can acquire a soul. Shortly after, Undine and the knight leave the forest and move to his castle, where the reappearance of his former fiancée will lead to eventual disaster and the knight’s death.

Goethe mentions the undine in the first book of *Faust* in the scene in Faust’s study when he calls up the four elementals, only to be subsequently rejected by the earth spirit. The undine figure will be much-treated by the Romantic Movement in German literature, particularly in the late romantic period. E.T.A. Hoffmann, a friend and collaborator of Fouqué’s, fascinated by the legend of the undine, wrote an opera of that name, and mentions the undine in a number of works. The undine figure was the inspiration for the magical half-maiden/half-snake, Serpentina, in *Der goldene Topf*.

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23 See Fassbind-Eigenheer 57-62 or Kraß 310-316.
24 Andersen’s 1837 *The Little Mermaid (Den lille havfrue)* has a similar concept but calls his protagonist a *havfrue* or mermaid, and adds the element that the mermaid must give up her voice in exchange for the soul. In Fouqué, there is also something lost: Undine seems to lose her connection to her water family, at least temporarily, during her marriage to the knight, a concept explored further in Chapter 3 of this work.

25 See Fassbind-Eigenheer 109-117 or Kraß 310-316.
26 Fassbind-Eigenheer 111.
The undine is taken up by a number of German-speaking authors, but is seen far less frequently than the figure of Melusine and after this period will find its most direct treatment in the late twentieth century, when Ingeborg Bachmann retells Fouqué’s tale from the undine’s perspective, in “Undine Geht” (1961). Fouqué’s Undine provides a necessary background for the close reading of Bachmann’s text, in which in epistemological structure of the encounter between undine and human becomes far more complex and nuanced. The analysis of Bachmann’s text leads to a discussion of the music thematic that persists in nearly any literary treatment of the human-nixie encounter. Music, and particularly song, often plays a decisive role in the moment of epiphany in the primary texts I will consider.

Likewise, Johannes Bobrowski’s 1964 lyric poem “Undine” treats the relationship between the Undine figure and the human being, appearing to take up where Bachmann’s work leaves off. Bobrowski’s lyric both recalls Goethe’s “Der Fischer” and opens up new possibilities with respect to the poetic conception of the encounter between human and water nixie, particularly with respect to the role of sound in the creative endeavor and the significance of poetry in the moment of epiphany.

A close relative of the undine is the German Nixe. The figure as it surfaces in literature by this name appears in two fairy tales by the Grimm Brothers, in both cases as an evil spirit, and in poetry of the romantic period. The element of malevolence seems connected to the Nixe tradition in particular, a characteristic not seen in the literary treatments of the medieval melusine

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27 Additionally, the Germanic undine literary tradition will influence the French ondine tradition, in which the tale is elaborated, particularly in the 20th century, most notably by Jean Giraudoux in his play Ondine (1938).
28 See Grimm, Mythologie on roots of Germanic Nixe tradition 244; 275-278.
29 See Grimm, Kinder- und Hausmärchen, Tales 79, 181.
30 Eichendorff wrote a number of poems that thematized the Nixe. See for instance “Am Strom” (1841) or “Lockung” (1848), among many others.
or the romantic-era undine. Grimms’ nixies lure children or men to their watery lairs, with the intent to kill or keep them captive.

Goethe’s mermaid in “Der Fischer” (ca. 1779), with her deadly allure, seems most closely connected to this version of the motif. Goethe’s ballad provides an exemplary textual site in which the epistemological nature of the human-nixie encounter can be interrogated. My close reading of this poem will focus on the hierarchy of the senses leading up to the moment of encounter and will explore the possible meanings of the ambivalent closing of the text, with respect to both the ear-eye dynamic and the role of music at the poetological level.

The nixie in “Der Fischer” also bears resemblance an early ancestor for these diverse mythical female water-dwelling figures: the siren. Scholars are largely in agreement that the nixie motif in its western iterations can be traced back to mythological water-dwelling creatures in several ancient Greek myths, which include naiads and oceanids. Sirens are the best known of this group, having endured most notably by way of Homer’s account of Odyssey’s encounter with the sirens in Book 12 of the Odyssey, the first known textual reference to the sirens.

Sirens became visible in their own right in the Germanic literary tradition during the romantic period, seen particularly in the poetry of Eichendorff, Brentano, and Heine. Known as the Lorelei, the German siren legend tells of maidens who protect the Rhine-gold, luring sailors to their deaths with their beautiful songs. The Lorelei tradition draws on the legend of the Rhine

31 The figure in Hans Sachs’ Die schöne Melusina (1556) closely resembles a witch, however. See discussion of early modern representations of mythical female figures related to the discourses of witchcraft in Gerhild Scholz Williams 23-45.
32 See Harvey on Naiads, Nymphs in Greek myth, 396, or Grimm Mythologie on roots of Germanic Nixe tradition, 244, 275-278. See Frenzel’s entry on “Verführerin, Die Dämonische” 774-788.
33 The term Lorelei will be spelled differently by each of the major poets of the age. See Annegret Fauser, “Rheinsirenen: Loreley and Other Rhine Maidens” in Austern and Naroditskaya, Music of the Sirens 250-273, for a discussion of the origin of the name Lorelei and for historical background of the figure in German literature.
gold as seen in *Das Nibelungenlied* and popular in earlier oral traditions. Wagner’s late 19th-century *Der Ring des Nibelungen* will also take part in the development of the Lorelei figure in German literature, but will revise the *Nibelungenlied*’s water nixies to his Rhine Maidens, changing the dynamics of the myth, but keeping the elements of water, music, and death central.

Franz Kafka conceives of a wholly different way of approaching the question of the human/siren encounter in his short text “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” (1917). An analysis of Kafka’s text will illuminate a path whereby the epistemological structure of the human-nixie encounter can be understood at the poetological level. It is particularly through Kafka’s text that the connection between the general epistemology at work in the literary representations of the human-nixie encounters in the texts under consideration, and a similar moment of epiphany for the reader, can be drawn.

In all the variations of the classical siren myth -- incarnated in German literature over time as water sprite, melusine, undine, nixie, Lorelei and siren -- the element of water, and its particular role in the epistemological character of human-nixie encounter, requires interrogation. I will close this project by considering in which ways water, particularly in its aspect as waves, is treated, and how it is represented by the respective poets in the interplay of the senses in the epistemological experience. By pursuing the hypothesis that audial awareness underlies the moment of epiphany, both on the textual and poetological levels, I hope to contribute to the scholarship on the nature of the encounter between the mythical and the human in literature as a figuration of the larger epistemological confrontation between the ear and the eye with respect to

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34 See Haymes, *The Nibelungenlied: History and Interpretation.*
35 See Haymes, *Wagner’s Ring in 1848.*
the transformative potential of these encounters and the poetological implications for the aesthetic experience.
Chapter 1: Early Encounters: Homer’s *Odyssey* and Hagen and the *Merewîp* in the *Nibelungenlied*

The encounter between human and siren first appears in one of the oldest works of western literature, Homer’s *Odyssey* (ca. 800 BC). The sirens in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in conjunction with Homer’s epic a foundational source for the nixie figure in its western iterations, were originally nymphs, playmates of Persephone, who were turned by Demeter into bird figures with the heads of human women, because they did not intervene in Hades’ kidnapping of her daughter. Sent to look for Persephone, the sirens called to her endlessly with their song (Harvey 396). Other kinds of water nymphs, particularly naiads and nereids, also appear in Ovid’s first-century Roman work, which features maidens who transform into brooks or other bodies of water in life-threatening situations (Books VII and XV, *Metamorphoses*).

These seminal texts, among many others, are thought to have provided inspiration for the generations of water nixies in their different iterations that appear in world literature, art, and culture to the present day, and both epics are commonly referenced in the well-established history of the motif in German literature. As the oldest of the foundational works that feature water nixies, Homer’s epic would require consideration in any inquiry about the meaning of the

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36 The sirens are found in numerous texts and fragments in the post-Homeric period, including in the works of Pliny, Hesiod, Euripides, and Virgil and his commentators. See Beate Otto’s chapter on the history of the figure in the classical Greek and Roman periods, “Mythische Wasserfrauen”, in *Unterwasser-Literatur* 26-34, and Elizabeth Frenzel for a history of the siren motif in world literature 774-788.

37 While Homer’s *Odyssey* is often cited as seminal in the scholarship in the history of the nixie motif in German literature, Ovid is also often referenced. See David Gallagher’s argument in *Metamorphosis* that Ovid’s text is a more compelling source for nymphs and nixies in German literature than is the *Odyssey* or Paracelsus’ account, since Ovid’s text features nymphs who transform into water, an important feature in both the Melusine and Undine mythical traditions 23-26; 339-348. Additionally, it is a commonly-held view in the literature that the ancient Romans were more influential with respect to German literary traditions during the Medieval period than were the Greeks. See for instance Albrecht Classen, “Heinrich von Veldeke”, as evidence that during the Medieval epoch in particular, Ovid’s text may have had particular influence.
human-nixie encounter in German literature. I suggest that the epistemological structure of the encounter between human and water nixie as it appears in Homer’s *Odyssey* is powerfully echoed in the motif in later texts of German literature. The passages that feature the human/siren encounter in the *Odyssey* therefore have an important status in this inquiry.

Homer’s sirens first appear in Book 12 of *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus, as guest at King Alkinoös’ palace after he has been washed ashore and rescued by the king’s daughter Nausikaa, is regaling the court with the tale of his voyage from Troy. In this part of his tale, Odysseus relates how Circe explained what awaited him upon leaving her island, describing the dangers ahead, the first of which is the island of the sirens.

Then the queenly Circe spoke in words and addressed me:

“So all that has been duly done. Listen now, I will tell you all, but the very god himself will make you remember. You will come first of all to the Sirens…

You must drive straight on past, but melt down sweet wax of honey and with it stop your companions’ ears, so none can listen; the rest, that is, but if you yourself are wanting to hear them, then have them tie you hand and foot on the fast ship, standing upright against the mast with the ropes’ ends lashed around it, so that you can have joy in hearing the song of the Sirens…” (Book XII, 36-54)

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38 As noted in the introduction, the *Iliad’s* passages with Thetis and other water nymphs represent the first known textual instances of encounters between human beings and water nymphs.

Circe provides Odysseus with a plan to both escape the sirens, and to hear their singing. She promises Odysseus that he can have “joy” in hearing their song. Joy, death and song are poetically connected in Circe’s description of the sirens. Odysseus tells his hosts how he instructed his crew to circumnavigate their island, and then describes the encounter, beginning as he and his crew near the fatal waters.

‘So as I was telling all the details to my companions,

Meanwhile the well-made ship was coming rapidly closer
To the Sirens’ isle, for the harmless wind was driving her onward;
But immediately then the breeze dropped, and a windless
calm fell there, and some divinity stilled the tossing
waters.

…but when we were as far off from the land as a voice shouting

carries, lightly plying, the swift ship as it drew nearer

was seen by the Sirens, and they directed their sweet song toward us:

“Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaians,

and stay your ship, so that you can listen here to our singing;

for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship

until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues

from our lips; then goes on, well-pleased, knowing more than ever

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41 See Inge Stephan’s reading of the encounter and the siren figure, in which sirens are always linked with death 122-24. The readings that associate sirens, water and death are too vast to list but include a recent study by Andreas Kraß, *Meerjungfrauen. Geschichten einer unmöglichen Liebe*, or Anna Maria Stuby’s 1992 book, *Liebe, Tod und Wasserfrau*. 
he did; for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans
did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods’ despite.
Over all the generous earth we know all that happens.”
‘So they sang, in sweet utterance, and the heart within me
desired to listen, and I signaled my companions to set me
free, nodding with my brows...’(XII, 165-200)

The sirens promise to tell him everything that transpired in Troy; they claim to know
everything that happens on earth. Odysseus finds the possibility of knowledge beyond human
scope irresistible. It is at that point that Odysseus signals his companions that he should be set
free. This signal contradicts what Odysseus knows: his actions work directly against the advice
he has been given by Circe and his own ministrations to protect himself. As such the moments
leading up to his decision to “signal(ed) with my brows” (198-200) are important. What does the
text yield about the moments leading up to his reaction, the signaling to be set free?

Odysseus indicates in his retelling the way in which this moment of longing unfolds.
First he tells how the ship was moving quickly toward the siren’s island when the wind drops
suddenly, which Odysseus attributes to an intervening god. He then describes the sirens’ song, in
which they tempt him with knowledge of all that happened in Troy and all that takes place over
the “generous earth”. The sirens also promise that no man sails past them until he has
“listened…. then goes on, well-pleased, knowing more than ever he did”. After Odysseus relates
what the sirens say, he takes up the narrative again, giving an account of his own reaction. He
calls their song “sweet utterance”, and says his heart desired to listen. The next sentence is the
signal that Odysseus’ companions should set him free. The moment in which Odysseus relates
how he asks to be set free is described in very few words, and the reader has only Odysseus’ mention of his heart desiring to listen and the preceding description of the sirens’ song as a sweet utterance to help understand what lay behind the signaling to be set free. The reader is left with the elements the text yields: Odysseus’ listening to the sudden stillness of the sea, the siren’s song, and the longing in his heart to listen further to the song, whose contents promise an epistemological treasure.

This passage initially seems to be in conflict with itself. For Odysseus as intellect -- in the Iliad Odysseus is often referred to with the descriptive epithet wily or resourceful, a trait that becomes central in the Odyssey -- the longing to know more will come as no surprise to readers of Homer. If anything were to tempt Odysseus, it would be knowledge, although of course he has numerous adventures in the Odyssey that argue for reading this passage differently. The reader may then expect that the locus of the longing would be Odysseus’ mind, or perhaps his eyes, in order to see and therefore know better. This is not what he says; rather that “the heart within me desired to listen”. The desire from the heart to listen further is mentioned after Odysseus refers to the song as sweet utterance. The song gives rise to the desire in the heart to listen; it is not connected to the mind, or the eyes. There is tension between an epistemological longing on the one hand, and a desire from the heart to listen further to the song

42 πολυ-τροπος polu-tropos, most commonly translated into English as ‘resourceful’; this is a common epithet in the Iliad. Polyanoi, having many fables, is another common epithet for Odysseus in the Iliad but not seen in the Odyssey, used here by the sirens, hence Pucci’s argument that the sirens in this scene deliberately speak to the Odysseus of the Odyssey. Pucci 2.

43 Odysseus’ longing to sail to the sirens’ island is often read as a prevailingly erotic one. See for instance Stephan’s reading, in which she analyzes Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of the scene between Odysseus and the sirens in Dialektik der Aufklärung 106-133. Anna Mary Stuby’s treatment of the encounter emphasizes the gender constellation and erotic potential of the encounter but focuses more on the Odyssey as a text oriented in its narrative style and structure to a feminine point of departure, and reads the scene with the sirens specifically as one in which Odysseus’ own identity as both a man and an artist is split, in retelling the encounter 20-37.
that contains the knowledge treasure, which is knowledge of oneself, on the other. This tension points to a deeper dichotomy between the head and the heart, or the eyes and the ears.

This passage can be read as an ontological description of the oppositional nature of human life, specifically in terms of how the epistemological moment comes to pass. The view of human nature as split between heart and head has deep roots in the western dialectical tradition, and one that has implications for the interpretation of this passage. This passage can be read as a battle of wits, in which Odysseus, attributed widely as resourceful intellect, is interpreted as outsmarting the sirens without being affected in return. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s Excursus in “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment” is often referenced in later interpretations of this passage and more broadly, in readings of the meaning of the human-nixie encounter in Germanic literature, in which Odysseus is read as victorious intellect, leaving myth behind. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus as a rational individual must engage with the archaic magic that the sirens and other mythical creatures he encounters represent. In this account, Odysseus neutralizes their magic in each case by resisting and moving forward in the epic. An interpretation that underscores the tension between head and heart in this passage, specifically the desire stemming from Odysseus’ heart to listen further, suggests a deeper engagement and occasions a fuller reading of this encounter.

For Odysseus the irresistibility of the sirens’ song lies both in its content and in what it promises. In her discussion of the siren figure, Inge Stephan indicates that the sirens’ song itself

45 Excursus I, “Odysseus oder Mythos und Aufklärung” in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Horkheimer and Adorno read the encounter through the lens of a “bügerlichen Urgeschichte”, 75; 35-62. My reading emphasizes a different aspect of the dynamic: that Odysseus is deeply affected by the song, by focusing on lines 198-200, in which Odysseus describes the longing in his heart. Compelling for my interest is that Horkheimer and Adorno focus on the acoustic aspect of the encounter, describing Odysseus as a listener, Hörender, who is bound in his Hörigkeit, 75. Their use of the term has more to do with reading the encounter as a kind of contractual obligation, however.
is the temptation, and argues that there are no words or content in the language of the singing (119). I disagree with Stephan’s reading of Homers’ sirens on this point: I read Odysseus as tempted primarily by the omniscience promised in the sirens’ song. This is a promise delivered in specific language that appeals to him. Further, the sirens’ language has formal features which, as argued by Pucci (3-9), reproduce the *Iliad*’s diction by referring to Odysseus by noun-epithet and other linguistic markers as the Odysseus of the *Iliad*, not the *Odyssey*. If the sirens do speak to the warrior of the *Iliad*, in a formal linguistic sense, and not to the journeyer of the *Odyssey*, as Pucci suggests, they are in effect proving their omniscience in advance (3-9). This specific language delivered by song, both in what it reveals and promises, leads to the desire to listen further.

Further, Odysseus’ signaling to be set free implies that a transformation of sorts has taken place. Odysseus does not claim to have received the knowledge promised by the sirens, but the song he hears causes him to act against his own interests despite knowing the danger in advance. Odysseus plans for the moment of temptation: he sees it in advance and follows Circe’s advice to prevent being lured. What the reader learns through his retelling, which could not have been foreseen, was how the temptation unfolds internally, in what way he describes the critical moment, when he tries to act against his own good. Being tempted by knowledge beyond human scope -- tempted by omniscience and more precisely, tempted by his own history, in the specific language the sirens use -- is an epistemological moment in this encounter, but it is at once more than that. The state of wishing to listen further, precipitated at the outset by Odysseus’ noticing and listening to the wind drop -- the desire from his heart to hear more despite knowing better --

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represents a moment of exceptional awareness, and the way Odysseus presents his own internal reaction to the sirens’ song speaks to it as a transformative moment.

Homer’s sirens are temptresses, but not in any modern sense which might accord physical beauty to the siren figure. Neither Odysseus nor Circe ever mentions the beauty of the sirens, nor is there any additional description from the poet apart from these passages. The emphasis in the text is on the sweetness of their song and what they sing about, as well as the promise of future singing. There is no hint that Odysseus sees the sirens and the reader cannot determine from the passage whether his gaze extends to them, but it is clear that the sirens see his boat, and their song is addressed to him, suggesting they know, and perhaps see, that Odysseus is present. The perspective in this passage, as retold by Odysseus, is both Odysseus’ and the sirens’ at once, but both are imperfect. The limit of the reader’s understanding of the sirens is confounding: we do not even know if the sirens resemble human women or the bird women that Ovid will later describe. The question of their appearance remains completely veiled in Homer’s account. It is almost as if Odysseus’ eyes were covered, although the passage provides no evidence for this view.

Homer’s sirens are fully aware of who passes by their island. In Odysseus’s retelling of the events, he says that the ship was “seen by” the sirens, and once it is seen, the sirens begin

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47 For a treatment of the connection between beauty, song, death and Lorelei figure in the romantic period, see Chapter 8 of Music of the Sirens, “Rheinsirenen: Loreley and other Rhine Maidens”. In later accounts of the encounter, one of the sirens flings herself off the island once Odysseus passes, and washes ashore at present-day Sorrento, Italy, which claims the siren as its eponymous founder: the city’s name contains the root for the ancient Greek word siren. This part of Italy, the Amalfi coast, was colonized by the Greeks in the 8th century BC, anecdotally as a result of this passage. The area was inhabited by Greeks, and the oral history and tradition of the sirens, and particularly their encounter with Odysseus, was firmly established there. See Strabo, Geography, 5.4.8.; 6.1.1.

48 The sirens are mentioned a final time when Odysseus relates the encounter to Penelope, in Book 13, line 322, but they are mentioned by name only, no further detail is given.
singing. It is not anonymous song, it is an intensely personal song and meant only for the listener. The sirens seem to possess the perfect knowledge they use to tempt Odysseus: they know exactly what will work to tempt him: his own past, sung to him.\textsuperscript{49} They see Odysseus’ ship and then they sing to him of what they know.

In contrast, the role of listening and hearing is foregrounded in Odysseus’ retelling of the encounter with the sirens. He uses the word “listen”\textsuperscript{50} in the passage when he is instructing his crew, and later, as the ship approaches the sirens’ island, he mentions the sudden stillness of the sea, which he attributes to divine intervention. Odysseus can only notice and remark on the sudden drop in the wind because he is listening, and I suggest he is listening closely. He has prepared himself and his crew for this encounter and he is ready for it to begin. Further, Odysseus describes the distance between ship and island “as far off from the land as a voice shouting carries”. The song itself is stressed by Circe (“the “melody” that “enchants”) and by Odysseus in his retelling, which he calls “sweet song”. The emphasis on song in this passages has been interpreted as an indication that the sirens are related to the muses (Pucci 7-8), and opens up the investigation as to the role of song in the act of creation; i.e. bringing into being through song.

The encounter with the sirens is characterized from the human side of the encounter by listening and hearing; and from the siren side of the encounter by sight and knowledge, as retold by Odysseus.\textsuperscript{51} This framework is emphasized in the original Greek by the parallel structure of

\textsuperscript{49} For an opposing view, see Maurice Blanchot’s discussion of the fallibility of the sirens in The Siren’s Song 59-65. Pucci also questions the omniscience of the sirens 8-9.

\textsuperscript{50} The word in the original is \textit{Akousas}.

\textsuperscript{51} My reading of the sensory divide represented by the encounter in Homer stands in contrast to many readings of the human nixie encounter, which see the nixie figure as representative of nature, often without words, and the
the verb “to listen”, which occurs twice in the first half of the passage and the verb “to know”, spoken by the sirens as “we know”, twice in the second half. Pucci emphasizes the sirens’ use of idmen, to know, which occurs at the beginning of the third to last and the final sentence in the sirens’ song; whereas the verb to listen: akousas and akkousai, respectively, comes at the end of the second and fourth lines, an observation which I add to Pucci’s reading (7). The dynamic between hearing and sight in the human/siren encounter is laid out plainly in Homer’s text. The underlying epistemological structure: the inherent tension between desiring with the heart to listen to a song which promises knowledge, and the transformative potential represented by the moment of wishing to listen further, anteceded by a state of attentive listening when Odysseus first notices of the stillness of the sea, becomes foundational for later textual representations of the encounter between human and mythical water woman.

*The Nibelungenlied*

Approximately 2000 years after Homer’s account of Odysseus and the sirens and well into the history of the literary motif,52 the nixie figure makes a brief but important appearance in the principal heroic epic poem of the German high middle ages, the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200). These passages, which provide an ideal textual example of the human-nixie encounter as figuration of the epistemological dynamic between eye and ear, represent the first known textual representation of the human figure as representative of culture, rationality or progress, constituted by and constitutive of language. See for instance Stephan, who acknowledges this division but problematizes its essentialist characteristic 124-125, or Austern’s “‘Teach me to Heare Mermaides Singing.’: Embodiments of (Acoustic) Pleasure and Danger in the Modern West” 52-95, or Syfuß 23-24.

52 The nixies’ appearance in the *Nibelungenlied* by no means represents the next chronological literary representation of the motif in world literature, but they are likely the first nixie in German literature. For a history of the motif in literature, see Frenzel. *Stoffe der Weltliteratur* 774-788. The mermaid figures also appear in artifacts from the early medieval period onward, including wood carvings, etc… See Otto 29-32. Ulrich von Zatzikhoven’s *Lanzelet* features mermaids, meerfiene, and has been dated approximately 1195-1200, very close to the first appearance of the NBL.
instance of the water nixie in German literature, but in the broader realm of Germanic literature
and myth, the water nixie and related motifs were evident in contemporary writings, as well as in
artistic depictions and oral tradition.\textsuperscript{53}

Several early Germanic manuscripts portray sirens or other mermaid figures in wood
carvings; the figures are also found adorning church panels and ceilings in the early medieval
period (Otto 29-32). One notable example from literature from the early medieval period is the
figure of Grendel’s mother in the second battle sequence of the heroic \textit{Beowulf} (lines 98-113).
She is referred to in Anglo Saxon as a \textit{nicor} and \textit{mere-wīf}, among other designations.\textsuperscript{54} Grendel’s
mother lives in the waters of a primordial mere, and in this respect the figure bears some
resemblance to the siren or other versions of the motif, but she is also situated firmly in a biblical
tradition.\textsuperscript{55} A fear-inspiring figure that more closely resembles beasts in other epics, such as the
gorgons, medusa, giants of the \textit{Edda} and other female monsters in classical and Germanic
mythology, Grendel’s mother as a matter of portrayal does not seem to stem from the water nixie
tradition. The designations used to describe her; however; one of them the same term used for
the water sprites in the \textit{Nibelungenlied} (\textit{merewīp}) in Anglo-Saxon (\textit{mere-wīf}) indicate a
commonality, and from this perspective the figure ought to be included in a discussion of
Germanic nixies, particularly as she is one of the very few similar figures which textually predate
the \textit{Nibelungenlied}’s nixies. As \textit{Beowulf} has been interpreted as a text characterized by the

\textsuperscript{53} See Edward Haymes’ \textit{The Nibelungenlied}. Haymes is a proponent of the approach that finds sources for epics of
this period in much earlier oral tradition, not agreed to by all scholars. See McConnell for a discussion of the diverse
scholarly approaches to the poem in his introduction to \textit{A Companion to the Nibelungenlied}, 1-18.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Nicor} is related to AHD \textit{nichus} and NHD \textit{Nixe}. See Jacob Grimm, \textit{Deutsche Mythologie}, 244, 275-278.
\textsuperscript{55} That Grendel’s mother is one of a number of beasts who are of Cain’s lineage is made explicit in \textit{Beowulf}. Nixie or
mermaid figures appear in the Latin bestiaries from roughly the 8\textsuperscript{th} century through the Early Modern period. See
Holford-Stevens, pgs. 29-37. In these catalogues, the nixie figure is often set apart from the monsters, also apart
from the angels and other heavenly beings, often situated in the center of the constellation of beasts, emerging from
the water. See also Otto 29-31.
traditions of both the ancient Germanic and emergent Christian religions,\textsuperscript{56} perhaps the figure of Grendel’s mother likewise combines elements of the old and new orders. Finally, the Icelandic heroic sagas and the writings contained in the \textit{Edda} corpus also contain references to mythical figures related to the water nixie, from swan maidens to goddesses who personify the waves.\textsuperscript{57}

The Nixies appear in Aventiure 25 of the \textit{Nibelungenlied}, when, on their way to visit Kriemhild in Etzel’s kingdom, the Burgundians, led by King Gunther and his knight Hagen, run into a serious obstacle: the water of the Danube has risen and they have no way to cross. Stuck for the moment and searching for the ferryman, Hagen hears splashing in the water and stops to listen. Described by the poet alternately as “merewîp”, “wîsiu wîp” and “diu wilden merwîp”, the nixies are bathing in the river when Hagen becomes aware of them. He hears them first, and after listening and then seeing them, he steals their clothing.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{quote}
Dô suocht’ er nâch den vergen wider unde dan.

Er hîrte wazzer giezen (losen er began)

in einem schœnen brunnen; daz tâten wîsiu wîp.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} See for instance Kleber, “The Christian Coloring”.
\textsuperscript{57} See the \textit{Poetic Edda}, (Codex Regius) Introduction and HH1. The earliest fragments, now lost, preceding the \textit{Poetic Edda} may predate the NBL; the first manuscript of the \textit{Edda} (Codex Regius), the collection now housed in Iceland, most likely a copy of a now-lost original, is dated ca. 1280. Snorri Sturluson’s prose \textit{Edda} was composed ca. 1220. Earlier oral traditions are very difficult to date. For a comprehensive discussion of the composition and dating of the Eddic poetry see Lindow 12-26. Further, in the Lancelot cycle of the Arthurian legendary both water- and land-dwelling fairies abound, and the legend of the Lady of the Lake contains similar thematic content in terms of supernatural water-dwelling women. Contemporaneous and possibly earlier legends from Britain include the Celtic fairy faith, the Selkie legends of Wales, etc… See Peter Orton’s chapter on humankind transformed into animal shapes, which addresses the swan maiden legend in Jacob Grimm’s writings and Eddic poetry, “Theriomorphism: Jacob Grimm, Old Norse Mythology, German Fairy Tales and English Folklore” 299-334.

\textsuperscript{58} The stealing of clothing speaks to the swan maiden legend, in which the man who steals the swan maiden’s clothing is bound to them. Sometimes the reverse holds. Found in the \textit{Poetic Edda} in the Germanic tradition, the legend also appears in Russian and Slavic mythology. In the \textit{Edda}, Valkyries also assume the shape of the swan maiden at times. See Grimm, \textit{Mythologie} 244, 275 and Frenzel 776. For an introduction to the swan maiden legend and related motifs in world folklore see Leary’s \textit{In Search of the Swan Maiden} 11-32.
Die wolden sich dâ küelen unde badeten ir lîp. (Verse 1533)

One of the nixies, Hádeburc, tells Hagen that if he returns the clothing, she will tell him how the trip to Hungary will turn out. The poet says that while watching the nixies float like water fowl on the waves, Hagen thinks that they have second sight and agrees to the terms.

Si swebten sam die vogele vor im ūf der fluot
des dühten in ir sinne stärk ûnde guot.
Swaz si im sagen wolden er gelóubt ez deste baz.
Des er dô hin z’in gerte, wol beschieden si im daz. (1572)

Clothed again, the second nixie, Sigelint, reveals to Hagen that her cousin lied to get their clothing, warns him that the Burgundians will not return to Burgundy, and implores him to call off the foray. When Hagen questions the validity of her claim, Sigelint gives more details as to the events awaiting them in Hungary. They will find, Sigelint uses the phrase, “den tôt án der hant” (1540), thus she characterizes the fate of those who choose to cross the river. Once it becomes clear that Hagen will not heed the warning, Hádeburc tells Hagen how to find and engage the ferryman in order to cross the water. The scene with the Nixies closes with Hagen bowing his thanks, saying nothing, and leaving to fetch the ferryman.

The salient characteristics of the nixie figure in this sequence with Hagen are two-fold: the nixies seem to dwell in another, more mythological world from the more realistic world of Xanten and Worms (Lionarons “Otherworld”, 168-170), and they possess knowledge of the future. The nixies are often interpreted as one of a number of inhabitants of the Otherworld,

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59 Das Nibelungenlied. Nach dem Text von Karl Bartsch und Helmut de Boor. 462.
60 The belief that prophesying the future is a female trait is rooted in the Germanic tradition. Documented by Tacitus in Section 8.21, it is also present in Germanic mythology seen in the Edda. See Lionarons “The Otherworld” 169,
including dwarves and dragons that populate the poem and functionally give it an essential mythological dimension (Lionarons “Otherworld” 169; McConnell *The Nibelungenlied* 36–37, 52).  

Hagen hears the nixies before seeing them. More properly, he hears the water first, for it is the splashing sound of the water that Hagen first notices. After hearing the water, he begins to listen, “*losen er began*”, (1533), and he then becomes aware of the nixies, bathing in the Danube. The MHG *losen* is related to the NHG forms of *lauschen*, *horchen* and *hören*. The hearing of the water seems to precipitate Hagen’s listening.

That it is Hagen who has the encounter with the Nixies is significant, as Hagen is generally considered one of three characters able to traverse between the two worlds of the heroic epic: Siegfried and Brünhild are the other two (Lionarons “The Otherworld” 169; McConnell *The Nibelungenlied* 32–43). Considered from an epistemological standpoint, Hagen is a compelling character. While he routinely ignores prophesies -- see for instance his rebuffing of Ute’s prophetic dream of the doomed outcome of the trip to Hungary in Adventure 25 -- this encounter may signal a shift in his willingness to listen to prophetic knowledge, which would be an indication of character development generally not attributed to Hagen. McConnell elaborates on Hagen’s uniqueness as a major figure in the epic in an epistemological sense: Hagen knows more than other characters, particularly illustrated by his actions after the encounter with the

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and “Disir, Valkyries, Völu, and Norns” 294-297, and documented extensively by Jacob Grimm in the entry on *weise Frauen* in his *Deutsche Mythologie* 224-245. See also Grimm’s entry on *Weissagung* in *Mythologie* 640-643 for an account of the genetic tendency of the gift of prophesy to pass from mother to eldest daughter.

61 I disagree with Lionarons’ assessment that the Nixies do not come from “a discernable or widespread tradition”. “The Otherworld” 168. I would place them into the tradition of the Homeric siren, and later the *Nichus* as described by Jacob Grimm *Mythologie* 275-278. The NBL nixies’ characteristics of omniscience, their connection to and prophesying of death, and the connection to the water are compelling similarities.

water sprites. McConnell reads this trait as representative of Hagen’s heroic qualities (*The Nibelungenlied* 36-37).

The water frames and colors Hagen’s experience of the nixies. His decision to believe the Nixies depends on their connection to the water. The poet says “Si swebten sam die vogele/ vor im ûf der fluot. Des dühten in ir sinne/ stärk únde guot.” (1536), indicating that the way in which the nixies float like water fowl signals their second sight to him. The poet next says that Hagen believes all that they say and that they tell him all he wants to know. The connection between the nixies and the water is central to Hagen’s initial faith in their vision. Later he will test this vision by trying to drown the chaplain, of course, but the initial grounding of his belief in the nixies’ second sight -- the relationship between the nixies and the water -- is striking.

The crossing of the water is an essential structural moment in the poem (Homann 762). The Nixies serve as both gatekeepers and vectors in this moment. At this juncture in the poem in which the mission to Hungary, and therefore the narrative itself, hits an insurmountable hurdle in the form of an impassable water, the nixies show the future and the way forward. They serve as the remedy for the structural barrier represented by the Danube, and they present a structural solution to ward off the coming tragic end, by warning Hagen not to continue. In both scenarios the nixie figure is situated at a critical juncture in the poem, framed by the element of water.

The nixies’ relationship to the water in this passage extends to a further structural interpretation. The Danube divides the regions of Xanten, and Worms -- the regions where most of the plot takes place to this point -- and the lands to the east, which include Hungary, the realm

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63 Cf. the ending of the second edition version of Grimms’ Hänsel und Gretel (KHM 15; 1819) in which Gretel knows how to cross an impassable water with the help of a duck, with whom she communicates. Gretel possesses foresight in this version and is generally much stronger an agent in the narrative than is Hänsel.
of Attila, not yet the backdrop for a significant part of the narrative. The water nixies in the *Nibelungenlied* can be understood as dwelling literally between these two realms. McConnell, Lionarons and other scholars have read the water nixies as representatives of the Otherworld, which appears at several important moments in the poem (“Otherworld” 169; *The Nibelungenlied*, 36-37; 52). The Otherworld is generally understood to be characterized by figures and events which reflect the pre-Christian Germanic mythical traditions, very often signaled by magical or supernatural events.64

While I agree with Lionarons’ observations on the Otherworld and Hagen’s role as representative of the Otherworld, I disagree with her reading of the water nixies as “beautiful women”. I do not see a textual basis for this observation and read these figures instead much like Homer’s sirens: characterized by their sight and by how they sound to the human in the encounter, rather than how they look. The only evidence as to how they might look is given by the poet when he writes “Si swebten sam die vogele/ vor im ûf der fluot. Des dühten in ir sinne/ stárk únde guot.”, and earlier, in the reference to them bathing, “in einem schönen brunnen/ daz tâten wisiu wîp./ Die wolden sich dâ küelen/ unde badeten ir lîp.” Neither quote attributes beauty to the water nixies; rather they are attributed wisdom and the ability to float like fowl.

In this passage, the Otherworld, represented by the nixies, exists directly alongside the real world of Xanten and Worms, represented by Hagen and the Burgundian army. I suggest the nixies here are not just representatives of the Otherworld, but can be read as standing in the confluence of the two traditions: they dwell at the meeting point of the Germanic pre-Christian

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64 See Lionarons, “Otherworld” 168-170 and McConnell 36-37; 52. The water nixies, along with dwarf Alberich, the dragon Siegfried slews, the adventures in Iceland, along with the island of the Nibelungs where Siegfried originally hid the treasure, are sites of the Otherworld.
and the Christian realms in the poem. The crossing of the Danube can be seen symbolically as the crossing from a Christian realm to an ancient Germanic one. The Danube divides and therefore is shared by both realms: Attila’s kingdom and the Burgundian territory. If these two territories are seen as representative of a dominant Christian tradition and a waning but still-vibrant Germanic pre-Christian tradition, with the Danube situated between them, the nixies, as both gatekeepers and vectors between realms can be read as a symbol of the confluence of the two traditions. The parallel is not perfect, as by the time the party crosses to Hungary the realm is depicted as pagan, but certainly no longer Germanic in nature, and much that has happened in the nominally Christian lands of Xanten and Worms bears the mark of the ancient Germanic, as has been amply noted in the literature (McConnell *The Nibelungenlied* 10-49; 66-67).

While acknowledging the limitations of this reading, it is nonetheless difficult to dismiss the fact that the nixies are textually situated in the water of both realms, and for this reason I read the water nixies as a symbol for the confluence of what the two different regions in the poem may signify, rather than simply representing one tradition over the other. Murphy’s work on the Stave churches of Norway as sites of confluence of the emergent Christian faith built in ancient Germanic terms, in their resemblance to the Yggdrasil, the tree of life in the ancient Germanic religion, lays out the argument for this interpretive approach (“Yggdrasil and the Stave Church.” Forthcoming.)

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65 See Haymes, the *Nibelungenlied* in which he argues that the epic signifies the triumph of the ancient Germanic heroic order over the emergent courtly order. Haymes discusses this in terms of a clash of values: that the epic serves as a social critique of the values of the rising nobility 9-21.
66 The nixies have consistently been interpreted as part of one realm -- the magical pre-Christian -- not as a symbol of the co-existence of the two traditions. See for instance Lionarons “The Otherworld” 168-170.
67 In *Vox Germanica: A Festschrift in Honor of James Cathey*. Oxford University Press, forthcoming. Also see Murphy’s earlier work on the Old Saxon *Heliand, The Saxon Savior* as the Gospel story told in the language of the ancient Germanic traditions. Murphy’s central argument is that in order to communicate respectfully and effectively
There is reason to think water nixies have been understood in this way before, particularly in the broader context of the history of artwork decorating churches. The nixie figure adorns numerous and varied works of art from this period: in addition to the wood carvings in churches from the Gothic period forward, several early Germanic manuscripts portray sirens or other mermaid figures. These early Christian depictions of nixie figures found on church panels, ceilings, and gravestones seem initially incongruous in the context of emerging Christianity. However, the nixie understood as vector, seer, or transmitter of knowledge in both traditions is one way to understand this figure as a symbol of coexistence between the old order and the new. Similarly, the nixies in the *Nibelungenlied* lend themselves to this interpretation.

The nixies’ role as seers and gatekeepers in this passage points to several possible mythological traditions. The nixie figure’s placement on the water and its power to point the way across echoes the ferryman Charon of ancient Greek myth, who leads the shades of the dead over the river Styx to the underworld (Harvey 98). Hagen is in the midst of searching for the ferryman when he becomes aware of the nixies, but it is the nixies who effectively show the way across the river in this passage, since once Hagen summons the ferryman and they quarrel, Hagen slays him and becomes himself the ferryman who leads the Burgundians across the river (McConnell *The Nibelungenlied* 37). The knowledge Hagen receives from the nixies amounts to a description of how the river can be crossed. A possible link between this passage and the Charon figure in classical mythology underscores the topos of certain death in this passage.

with the only partly-converted Saxons, the *Heliand* poet tells the gospel story in terms that would have been understandable to his audience i-v; 3-11..
68 See Otto 29-32. Depending on the region and epoch, these depictions are interpreted very differently. Mermaid figures are found in churches from the Byzantine period forward, with multiple interpretations as to the role they play, often seen as luck-bringers to fisherman and sometimes as helpers to travelers.
Germanic mythology as found in the *Edda* provides another approach to both a richer interpretation of the nixie figure, and to possible meanings for the role of the water in Hagen’s encounter with the nixies. The nixies recall the Fates, or *Norns*, in Germanic mythology. The nixies’ number is not clear in the *Nibelungenlied*: they number at least two but may be three. The Fates in the ancient Greek number three; in ancient Germanic tradition as found in the *Edda* they generally number two or three, and in both traditions the fates are endowed with the power of foresight and destiny.69 The Norns as depicted in the *Poetic Edda* are found at the base of the tree Yggdrasil, sitting by the well of *Urd*, a word that denotes that which has happened, but in the sense of that which must have happened, weaving the fate of mortal man and the gods alike. The names of the Norns are *Wyrd* (fate) *Verandhi* (becoming)70, and *Skuld* (shall be).71 The Norns periodically sprinkle water from the well on the tree Yggdrasil, to preserve the life and balance of all living things.72 The nixies in the *Nibelungenlied* echo this older tradition which strongly links prophetic sight to mythical female water-dwellers, or those who dwell near the water.73

69 The Norns are not portrayed monolithically in Eddic poetry: sometimes they number three, particularly in the *Völuspa*, stanza 19, sometimes they number more than three, and have powers for good and ill with respect to childbirth and the fate of humankind, particularly in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*. The well of *Urd* is found in Eddic poetry, in the *Völuspa*, stanza 19 or in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* (verse 19). *Urd* is related to modern German *werden* and the modern English *weird*, through old English *wyrd*, “fate, destiny”. Cf. the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* (I.1 and particularly I. 3 for the prophecy concerning Macbeth) connection to the Fates, both in the German and classical Greek traditions. See Harvey for ancient Greek Fates 74; Lindow 245.

70 Related to NHG *werden*.

71 See Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, verse 18, or the *Poetic Edda*: the *Völuspa*, stanza 19 (Codex Regius).

72 The word fate has its root in the Latin *Fata*, noun for the word *Fates* but also a past participle for the verb *fari*, to speak, so fate is that which is said or spoken. This is equivalent to the ancient Greek *moirae*, which refers to the Fates, and to that which was said. It is noteworthy that *fata* is also the common root for fairy in romance and Germanic languages. The etymology of *Norn* is Icelandic in origin. There is a suggestion that *Norn* refers to an Indo-European base that means “to twist or twine”, which would nicely align with the conception of the spinning Fates, but the O.E.D. considers this etymology doubtful (O.E.D. Online. March 2012).

73 The nixies also appear to draw on the legend of the swan maiden, found in the *Poetic Edda*, as well as in broader Scandinavian, Russian, and eastern European mythologies. The poet’s indication that the way in which the nixies
The well of *urd* has its own mythological history: along with the Tree Yggdrasil, it is the source both of Odin’s ability to read runes and origin of the runes themselves when he reaches out to seize the runes from the branches above the well, after hanging for nine days. The connection between the well of *urd* and knowledge is supported by both its role in the mythology surrounding the Norns and the origin of the runes. The well and the tree as the source of runes and therefore a source of transmittable knowledge, as well as the relationship between the Norns’ foresight and sprinkling from the well, provide a basis in Germanic mythology for interpreting in which way the water might bear on Hagen’s moment of epistemological transformation.

In biblical traditions, water may symbolize transformation, epiphany, and rebirth. In the New Testament, water is a central element in the baptism rite, symbolizing rebirth in the Christian faith. In the Old Testament, water is often the site of momentous transitions, such as the Exodus, also as the site of meetings with angels, or even with God.

Based on this brief overview of traditions that may have been at work for the poet of the *Nibelungenlied*, interpretive possibilities for the role of water in this passage are enriched: as symbol for transformation, death, new life or the balance of life, and source of knowledge outside human scope. In the scene in which Hagen encounters the nixies several of these

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74 *Poetic Edda*, “Sayings of the High One” (Hávamál), 34-35. Stanza 80.
75 Other poems in the *Eddic* corpus point to the well as source of knowledge including the poetic Hávamál and Snorri’s *Gylfiaginning*. See Lindow 212, 301.
76 See Murphy’s interpretation of this line in the *Völsunga* with respect to the Fuþark and how the rune staves could have knowledge carved on them, in “The Secret of the Sequence of the Runes in the Elder Fuþark.” 11-12.
77 See Murphy, *Gemstone of Paradise* 117-131.
78 For instance Genesis 32:22-32, in which Jacob wrestles all night with a man, interpreted often as an angel, on the river Jabbok. Jacob reports he came face to face with God in the struggle, changes his name to Israel the next day.
79 For an in-depth discussion of possible historical/cultural and religious influences for the NBL poet, see Haynes, *The Nibelungenlied* and McConnell *The Nibelungenlied* 1-9.
elements are at work. Death is an explicit theme in the passage: the nixies warn that anyone who crosses the Danube takes “den tôt án der hant” (1543). Hagen’s knowledge of the future, which appears to compel him even more firmly to go forward to Hungary, in spite of or because he knows with certainty what awaits the party, originates in the water nixies and from his belief in their power of second sight (sinne), which stems in turn from his seeing them and hearing them on the water -- how they splash and float like fowl.

In revealing the future, the nixies both give Hagen a choice to avert the doom, and allow the narrative force of the epic to continue over the water and toward Hungary, once Hagen refuses to turn back. The sight the nixies possess, which they pass to him in the form of their prophesy, seems only to strengthen his resolve and to ensure that their mission is a hopeless one, as he demonstrates quite clearly by destroying the boats once the company crosses the river.

This side of Hagen’s character is in ample evidence earlier in the epic, particularly in Aventiure 24, when Ute confides her dream that the company should not travel to Etzel’s court because the mission is doomed. Hagen dismisses the dream out of hand. When Hagen’s reaction to the two prophesies is taken into account, it appears to corroborate the character trait that Hasty characterizes as relentless (79-94). While I agree that Hagen exhibits relentlessness for the better part of the epic, I read his reaction to the knowledge of certain death as revelatory of the possibility of epistemological transformation. His belief is radical, in comparison to his stance toward the previous prophesy.80

Once their functional role is fulfilled, the force that the nixies’ exert on the poem translates to the power of free will, and it is a power held by Hagen, in a practical way: he has

80 As McConnell notes; it is a departure. *The Nibelungenlied* 37.
the knowledge of the future and makes his choice (Homann 764). In this sense Hagen is transformed by what he learns from the nixies, although his choice may not appear in any sense radical: he chooses death and honor, which is in accord with his character through the poem (McConnell “The Nibelungenlied: A Psychological Approach” 185). The fact that the knowledge he now possesses is certain puts Hagen’s decision in a different light and affirms that his encounter with the nixies results in extraordinary awareness.

I read the epistemological moment of this passage, i.e. the moment in which Hagen becomes aware of knowledge outside human scope in the encounter with the water nixies: knowledge both of the future, and the practical knowledge of how to cross the river, as both an epiphany on the level of the text and as symbolic of the possibility to experience moments of exceptional awareness in human life, a possibility described by Albert Borgmann as a *focal occasion* (“Cyberspace” 1). The focal occasion has two essential components: it must be both communal and affirming on the one hand, and occur with ritual repetition on the other. Thus while the focal occasion is linked to the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*, or the “auspicious moment”, in which the meaning of life “gathers and is disclosed from the rush and flow of time” it differs in that for the focal occasion to be realized in a substantial way, these moments must be built into one’s life (“Cyberspace” 1). I suggest that the quality of *attentive listening* that Hagen displays prior to his encounter with the nixies signals a state of readiness that makes the way clear for a moment of insight that has the power to clarify and infuse life with meaning.

The quality of attentive listening as the antecedent to the transformative epistemological potential of the human-nixie encounter is a unifying thread between the passages in the

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81 See Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* or *Nichomachean Ethics*, and Plato’s *Phaedrus* for articulations of the classical rhetorical understanding of *kairos*. 
Nibelungenlied and the Odyssey. In both passages the sound of the water is the first signal of the encounter: the splashing sound in in the NBL, and the sudden drop of the wind in the Odyssey, which Odysseus notices as the sudden calm of the water. This signal is followed by active listening on Hagen’s part (losen er began) and active preparations to listen, on Odysseus’. In both passages attentive listening precedes the encounter with the nixie and the moment of extraordinary awareness that accompanies it.

Further, the sirens in the Odyssey promise to share omniscience with Odysseus if he comes ashore, a promise that at first glance does not come to pass, but upon a closer reading seems borne out by both the way the sirens address Odysseus (Pucci 1-9) and the references they make to Troy -- proving their boast in advance, so to speak. The Nibelungenlied’s nixies do share the foresight they possess.\(^{82}\) The vision of the future is passed to Hagen and carried into the realm of human action; in contrast to Odysseus, who in as far as he is affected by the encounter with the sirens once the ship has been eclipsed by their island is a matter the reader has no access to: the reader is only privy to the pivotal moment of longing.

In both passages, death is linked to prophesy. As suggested by the introductory passage in which Circe introduces the sirens to Odysseus, there is a legend at work in the world of the text about the sirens’ luring crews to their death: it is understood at the text level that Odysseus’ crew will likewise die if they come ashore. In the Nibelungenlied, Hagen and his company will also die if they cross the water, albeit not because of or in proximity to the nixies. In this case the death will come much later, and the water nixies stand opposed to that prospect -- they favor

\(^{82}\) It can be argued of course that this sharing of the future is compelled; after all, Hagen steals the Nixies’ clothing and in so doing might well compel them to share the first, false vision, but there is no compulsion for Sigelint to share the real vision once their clothing is returned.
Hagen, another indication of his special status in the Otherworld (Lionarons “The Otherworld” 168-170). The link between the nixie, death, and an experience of knowledge outside human scope -- specifically with respect to the past, present, and future -- is firmly made by both accounts.  

Fateful luring is central to the siren encounter in the *Odyssey*, as it will be with the Lorelei figure and other later versions of the siren. The nixies do not wish to lure the Burgundians to their deaths: to the contrary, they plead for Hagen to turn back. Likewise the nixies do not sing: the word “sprach” is used each time the nixies speak to Hagen. Death and song are not explicitly linked here, as they are in the siren encounter in the *Odyssey*. 

In both texts, the human figure is seen and the nixie figure is heard, but in the *Nibelungenlied*, the nixie is also seen; while in the *Odyssey*, the appearance of the sirens is veiled to the reader. It should be noted that in Hagen’s perspective, which is what the text yields as to the appearance of the water nixies, wisdom and a significant connection to the water are the aspects that emerge, not their beauty, an attribute which has been read into the figure.  

Further, Hagen sees and actively interacts with the nixies, while Odysseus is often read as victor of this potentially deadly encounter by virtue of his superior intellect. This argument misses the emotional depth of the encounter with the sirens. A closer reading suggests the opposite: Odysseus’ reaction to the sirens, specifically the joy in his heart and the longing to listen further,

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83 The link between sirens and other mythological female water-dwellers and death has been extensively researched. See Grimm, *Mythologie* 244, 275-278 Frenzl, 774-788, Kraß and Stuby, among others. The epistemological aspect of the encounter is less in evidence in contemporary secondary literature.

84 Not on the textual level at any rate. In the following chapters I will explore the link between the topos of the human-nixie encounter and poetry as music.

85 See for instance Lionarons “The Otherworld” pg. 153.

86 See Adorno and Horkheimer’s Excursus on the encounter in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* for the present-day basis for this interpretation. Kafka’s “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” also appears to place emphasis on Odysseus as unaffected intellect. A discussion of his 1917 fragment appears at the end of Chapter 3.
which results in his attempt to act against his own life-interests, speak to the encounter as a real interaction, not only as a way to trick fate. The language the sirens use is an intensely personal language, meant for Odysseus alone, that has an immediate, radical effect. Odysseus’ behavior represents a response. The sirens’ song and Odysseus’ reaction to it can be read as a deeply personal dialogue.

Despite differences in the encounter as it unfolds in the two texts, the passages in the Nibelungenlied echo the essential aspects of the epistemological structure of the human-nixie encounter in the Odyssey. In both epics, water nixies vocally share knowledge outside human scope, tinged with death, with the human being in the encounter. Further, the dynamic between the ear and the eye leading up to the encounter is structurally very similar: both Hagen and Odysseus, immediately after hearing the water, listen attentively, and then become aware of the nixies, an awareness that for both represents a moment of extraordinary awareness. In both passages it is the human posture of attentive listening that antecedes, and I suggest makes way for, the transformative potential of the encounter with the nixie.

To close, the encounter between human and water nixie in the Nibelungenlied not only carries on the essential epistemological nature of the encounter as it appears in the Odyssey, the interpretive potential of the encounter is deepened with respect to the semiotic nature of the nixie figure and the role of water in the epistemological moment. Based on possible influences from the ancient Germanic, Classical and Biblical traditions, the meaning potential of the role of water in the encounter extends to knowledge outside human scope, including knowledge of oneself and what is fated, death, the possibility of new life, and transformation. The poet’s description of the nixies as water-dwelling beings with foresight, which in my reading echoes the norns of the
Edda -- these nixies dwell likewise in the water of what must be, saying the fate of mankind -- brings a further shade of meaning to the encounter. The NBL nixies remain seers who endow the human in the encounter with extraordinary knowledge, a moment precipitated by audial awareness, but they are more than that. In this medieval epic the nixies become both benevolent vectors who point the way and cautionary figures to the human seeking to cross the divide.

These few lines in the Nibelungenlied, in proportion to the work as a whole a tiny, fleeting moment in this epic poem, deserve nonetheless to be seen as foundational to the flowering of water nixies in their diversity in future German texts, and provide an important backdrop for the discussion of an 18th-century poem about a water-dwelling woman who echoes both the Nibelungenlied nixies and their forbears, the norns: Johann von Goethe’s “Der Fischer”.

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Nearly six centuries after the encounter between Hagen and the water nixies appeared in the *Nibelungenlied*, an era opened in which water creatures brought to life by poets writing in the German language flourished. Writers including Goethe, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Tieck, Eichendorff, Heine, and Fouqué offered their versions of the human-nixie encounter. This concentrated burst of creativity that produced the nixie motif in the lyric poetry, fairy tales, short stories, musical compositions, and novels of the epoch in great number and diversity was unprecedented and remains so: no era of German literary history, and more broadly Western literature, enjoyed so many encounters between water fairies of all kinds and human beings before or since. In a very real sense, the romantic age was the age of the water nixie in German literature.\(^{87}\)

In this chapter I will explore Goethe’s “Der Fischer” (ca. 1779), a ballad in which the human-nixie encounter, seen as potentially transformative epistemological moment, is exemplary.\(^{88}\) I offer a close reading of this poem in which the epistemological character of the encounter between human and nixie, primarily with respect to the question of the relationship between visual and the acoustic realms, represents the central line of inquiry. A second line of

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\(^{87}\) See Gallagher, *Metamorphosis* 345-351 or Annegret Fauser’s “Rheinsiren, Loreley and other Rhine Maidens” 250-273, Otto 52-72 and 104-107, for examinations of the motif during this period.  
\(^{88}\) In the intervening periods the Nixie motif found extensive treatment, both in terms of primary texts and corresponding secondary literature. The most well-known tradition to emerge in the intervening time is the legend of Melusine, with influence and reverberations in literature and culture to the present day. See Sturm-Maddox and Maddox, Otto, and Steinkämper for histories and perspectives of the Melusine figure.
inquiry will pursue the transformative potential of this encounter on the textual and poetological levels.\textsuperscript{89}

Der Fischer

Das Wasser rauscht', das Wasser schwoll,

ein Fischer saß daran,

sah nach dem Angel ruhevoll,

kühl bis ans Herz hinan.

Und wie er sitzt und wie er lauscht,

teilt sich die Flut empor;

aus dem bewegten Wasser rauscht

ein feuchtes Weib hervor.

Sie sang zu ihm, sie sprach zu ihm:

Was lockst du meine Brut

mit Menschenwitz und Menschenlist

hinauf in Todesglut?

Ach wüßtest du, wie's Fischlein ist

so wohlig auf dem Grund,

du stiegst herunter, wie du bist,

und würdest erst gesund.

\textsuperscript{89} Given the multitude of exemplary texts from this period, it proves very difficult to focus on only one text. There are numerous works within this literary context featuring the human-nixie encounter which serve to illustrate the potentially transformative epistemological encounter. See for instance Eichendorff’s \textit{Am Strom} (1841) or \textit{Lockung} (1848), Novalis’ \textit{Heinrich von Ofterdingen} (1802) or Müller’s \textit{Die schöne Müllerin} (1821).
Labt sich die liebe Sonne nicht,
der Mond sich nicht im Meer?
Kehrt wellenatmend ihr Gesicht
nicht doppelt schöner her?
Lockt dich der tiefe Himmel nicht,
das feuchtverklärte Blau?
Lockt dich dein eigen Angesicht
nicht her in ew'gen Tau?

Das Wasser rauscht', das Wasser schwoll,
netzt' ihm den nackten Fuß;
sein Herz wuchs ihm so sehnsuchtsvoll,
wie bei der Liebsten Gruß.
Sie sprach zu ihm, sie sang zu ihm;
da war's um ihn geschehn:
Halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin
und ward nicht mehr gesehn.\textsuperscript{90}

The encounter between human and nixie in “Der Fischer” takes place acoustically. The experience of Goethe’s poem at both the textual and poetological level is characterized by sound.
The poem opens with the sounds of the water: \textit{Das Wasser rauscht’, das Wasser schwoll}. As the water laps and swells, the fisherman is sitting by and listening, \textit{Und wie er sitzt und wie er}

\textsuperscript{90} Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. \textit{Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche}. Vol I: Gedichte.
lauscht. The verb “lauschen” connotes quietly paying attention, or eavesdropping.\textsuperscript{91} It is this state of quiet attentiveness that precedes the wet maiden sweeping forth and appearing before the fisherman.

When the nixie appears to the fisherman, it is first through sound: \textit{Aus dem bewegten Wasser rauscht/ Ein feuchtes Weib hervor.} She sweeps up from the moving water and toward him.\textsuperscript{92} The word used to describe the sound she makes, \textit{rauschen}, is the same used to describe the sound of the water in the first line. This is the manner in which first she becomes perceptible to the fisherman, not as an appearance but first as a sound -- the sound of her is the sound of the water.\textsuperscript{93}

The implication of these first lines that precede the encounter is that the fisherman must see her, but the description of her is almost entirely acoustic.\textsuperscript{94} The only clue to the nixie apart from the acoustic is the descriptor of her as a wet maiden, \textit{Ein feuchtes Weib}, which is neither acoustic nor visual.\textsuperscript{95} Otherwise, the reader has no sense of this nixie apart from sound. The first stanza is thus characterized almost entirely by sound, and specifically the sound of the water, which is also the sound of the maiden, contrasted by the quiet of the fisherman, which can be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91} Grimm “Wörterbuch” Band 12, Spalten 353 – 358. It is noteworthy that \textit{lauschen} is the NHD form of MHD \textit{losen}, as documented in Grimm.
\item \textsuperscript{92} The verb \textit{rauschen} connotes the sound of movement: a lap or a swoosh, the sound of fluid movement. For a treatment on the semiotic of \textit{rauschen} in German literature see Katja Stopka, “Töne der Ferne: Über das Rauschen in der Literatur” 59-71.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Goethe said of writing the poem, „Es ist in dieser Ballade bloß das Gefühl des Wassers ausgedrückt, das Anmutige, was uns im Sommer lockt, uns zu baden; weiter liegt nichts darin.”. \textit{Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche, Briefe} 1:248.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Cf. Eichendorff’s corpus in which the verb “rauschen” is used frequently to refer to the sounds associated with the water nixie.
\item \textsuperscript{95} I disagree with Ellis Dye’s reading of this phrase: that it is a heavily ironic and clear intrusion of the narrator, parallel to “Lo- a damp wench!” in the English of the period 129. See his chapter on the ballad, 114-162. I read the line as descriptive and supportive of the non-transparent nature of the nixie figure. The phrase “ein feuchtes Weib” gives very little information to the reader. My reading would also take the most salient textual source of Goethe’s maiden to be the three Norns as described in stanza 18 of the \textit{Völuspa} (Prophesy of the Seeress) of the \textit{Poetic Edda}, (\textit{Codex Regius}): “Thence came maidens/ much knowing/ three of them/ out of that lake”.
\end{itemize}
understood as a lack of sound of the human. In other words, sound characterizes the nixie and the lack of sound, or quiet, characterizes the human.

The sound of water and the lack of any sound on the part of the human points to an important aspect of this stanza and of the poem itself: the lack of objects. There are no real clues to the fisherman. The mention of his fishing rod and his heart stand out because there are hardly any objects in the ballad (Wellbery 257).

The second stanza likewise opens with sound: Goethe tells how the maid sang and spoke to the fisherman. This is not the sound of water, which opened the first stanza, but of a voice. The reader still has almost no information about the nixie’s appearance: the entire experience of her to this point, again outside the descriptor of her as a wet maiden, is determined by sound.96

The remainder of the second and third stanzas is composed of the content of the nixie’s singing and speaking: it is an extended quote. After the remonstration for trying to capture and kill her kin, she points out that the fisherman would certainly come down into the water if he knew how happily the fish lived there.

Ach wüßtest du, wie’s Fischlein ist
So wohlig auf dem Grund,
Du stiegst herunter, wie du bist,
Und würdest erst gesund.

96 As explored in the previous chapter, Goethe’s nixie, similar to Homer’s sirens and the nixies bathing in the Danube is not thematized by appearance but how the figure sounds: they see, but the human in the encounter knows them through sound.
In this stanza the nixie offers a possible vision of the future; she is not speaking to what will absolutely happen, indicated by the subjunctive voice. The “wüßtest” alerts the reader that the fisherman does not know what it’s like to be happy and healthy in the water, but if only he did know, this would be the future he would choose.

Goethe’s use of the subjunctive here signals the realm of the possible, the realm of what might be. It departs linguistically from the mood of the first stanza, which is all in the indicative voice: a description of what is. The use of subjunctive in this stanza, which is devoted entirely to the content of the nixie’s song, is a signal that the nixie speaks for what might be. The nixie opens the world of what might be through her singing and speaking: through sound. She is the sound of what might be, what might become, of what is possible.97

The stanza ends with the nixie saying that if the fisherman only knew, he would come down into the water, and be healthy for the first time. There is foresight and knowledge in the very few lines the nixie speaks to him -- she speaks with authority about the future. This is not a straightforward prediction; rather an “if…then” argument, which is certain for itself of the allure of the deep, if only the fisherman knew what it was like below. The second stanza ends with the nixie holding out the world of the possible through her singing and speaking, through her sound, to the silent fisherman who, in so far as he is characterized by her speech, does not know.

Further, there is no poetic conception at this point of the fisherman as anything but a silent listener, which is how he was introduced in the first stanza. The focus of the poem since the appearance of the nixie shifts entirely to her, so the reader’s picture of the fisherman remains

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97 In this respect Goethe’s nixie strongly recalls the Norns of the Völuspa of the Poetic Edda. As noted, the Norns emerge from the well of Urð. See Lindow 234-45 or Lionarons 282-288.
intact as the acoustic description of the nixie develops, taking the poetic foreground. Knowledge and sound are contrasted with the silent posture of listening.

My interpretation of the fisherman as a sketch, a void that will have to be filled by the reader, is in contrast to many interpretations of the poem, for instance Ellis Dye, who reads the fisherman as the “work’s sentient center” (127). Monika Schmitz-Eman sees the fisherman pulled to the deeps by his own Narcissus-like longing for himself, a process aided by the metaphors of reflexivity used by the nixie (218–220). My reading is interested in the moment of self-recognition, but equates the figure of the fisherman with a sketch that offers much less to discover at the textual level than the poetological level, and underscores the acoustic force of the nixie figure and of the encounter itself. The figure of fisherman taken on its own terms reveals very little.98

On the poetological level, the reader’s experience mirrors the fisherman’s. The open description of the fisherman in the first stanza, with so little conveyed by the poet apart from the characteristics of silence, the cool down to his heart, and his listening over his fishing-pole allow the reader to easily occupy his position. In fact, the reader is drawn in to his position. What he sees and hears the reader hears, because there is no medial description: Goethe does not portray what the fisherman’s reaction to the nixie is; it is only through direct experience of it that the reader learns, and in this sense becomes the listener. Because the image of the fisherman remains intact, the reader experiences the nixie as the fisherman does: acoustically.

This is not a poetological posture which is in any sense a stretch: there is no need for the reader to strain, imagining what the experience is like. There is no poetic description of the

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98 Heinz Politzer also discusses the fisherman as silent while the nixie herself speaks and sounds 20.
fisherman’s experience, there is only the experience itself, which is almost entirely acoustic, so that there is nothing to prevent the reader from the full experience. If there were a description of what the fisherman saw, the reader would have to imagine, because the experience of what is visual but mediated in writing cannot happen any other way. Sound, on the other hand, when given through direct speech as it is here, is direct and unmediated.99

The only aspect that the fisherman may experience as visual is the one hint that the nixie is a wet maiden. On the other hand, the descriptor “ein feuchtes Weib” does not necessarily convey a picture, and it may as easily convey sound, since something wet or damp can be recognized by sound often more readily than by sight.100 The remainder of the poetic description of the nixie is conveyed through sound. The reader hears it all directly -- not through the fisherman, not mediated, but directly -- so that the reader assumes the pose of the silent listener. The bare and open sketch of the fisherman allows the reader to fully experience the nixie; in fact the reader is drawn in to the fisherman’s shoes, which structurally gives rise to the nixie’s direct speech to the reader.

This poetological motion, which draws the reader in and down, is supported by the music of the poetry, which evokes both the sound of the water lapping, but also of human breath.

99 My reading is in contrast to several scholars, e.g. Ellis Dye and Stathis Gourgouris who claim that the experience in “Der Fischer” and the passage with the sirens in the Odyssey, respectively, is primarily visual and sensual, mediated through the imagination. See Dye, 127-129 and Gourgouris’ chapter on the Odyssey, “The Gesture of the Sirens”, 161-198. Feminist scholarship, while not monolithic, has also mainly seen the human-nixie encounter in terms of how the nixie figure is mediated through the visual imagination and more specifically, through the erotically-oriented male gaze. See Stuby 9 and Silvia Bovenschen for a theoretical framework that elucidates the visual as an historically powerful means of limiting possibilities in how women read, see, and are seen in literature and culture.

100 The concept of recognition through sound as opposed to sight is developed in Herder’s Abhandlung. A lovely poetic example can be found in the Old Saxon Heliand, in which blind followers of Christ recognize him by his footsteps and shout out in order to be seen by him, or in the opening scene of David Lynch’s Blue Velvet (1986), in which a severed ear is discovered by the protagonist.
Drawn in through the music of the poetry, which both describes and resembles waves, the reader recognizes the rhythm of human breathing that carries through the poem. The ballad thus becomes an autonomic activity: hearing the water though the music of the poetry, and drawn in by the breathing rhythm of the lines, the reader becomes the fisherman. The reader is there because she hears what the fisherman hears, and her own breath carries the reading of the poem forward.

The direct encounter between the reader and the experience of the nixie extends through her singing and speaking; that is the bulk of the experience. The reader must accept the nixie’s questioning, indeed because the fisherman is absent from the poem for the entire stanza, the reader has little choice but to listen to the nixie’s questions, to hear them, not as questions to the fisherman, because he is not there in any real or perceptible sense, but as questions to the reader herself. The de facto poetological posture is one of engagement, and the experience is direct -- the reader has to deliberately choose to disengage in order to create distance. Further, for the reader this is an experience of being present -- the fisherman’s absence in the second stanza and the nature of the figure as more sketch than figure, more of a posture than a character, not only invite the reader but assume that the reader is there as the listener. If the nixie is speaking, she is speaking to someone.¹⁰¹

In the third stanza the vision of the possible future is reinforced rhetorically by a series of leading questions, which refer to the possibility the nixie dangled in the previous stanza: that it is really the fisherman’s own wish to come down into the water. She no longer uses the subjunctive voice to point to what might be; here she is asking, in the indicative voice, if this vision isn’t, in

¹⁰¹ See Herder’s argument on the main purpose of speech as communication. For Herder even the most primitive speech exists always in order to communicate something with someone, *Abhandlung* 5-15
fact, what he desires. She begins with two leading questions not about the fisherman, but about nature’s own desire to come down to the water.

Labt sich die liebe Sonne nicht,

Der Mond sich nicht im Meer?

Kehrt wellenatmend ihr Gesicht

Nicht doppelt schöner her?

The nixie’s claim that the fisherman would come down and be whole for the first time, if only he knew how lovely life beneath was, is followed by the nixie asking if it isn’t so that the sun bathes herself in the sea, and the moon as well. She then asks if it isn’t so that the face of the sun, breathing in the waves, turns back from the sea, now doubly beautiful. The sun’s face has become doubly beautiful in her reflection from the sea. The sun is drawn to the water and in being drawn in, become more beautiful than she was before. The claim that the nixie made in the previous stanza that the fisherman would become whole for the first time down below is supported by this observation about nature. Even the heavenly bodies strive to come down to the water, according to the nixie’s argument, in the only way that they can: through reflection, and in so doing become lovelier.102

This is striking both in that the sun and moon are attributed volition and desire, but also that the poetological force of the poem that arises from the second stanza continues in these lines: the sun and moon are drawn down, just as the reader has been drawn down to occupy the

102 This poem has been widely interpreted as one of Goethe’s *naturmagische Ballade*, a term coined by Paul Ludwig Kämpchen in *Die numinose Ballade* in which the nixie is interpreted as representing the raw magical power of nature and the fisherman as representative of human culture. There is a critical tradition of interpreting the often-anthropomorphized magical power of nature represented in poems, particularly ballads, of the romantic era, as an opposing and driving creative force compared to the effects of human culture. See discussion in Dye, 125.
empty figure of the fisherman. The description of the sun and moon’s descent and turning back, more beautiful, strengthens the force of the downward pull upon the reader. As the nixie turns back to the topic of the fisherman’s own desires; the reader, by now fully present in the place of the fisherman but also aware of the continued exertion of the downward pull, hears the questions again as questions to her.

\begin{quote}
Lockt dich der tiefe Himmel nicht,

Das feuchtverklärte Blau?

Lockt dich dein eigen Angesicht

Nicht her in ew'gen Tau?«
\end{quote}

Following upon the examples of the sun and moon, there is a pull from both nature and logic to answer affirmatively. The downward pull is exerted through these lines: everything the nixie lists wishes to be below, and goes below, albeit through reflection. Further, the music of the poetry, resembling waves and in its rhythm and echoing human breath, accompanies the downward pull so that what is happening to the reader feels natural, cyclical, and unalterable.\textsuperscript{103}

The language of the nixie’s song also reinforces the experience of going from above to below in a steady rhythm: she refers to the water as the deep heaven or sky, as the wet transfiguring blue. The image of a body of water as a heaven or sky tips the reader immediately upside down: vertigo is a natural response to imagining water as deep as the sky is high.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{103} Cf. Goethe’s 1831 lyric “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh”, in which the downward motion is likewise at work and both resembles breathing and thematizes breath directly.

\textsuperscript{104} I disagree with Dye’s reading here of the absurdness of the heaven as the deep, in his reading of the nature imagery, 130-31. Dye contends that the element of the absurd distances the reader even more from the poem, that the narrator is making his own presence felt through this absurdity. I argue in the opposite direction that the reader is directly within the world of the poem at this point in the ballad, and that the metaphor of the heaven as something deep strongly recalls the vertigo of standing someplace very high and looking into a depth, an experience which may
transposing of the heavens into the deep of the water through this specific language paints the poetological motion of the poem in words: the sky comes down into the water. The reader, sitting in for the absent fisherman, likewise experiences the downward pull. Even imagining the heavens as a depth induces the sense of free-fall: the pull downward comes from all sides: the vacuum that the fisherman’s sketch represents; the nixie’s nature metaphors, the rhythm of the language itself, and the imagery within the language of her singing and speaking all lead in one direction: downwards.

The final couplet of the third stanza asks if the fisherman’s own face doesn’t lure him, if his own face turned back to him from the eternal dew does not lure him. This image, parallel to the one that precedes it, asks the reader to imagine not the heavenly bodies tilting forward, but herself looking down into the water to see her own face looking back at her from the eternal watery depths. If the reader imagines the fisherman here, the fisherman will likewise be leaning down to see himself, Narcissus-like and in this leaning, this tilting, the force of both the poetological and textual levels of the poem is identical and clearly felt. The reader is asked to see herself tilting forward over the water, and in that image the same sense of vertigo or falling that accompanies the last image remains. This force is exerted throughout the poem, but it is especially salient in this stanza.

The downward pull I have referred to can be understood in terms of the gravitational force. The pull downwards in a sense is always at work, and the universality of the experience of
falling, of being pulled down, underscores and supports the poetological experience that I suggest is at work in the poem. To imagine falling or being pulled toward the water, especially when near a body of water, is a common experience.\textsuperscript{107} The exaggeration of this specific gravitational force, which is in a physical sense a constant of human life, is at play in these two stanzas: it is an exaggeration of a fundamental feature of human life, based on an elemental law of physics. We are upright, but if we tilt or are pulled, we will go down.

The poetological experience of these two stanzas heightens that feature of human life such that the reader becomes aware of it. Adults do not need to be aware of the laws of gravity: they simply act in accordance with them, at least most of the time. Children, of course, have to learn to work within these natural laws and in a sense, have to learn to accept them. Anyone who has spent time around children leaning to pull themselves up and later walk will recognize that at some point the toddler accepts the law of gravity and learns, usually at astonishing speed, to work within those bounds.

According to Jacques Lacan, children learn about the underlying systems that give rise to laws that define much of human life almost fully subconsciously, which he describes as the Real, first through close interaction with the mother and then primarily through language in which a construct of the real is construed, which Lacan describes as the Symbolic Order.\textsuperscript{108} The symbolic

\textsuperscript{107} The commonality of the experience of fear induced by the pull of gravity when near water can be explained in a number of ways. Psychoanalytic theory explores the fear of water broadly or falling in terms of fear of death, change, or a traumatic birth experience. Cf. Hogan’s chapter on the affective experience of reading, in which he takes a cognitive approach, “The Reader: How Literature Makes Us Feel” 140-165. In a similar vein, evolutionary psychology sees a link to ancestors of human beings, particularly any land mammal, for whom water always presents a fundamental danger. See for instance Isaac M. Marks’ chapter on fear in The Maladapted Mind, 57-73.

\textsuperscript{108} Lacan introduces the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in Seminar II (“The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis”) and develops them further in Seminar XXII, (“RSI”), 1974-1975. The Mirror Stage describes Lacan’s description of the subject, particularly the development of the child in terms of its own self-image.
order makes sense of the world, so that the forces which in one sense define life, such as mortality, the laws of physics, and physiological aspects of human life, e.g. the synaptic responses of the brain which make possible the most minor and taken for granted aspects of everyday life, and other phenomena which form the conditions for human life remain behind the curtain of the symbolic order. The real in its most frightening aspect, human mortality, is for Lacan effectively kept behind the curtain of the symbolic order so that fear does not paralyze the ability of humankind to live life.

Lacan describes events in human life which result in a slipping of the symbolic order for the space of the event, which may be only momentary, such that that the real is present and visible, akin to the curtain falling during a play where the audience sees something it is not meant to see. He describes these moments as traumatic, particularly for children. The real becomes visible, and in the time it takes for the event to transpire, the symbolic order is suspended and the person having the traumatic experience may have a moment of extraordinary awareness.

The poetological experience of “Der Fischer” extends to a similar slipping of the symbolic order, or a being made aware of the real, facilitated by the exaggerated sense of falling or being pulled downward which, when considered as the gravitational force, is simply one of the framing conditions of human life. Coupled by an additional aspect of human biology, i.e. that human beings must in a fundamental way avoid being pulled into the water, because they cannot survive in the water, the exaggerated downward pull into the water has the effect of a slipping of the symbolic order, thereby revealing the real, which in this case includes a glimpse

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109 I refer here broadly to the gravitational force as one of the laws of physics that form the background of human life, in a physical sense: one of the things that make life possible.
of the opposite of that which supports life, which is that which may take life away. In other words, a common feature of the human experience of the water, broadly seen, i.e. that water is dangerous to humans, is brought into relief by the downward pull of the poetological force of these two stanzas.

The feeling that accompanies this downward pull is fear, which signals the danger of the water and likewise, death. The fear of death lies at the root of the human fear of being pulled into the water. The line, “Kehrt wellenatmend ihr Gesicht”, speaks with particular force to the fear and presence of death in the poem, as the fisherman and the reader cannot breathe the waves as the poet suggests that the sun’s reflection can do. Human beings know instinctively to fear this downward pull when near the water. Stemming from the inevitable directionality of this force, the form of the language in its rhythm echoing the waves and the human breath, and finally by the imagery that brings the reader from the heavens to the depths and reinforces that impression by an image of the reader tiling herself close enough from the water’s edge to be able to see her own reflection, the fear of death becomes central in the reading of this poem.

This experience, enacted in the realm of the imagination, is also felt in the reading of the poem. This poetological experience may give rise, like Lacan’s slipping of the symbolic order so that one of life’s framing conditions -- mortality -- is plainly seen and felt for a moment, to a traumatic experience but also to a moment of extraordinary awareness. Seeing death as the backdrop of human life is not generally part of the quotidian experience in human life, and
according to Lacan, it cannot be, or we could not function \(^{110}\) but these moments, as necessarily limited in time, can bring on the possibility of exceptional awareness.

This possibility for a moment of extraordinary awareness arises structurally from the poem. The first stage of the poem, the quiet posture of listening embodied by the fisherman figure, and subsequently experienced by the reader on the poetological level, such that the reader is drawn into the fisherman’s place and experiences the poem directly; in the acoustic realm, is the foundation for this moment of extraordinary awareness. The structural aspects that give rise to the fear of death as a central poetological characteristic of the poem likewise make the moment of extraordinary awareness possible.

Unlike the second stanza, the third stanza refers not only to the future as it might be; the nixie speaks in these lines about how the fisherman feels now. She asks questions, but presumes to know the answers already. This is neither straightforward prediction nor a mere call to what might be; in the nixie’s questioning itself is an unfolding of what might be based on specific knowledge of the fisherman. This is a vision of the future, but a very specific one, one for the fisherman alone, drawn from a specific knowledge of him.

In this stanza the nixie continues to embody the possible, as she did at the first stage of her presence in the poem, but she is at this point the sound of the possible mixed with knowledge, a specific knowledge of the fisherman.\(^{111}\) The constellation of the nixie as the sound of the possible and the fisherman as silent listener is still at play in these stanzas, but the nixie becomes vivified by knowledge, so that what she sounds like -- the possible -- is reinforced by

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\(^{110}\) See also Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death*, which argues that it is in a very basic sense the ignoring or denying of our mortality which preconditions human life 11-25.
knowledge of the subject. She is here not only the sound of what could be, but the sound of a future the fisherman desires in the present. Certain knowledge in combination with what is possible adds another dimension to the nixie figure; further, these traits hearken to much older water-dwelling female figures in myth who speak the future: the fates.

Similar to the nixies in the Nibelungenlied, Goethe’s nix echoes characteristics of the fates, particularly those found in the Eddic poetry of Germanic tradition. The three maidens in the Old Norse Völuspa (The Prophesy of the Seeress) of the Poetic Edda are primarily identified with three the temporal aspects, as explored in Chapter 1.112 Further, the Norns in the elder Eddic poetry not only say the fate of humanity, but play an important role in the making of the fate of humankind.

Thence came maidens,
much knowing,
three of them, out of that lake.
Which stands under the tree.

... They established laws,
They chose lives
for the children of people,
fates of men113

112 My reading take the most resonant textual source of Goethe’s maiden to be the three Norns as described in stanza 18 of the Völuspa (Prophesy of the Seeress) of the Poetic Edda, (Codex Regius). See Snorri’s interpretation in which the three maidens come out of a hall at the base of Yggdrasil, in the Gylfaginning. See Lindow 243-45.

113 Stanzas 18-19 of the Völuspa of the Poetic Edda, (Codex Regius).
The norns are shown emerging from the lake at the base of the tree of life, Yggdrasil. The lake at the base of Yggdrasil, the *Udarbrunn* (well of Urd)\(^{114}\) in the *Völuspa*, understood as that which was becoming, but in the sense of what was fated: that which must have become. Emerging from the well of *Urd*, which is also the source of the Runes\(^{115}\); the norns write on a stick\(^{116}\) and establish laws which determine the fate of mankind.

Goethe’s ballad strongly recalls the fates in ancient Germanic mythology. The nixie in this ballad displays the three temporal aspects of the norns: in the second stanza she speaks both present and future; in the third stanza the future changes from possible to much more certain future. In the nixie’s use of present and future tenses and the subjunctive mood, she echoes the norns. Curiously, the connection between the norns and the past tense is limited in its representation in the *Völuspa*: the past is represented by *Urd*, (became, or what must have become); nor it is a tense Goethe’s nix uses: the use of the past tense is confined to the narrator.

The nixie’s focus is on what might and shall be; likewise there is a strong connection to fate, in the sense that the nixie knows what the fisherman will do by poem’s end: she knows his fate. The hearkening to the fates suggests a link between nixie and the making of fate, as opposed to the mere saying of fate.\(^{117}\) This nixie seems endowed with not only knowledge of the future, which she shares, but with at least some power over the future.

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\(^{114}\) As noted above, the well of Urd is found in Eddic poetry, in the *Völuspa*, stanza 19 or in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*.

\(^{115}\) *Poetic Edda*, “Sayings of the High One” (Hávamál), pgs 34-35. Stanza 80. Other poems in the *Edda* corpus point to the well as source of knowledge including Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*. See Lindow 212, 301.

\(^{116}\) See Murphy’s interpretation of this line in the *Völuspa* with respect to the Fuþark and how the rune staves could have knowledge carved on them, in “The Secret of the Sequence of the Runes in the Elder Fuþark”, 11-12.

\(^{117}\) Cf. the nixies of the NBL, who, although endowed with sight, do not seem able to alter the course of fate. Goethe’s Nixie appears more connected to the Norns in this respect: there is built-in ambivalence about how much power she has over what is to come, but there is evidence that she has more power than the voicing of the future.
Another aspect of “Der Fischer” which speaks to the norns of the Völuspa is the way in which the nixie appears in the poem. Goethe’s nixie rises from the pond, from the well of Urd, from the source of what is becoming but also what must become. The description of the nixie’s appearance -- as a wet maiden rushing forth out of the water -- evokes the three norns emerging from the well of Urd. The nixie emerges as the Norn maidens emerge in the Völuspa, from the water, knowing but also making fate.

The echoing of the norns by Goethe’s nixie underscores the way in which texts speak to, and influence, each other over the course of time. I understand Bakhtin’s use of the concept of addressivity to be at work in the human-nixie encounter as recurring motif in the texts under consideration, and I find it particularly useful as a way to understand how specific structural aspects of the encounter resurface over the course of time.

The poetic conception of the nixie as knowing and the human as not knowing, but listening, is pronounced in this lyric and resembles the structural nature of the encounter in the Nibelungenlied and the Odyssey. Both Hagen and Goethe’s fisherman resemble Odysseus’ posture of attentive listening prior to his encounter with the sirens, and in all three texts the moment unfolds in a similar way.

The encounter between human and nixie is signaled in the three texts by the sound of water. In the Odyssey, it is the calm of the water, the lack of wind that Odysseus notices. In the

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118 This is particularly similar to the Seeress’ Song in the poetic Edda, where the three Norns, described as maidens, emerge from the Well of Urd. Snorri envisions the fates emerging from a hall, not a lake, a poetic conception of epistemology which surfaces in a similar way in Bede’s anecdote in the Ecclesiastical History of the English People in which a councilor to King Edwin, in 726 AD, suggests that the Christian missionaries who have come to court ought to be given an audience in the event that Christianity might give them any insight to the question of what happens before life and after death. The councilor uses the metaphor of a bird which, flying into a hall, flies about near the fire for a few moments, and then departs from the hall.

119 As discussed in Chapter One, in the passage in the Odyssey there is a linguistic framing of knowing on the part of the sirens and listening on the part of the human.
**Nibelungenlied** it is the plashing of the water Hagen notices, after which he listens. Finally, in Goethe’s ballad the fisherman is sitting, and as the water laps and swells, he listens. In each work the nixie figure appears shortly after the poet has indicated this state of listening.  

The encounter itself is largely characterized by the epistemological, by a moment of awareness that seems to come about as a result of the nixie’s omniscience or knowledge of the future. The experience is not purely epistemological however; not in a limited sense, as there is an emotional element that accompanies two of the texts quite clearly. The heart is mentioned twice: in both “Der Fischer” and the *Odyssey*, “joy” and “longing” characterize the moment of encounter with the nixie. These descriptions do not belong to a purely epistemological experience. Musicality plays a role in all of the texts, which points to the affective nature of the encounter. E.T.A. Hoffmann describes the potentially transformational experience through music in *Beethovens Instrumentalmusik*,

> Sie ist die romantischste aller Künste, beinah möchte man sagen, allein echt
> romantisch, denn nur das Unendliche ist ihr Vorwurf...Die Musik schließt dem
> Menschen ein unbekanntes Reich auf, eine Welt, die nichts gemein hat mit der
> äußern Sinnenwelt, die ihn umgibt und in der er alle bestimmten Sehnsucht
> hinzugeben. (285, 10-15)

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120 Given this structural similarity, it is legitimate to ask if the nixies would have appeared to Hagen or to the fisherman were both human figures not in a state of listening. Wellbery’s interpretation is, in part, that the fisherman is imagining the nixie, which he ties to Goethe’s use of *lauschen*. I agree with Wellbery’s reading of *lauschen* as a signal that the fisherman is attentive and in a state of readiness, but I depart from his reading that the nixie is entirely imagined. Wellbery 263.

121 In any case they would not appear to belong to an epistemological experience that is unaccompanied by an affective element.
The connection between heart, ear, and transformation that Hoffmann refers to pervades these texts. The reference to the fisherman’s longing heart signals this aspect of the moment of awareness. The outcome of that encounter has fundamentally to do with his heart, and as such seems to exceed a purely epistemological experience. Odysseus’ heart is also mentioned in his encounter: “My heart within me desired to listen” (197). The longing with the heart to hear more indicates the affective aspect of the moment of awareness that results from the nixie encounter.

I suggest that these structural similarities are not only a carrying-forward of myth nor a hearkening to legends of a more ancient time for their own sake; rather they also occur in order to address and readdress central questions and issues raised in the older texts. In communicating with the older texts, the later-appearing texts take up those questions again, questions which persist. Questions as to the extent and type of knowledge that can be attained by human understanding go back to the earliest known texts and discourses. To look at the human-nixie encounter understood as a recurring motif in communication with earlier texts that dialogically address issues concerning the limitations of human knowledge reflects the approach

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122 A noteworthy instance of the ear informing the heart, not connected to music, can be seen in Hartmann von Aue’s Der arme Heinrich. Heinrich’s decision to stop the maid from sacrificing herself comes about as a result of his hearing the whetting of the doctor’s knife, which leads him to feel compassion for another human being, arguably for the first time, lines 1217-1241.

123 See Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm K-HM “Vorrede” in which they offer an explanation as to the purpose of fairy tales, a compelling text for the context of composition of this ballad, especially given that the Grimms’ work on fairy tales emerges in the time just after the appearance of this text. This understanding of the role of fairy tales and related genres as enunciated in the “Vorrede”, particularly with respect to culture, played a central role in the literary and cultural history of the 19th century. Herder’s discussion of the concept of Volkspoesie, he discusses the need for a reawakening of folk tales and ballads, in order to rejuvenate the German literary tradition and in order to support the trajectory toward nationhood. Sämtliche Werke.

124 See “Speech Genres.” and “Discourse in the Novel.” in which Bakhtin discusses the essentially dialogic nature of literature and the way in which intertextuality addresses abiding questions and issues.
this project takes to works of literature, i.e. to pursue a questioning about the transformative epistemological potential in human life.\(^\text{125}\)

The fisherman, as silent listener, is not a passive listener. Goethe’s nixie is not a genie holding out a universally-inviting scenario: she speaks and sings what the fisherman wishes for himself. In both the specific knowledge that the nixie possesses and her use of the word “lockt”, or luring, there is an echo of Homer’s sirens. The lure here is not the omniscience that Homer’s sirens promised Odysseus, although the nixie and the sirens both possess uncanny knowledge of their subject; rather it is the beauty of the water itself and the reflection of the fisherman’s own face looking back at him that lures. There is a double lure of water and oneself reflected in it, in which the reflected face is more beguiling than the face itself.\(^\text{126}\) For both the heavenly bodies and the fisherman, the face reflected in water is more beautiful than the face itself. A distinction between things in themselves and the appearance of things as reflected runs through the ballad, but is especially prominent in this stanza.

The distinction between things in themselves and their appearances corresponds to a concept that has occupied philosophers since the pre-Socratics but which found particular resonance in the time surrounding the writing of this poem. Central to enlightenment discourses

\(^{125}\) I refer here to Heidegger’s discussion of the philosophical orientation suited to ontological questions as a questioning “das Fragen” in “Die Frage nach der Technik”. Heidegger writes, “Das Fragen baut an einem Weg”, 5. My project relies on the posture of questioning to approach the meaning of the primary texts.

\(^{126}\) See Wellbery’s interpretation of the Narcissus thematic as noted above, 274-279. Ellis Dye’s reading of the ballad depends heavily on the metaphors of reflection, in which he claims that the reflection creates a sense of distance between the fisherman and himself and between the reader and the poem. Further, he argues that the reflection is always a reminder of the reader and the fisherman’s narcissistic characteristic, such that the nixie is a means to a solipsistic end: a way back to oneself, 124-132. See also Politzer’s interpretation of the mirror imagery of the poem as indications of the fisherman’s essential narcissism, 151-152. My reading is also interested in how the nixie figure, and particularly the encounter, speaks to the reader, but is more interested in how the encounter may give rise to extraordinary awareness rather than to the solipsism of the narcissistic gaze.
and in particular the philosophy of Immanuel Kant is the distinction between subject (self) and object (world).\textsuperscript{127}

In the Kantian architectonic, delineated primarily in the three critiques of reason, the first of which was published two years after the writing of Goethe’s ballad, the nature of human cognition and perception is understood by Kant such that there can be no connection between the self and the world as it is; rather the connection is between the perceiving self and what can be perceived of the world. What can be perceived are appearances, and there is no easy way to establish a connection between the things-in-themselves (noumena) and the things as they appear (phenomena). The world that can be known to human beings is entirely drawn from and based on appearances. The noumena are unknowable, and accordingly the gulf between self and world is a central feature of human life.

A reading of Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} and \textit{Critique of Practical Reason} leaves the clear impression that despite Kant’s intentions and rigorous attempts, the self is deeply isolated from the things most precious to it -- daily and spiritual life.\textsuperscript{128} Within Kant’s system as described in these two books, there is a wide and unbridgeable divide between the thinking subject and the world.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{127} For a comprehensive introduction to the influence of German idealism in the historical context of Goethe’s poem, see Terry Pinkard, \textit{German Philosophy: 1760-1860. The Legacy of Idealism}.

\textsuperscript{128} The difficulties involved in the treatment of synthetic \textit{a priori} propositions and the doctrine of the thing-in-itself significantly weaken Kant’s attempts to ground a relation between the self and the world. There is not a sufficiently demonstrated connection to the phenomenal world nor is there a corresponding relationship to the noumenal world. The transcendental ideas and the postulates of practical reason both fail to enable such a relationship.

\textsuperscript{129} Kant addresses this divide, the \textit{unübersehbare Kluft}, in the introduction to the book intended to complete his critical philosophy, the \textit{Critique of Judgment}, and proposes that it is only through an examination of the faculty of Judgment, and the role of reflective judgment (\textit{reflektierende Urteilskraft}) in particular, that this divide can be overcome. Kant figures the problem as such: the two realms of the sensible (i.e. nature, world) and the supersensible (i.e. freedom, as realized by man) operate separately, but that the concept of freedom is meant to, and must, have an influence on the concept of nature.
Given a desire on the part of the perceiving subject to know things as they are, this is a sobering and isolating existence. For Kant, there is undoubtedly a desire to know things as they are, which means that human nature wishes always to know the world as it is, the self as it is, and God as He is. This drive to know is understood by Kant as the desire for the unconditioned, a feature of speculative reason, and the highest stratum of the human cognitive faculty. Thus for Kant the metaphysical desire, or the desire to know and fully experience the deepest elements of human life -- the self, the world, and God -- is only explicable as a functional component of the reasoning faculty and not capable ever of reaching its goal.

The imagery that Kant uses to illustrate reason’s desire for the unconditioned is that of a bird flying up toward the sky, not able to ever to get to the top. That the desire for the unconditioned is a fundamental element of the Kantian system implies that the unconditioned exists at the very least in the sense that it can be sought after, if not in a more positive sense. There is no satisfactory answer in Kant’s metaphysics; certainly, but in the description of the endless desire on the part of humanity to know and fully experience the world, the self, and God, the longing itself stands out as what remains. The longing to know and connect in a full and meaningful way characterizes humanity for Kant, although the path to fulfillment is effectively blocked in his system.130

The Enlightenment conception of a necessary and uncrossable divide between self and world is present in Goethe’s poem, and is particularly evident in the third stanza. This divide is

130 Although Kant makes a very compelling case that in employing the teleological principle, man as a moral subject is both within and apart from Nature and in that respect bridges the divide, the unübersehbare Kluft, between the concept of nature and the concept of freedom, the impression persists that the real and troubling Kluft within Kant’s architectonic, between the thinking subject and the world, is in my view unchanged by the otherwise important advances made in the 3rd Critique.
thematized by the difference in beauty and quality between the faces of the heavenly bodies and their appearances; likewise by the face of the fisherman and his reflection. The fisherman as sketch, as a vacuum figure that poetologically must be occupied, reinforces this divide as well. The true self of the fisherman, or any sense of his identity, is utterly unknowable by the reader. The fisherman is simply not available to the reader.

Further, although the reader as subject experiences the nixie directly, an experience that draws entirely on the acoustic realm, but does not, to this point in the poem, open up a knowledge of the world as it is, nor of the self as it is. The divide between how things look and how they are functionally prevents access to knowledge of the world in the poem. Likewise the possibility of understanding how the nixie knows both the desires of the fisherman and the future -- the source of beyond-human knowledge in the ballad -- remains veiled. The poetological experience reinforces this dimension in an important way: the reader is pulled in and down, but is never made aware of how or why.

In this respect, the enlightenment worldview that identifies the thinking subject and its structurally limited relationship to the world through cognition and perception as central to the human condition is at work in this poem, underscoring the gulf between the self and world. The subject’s longing to know and experience fully, and the impossibility of ever achieving that end are represented both by the figure of the fisherman, which is empty, the lack of access that the reader has to him, and in the nontransparent nature of the nixie’s knowledge.

Although the Kantian divide is at work here, the nixie as the sound of what is possible points in another direction; namely, toward what cannot be known in human life but what is nonetheless at work, with the potential to be glimpsed, not known. In the nixie’s singing and
speaking, which is the entire poetological experience of the reader to this point, there is also no sense of the world as it is in itself, only as it might be, were there a knowledge on the part of the fisherman, and by extension, the reader, of life under the water. The nixie sounds what is possible, reinforced by the fisherman’s own desires: she speaks in a knowing way about him, and since the reader has to become him to read the poem, she speaks in a knowing way about the reader. This knowing does not give the reader access to those sources of knowledge: this is not a transparent exchange of knowledge; it is again, a drawing in and down, but it is a knowing which can be heard.

The split between self and world is strengthened by the nixie’s nature imagery and her description of the fisherman tilting down to see his own face reflected back at him. In the sounding of what is possible; however, there is a hint of what cannot be known but is nonetheless at work and present in the world of the poem. Further, in the experience of the reader becoming the fisherman through the posture of quiet listening, the gulf between self and world is challenged.

The listening posture speaks to another way of understanding the world. The fisherman listened before the nixie appeared; and in that silent posture of listening, the fisherman himself enters into the realm of the possible and listens for what might be. To listen is to listen for something. Listening for something signals an ontological posture which makes room for

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131 The fisherman’s listening posture has been interpreted differently in the literature. See for instance David Wellbery, who takes Goethe’s use of the verb lauschen to mean the nixie may be entirely imagined, although his reading extends to a fuller interpretation of the fisherman’s posture and relationship to the nixie -- the listens signals desire to see her, 249-262. Dye, on the other hand, takes the listening also to be listening for something, but sees a need for the self to have itself affirmed. The nixie plays the role of confirming what the subject wishes for anyway: to see itself, 124-132. Werner Zimmerman sees Goethe’s use of lauschen as a sign that the nixie rises in response to the fisherman’s own desires for self-fulfillment, 156. My reading aligns with Wellbery’s in that I agree the listening
another way of experiencing the world. In the sounding of what is possible, the desire for the unknowable is echoed, and this points to a way in which the self and the world are deeply connected: they are here connected in the unfolding of nixie’s song, but not only in her song; in the listening to it, and in the listening for it. In this respect, the poem eclipses the Kantian description of the structural gap between the self and the world and hints at another possibility, another way of understanding the world.

This ontological posture can be productively understood in terms of the focal occasion. The human posture of listening, of being ready for, or anticipating, makes room for the moment of extraordinary awareness, and in that making room, there is an openness to a way of being that necessarily eclipses the Kantian divide. The posture itself sets up the structural possibility in the poem for a difference kind of experience, one potentially transformative. In this human posture, represented by the figure of the listening fisherman at the outset of the poem, the possibility for unity between the self and the world, for not only a deep connection but for an awareness of that connection, quietly inheres. It is only a possibility, but the possibility itself strongly recalls the Kantian bird aiming for the heavens and further, suggests that there is a way to get there.

The shift from the second to third stanza, from the nixie’s description of a possible future to a rhetorical looking for confirmation that this is the future he wants, implies the possibility of

\[\text{signals a state of readiness on the part of the fisherman, but my interest is in the nature of the epistemological moment and its transformative potential.}\]

\[132\text{ See Borgmann “Cyberspace”, 3 or Technology 196-210.}\]

\[133\text{ The conception of the human desire for knowledge/ relationship to knowledge as symbolized by a bird was not new in Kant’s time. Bede’s anecdote of the bird in the hall sets the hall as human life such that anything outside the hall is invisible to human sight, is one present in the literature of the Early Middle Ages, most notably in Beowulf. See Murphy’s discussion of the Bede account in The Saxon Savior.}\]
free will. The fisherman can choose between visions of the future. The nixie does not tell him what he wants; she refers to what he would want, if he only knew, and then asks by way of a number of leading questions if that isn’t so. This way of proceeding verbally leaves open the possibility that the fisherman could contradict her; that he could choose to ignore or reject this vision of life under water.

The nixie knows what he will choose -- the end of the poem and the last stanza make this plain -- but her leaving open the possibility creates a poetic vision of the future in which both choices can exist together. One choice appears privileged in that it is based on knowledge of the fisherman and will align with future events in the poem, but her rhetoric approach leave open the possibility of free will.

The logical inclusion of free will in turn reinforces an important tenet of the Enlightenment. Instead of a world driven entirely through divine design and modulated by the laws of morality, enlightenment thinkers insisted that not only did the concept of free will exist in human life, but that it was at the heart of human interaction.134

The third stanza ends as it began, with questioning, and although I argue that the nixie knows the answers, and indeed that the close of the poem will bear her foreknowledge out, the logical possibility of free will is at work in her questioning. In this sense, the nixie also speaks for what is possible; she is again the sound of what is possible. In so far as free will is present as

134 Kant’s second Critique focuses to a large extent on the concept of free will and the way that it operates within the human faculty of practical reason. Very similar to the striving of speculative reason for the unconditioned, the practical reason also always strives for an unconditioned, which in this case is found in the notion of “ought” - what ought to be done. The exact reasons behind the “ought” in the realm of human interactions, in the ethical realm, cannot ever be divined by the faculty of practical reason, but that striving to know is present and responsible for the ability to act in a moral way. Human beings are capable of ignoring the moral law, but the concept of freedom always precedes the moral law, thus securing the place of free will in the Kantian system, which was highly influential on political thought and on political happenings of the era.
a possibility in the poem; the fisherman, and hence the reader, may choose one path or the other. On the textual level this possibility may appear as merely a formal choice, but the fact that it is there is important, and the possibility itself speaks both to an enlightenment view and to something that must go beyond it.

The third stanza leaves off with the sense of being drawn in and down, the nature imagery and the image of the fisherman tilting down to see himself in the water. The reader experiences this sense of being pulled, and as the image of one’s own face, in this tilting posture, is seen looking back up; the opening line of the last stanza repeats the first line of the poem, bringing the reader back to an awareness of the water. This repetition not only reinforces the centrality of water; it reiterates the importance of sound in the poem, and the musicality of the ballad. The autonomic music of the ballad carries through the poem, but with the repetition at the outset of the fourth stanza, the wave-like quality of the language is underscored.

The reader, having just been pulled in, down, and toward the water, now is hearing the water directly. The language sounds like waves: the reader can hear the music of the waves through the poetry, and here, especially through the repetition. It is not unlike breathing -- the same sound occurs at the end of the poem as occurred at the beginning, only reinforcing the sense of inevitability.

Das Wasser rauscht', das Wasser schwoll,
Netzt' ihm den nackten Fuß;
Sein Herz wuchs ihm so sehnsuchtsvoll
Wie bei der Liebsten Gruß.
The next line tells how the fisherman’s foot got wet: the water lapped at his foot. The water continues to be the focus of the language: it is the subject and the fisherman’s foot the object. This representation of the fisherman as being acted upon by the water reinforces the fisherman figure as mere sketch. The water is everywhere in this poem: as sound, as the sound of the nixie, and the sound that the poem mimics, but here in the last stanza is the first encounter with the water.

Up to this point in the poem, only the nixie has encountered the water. Since the nixie rises from the water and is experienced almost entirely acoustically, this represents a union of sound: it is difficult to distinguish the two entities in the poem. The fisherman however, and by poetological extension the reader, has not yet encountered the water except through sound. Now, on the textual level, the fisherman is encountered by the water. This is not a willed encounter: the water touches his foot.

Goethe mentions the fisherman’s heart, an echo of the first stanza, but here having changed from cool to longing, as if, the poet says, he has been greeted by his beloved. Since it is the only clue the reader has to the character of the fisherman, the change in heart is important. The immediate connection of the reference to his beloved might seem to be that the nixie, with her singing and speaking, has reminded him of his beloved. This is difficult to gauge from the language, as it can as easily mean that the longing growing in his heart was similar to the longing of seeing/experiencing a beloved. It need not refer here to the fisherman’s own beloved; rather to the universality of that feeling.

The reader learns relatively little from this line, which both supports the sense throughout the poem that the fisherman is only a figure, a vacuum to be filled by the reader, but here points
to another dimension; or at least to the potential for something fuller. This change -- from a cool to a longing heart -- is a slim foundation by which to know the fisherman, but this shift between states of feeling is the only avenue by which to learn more about the fisherman: this change of heart is the only development exhibited by the fisherman figure.

The placement of the longing of his heart, which is the only site of development connected to the fisherman to this point, takes place directly after his foot is touched by the water. The change in the condition of the fisherman’s heart does not happen directly after the singing and speaking of the nixie; rather it is after his foot is touched by the water. The water, as repeating line which frames the entire poem, may only be a reminder to the reader of the sound of water, and that is its poetological effect; however because that line is there, and precedes the line about the moistening of the foot, the reader is left with the impression of water as the probable, at least most immediate, cause, for the change of heart.135

The reader does not know what causes the change of heart and finally cannot know because the reader’s heart is not changed, and this division is an important moment in the poetological experience of the poem. The encounter of the fisherman’s foot with water is the nearest condition the reader can find to explain the change the fisherman’s heart undergoes. The

135 See C.G. Jung’s Über die Archetypen des kollektiven Unbewussten or “Über den Archetypus mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Animabegriffs.” Jung’s reading of the symbolism of the nixie figure as a symbol for the primordial anima and the role of water as symbolic of the unconscious. This interpretation is important to note given my focus on attentive listening, in that the water as the first sound in the encounter, understood as the sound of the listener’s own unconscious, signals the appearance of the nixie, which for Jung symbolizes a knowledge-bringer, among many other attributes of the anima. In his interpretation of Goethe’s nixie in “Der Fischer” and related figures, he writes, “Die Nixe ist eine noch instinktivere Vorstufe eines zauberischen weiblichen Wesens, welches wir als Anima bezeichnen. Es können auch Sirenen, Melusinen, Waldfrauen, Huldinnen und Erlkönigstöchter, Lamien und Sukkuben, welche Jüngliche betören und aussaugen.” “Über die kollektiven Unbewussten.” There is also a strong connection between the norns of the Poetic Edda and birth, as both in the Elder Edda and in Snorri the norns are present at childbirth. See Lindow 243-245. The water as medium for transformation recalls both ancient classical mythologies and biblical tradition, as explored in Chapter 1.
fact that the reader and the fisherman experience this differently reveals a division: prior to this moment in the poem the reader had heard everything the fisherman heard; now his foot is moistened, but the reader’s is not. Here his heart is moved, but the reader’s is not. The intense poetological nearness of the reader to the world of the poem is suddenly broken, and the reader is again learning secondhand, through the mediation of the fisherman figure.

Sie sprach zu ihm, sie sang zu ihm;
Da war’s um ihn geschehn;

The stanza continues with the nixie speaking and singing to him: the order of the two verbs is reversed from the opening of the second stanza.\textsuperscript{136} In this case the reader doesn’t hear the nixie’s word, but only learns that “it” happened to him. What the “es” refers to only becomes clear in the last couplet, at which point the moment has passed.\textsuperscript{137}

The lack of transparency of the nixie’s singing and speaking in this stanza represents a further change from her speech earlier in the poem. The reader is suddenly left out of what the fisherman experiences. This lack of access sheds light on the opening lines of the stanza. The fisherman’s heart undergoes a change directly after his foot is moistened by the water, but the reader, having been drawn into the world of the poem and down, to the extent that she is tilting forward to see her own face, now is hearing about something rather than experiencing it directly. The direct poetological experience that had taken place in the poem through sound is partly broken. Now the sound of the water is still present to the reader, but the song and speech of the nixie is not, and the reader learns of the change of heart but cannot divine anything about it. The

\textsuperscript{136} See Politzer, who reads the reversal as an indication of the fisherman’s narcissism, 452.
\textsuperscript{137} Wellbery notes this line is a “balladesque formula of closure” and remarks that in citing it Goethe subverts the ballad’s prototype in this respect because the subject, who would normally carry on the transmission, has disappeared 283.
earlier inertia of having been pulled down and in to the fisherman figure is ended here: the reader cannot know more.

Whatever happened (“ist geschenen”) to the fisherman is cloaked from the reader, as is the content of the nixie’s singing and speaking. The only thing the reader has been able to experience directly in this stanza is the sound of the water: the repeating of the first line is a sound the reader can hear directly, through the wave-like language. Left only with that sound, the reader hears about the nixie’s singing and speaking, but does not experience it.

\[ \text{Halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin} \]

\[ \text{Und ward nicht mehr gesehn.} \]

The last two lines of the poem indicate the outcome of the two possibilities the poem represents: This is a half-willed surrender to the watery world. The vision of the future that the nixie holds out and the possibility that the fisherman can reject it are represented and connected linguistically in these last lines. To the question of how exactly the fisherman disappears and whether he chose that outcome, the reader is left with ambiguity. The last lines ask the reader to accept that the outcome is both compelled and willed at once. The nixie presents the possibility of both what was desired, and by logical extension its opposite: the possibility to reject the desired future. She offers both possibilities through her rhetorical line of questioning, in the sounding of what was possible. The closing lines of the poem do not elucidate which possibility is actualized. The fisherman both sinks and is pulled by the nixie down into the water.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{138} This outcome reinforces the similarity to the norns of the \textit{Völuspa} discussed above with respect to rising from the Well of Urd: from the source of what is becoming but also what \textit{must} have become. The outcome bears out the nixie’s foreknowledge and strengthens the sense that what she sounded as possible earlier in the poem must always have needed to become.
For the reader, after having experienced much of the poem directly through sound, this ambiguity is difficult. These final lines, excepting the repetition of the water lapping and swelling, are closed, and only describe what happens to the fisherman. The previous poetological posture of the reader as fisherman has ceased with the two concrete and closed occurrences that occur for the fisherman: the moistening of his foot and the longing in his heart. The reader is displaced by these occurrences because they are mediated; they are not experienced acoustically the way the poem is structured in the second and third stanzas. There is no direct access to the final experience that occurs at the textual level, to the half-willed submergence.

There is; however still a rhythm to the language which carries through the poem, and in that it resembles the sound of the water, the reader is also not entirely cut off from the world of the poem. The language, with its rises and falls, wave-like and echoing the rhythm of human breath, carries on and in that sense the reader is still able to hear and experience something directly: the water.

In the fourth stanza the reader is left without the nixie: the reader can only hear the lapping of the water; and in that partial access there is a distance created. The reader is only partly there. The nixie does not exist as sound for the reader any longer, but the sound of the water itself is still present, and as it carries forward, the reader hears it. In the distance created by this sense of being able to hear but not fully experience, the reader leans forward in a poetological sense. The reader has been cut off, but this is not a full and final separation. Able to hear the water -- indeed there is no escape from the water if the reader reads to the end of the poem -- but no longer able to hear fully; and in not hearing fully, not experiencing what the
fisherman experiences, the reader leans forward to hear and glimpse what was there to be heard before. In this leaning forward the reader is listening for the nixie.

In the longing to hear the nixie’s singing and speaking, now masked, the reader feels the longing in her own heart and in this transition again becomes the fisherman. Through the structural gap between the reader and fisherman, created by the lack of transparency in the change of the fisherman’s heart and the content of the nixie’s song, the reader, in the longing to hear more, becomes the listener. This posture of quiet listening, of straining to hear, echoes the posture of the fisherman in the first stanza.

The reader accompanies the fisherman through the poem, but it is only through a sudden distance between the two that the experience of unity becomes possible. Having already been pulled to the water’s edge by the downward motion of the poem, the nixie’s use of nature metaphors, and the structural characteristic of the fisherman as empty, now occupied by the reader, the reader is here at water’s edge, looking back at herself when the direct acoustic, and hence direct poetological, experience is ended and only the sound of water remains. The resulting longing on the part of the reader coincides with the fisherman’s longing, giving rise to a unity between the two.

It is this poetological progression, in conjunction with the structural nature of the emptiness of the fisherman figure, which compels the reader to occupy the fisherman’s place, that yield what I describe as a unity of reader and fisherman at the end of the poem. The precise nature of what the fisherman experiences is cut off, but the sounds of the fisherman’s surroundings remain. Stemming both from its content and form -- resembling waves through its music, at once denoting waves through its words -- Goethe’s language reinforces the presence of
water such that the reader hears and experiences the rises and swells of the waves. It is this half-access, this half being able to hear, that gives the reader the impression that she may still be able to hear, if only she listens. This series of poetological moments give rise to the reader’s posture as quiet listener, unified with the fisherman.

The poem, “The Snow Man” by Wallace Stevens illustrates this posture.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place
For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Like Stevens’ listener, the reader of “Der Fischer” becomes a listener, able to behold both
the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. There is something missing in the final
stanza. For the reader, there is something previously there that is no longer there. There is an
absence, but the absence represents something. That is the nothing that is there, for the reader.
The song of knowledge that the nixie brought forward in the second and third stanzas, containing
knowledge of the future and of the fisherman, is now missing; and from both the content and
form of the last stanza the reader becomes aware that the song is absent, and listens for it. In
straining to hear the now absent song, the reader can behold both what is and is not there.

This posture presents the possibility for a moment of extraordinary knowledge on the
poetological level. The reader had been privy for a short time to a kind of experience of beyond-
human knowledge. Further, for the span of the second and third stanzas, the reader experienced
the nixie’s song directly in the acoustic realm. This experience ends with the opening of the
fourth stanza at which point the reader, still at the water’s edge, tilting forward, hearing the
water, can no longer hear the nixie. Separated from the experience of that song, the reader is in a
position to behold both what is there: the sound of water and her own self, and what is not there:
the nixie’s song of beyond-human knowledge. Through that separation and the longing to hear
more, the reader beholds both, which gives rise to the possibility of a moment of realization.

The double-sidedness of this posture: being pulled down but wishing to hear more, in
addition to listening for more, mirrors the fisherman. This experience of two outcomes that
initially appear to be opposites -- that is, a wishing either to go down under the water or a rejection of that future -- are now both realized. The reader, like the fisherman, is both pulled and listens for more. This unity arising from what seemed to be an oppositional structure represents the potential for a moment of extraordinary awareness on the poetological level, coinciding with a moment of epiphany at the textual level.

The coincidence of fisherman and reader in their half-willed submergence reveals a kind of unity with respect to subject and object, or self and world, that is glimpsed at the outset of the poem in the fisherman’s posture of quiet listening, a unity that provides a response to the Kantian description of a world that is always split in two. The world of the poem is a world that is unified. Goethe’s ballad presents both the world as representative of an enlightenment position, i.e. a world defined by oppositional forces and by an unbridgeable separation between the perceiving self and the world, and presents the world from a very different perspective, in which the self is unified with the world.

The fisherman, in his posture of quiet listening, and by poetological extension the reader in that same posture, signals a unity rather than division. The perceiving self, listening for something that is not yet there, which in the world of the poem becomes the nixie’s song, already knows more than the self is allowed to know in a strictly Kantian framework that always posits opposition between self and world, or what can and cannot be known. The state of awareness prior to the nixie’s song signals the readiness to have an extraordinary experience, one I conceptualize in terms of Borgmann’s focal occasion. The poetological posture that arises in the fourth stanza, once reader’s direct and full acoustic experience of the nixie’s song is broken, leads to the reader’s longing to hear more of the nixie’s song, a longing very much like the
longing the fisherman’s heart. In this longing on both levels of the reading of the poem there is a unity between fisherman and reader: an attitude of wishing to hear more. This unity represents a possibility for understanding the world and being in the world that stands apart from the understanding and experience for being in the world delineated in the Kantian system, an understanding that is likewise present in the poem.

The possibility of another way of understanding and experiencing the world is a radical one and one that may be transformational for the reader the way that it is for the fisherman. This possibility of the world as united, alongside the Kantian description of the world as divided, in itself a radical posture on the textual level, also represents a poetic bridge from the enlightenment to the romantic period.

Although composed prior to what is generally considered the romantic era, this ballad anticipates the romantic period, and Wellbery argues, paves the way for the literature to come (248). The half-willed submergence into what is and must remain unknowable to the reader, i.e. life under the water, as well as the source of the nixie’s knowledge, points to a romantic longing to bridge the gap between heart and mind, between eye and ear, insisted on by enlightenment thought. In the fisherman’s half-choice to submerge a number of characteristics of romantic literature emerge, such as the longing to overcome the normal boundaries of human existence, the longing for unity with nature, for death, and for a return to a time when legends hold sway.

139 See Kord on the dominance of the visual realm in the Enlightenment, 61-78. As noted in the introduction, Borgmann discusses this development in terms of the etymology and history of the word “focus”, which as he notes took on a relation to the optical in the writings of Johannes Kepler. Technology 197. O’Callahan traces the dominance of the visual in terms of discourses of perception to philosophy’s modern era, in which he refers to the work of Kepler, Newton, Descartes and Berkeley, 2. See also Austern’s chapter on the acoustic character of the mermaid figure, in which she links the acoustic realm to the feminine and traces the motif and its connections to both femininity and notions of the infinite, danger, and death, in “Teach Me to Heare Mermaids Singing”: Embodiments of (Acoustic) Pleasure and Danger in the Modern West.” 52-105.
and the imaginative force, through *Poesie*, enlivens and unifies the apparent divisions in human life.\textsuperscript{140}

Further, the poem is an acoustic experience. The role of the ear versus the eye in the human epistemological experience is one that found particular relevance in the shift from enlightenment to romantic thinking.\textsuperscript{141} The visual as the dominant marker of the epistemological characterizes the enlightenment, appearing frequently in the writings of the era.\textsuperscript{142} The Romanic period on the other hand is often characterized by an emphasis on audial awareness, on the importance of music, and on the senses as avenues to truth.\textsuperscript{143} The transition from a worldview heavily reliant on the eye to one that favors what truth can be learned from the ear is present in “Der Fischer”.

Understood as a literary bridge from an era marked by logical opposition and dominated by the visual, to one marked by the desire for unity and increasingly turning toward truth-seeking in the aural realm, this ballad is far more than a representation of the experience of sitting near water on a hot day, as Goethe said of this work. Similar to the nixies of the *Nibelungenlied*, the water nixie in “Der Fischer” symbolizes a way to go from one epoch to the next; she can be understood as a vector pointing the way to the next stage of human cultural and literary history.

The world of the poem is an acoustic world, and it is only when that direct acoustic experience ends that the possibility for a moment of extraordinary awareness takes place for the reader: the longing to hear more results from the absence of the nixie’s song of knowledge, an

\textsuperscript{140} F. Schlegel, “Progressive Universalepoesie”, 79.
\textsuperscript{141} See E.T.A. Hoffman *Beethovens Instrumentalmusik* on the importance of music to the Romantic era.
\textsuperscript{142} As noted above, Herder explored the human epistemological process as one that is initiated by the sense of hearing, in the years just before the writing of “Der Fischer”. See for instance *Abhandlung* 57-62.
\textsuperscript{143} Cf. Novalis “Die Welt muss romantisiert werden”, and “Monolog”; also Schlegel’s “Über die Unverständlichkeit”.

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acoustic poetological experience. The ear is the central avenue for not only knowing what can be known but as a gateway for an epiphany for what normally cannot be known. This radical shift from a worldview that understands the visual as the primary pathway to truth to the audial is a signal that the enlightenment is giving way to the romantic period.

It is more than that. Goethe’s “Der Fischer” brings to life two different ways of understanding the world and asks the reader to not only see both possibilities from above but to experience them directly, which takes the form of a unity arising from multiple focal points in the poem. The reader, as I have argued, after losing direct access to the full acoustic experience of the poem, wishes primarily to hear more of the nixie’s song. This is a song of the possible sung by a nixie who, like the norns, rises out of the well of what must become, defined almost entirely by sound. This is also a song of knowledge of the fisherman and hence of the reader herself, which she hears while tilting forward, seeing herself in the water’s reflection. In the moment of wishing to hear more of that song, the reader beholds both the nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is, and in beholding both at once, may for a moment rise above the epistemological experience that characterizes human life and be transformed by it.
Chapter 3: “Es war nie zu Ende”: Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” (1961)

In Ingeborg Bachmann’s 1961 short story “Undine Geht”, the story of the encounter between human and nixie is told for the first time entirely from the nixie’s point of view. Bachmann’s nixie, an Undine, narrates this internal monologue, in which she explains why she is leaving the human world and returning to the water. While this text is generally considered a literary response to Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s 1811 novella Undine and the 20th-century drama by Jean Giraudoux, Ondine (1939), (Fassbind-Eigenheer 123, 136), Bachmann’s protagonist speaks for the figure of the mythical female water creature from a number of traditions -- she is not confined to giving voice to Fouqué’s Undine. In this chapter I will offer

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144 That Bachmann has given her Undine a voice is significant in several respects. This characteristic of the text has been much explored in terms of the gender dynamic by diverse feminist scholarship: Fassbind-Eigenheer, Horsley, Achberger, Baackmann, and Sara Lennox, among others. Given the prevailing silence of nixie figures in the last nearly two hundred years since Goethe’s nixie in “Der Fischer”, particularly when compared to the prophesying characteristic of the nixies in earlier texts, this text as monologue, as undiluted speech, is all the more striking. Exceptions to the silence of the nixie figure in German literature since the early romantic period are the Lorelei figure in Clements Brentano’s ballad “Zu Bacharach am Rheine” (1801) and in his novel Godwi (1801) among several others, including Goethe’s revision of the Melusine legend in his Die neue Melusine, in Book 3 of Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre (1821). The thematic of the sirens as silent is best known from Kafka’s 1917 fragment, “Das Schweigen der Sirenen”, discussed later in the present chapter. Another important example of this literary trend, in which the sirens or nixie figures are discussed but not heard from directly, is Rilke’s “Die Insel der Sirenen” (1908), in which the reader can nearly hear the song of the sirens. In this lyric as well it is the silence and not the song that is thematized and which forms the strongest impression.

145 For a thorough account and analysis of the undine motif in literature, see Ruth Fassbind-Eigenheer: Undine, oder Die nasse Grenze zwischen mir und mir. Ursprung und literarische Bearbeitungen eines Wasserfrauenmythos, von Paracelsus über Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué zu Ingeborg Bachmann.

146 Fouqué’s Undine is thought to have stemmed largely from two sources: Paracelsus’ Liber de Nymphis, Sylphis, Pygmaeis et Salamandris et de Caeteris Spiritibus (ca. 1566) and the Melusine legend, originally recorded as Roman de Mélusine by Jean d’Arras (1393). A third source may have been Christian August Vulpius’ novel, Die Saal-Nixe (1795), as identified by both Fassbind-Eigenheer and by Andreas Kraß, 165-205. For an examination of the French literary origins of the Melusine legend, see Maddox and Sturm-Maddox, Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France. The Melusine legend entered the German literary tradition in Thüring von Ringoltingen’s Melusine (1456) and has a vivid history in its own right: the Melusine figure is featured in numerous texts, such as Die schöne Melusina (1556) by Hans Sachs, Goethe’s Die neue Melusine (in Book 3 of Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, 1821). Melusine is the name of one of the main characters of Theodor Fontane’s 1899 novel Der Stechlin; a version of her story is also told by Ludwig Tieck in his Sehr wunderbare Historie von der Melsina (1800), and Georg Trakl’s poems Melsine (1909, 1912), to mention only several.
a close reading of “Undine Geht” that concentrates on the thematic of temporality, which I argue is multidimensional and nuanced in scope in Bachmann’s short story, and its role in the moment of epiphany on both the textual and poetological levels.

The term Undine, from Latin “little wave”, originated with renaissance philosopher Paracelsus, who in his treatise Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus outlined a system of natural philosophy that draws on the four elements that make up the world and the spirits, or elementals, that embody them. It is primarily Paracelsus’ work that influenced poets and writers who take up the undine theme in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, including Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s Undine (1811).

The literary tradition stemming from Paracelsus’ sixteenth-century work opens with Goethe’s brief mention of the Undine in the scene in Faust’s study in Faust (1808), in which Faust summons the four spirits of the earth, naming Undine as the water spirit, only to be subsequently rejected by the earth spirit. The next major work to feature the undine figure is Fouqué’s 1811 novella, Undine. The undine figure found its greatest resonance in the German romantic epoch, particularly in the late romantic period. E.T.A. Hoffmann, a friend and collaborator of Fouqué’s, fascinated by the legend of the undine, wrote an opera of that name.

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147 Several classical schools of thought claimed four or five elements made up all of creation. Plato traces the notion to the pre-Socratic Sicilian philosopher Empedocles (ca. 450 BC), but himself is considered the first to have used the word element, stoicheion (from stoicheo, “to line up”). See the Timaeus. Aristotle would add a fifth element, ether, aether. The understanding that divides life on earth into the four (or five) elements is fundamental to the classical representation of water spirits and later to medieval cosmology surrounding mythological water beings. For Fouqué and modern poets who respond to his work, including Bachmann, Paracelsus’ work provides the critical foundation for an understanding of the elements and the elementals that are found in each element, including the Undine.


149 This scene draws directly on Paracelsus’ account, with naming the four elementals which represent the four elements of earth, water, air and fire.

150 It is in Fouqué’s version that an important element of the water nymph legend becomes explicit; namely the matter of the soul. Cf. Andersen’s Little Mermaid (Den lille havfrue, 1837), in which the mermaid gains access to a soul but loses her voice.
with Fouqué, and mentions the undine in a number of works. The undine figure was the inspiration for the magical half-maiden/half-snake, Serpentina, in Der goldene Topf.

In Fouqué’s fairy tale, Undine is the adoptive daughter of a fisherman and his wife, who live near a pond in the middle of a forest. Huldbrand, a wandering knight seeking shelter from a storm, is given lodgings with the fisherman and his wife for the night and upon meeting Undine, falls in love and proposes to her. Undine confides when they marry that she has gained a soul: she is a water spirit, and it is only through marriage to a mortal man that she may acquire a soul. In Fouqué’s text, there is not only something gained, but also something lost: Undine loses her connection to her water family, at least temporarily, during her marriage to the knight. Undine and Knight Huldbrand leave the forest and move to his castle, where tragedy awaits the pair with the reappearance of Huldbrand’s former fiancée.

Bachmann’s twentieth-century version of the legend, “Undine Geht”, begins with the accusation, “Ihr Menschen! Ihr Ungeheuer! Ihr Ungeheuer mit dem Namen Hans! Mit diesem Namen, den ich nie vergessen kann.” Undine’s monologue is an account of her relationship with Hans, which is at once an account of this Undine and her relationship with a man or men

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151 Undine. Zauber-Oper. First performed in Berlin in 1816. The music was written by E.T.A. Hoffmann and lyrics by Fouqué. The scenery was designed by the well-known Berlin architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

152 See Fassbind-Eigenheer 109-116 or Kraß 310.

153 Sources of the concept of a water nymph seeking a soul through marriage to a mortal include earlier European folk tales. See Grimms’ “Herr Peter Dimringer von Staufenberg”. Deutsche Sagen, No. 522, 591. Andersen’s 1837 The Little Mermaid (Den lille havfrue) has a similar concept but calls his protagonist a havfrue or mermaid, and adds the element that the mermaid must give up her voice in exchange for the soul. Eigenheer 86-91.

154 See Kraß’s chapter on the undine figure and the work he cites as Fouqué’s main source, Christian August Vulpius’ Die Saal Nixe, which has a similar plot and essentially identical character names, although the constellation is different. Vulpius’ novel appeared in 1795, well before Fouqué’s work. The striking similarities of name and plot form the basis of Kraß’s argument that Fouqué drew heavily from this little-known source. Kraß 166-168.

named Hans and an account of the relationship between the nixie and human figures in the various literary strands associated with this legend.

Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” is thus immediately and purposefully intertextual: it takes up a dialogue with the texts that have come before and through its use of the internal monologue, presents an entirely new aspect to the textual history surrounding Undine specifically and the water nixie more broadly. Considered in light of Bakhtin’s concept of addressivity, this text is transparently turned toward someone; i.e. toward the network of texts that make up the literary history of the Undine figure and more broadly, supernatural female beings in mythology. Situated very differently from Goethe’s lyric, which evokes and engages earlier texts and the mythological content they refer to implicitly, through metaphor and poetic conception, “Undine geht” takes up the discourse about the female supernatural in literature and myth, and specifically the water-dwelling female, directly.

Bachmann’s text follows the encounter between Undine and Hans through several of its cycles. The language Undine uses to tell her story is cyclical, fragmentary and repetitive (Achberger “Undine Goes” 85-92): it does not proceed in a chronological or linear fashion and resists translation into a plot summary. The second paragraph of the text illustrates this cyclical aspect.

\[156\] For an influential theoretical framework by which to understand the role of the image of the female supernatural in literature and myth and its influence in the cultural realm from a feminist perspective, see Silvia Bovenschen’s *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit. Exemplarische Untersuchungen zu kulturgeschichtlichen und literarischen Präsentationsformen des Weiblichen*.
Immer wenn ich durch die Lichtung kam und die Zweige sich öffneten, wenn die Ruten mir das Wasser von den Armen schlugen, die Blätter mir die Tropfen von den Haaren leckten, traf ich auf einen, der Hans hieß (253).157

Undine speaks here about a cycle in the past -- all the verbs in this section are in the simple past tense -- which underlies the impression that this cycle is not ongoing; however Undine’s use of the word “immer” belies that impression. The cycle that preceded her meeting with Hans always went this way, she is saying. When coupled with the use of “wenn”, the impression created by the opening of “immer”, i.e. that this cycle is ongoing despite the past tense of the passage, is strengthened.

This section is also noteworthy because it reveals the connection between Bachmann’s Undine and nature: here the branches open for her as she comes into the clearing; the water plants wipe the water from her arms, and the leaves lick the droplets of water from her hair, setting up an immediate symbiotic relationship between Undine and the realm whence she comes, when she enters the clearing. Her realm of origin is water, a natural realm. Moreover, the elements of nature aid in Undine’s entering into the world of men, symbolized in this passage and throughout this text by the clearing. These elements of nature essentially dry her off as she goes from water nymph in her own element to the world of humanity.158 Undine is helped by the elements and essentially connected to them.

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157 “Undine Geht “, pg. 253
158 The connection between Bachmann’s Undine and nature has been amply noted; for the Undine figure broadly see Fassbind-Eigenheer pgs. 31-33; 74-86, 133-134. The scholarship often stresses the difference between nature and culture in terms of the gender constellation, or in the case of feminist scholarship on the text seen broadly, reads that division critically. See for instance Horsley, who problematizes this opposition, 223-225 or Baackmann, who reads both a confirmation of the traditional gender roles in the representation of the love story between Hans and Undine and a challenging of that relationship through the text structure, 45-57. Although I agree that the oppositional gender dynamic is certainly important and a constant in the representation of the encounter, my own interest is less in the
When Undine’s monologue is coaxed into a more linear structure, Undine’s account of her relationship with Hans follows roughly this pattern: Undine and Hans meet in a clearing, *die Lichtung*,\(^{159}\) greet each other, are together, something goes wrong and she returns to the water, only to one day rise to the surface and begin again.

...und eines Tages sich besinnen, wieder auftauchen, durch eine Lichtung gehen, *ihn* sehen und „Hans“ sagen. Mit dem Anfang beginnen…Einen Fehler immer wiederholen, den einen machen, mit dem man ausgezeichnet ist. (254-5)

There are numerous variations to this pattern, which provide glimpses of Hans and Undine in different settings, both in rural and forested landscapes, and in urban scenes: she refers to visits to the theater, drinking Pernod, a train station, and the great boulevards. Their story exists in different temporal dimensions: they meet in the present day, evidenced by the gadgets and references to science and modern life which punctuate her account, but these encounters also exist in the past of the undine legend, as seen in the meetings in the clearing and the other appearances of the mythological (Achberger “Undine Goes” 89).

The monologue cycles through versions of their encounter, which is colored by Undine’s references to Hans’ life and character, and glimpses of Undine on her own, both in the water and gender dynamic per se, than in Undine’s connection to nature as revelatory of the potential to understand the world as connected to nature rather than divided from it.

\(^{159}\) The *Lichtung*, clearing, is always the scene of the initial meeting in this text, but it’s important to note that in more than one case the clearing is transposed into Hans’ home. His living room is described as becoming a clearing: „...wenn die Lampe das Zimmer versorgte, die Lichtung entstand, feucht und rauch der Raum war, ...dann war es Zeit für mich.“ (257). Strikingly the meeting in the clearing does not speak directly to the Undine tradition in either the Giraudoux or Fouqué text: this recalls rather the Melusine tradition, in which the male protagonist meets a fairy in a clearing. Initially, the man and fairy marry and one of their three daughters is called Melusine. The story repeats when Melusine meets Raymondin Poitou in a clearing near a fountain.
in the world of men. Undine intersperses her story of their relationship with accusations about how Hans is with his wives, with his children, and how he engages with the world. After a general account of his betrayal of her, Undine speaks about the admirable qualities in Hans and returns to the water, which is the closing of the monologue.

Undine’s monologue is internal, but she speaks both to and about Hans using alternately the “Ihr” and “Du” forms to address him, as well as referring to him in the third person, as in the section above. She is telling their story to herself and to him.

A few lines into the text, Undine goes on, “Ja, diese Logik habe ich gelernt, dass einer Hans heißen muss, dass ihr alle so heißt, einer wie der andere, aber doch nur einer.“ (253) The name Hans likely refers to the knight figure in Giraudoux’s *Ondine*, called Ritter Huldebrand in Fouqué’s text. In the course of both plots, the knight falls in love with and marries Undine and the pair leaves the wood to live in his castle. In both cases the knight ends up breaking a promise to Undine, which sends her back to the water, and ultimately results in his death.

160 Baackmann reads the Undine/Hans relationship as symbolic for the male/female dynamic, particularly one situated in the 1950’s, in which when the relationship ends, Hans returns to his normal life. Undine has very few options and is must either be silent or shamed after they part. She is wordless, except when they are together. Baackmann problematizes this relationship in her reading and suggests the text is ambivalent towards it, 45-59. Although my primary interest is not in the Undine/Hans relationship as a figuration of gender, I agree that the text seems to be looking for a new relationship between them: the calls to each other and the ending speak for this view.

161 The broken-taboo thematic is important for texts featuring water nymphs going back to d’Arras’ *Melusine*, but functions differently in the Undine legend. For the importance of the taboo/transgression in the Melusine myth, see Gerhild Scholtz Williams’s chapter on the Melusine myth, “Magic and the Myth of Transgression: *Melusine de Lusignan* by Jean D’arras (1393)” in *Defining Dominion: The Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany*, 21-45. In contrast to the Melusine variations, the consequences in this tradition are more severe: the result of the broken taboo is the death of the human and the forced return of the water nymph to the water.

162 Giraudoux’s drama departs from Fouqué’s at several important junctures, but in both texts the knight breaks a promise to Undine and dies as a result: in Fouqué’s version it is a promise not to mistreat her near the water lest her powerful uncle or other water-kin seek vengeance; in Giraudoux’s, Hans is unfaithful with Bertha, his former fiancée.
Beyond its intertextual significance, the name Hans is important within this text. Undine goes on a few lines later that even once she returns to the water and the rivers and seas have washed away Hans’ kisses and all physical traces of him from her, his name remains.

Und wenn eure Küssse und euer Samen von den vielen grossen Wassern- Regen, Flüssen, Meeren- längst abgewaschen und fortgeschwemmt sind, dann ist doch der Name noch da, der sich fortgepflanzt unter Wasser, weil ich nicht aufhören kann, ihn zu rufen, Hans, Hans…(253)

Undine is not able to disassociate herself from Hans even after separating from him and returning to the water. This connection is represented by her calling his name from under the water, a striking image, particularly in terms of the significance of sound to the encounters between Undine and Hans. Even when he must not be able to hear her, when she has left and returned to the water, she calls to him.\textsuperscript{163}

As with her connection to nature as she goes from the watery realm to the realm of humanity, Undine remains connected to Hans through her speech even once she has departed. Three paragraphs into Bachmann’s work, an essential characteristic of Undine is her connection to both realms, but in a specific way. It is not that Undine becomes connected, either to nature or to the world of men. She begins as connected, in terms of the structure and language of the text. Her role in the text to this point is one of connection to both realms, i.e. she begins connected and stays connected, at different points in the cycle of her encounters with Hans.

\textsuperscript{163} This passage is more striking when taking into consideration Herder’s theory of speech as always communicative, as developed in the \textit{Abhandlung 57-62}. According to Herder’s theory of all speech as inherently communicative, Undine is still trying to communicate here with Hans, an understanding of language which places emphasis on the role of Hans as the listener.
The circuitry of the language and its poetic character underscore the impression of connectedness: there is no way for the reader to reconstruct the narrative such that Undine begins in one realm or the other and then clearly enters the other realm: the cycle has no beginning. There are numerous encounters, but no clear first encounter. Even the end of the story, often read as the last encounter,\textsuperscript{164} ends ambiguously.

Undine’s monologue; however, very early on signals clearly that, for her, there is an end.

Aber lasst mich genau sein, ihr Ungeheuer, und euch jetzt einmal verächtlich machen, denn ich werde nicht wiederkommen, euren Winken nicht mehr folgen, keiner Einladung zu einem Glas Wein, zu einer Reise, zu einem Theaterbesuch.

Ich werde nie wiederkommen, nie wieder Ja sagen und Du und Ja. (254)

The content of Undine’s speech stakes out a position of finality: this is her story, and after her story ends, she will go. Buttressed by the title, the intention of the language with respect to its content is clear, but the form of the language: poetic, cyclical, and very difficult to separate into a linearity, stakes out a different position. When Undine says she will never again say you and yes and you, she is already saying them again. She is continuing the cycle of encounter with Hans, here speaking to Hans about what she will no longer say, and in saying she will no longer say it, she is saying it. This inability to disconnect is emphasized by the otherwise redundant Du. She cannot help but say that word again, which is a way of naming him, reinforcing their connection. This tension between signaled intent and content of her language courses through the text.

\textsuperscript{164} See for instance Kraß or Achberger (“Undine Goes”) who each read the last textual encounter as final.
Moreover, the form of the language evokes the sound of waves in its cyclical and repetitive nature. The reader hears both Undine’s thoughts and she expresses them, but also the sound of water from the text. The messages that each brings, in form and content, are divergent. The wave-like acoustic that is a hallmark of Bachmann’s language in this text also echoes human breath, which aligns this text with “Der Fischer” in its autonomic quality. The waves and the reader’s own breathing draw the story forward. Both are in tension with Undine’s own stated intention, i.e. that this story will come to an end.\footnote{165}

The dual nature of Undine’s language can be read as tension but also as a means by which to understand Undine as essentially connected in this text, as not able to be either in one world: the world of a story which ends; or another: the world of a story which does not end.\footnote{166} Undine in this text is always in both worlds. Undine is connected to both the watery and human realms in the story, and seen from the vantage of the form and content of the language; she is also connected to both the textual and the poetological levels: she exists in a story which for her will end, in the content of the language on the textual level. On the poetological level, in which the reader hears both the rhythm of water and of human breath, no ending is possible, and Undine is necessarily connected to this level as well. This is her language that comes as if in waves.

\footnote{165} This tension has been explored by Achberger among others, in terms of the tension between melos and logos, music and speech (‘Undine Goes’ 85-90), i.e. between this text as a kind of feminine writing and what is seen in certain feminist scholarship as the male narrative style, dominated by the analytic tradition of logical oppositions. See for instance Julia Kristeva. The Kristeva Reader, 97-120. Kristeva asserts that feminine writing and speech can be understood as essentially different from its masculine counterpart, that a woman is that which cannot be put into a category, pinned down, and so might always seem in conflict with herself from a perspective that seeks to proceed analytically. Horsley examines the text from the perspective of French post-structuralist feminist thought, which includes the work of Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, finding that the text both reaffirms and questions the duality of the male-female opposition, 223-226.

\footnote{166} In my reading “Undine Geht” hearkens powerfully to “Der Fischer” in this respect, that there are two conceptions at work in the text that are in tension. The reader is invited to see both at once.
The next line explicitly acknowledges the role of language in Undine’s interaction with Hans: she places her inability to stop saying the words into a larger statement about language.


Undine signals her own duality shortly after. “Ich liebe das Wasser….Dem gleichgültigen Spiegel, der es mir verbietet, euch anders zu sehen. Die nasse Grenze zwischen mir und mir.” (254). Undine sees the water dividing her from herself, dividing her two selves into the world of under the water and the world above it. She can be divided that way, she is saying, but in the text, there is no division. She is always in both worlds.

The fact that Undine has no questions in her life, and as she goes on to say, has known no questions, she ascribes as the reason for her not having had children with Hans. This is a striking causal link and sheds light on the way Undine thinks of language both in terms of her life and in the world of men. Although Undine is in both realms in this text and resists being placed firmly in one realm or the other, she refers to her life in the water as if it is a separate existence. She refers therefore either to a time not represented in the text, before a first encounter with Hans, or to the way she sees herself, which is distinct from the world of men. The text as a whole does not support this view, in my reading, but in terms of the intention of the content of language Undine uses, this is her view of her own life. With respect to language, and specifically questions, Undine says she has none in her life. She goes on to say,

“keine Forderung, keine Vorsicht, keine Zukunft und nicht wusste, wie

man Platz nimmt in einem anderen Leben. Ich habe keinen Unterhalt gebraucht,
In this passage Undine underscores the gulf between how she sees herself and what her own language asserts. Undine distances herself from questions, intention, claiming she does not need this kind of entertainment, talking, affirmation; that she only needs air, all different kinds of air, but she goes on to say she needs to be able to breathe, in order to say new words, for a ceaseless confession, and then she repeats: yes, yes. The distance between her expressed intent and the territory staked out by her own speech is brought into sharp relief as her monologue proceeds.

In asserting her reliance on air for language through language, Undine points to a deep-seated conflict that not only runs through the text but that implicates all language as inherently insufficient. The philosophical posture that criticizes language as insufficient to meet its own goals is perhaps linked most explicitly to Nietzsche, but goes back much further. “Monolog” by Novalis and Schlegel’s “Über die Unverständlichkeit” both treat the topic. This ambivalence is taken up by Bachmann and a number of her contemporaries writing in German.167 This is an issue that Bachmann, a scholar of Wittgenstein, treated both in her texts and discussed outside of

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167 I am thinking of both Günther Grass and Peter Hanke, in whose works both the limits of language as insufficient to communicate, and the necessity to use language despite that lack, are underscored. The topic is treated poetically in both Katze und Maus and Endloses Unglück, among other texts. Cf. Hofmannsthal’s “Ein Brief” (1902), in which Lord Chandos’s is agonized by the impossibility that language can do what it is tasked to do, in his letter to Francis Bacon.
her writing. The agonies over language’s limitations surface here through the gulf between what Undine says about language and how she uses it.¹⁶⁸

Undine refers next to how, once her confession had been taken down, she was condemned to love and when she came freely out of love, she had to return to the water, which she calls the element in which no one builds nests. She portrays the water as the element lacking the human accoutrements of planning, domesticating, building. Undine sets up a distinction here in terms of consciousness and activities that reflect an awareness of the future between the natural realm, which in this text is the watery realm, and the human realm. This emphasis on time and the description of the human realm as the realm in which time is present and understood -- where time is reified -- serves an important role in this text. It is one of the contrasting features that Undine identifies to differentiate one realm from the other.

In order to draw this distinction, Undine must be herself aware of time in some way and thus connected to the human realm in which an awareness of the forward motion of time is central. The awareness of time that Undine reveals in her description sets her firmly in both realms: she may see herself as primarily connected to the natural realm but her description belies that distance. Further, the use of language is a conscious activity for Undine: she is putting the language down in a confessional manner, as she says. The monologue itself speaks to a conscious activity, as she has stated that once she is done with this monologue she will return to the water, revealing a consciousness about the activity she is undertaking. Finally, Undine takes part in the very oppositional categories of analysis that she ascribes to the human realm -- employed by her to differentiate the two -- which reminds the reader of the tension between the

¹⁶⁸ See for instance Arturo Larcati’s chapter on Bachmann’s critique of language, particularly the way she was influenced by the philosophy of Wittgenstein in this regard, in “Zur Kritik der Philosophie und der Sprache.” 21-36.
stated intent of her language in terms of its positioning and the way in which the language functions to communicate.

This thematization of the temporal is important because Undine is ascribing both the awareness of time and its nature as linear as attributes of the human realm. Although Undine’s speech relies on the categories that she ascribes to humanity, the one characteristic of the human understanding of time that Undine has so far pointed out -- its nature as forward moving, hence the need for planning and building -- is a feature that Undine’s language, at both the textual and the poetological levels, does not partake of. Although there is an awareness of time on Undine’s part in order to ascribe it to humanity; her monologue, as noted above, is circular, repetitive and fragmentary. It is not possible to turn this monologue into something with a beginning and an end: it resists chronological order.

In this one respect, there is a gap between Undine and the human realm, as she has described it. The human conceptualization of time as linear and forward-moving is not something the text or Undine’s narrative supports. Although Undine remains connected always to both realms in this text, the temporal aspect is one site that may reveal something about Undine’s nature with much more credibility than that of the bulk of her own assertions, which are often undermined by her own particular use of language.¹⁶⁹

She goes on to say that when she returns to the water, she simply is there until one day she becomes aware of herself, surfaces, returns to the clearing, and the encounter with Hans begins again. “...und eines Tages sich besinnen, wieder auftauchen, durch eine Lichtung gehen,

¹⁶⁹ Undine’s characterization of the world as divided in a temporal sense works against the reader’s experience of the text, allowing for an opening in which the reader may understand the world as connected.
ihn sehen und „Hans“ sagen. Mit dem Anfang beginnen…Einen Fehler immer wiederholen, den einen machen, mit dem man ausgezeichnet ist.” (254-5)

The phrase, “und eines Tages sich besinnen” is striking in how it reinforces the opposition between the human realm and the watery realm in terms of consciousness. The idea that the natural realm and the beings that populate it do not partake of consciousness, that consciousness is a human attribute dates back to the pre-Socratics, but the extension to the mythical, which in the case of the water nixie broadly has been generally understood as akin to humanity, at least in terms of speech, is not generally part of the discourses surrounding the nixie figure. The idea that the water nixie in particular does not have consciousness; however, is present in Kafka’s 1917 fragment “Das Schweigen der Sirenen”. Kafka’s text recreates the scene in Book 12 of the *Odyssey*. “Hätten die Sirenen Bewußtsein, sie wären damals vernichtet worden. So aber blieben sie, nur Odysseus ist ihnen entgangen.”  

In the next passage, immediately after the encounter in the clearing, Undine refers to her meeting with Hans as a mistake that she is marked by, and asks how being washed by all the waters of the earth can ever help that. She then speaks for a few lines about Hans’ life, specifically about his wives sharpen their tongues and flash their eyes, and how the gentle wives let fall a few tears, which, Undine says, do their work. She relates how the men, Hans, don’t say anything, but absentmindedly stroke their children’s and wives’ hair, turning up the radio, reading the newspaper, but hearing the wind and the sound of seashells despite the other noises.

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170 The idea that the water nixie has no soul and can only acquire one through marriage, explicit since Fouqué’s 1811 *Undine*, speaks strongly to discourses of Christianity and the supernatural, important to the history of the motif but not identical to the question of consciousness, which speaks in my reading more to philosophical discourses in terms of what role the epistemological plays in human life, a question found in literary and philosophical works to the earliest texts.

171 A fuller discussion of Kafka’s fragment follows in the last section of this chapter.
This brief description of Hans’ life apart from Undine emphasizes two things: that Hans is separated from his wife and children -- that there is a gulf that sets him apart -- and that Hans hears something that presumable his wife and children do not. These lines underscore Hans’ ability to hear, and a few lines later, to listen, which leads up to the next textual encounter with Undine.

The moment of meeting between Hans and Undine, in its different versions and dimensions, comprises the bulk of the monologue, and despite the cyclical nature of the account, which has been interpreted as leaving more openings in the text than clear signals and answers as to the precise nature of these moments and their relationship (Horsley 225), there are significant points of overlap in the structure of those moments of encounter.

Sound signals the moment of encounter between Undine and Hans. In this description of their meeting, the second in the text, while Hans is busy with wives and children and newspapers, looking through the bills and turning the radio up loud, Undine says,


Important to this description of what precedes the encounter, Hans here is in his own home. His home becomes the clearing, unlike the first description in the text of the encounter, which takes place in the natural clearing. There is nothing to support the idea that this first textual encounter is the first encounter; to the contrary, Undine’s use of the phrase “wieder
auftauchen….Mit dem Anfang beginnen” speaks against this encounter as first encounter. The use of language suggests the circular nature of time in Undine’s understanding of her own existence.

What brings Undine to this clearing which is transposed into Hans’ home? Hans rises, presumably from sleep or rest, and goes off to listen, listening down the hall, listening in the yard, and finally hearing what he was listening for: Undine. In her description, the key element is the way in which Hans is listening, and then hears the note of pain, the call from far off. He is listening, and then hears. The role of audial awareness as antecedent to the encounter with Undine is salient in this passage.

The next passage switches to another description of Hans’ lives, this time with the focus on his wives. Undine then chastises Hans for his way of talking, and that is precisely what she has remarked on in this passage: not anything specifically about Hans’ wives, but about how he talks about them. This is important because Undine is not criticizing Hans’ wives, at least not in this passage; instead her singular focus is on Hans’ understanding of the relationship and how it expresses itself in language. Undine is working through the verbalization of Hans’ marital relationships, not the relationships themselves. “Ihr Ungeheuer mit euren Redensarten, die ihr die Redensarten der Frauen sucht, damit euch nichts fehlt, damit die Welt rund ist.” (255).

Undine here links Hans’ ways of speaking with his forming of attachments with women and completing their lives in that respect; so that, as Undine says, the world may be round. This is noteworthy because in the previous section Undine drew a causal link between her lack of

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172 These lines, among others, are thought to have been inspired by Hans Werner Henze, close friend to Bachmann, who wrote an opera entitled “Undine” (1957). Bachmann and Henze lived together in Italy in the years before “Undine Geht” was published and it is considered likely that their respective work on the Undine material influenced the other. See discussion in Fassbind-Eigenheer 126-133, or Achberger “Undine Goes” 86-89.
questions and the fact that she did not have any children with Hans. Here is another link between a feature of language, in this case a way of talking, and human relationships, specifically gender relationships. Undine sees a relationship between the two. She goes on to accuse Hans of jealously, of cavalier charity, “hochmütigen Nachsicht”, of tyranny with his wives and women. This leads back to language as well, as Undine condemns his goodnight talks with his wives. Undine points to different aspects of Hans’ language as the basis of his relationships with human women.

There follows a section in which Undine describes her astonishment that both Hans and his wives have their own work, advance in their own fields, put their money together and set the future in this way. “…da strebt ihr euch an, legt das Geld zusammen und spannt euch vor die Zukunft. Ja, dazu nehmt ihr euch die Frauen auch, damit ihr die Zukunft erhärtet, damit sie Kinder kriegen…” (256).

The emphasis on the future is compelling in these lines. Undine places an understanding of time as linear and specifically, as future-oriented, on humanity, as she did in the previous section. In detailing Hans and his wives this way, she also demonstrates the ability to conceive of time this way, but the language Undine uses to describe Hans’ and his wives’ positioning toward the future puts Undine at odds with that particular stance. To speak of hardening, or setting the future, of tightening themselves before the future, is a description which belies a lack of comfort with the very idea of the future. It is as though the future is an object in Undine’s description: something which can be set or hardened or tensed up in front of. This description of the human understanding of time sets Undine apart from humanity, and because there is relatively little to
this point in the text that allows for a glimpse into what differentiates Undine from the human realm apart, this divergence in the understanding of the nature of time stands out.

The future continues to play a role in this passage. “Oder ihr verbietet euren Frauen, Kinder zu haben, wollt ungestört sein und hastet ins Alter mit eurer gesparten Jugend. O das ware ein grosses Erwachen wert! Ihr Betrüger und ihr Betrogenen. Versucht das nicht mit mir. Mit mir nicht!” (256)

Undine here accuses Hans of prohibiting his wives the opportunity to have children so that they may hasten into old age with their saved-up youth, calls them deceivers and deceived and warns them not to try that with her. The concept of rushing into old age with a saved-up youth is another of Undine’s descriptions of the human posture toward time, specifically toward the future, which likewise here reveals a gap between Undine’s understanding and what she ascribes as human understanding by virtue of the foreignness with which she describes the future.

The distance, the gap created by the description of the human posture toward the future and how Undine views time, is important because it is one of the only clues as to how Undine experiences time. Undine’s understanding is a beyond-human understanding, and the only access the reader has to her understanding is to be able to see where her description of the human realm and the natural realm differ, which has so far come to light only in terms of the temporal. The conceptualizations supported by the text structure at the poetological level itself can be understood by the reader as bearing out Undine’s own understanding. To this point in this text, the salient feature that separates Undine from the way in which she describes the human realm is
the temporal. It is worth remembering that despite her insistence otherwise, except in this one respect that Undine is actually deeply connected to both human and natural realms.

In the following section Undine gives a slightly fuller account of her meeting with Hans. The section begins with Undine reprimanding Hans for his muses and beasts of burden, and for his spouses whom he has allowed to speak. Undine emphasizes the role of language between Hans and his wives here again.


(256)

Here Undine moves immediately from the connection between talking and the marital or gender relationship to a description of her own laughter in the water, which she goes on to connect with Hans’ listening in the yard and garden. This is an echo of the previous encounter between the two, but here Undine asserts that it would have been better had Hans not listened, because it is essentially an admission that Hans is able to be seduced by the sound of pain, by the allure of a great betrayal more than by any other means.

Of note in this echoing of the previous encounter, which is at once every encounter that takes place at Hans’ home as the clearing, is that Hans as listener is the causal agent, the force that sets the encounter with Undine in motion. The emphasis on the acoustic and on the human posture preceding the encounter is set very firmly at this point in the text.
Undine is also speaking in this section about how men are both sufficient to themselves and in disagreement with themselves: “dass ihr euch genug seid und nie einverstanden wart” (256). The great betrayal that Hans longs for is connected to his lack of self-agreement: Undine claims that Hans is not in agreement with the houses and things that are fixed, that he builds, and that he secretly longs for the destruction of all that he has built: that in his mind, he has seen this destruction many times.

Undine admonishes Hans for having played with the thought of destruction too many times. Here she again refers to her own arrival in Hans’ life, and in this description, as with the two moments of encounter that precede it in the text, her arrival is marked by sound: “Wenn ich kam, wenn ein Windhauch mich ankündigte, dann sprangt ihr auf und wusstet, dass die Stunde nah war, die Schande, die Ausstoßung, das Verderben, das Unverständliche. Ruf zum Ende. Zum Ende.” (257)

Undine describes Hans’ secret wish for destruction as the call to the end. The emphasis is on sound rather than sight. Undine also describes this betrayal as shame, expulsion, ruin and that which cannot be understood. The connection between her coming and a lack of human understanding is underscored. The natural realm, established earlier in Undine’s monologue as that element in which no one builds nests, is again portrayed in this encounter as opposed to what is built and can be understood.

In the next line, Undine calls Hans a monster and says that she loves him, because “… ihr wußtet, was der Ruf bedeutet, dass ihr euch riefen ließt.” (257) The final clause, which asserts that Hans let himself be called, strengthens the sense that it is Hans who brings about the encounter. Undine refers to how Hans is not in agreement with himself, but asks when she was
ever in agreement. “Wenn ihr allein wart, ganz allein, und wenn eure Gedanken nichts
Nützliches dachten, nichts Brauchbares, wenn die Lampe das Zimmer versorgte, die Lichtung
entstand, feucht und rauchig der Raum war, wenn ihr so dastandet, verloren, für immer verloren,
aus Einsicht verloren, dann war es Zeit für mich.” (257)

In these descriptions, the sounds that precede the moment of encounter between Hans and
Undine are sounds of nature, often connected with water: the gust of wind, the note of sea shell,
Undine’s laughter rippling the water. These sounds characterize the moments before the
encounter.

Hans’ posture from one encounter to the next also bears similarities. He is twice
described as listening: “lauschen den Gang hinunter, lauschen im Hof” (255-6). In the encounter
above, in which the living room transforms into the clearing, the precipitous factor seems to be
the state that Hans is in: empty, with nothing useful to think of, lost. Both postures -- listening
and at a loss -- seem to signal a readiness in Hans for Undine to appear. Undine points to Hans’
divided state as the time she really loves him. Undine’s call to Hans, “der Ruf zum Ende”, does
not come randomly. There is a time for Undine to come, “dann war es Zeit für mich”, and that
time comes about by way of how Hans is at those moments: he is quiet, empty, and listening for
something.

Undine goes on, “Ich konnte eintreten mit dem Blick, der außordert: Denk! Sei! Sprich
es aus!” (257) She comes when he is ready, and calls on him, but what is Hans meant to think,
be, and say? This remains an open question until several lines later, when she returns to the topic
of what Hans secretly longs for.
In the next lines the reader glimpses more of what leads to the encounter, and with that, what these moments might mean for Hans. This passage begins where the last left off: with the idea that a lack of understanding was a good harbinger for their time together. “Ich habe gesagt: Ich verstehe dich nicht, verstehe nicht, kann nicht verstehen! Das währte eine herrliche und große Weile lang, dass ihr nicht verstanden wurdet und selbst nicht verstandet, nicht warum dies und das... ” (257)

Undine says she does not understand Hans, can’t understand, nor does Hans understand why there are borders, politics, newspapers and banks. Undine describes next how she came to understand the things of the world, “die feine Politik verstanden, eure Ideen, eure Gesinnungen, Meinungen, die habe ich sehr wohl verstanden und noch etwas mehr.” (275). She goes on that understanding those things of the world was the reason she did not understand Hans: because the incomprehensibility of all of those things is what Hans secretly loved and what moved him. She elaborates,

Und das war es ja, was euch bewegte, die Unverständlichkeit all dessen. Denn das war eure wirkliche große Idee von der Welt, und ich habe eure Idee hervorgezaubert aus euch, eure unpraktische Idee, in der Zeit und Tod erschienen und flammten, alles niederbrannten, die Ordnung, von Verbrechen bemäntelt, die Nacht, zum Schlaf mißbraucht. Eure Frauen, krank von eurer Gegenwart, eure Kinder, von euch zur Zukunft verdammt, die haben euch nicht den Tod gelehrt, sondern nur beigebracht kleinweise. (258)

Hans is moved by the incomprehensibility of the institutions and order that marks human life, and the idea that he secretly nurtures, the great and unpractical idea in which time and death
burn brightly, this is the idea that Undine charms out of Hans, *hervorgezaubert*, but not in the sense of seduces; rather that she magically brings it forth from him: she conjures it from him. In this idea, order is varnished with crimes, the night is misused for sleep. These are disparate glimpses of what Hans’ great idea is. The kernel that seems to hold together is that there is disorder at the heart of the ordering of human life, and in the center of that disorder stand death and time.

Added to this central part of Hans’ idea are references to his wives and children. Undine says his wives are sick with Hans’ present and his children were doomed to the future. She goes on that his wives and children did not teach him about death, but only instilled it in him in small ways. These lines underscore death and time as the heart of Hans’ great, impractical idea.

It is not only time taken broadly, but that specific times characterize Hans’ different family members. His wives are here connected to the present, and his children to the future. Children are also linked to the future earlier in the narrative, in the passage above, in which children are conceived in order to set the future. Undine previously alludes to the connection between Hans’ wives and the present when she refers to them as the partners involved in needing to fix or set the future.

As Goethe’s nix in “Der Fischer” and the water nixies in *Das Nibelungenlied* each echo the Norns of the Völuspa of the *Poetic Edda* differently, Undine’s thematization of the present and the future in these lines also hearkens to the maidens who rise out of the well of Urd, much knowing.\(^{173}\) Specifically, although Bachmann’s Undine attaches the present tense to Hans’ wives in this passage; more broadly the present tense is reserved for when she is speaking of her own

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\(^{173}\) Stanzas 18-19 of the Völuspa of the *Poetic Edda*, (Codex Regius).
actions, or what is happening around her in the world of the text -- this takes place in the present tense. Undine embodies the present tense in this text. In addition, Undine’s observations of Hans, which extend essentially to all humankind, take place partially in the present. These descriptions do not refer to Undine and Hans together; rather these are thoughts Undine expresses about humanity in general.

The future is clearly associated with the human realm for Undine. The world of men belongs to the future: to building, to establishing, to activities which have to do essentially with a future life. Children and wives, families, are placed firmly into this future-oriented stance. The family life of humanity is associated with the future.

The past tense in Undine’s monologue is inhabited by portrayals of Undine and Hans’ time together. The encounters generally take place in the simple past tense. Undine and Hans’ time together is time that, from the perspective of the language Undine uses, is past.

In this respect “Undine Geht” as text divides time into three distinct realms of present, past and future, recalling the three maidens in the Old Norse Völuspa who emerge from the lake at the base of the tree of life, Yggdrasil, each primarily identified with one temporal aspect: Urd (what became), Verdandi (what is becoming), and Skuld (what shall be).174

Bachmann’s text complicates the analogy with the Norns of the Völuspa, however; because the text structure itself, i.e. the impression the narrative creates as a whole on the poetological level, strongly resists being divided into the three temporal aspects. Undine’s monologue lays out the three temporalities specifically; the narrative overall, however is not

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174 Stanza 18 of the Völuspa (Prophesy of the Seeress) of the Poetic Edda, (Codex Regius). See Snorri’s interpretation in which the three maidens come out of a hall at the base of Yggdrasil, or the tree of life, in the ancient Germanic religion, in the Gylfaginning. See Lindow 243-45.
linear but circular, so that although taken together the three voices of the Norns are present in the
text, there is an additional voice, created by the text itself, which suggests a different
understanding of time than can be found in the three temporalities divided in Undine’s
monologue into past, present, and future.

The voice of the text, circular, repetitive, and heavy with inevitability, also echoes the
mythology associated with the Norns of the *Poetic Edda*, specifically the *Urdarbrunn*, the well
of Urd\(^\text{175}\), which lies at the base of the tree Yggdrasil. *Urd* is understood as that which was
becoming, but in the sense of what was fated, that which must become. “Undine Geht” as text
has a marked sense of the inevitable. Despite Undine’s claim that she will leave and her voicing
of the reasons which ground her decision, the end of this short story does not bear out an
absolute end,\(^\text{176}\) rather points strongly to the beginning of the next cycle or encounter. Moreover,
the conception of time that the text as a whole suggests is different from the three tenses at work
in Undine’s monologue: through the form of Bachmann’s language, which is always poetic but
at points in the text becomes poetry, characterized by its wave-like circularity and repitition, the
voice of the text suggests an independent conception of temporality, one that must unfold as it
does, one that cycles rather than travels a straight line, one that will not allow for an ending
despite the expressed intent of the text, seen in Undine’s point of view. The way in which the
three temporalities depend, and indeed stem from, the text as a source suggest that the voice of
text -- circular, doomed to repeat itself, and giving life to the three tenses that are at work in
Undine’s monologue, echoing the well of *Urd* -- operates independently as its own
representation of temporality.

\(^\text{175}\) As noted above, the well of Urd is found in Eddic poetry, in the *Völuspa*, stanza 19 or in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*.
\(^\text{176}\) Cf. Andreas Kraß’s reading, 337-341, which stresses the finality of Undine’s leaving.
Reading the voice of the text as an echo of the well of *Urd* vivifies the interpretive possibilities. Bachmann’s work is deeply connected to “Der Fischer” and the *Nibelungenlied*, not only because of the common thematic content, but with respect to their echoing of the Norns as referent in the ancient Germanic mythological. Coupled by the similarity in terms of the emphasis on the human posture of attentive listening, which I argue plays a central role in each text, the common echoing of the Norns becomes more than a noteworthy readerly possibility; rather these core similarities suggest a common ontological positioning that supports two important observations: the role of fate connected to knowing, i.e. connected to the role of the epistemological in human life, is important to understanding the moment of extraordinary awareness, as is the discussion of the role of literature with respect to the transmission of knowledge, which a reference to the Norns and the Well also suggests. In addition, the attentive listening signals a readiness to experience a moment of extraordinary awareness, or focal occasion, signals that it is the human posture that has the causal agency in the broader conception of how a moment that, in an epistemological sense, transcends the normal course of human life, can take place.

The way in which the human-nixie encounter in each of the texts takes place suggests that the possibility to transcend the fixedness associated with the idea of fate and its relationship to the epistemological dwells in the human ability to listen attentively, to be ready. It suggests further that the echoing of the Norns evokes a fuller ontological posture than only that of fatedness; rather that the three temporalities with which the Fates are associated give rise to insight into the role of the awareness of time as central to the focal occasion. Understanding the Norns as mythological referent in the human-nixie encounter in each text allows for the
importance of time in the moment of epiphany to emerge, on both the textual and the poetological levels. In the structural character that makes possible the moment of epiphany, an awareness of time is central, essentially with respect to its role in human mortality. This reading allows for deeper insight into the structural and interpretive possibilities afforded by each text in terms of the moment of extraordinary awareness, particularly on the poetological level, in which the role of time in such a moment in the course of human life can be better understood.

In “Undine Geht”, the well is the well of what must become, and it is the well that the three maidens of the Völuspa rise out of, much knowing. The three temporal voices of the text rise from it, also much knowing, also writing the fate of mankind on sticks, in the sense of writing runes, or, one step further, writing literature. It is the text understood this way, as giving rise to the three temporalities at work in Bachmann’s short story, the source of them but not identical to them, that a conception the poetological level of this text comes into focus.

Through Undine’s portrayal of the human understanding of time, an understanding that is future-oriented, her representation of her encounters with Hans, which take place in the past tense, and the descriptions of herself, which take place in the present tense, the reader becomes aware of the text as source, as giving rise to these three representations of time. The text works at odds with this delineation, suggesting by its own structure that there is another understanding of time at work, a fourth understanding. This understanding, embodied by the text structure itself, is brought into relief by the ways in which it departs from the three temporal voices Undine uses. When the reader notices that difference -- a structural possibility that emerges with particular force in this passage in which time is thematized -- the reader becomes aware of the text as its

177 See Murphy’s interpretation of this line in the Völuspa with respect to the Fuþark and how the rune staves could have knowledge carved on them, in “The Secret of the Sequence of the Runes in the Elder Fuþark.” 11-12.
own voice and hence becomes aware of herself as reader. More specifically, the reader, noticing that there is a separate and independent conception of time voiced by the text itself, becomes aware of the artist, of the author.

The voice of the text understood this way, as giving rise to the temporalities that are at work in the text, but by its own characteristic suggestive of a different understanding of time, brings the reader to an awareness of the text, likewise the author, as separate from Undine, because Undine herself does not possess the fullness of this conception of time. Her voice has places of overlap with the voice of the text, but she asserts an ending to the story, just as she asserts differences between her own engagement with the human realm and her native watery realm; differences that, in my reading, the text does not bear out. Undine is connected to both realms, so in this respect the text speaks a different reality than she does. The text likewise speaks to a different temporal possibility: that there are neither beginnings nor endings, and in this respect stands out from Undine’s portrayal of the temporal dimensions at work in her monologue. The voice of the text says something different about time. When the reader becomes aware of this gap between what Undine says and the way the text operates, there is an accompanying awareness of oneself as reader and of the voice of the text as present. The independent conception of temporality that the text evokes provides a structural possibility for a moment of awareness on the poetological level, a moment in which the role of time is central. This structural possibility is better seen as this passage continues.

In the next lines of this passage, Undine elaborates on Hans’ great idea.

Und zugleich: Geh Tod! Und: Steh still, Zeit! (258)

Death and time are the part of Hans’ great, impractical idea that stands out. When Undine addresses death and time here directly, banishing death and telling time to stand still, the core of Hans’ idea emerges: the fear of death, the role of time as that which carries mortals toward death. The reader glimpses what Undine helps Hans to be, think, and say, which was elusive earlier in this passage: that mortals long for time to stop, for death to go. The awareness of death and the inevitable flow of time are what Hans must recognize and say; and the reader, brought to awareness of herself as reader at this point in the short story may here likewise experience a longing for time to stand still, for death to go, which is an acknowledgment of mortality. To recognize, as Undine says, that there is death in it and that there is time in it, is to be face to face with the fact of human mortality.¹⁷⁸

The structural nature of the possibility for a moment of awareness that these lines represent is an awareness of death and the role of time in human mortality, for both Hans and the reader. On the poetological level, similar to the moment of vertigo in “Der Fischer” in which the reader feels herself pulled toward the water and in that moment may, encouraged by the sound of water and its proximity, see death as the backdrop of life, this textual site can be understood in

¹⁷⁸ Horsley analyses the way in which Undine brings Hans an awareness of his own mortality as the valorization of the feminine principle at a moment in which the logo-centrism of the patriarchal order has failed utterly, making way for a different possibility for Hans and mankind, that “(allows) the potential nobility of men to become visible”, 228-29. I agree with Horsley that an extraordinary moment has taken place at the textual level, and that the role of mortality in human life stands at the center of that moment. My own interest is more concentrated on the epistemological character of the moment and its implications for transformation at the poetological level.
terms of Lacan’s description of an event in which a glimpse of the real results in an acknowledgment of mortality, when the symbolic order slips for a moment: a traumatic event.\textsuperscript{179}

In Undine’s description, Hans secretly wished for this, for the destruction of all order, which is death, but only with her help could he be, think, and speak what he wanted. For Hans here wishes for both: for death and for death to be banished. For Undine to banish death and tell time to stand still, both entities have to be there, and they are there, as she states. Undine’s bringing Hans to an awareness of the inevitability of death and time and the desire to be free of them opens up the possibility for a moment of extraordinary awareness for the reader. The form of Bachmann’s language in its evocation of waves reinforces this possibility by inviting the reader to hear the water, in which there is always danger.

After Undine says these words to Hans, he spoke then, Undine describes, “mit einer verlangsamen Stimme, vollkommen wahr und gerettet, von allem dazwischen frei, hast deinen traurigen Geist hervorgekehrt...” (258). This description of Hans affirms that something extraordinary has taken place for him. His spirit has turned toward her; his voice is completely slow, truthful and saved, and freed from everything. In seeing the wish for death and for death to go, for time to stand still, Hans is changed, at least momentarily.

This passage confirms the sense from earlier descriptions of the initial encounter between Undine and Hans that when he doesn’t understand or can’t think of what use he is, in this case that his spirit is not meant for any use, that she loves him most and that their love thrives. Another message that radiates from this passage is the idea that Undine teaches Hans something about his life that he didn’t know before. Her confirmation of death and time followed by her

\textsuperscript{179} See also \textit{The Denial of Death}, in which Becker argues that it is in a very basic sense the ignoring or denying of our mortality which preconditions human life, in a psychological sense, 47-67.
command for death to flee and time to stand still has a strong effect. His reaction to these words, to her commands, signals that this has been a moment of exceptional quality. This is a transformational moment for Hans, which comes about as a result of his encounter with Undine, but specifically it is the acknowledgment of the role of death and time in human life that gives rise to the possibility for Hans.

It is in this moment of the text that something more of Undine’s supernatural vision can be glimpsed. Undine, moments after conjuring, _hervorgezaubert_, Hans’ unpractical idea of the world, in which death and time appeared and burned bright, shows him those forces and commands them to retreat. She does not outright tell Hans the future, although later in the text she alludes to what is to come for both of them. Her power of vision seems to lie rather in her ability, through words, to tell the defining forces in human life -- death and time -- to retract for a moment. In that moment in which death, once acknowledged, is told to go and time, once acknowledged, is told to stand still, Hans’ spirit is changed, his voice is changed -- he is momentarily transformed. It is not a change that endures; Hans and Undine go through the cycle again and again, but the force of the encounter changes him in that moment.

Likewise the reader may experience that moment of awareness and the wish for death to go, for time to stand still. This is brought about both structurally, by the way that the text suggests a different conception of time than the temporalities at work in Undine’s monologue, and by the thematization of death and time in this passage and the resulting possibility for the acknowledgment of the role of time with respect to human mortality, and in turn the life-defining nature of mortality. I read this moment as an echo of Lacan’s description of seeing the real, here better framed as hearing the real, which is the wish both for death and for death to go. From
these two loci the possibility for a moment of transformative awareness arises at the poetological level.

How is the reader to understand Undine’s call for death to flee and for time to stand still? In what way can Undine stop time and banish death? In one respect: as literature. It is as literature, in one of its aspects understood as the transmission of knowledge, that Undine as text can banish death and stand time still for a moment.\textsuperscript{180} Bachmann said of the Undine figure, “Die Undine ist keine Frau, auch kein Lebewesen, sondern, um es mit Büchner zu sagen, ‘die Kunst, ach die Kunst’. Und der Autor, in dem Fall ich, ist auf der anderen Seite zu suchen, also unter denen, die Hans genannt werden.”\textsuperscript{181} In Bachmann’s terms, Undine as art has banished death and stood time still, and the reader is afforded a moment to glimpse that. As Undine banishes death and stops time for Hans for a moment at the textual level, the text gives rise to a similar moment of awareness for the reader.

Gadamer’s theory of aesthetics is helpful here, pointing out that there is the possibility for the audience to dwell with the artwork in a way that is transformational, and specifically that poetic language plays a critical role in the hermeneutic possibility for a different way of seeing, or more radically put, of being, for the reader, in the space and time taken up by the aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{182} This conceptual framework is illustrative for both the moment of epiphany for Hans, at the textual level, and of the possibility for a similar transformation for the reader at the poetological level.

\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Poetic Edda}, “Sayings of the High One” (Hávamál), 34-35, Stanza 80. Other poems in the \textit{Eddic} corpus point to the well as source of knowledge including the poetic Hávamál and Snorri’s \textit{Gylfaginning}. See Lindow 212, 301.
\textsuperscript{182} See for instance “Über den Beitrag der Dichtkunst bei der Suche nach der Wahrheit”, or “Dichtung und Mimesis”.

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This text, seen as a whole and held up against the three distinct temporalities in Undine’s monologue, puts the reader into dialogue with the text by bringing about an awareness that the reader would not otherwise have had: an awareness of death of time, and necessarily, of herself. This is a very different poetological encounter than that which occurs within “Der Fischer”, in which the reader is drawn into the world of the poem and dwells there until the acoustic connection is broken. Here the reader cannot occupy Hans’ place or hear precisely what he hears, although she does hear Undine’s voice directly, this is a story about something, something the reader does not have full acoustic access to on the poetological level, as is possible in “Der Fischer”.

In “Undine Geht”, the reader sits outside the text but becomes aware of time and the text as separate in its representation of time. The reader becomes aware of a different possibility for understanding time and this brings with it the need to acknowledge the role of time in terms of death. Death and time must be acknowledged, and once they are, the text as art, which means it is being read, may banish death for a moment, may stand time still for a moment. This cannot happen without the reader, as Gadamer suggests; this is an activity, a dialogic structure that is itself constitutive of the possibility for epiphanic awareness.

The next passage begins to shed light on what will bring a wished-for end to the cycles of encounter with Hans. Undine is speaking in this section about another cycle with Hans, here she refers to different men named Hans, one after the other, each one different from all others. They meet in the clearing and are together in both the mythical past of the Undine legend, as when she

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183 Cf. Humboldt with respect to the notion of language as energeai, activity, rather than ergon, a work. “Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts.”, 368-756.
says, *im Donauland war es*, as well as in the modern day: “unter Platanen auf den grossen Boulevards, er trank mit mir Pernod.” (258). She speaks of an ending when she says,


Undine reveals the impossibility of a real ending here with her language: there is a sign for the ending that she makes with her hand, a sign for the end that finds no end. There was never an end, she goes on, and at the close of the thought she repeats the imperative for death to flee and time to stand still. Undine’s monologue points to her desire and intention for an ending to the cycle, but both in the form of the text structure itself, and in the content of what she says, the notion of a real end is not supported.

It is noteworthy that the passage here that describes a moment of parting between her and Hans after another cycle of meeting in the clearing is entirely in the past tense, reflective of the larger pattern, yet when Undine speaks about making the sign and the nature of the sign for the end, she speaks in the present. This is her voice describing herself: herself in the present.

Undine’s observation here is a wish, something that she says now, to Hans and to the reader, but not to a Hans who is present.

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184 *Donauland* refers to the oldest known textual site for water nixies in the Germanic tradition -- the *Nibelungenlied* -- but also to much more recent background text for the Undine legend specifically; namely Christian August Vulpius’ novel, *Die Saal-Nixe* (1795), identified by Andreas Kraß as likely source for Fouqué’s *Undine*, 165-205. Vulpius’ novel was reworked as *Hulda oder die Nymphe der Donau* (1804). See Kraß 205-207.
In the next section Undine relates a reaction to Hans’ transformation by the natural realm, which seems to occur, as it has before in the narrative, when he is in a state of disagreement with himself, empty of insight about his own life; then, Undine says, he spoke truthfully, but only then. This is the reaction, in very similar language, to Undine’s urging Hans to think, speak, and be, to her calling on death to flee and time to stand still. It is Hans’ reaction to his own awareness of time and death, his fear of it and his wish for it. His listening brings Undine forth, who helps him to see death and time, and once he hears her words, and understands his own mortality, his spirit, as Undine stresses in the above passages, changes.

But the possibility of transformative change does not extend only to Hans and the reader. The natural realm, represented by the element of water in Bachmann’s text, itself reacts to Hans’ transformation. “Dann sind alle Wasser über die Ufer getreten, die Flüsse haben sich erhoben, die Seerosen sind gleich hundertweis erblüht und ertrunken, und das Meer war ein machtvoller Seufzer, es schlug, schlug und rannte und rollte gegen die Erde an, dass seine Lefzen triefen von weissem Schaum.” (259)

Here the rivers rise, the water lilies blossom a hundredfold and then drown, and the sea becomes a giant sigh, beating, rolling and running over the earth. This is a transformation but not a peaceful one. It brings an overabundance of the element of water to the earth. Death accompanies the rising waters. This is both beautiful and violent at once; as the element of water

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185 Drawing on the mythology of the elemental Undine as portrayed by Paracelsus, the classical philosophical conception of the four elements of life form an important backdrop to this and any text that features the water nixie, and the Undine figure in particular. In this passage, one of the elements has come out of balance: water, with destructive implications.
is beautiful and dangerous for human beings. Bachmann’s language emphasizes both the beauty and the danger by echoing the sound of water in its alliteration, particularly in the last lines of the passage.

The reaction of nature to Hans’ transformation points to the way in which Undine unifies the natural and human realms in this text. The inherent relatedness here of nature to Hans represents one source of this unity, which is an extension of the connectedness of the human and natural realms. The way in which the text functions as its own temporality, separate from Undine’s three temporal voices, represents another source of unity which arises from the text. The temporality that arises from the text structure presents a circular conception: without beginnings or endings. It is a glimpse of the world as connected, as inherently related.

A clearer description of the source of Undine’s anger toward Hans comes immediately following the imagery of the watery world’s beautiful but finally destructive reaction to Hans’ transformation. “Verräter! Wenn euch nichts mehr half, dann half die Schämung. Dann wusstet ihr plötzlich, was euch an mir verdächtig war, Wasser und Schleier und was sich nicht festlegen läßt.” (259)

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186 Similar to the awareness of danger that comes with the sensation of being pulled down into the water on the poetological level in “Der Fischer”, here Bachmann shows the logical extension of an overabundance of water, which although beautiful in its imagery, soon becomes deadly. This logical necessity serves to remind the reader of the inherent danger of water to humans, strengthening the possibility for the reader to see death as the backdrop to life; but it also reinforces the sound of waves, which has both a mimetic function and one that serves to point to the idea of life, not only death.

187 The temporal as site of tension in this text has been well-noted, particularly in feminist scholarship. Horsley discusses the contradiction of the temporalities at work, with particular interest in the two notions of temporality as reflective of a logo-centric or traditional patriarchal view versus one that is from a feminine point of view, especially as articulated by the French neo-feminist post-structuralist theorists, 229-230. Fassbind-Eigenheer describes the functioning of temporality as a metaphoric state of an asymptotic utopia that the Undine-figure represents, such that she stands both within and apart from time. Hans can only approach this state of utopia, but never reach it, although union with Undine brings him a moment of total presence, which in Fassbind-Eigenheer’s reading evokes Wittgenstein’s notion of “Leben in der Gegenwart”, 151.
This section sheds light on how the cycles of encounter turns so that Undine returns to the water but more importantly, it sheds light on why she has decided to leave for good, a departure from all previous encounters which signals a final end. Undine relates in this section how Hans becomes suspicious of her and begins to regret and denounce her, in order to resolve the instability that has emerged from his time with her. The state of transformation, in which Hans is empty, devoid of any more insight, sees death and time and his own secret wish for them and for the destruction of order that they bring: this state becomes unpalatable to Hans. To rectify it, to make solid what has become unstable, he denounces Undine. Instead of recognizing his own complicity in his changed life, he sees the locus of change, sudden and unwanted change, in Undine.

She continues that in the effort to dutifully denounce her and return to his previous state of solidity and stability, Hans quickly sets up altars and sacrifices her. “Ihr habt die Altäre rasch aufgerichtet und mich zum Opfer gebracht. Hat mein Blut geschmeckt? Hat es ein wenig nach dem Blut der Hindin geschmeckt und nach dem Blut des weißen Wales? Nach deren Sprachlosigkeit?” (260)

The references to the tasting of Undine’s blood evoke both pre-Christian rituals and the Christian communion, neither of which is an explicit feature of the Undine literary tradition, nor does it surface in the water nixie mythology more broadly. This reference seems instead to ask

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188 Bachmann’s text as a whole has been understood as an allegory for the male/female relationship and is often seen as a battle, with clear winners and losers. See Achberger “Undine Goes”, 90. This passage in particular can be read as a scathing indictment of the gender dynamic between men and women in which a relationship can be fatal for women, can shame and mark them for life, where for men this is rarely the case, and once a particular relationship is over, life goes on. See for instance Horsley 232-234.

189 The Melusine tradition has strong connections to a move from pre-Christian belief to the Christianity of the early modern period and is associated in particular with the concept of the female supernatural, often understood in terms of the female demonic in the discourses of the period. See for instance Scholtz-Williams 23-45. Cf. Hans Sachs’
the reader to see the consequences of the human realm turning violently against the natural
realm, but also asks the reader to understand Hans’ betrayal as a sacrifice.\textsuperscript{190} This passage in
particular has been read as an allegory to the gender dynamic between men and women broadly
seen, in which the power of the relationship has resided historically with men with disastrous
results for women.\textsuperscript{191}

It is noteworthy in this passage that Undine attributes something of the taste of the
speechlessness of the doe and the white whale to herself, which echoes an earlier passage in the
narrative in which she refers to the speechlessness of the animals, specifically the creatures of the
watery realm, at that point remarking that she too will soon become wordless. The reference in
this passage points again to that claim, that speech will soon be lost, with Hans’ sacrifice of her.
There is a promise of the end of her monologue in this passage, a glimpse of her stated wish to
go and to become speechless like the other beings of the water.

Undine conveys this intention in language, so the promise of wordlessness is still at odds
with the text itself. She has promised to become a speechless creature, but she has not yet made
that transformation. The reference to speechless creatures and the connection Undine draws
between herself and them at this point in the text, a pivotal point at which Hans’ betrayal marks a
real change in their relationship, allows the reader to begin to see an ending where there was
previously no sense of how an ending might come about, or for what reason.

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\textsuperscript{190} Hans’ betrayal of Undine in Bachmann’s text harkens clearly to the Undine legendary beginning with Fouqué
 echoed by Giraudoux, that Hans/ Hulbrand in each case breaks his promise to Undine, which requires her to return
to the water and ultimately causes his death.

\textsuperscript{191} See for instance Lennox 309, Baackmann 45-57; Horsley 232-234.
The pull of the ending makes itself felt at this point, because Undine’s promise very early on in the narrative to become speechless resurfaces with the allusion to her own blood as reminiscent of speechless animals. The reader feels the current of the monologue, which has been largely circular, going now in one direction: forward, to the end that Undine refers to earlier in the text. This is both a literal end of speech, when she leaves the world of men and finishes her monologue, and the end of even the possibility of speech, when she resumes her nature as a water being, speechless.

The change in the current of the text gives the reader insight into Undine’s proposed leave-taking. The silencing of this Undine becomes a possibility for the reader for the first time in these lines. Despite Undine’s claims in the text to this point, the idea of a real ending has not been supported by either Undine’s monologue, with its circularity in how she recounts her encounters with Hans, or by the form of Bachmann’s language, which reinforces the cyclical with poetic repetition and fragments, evoking the sound of waves. Undine’s intention to go has been undermined by both the form and content of the language of the text until this passage, when the pull of the narrative turns toward that ending. The allusion to the speechlessness of the water creatures gives weight to Undine’s claim, and the reader is afforded a glimpse of the ending. This glimpse has both death and time in it: death because the reference to the speechless beasts is part of the sacrificial scene at the altar; and time because the current of the text with this allusion has changed to a future-orientation. With this sighting of an ending and the possibility
that Undine could silence herself as she has promised, another structural possibility for a moment of awareness as to the role of death and time on the poetological level opens up.\(^{192}\)

Undine goes on, “Wohl euch! Ihr werdet viel geliebt, und es wird euch viel verziehen. Doch vergesst nicht, dass ihr mich angerufen habt in die Welt, dass euch geträumt hat von mir, der anderen…” (260)

This passage reminds the reader of Hans’ role in bringing about the encounter. Despite Hans’ renunciation of Undine; she points out, it was he who called her into the world. Since there is no scene in which Hans actually calls to Undine, the call that she refers to here is his posture of listening. Hans was ready to hear Undine’s call, which led in their encounters to a new understanding, a different spirit for Hans, and finally, to his betrayal of her.

Undine closes this passage by linking speech to Hans’ betrayal of her, which supports the allusion to the speechlessness of the creatures and her own speechlessness to come. Speech becomes a human trait and speechlessness a natural trait. Undine’s own monologue works against this claim, and the gap created by the Undine’s claims with respect to language and the text itself as constructed by language, a difference which begins to emerge strongly at this point in the reading, suggest a possibility for a different kind of speech.

Undine then retreats somewhat and says she cannot leave that way. She says she must say something good before parting this way: “damit nicht so geschieden wird. Damit nichts geschieden wird.” (260). In the following section, which stands out from the rest of the monologue in both its prevailingly positive tone and in its form as a list of Hans’ qualities on his

\(^{192}\) This sighting of an end gives the reader the impression of a real ending to come, which occurs, although I will argue not permanently, when the reader is able to hear Undine leave at the close of the text.
own, not related to Undine or their time together, Undine praises various aspects of Hans’ qualities and the qualities of humankind: “War das nicht gut und schön gesagt? Nie wird jemand wieder so sprechen können von den Strömen und Kräften…und von den Kernen aller Dinge.”

Undine links Hans to speech here again, to language, but this is a positive side of Hans’ abilities with language. Undine is also using language kindly in this passage. Many of the qualities she attributes to Hans she displays in the very naming, the act of listing his good points, the things she loves about him. She continues to speak in this formula: that never has anyone spoken this way about the elements, the universe, or the earth. She touches on the sciences, and how Hans speaks about them, and turns to philosophy and history, that never has anyone spoken of the conditions for humanity, about ideas, goods, about the past and future of the earth.

This section provides a window to the historical context in which Bachmann composed this short text. The mythological and fairy-tales elements that align with the legendary surrounding the Undine figure (Achberger “Beyond Patriarchy” 1-13) keep Undine’s narrative mainly unbound from its socio-historical moorings; but in these passages, a sense of the western post-war world emerges, particularly in Undine’s references to science, politics, and institutions. In addition, the depiction of Hans as split between his desiring of the destruction of the world and of his own wish to keep the world ordered through a denunciation of Undine and an upholding of the mundane in his life points to a tension between the call to the past that poetry affords and the unblinking view of the modern world that forms its opposite, a tension that marks Bachmann’s works and ties this text to her oeuvre and its own time.\(^{193}\)

\(^{193}\) See for instance Horsley 222-23, Sara Lennox 31-42, or Achberger “The Thirtieth Year” 74-90.
In her naming of Hans’ qualities, she finally names his own ability to name things. She says he brought magic to objects by naming them. She thematizes Hans’ essential connection to language, which has been a feature of her monologue from the outset, but here Undine endows Hans with a powerful, and in her words, magical power to name.\textsuperscript{194} She says that the objects, which could not understand the names they were given by Hans, were nearly moved by the act of being named.\textsuperscript{195}

Undine then begins the final part of her monologue. She says no one has ever spoken in such a way about himself, nearly truthfully, so nearly deadly truthfully. “Nie hat jemand so von sich selber gesprochen. Beinahe wahr. Beinahe mörderisch wahr.” (262). She turns in the next line from the past tense, which she uses in this passage when speaking about Hans, to the present tense, which is generally reserved for Undine speaking about herself. She is leaving. “Übers Wasser gebeugt, beinahe aufgegeben. Die Welt ist schon finster, und ich kann die Muschelkette nicht anlegen. Keine Lichtung wird sein. Du anders als die anderen. Ich bin unter Wasser. Bin unter Wasser.” (262)

Despite the lack of a subject in this section it is clear that this is Undine speaking about herself, because it is in the present tense. The present tense signals Undine’s voice when she is speaking about herself throughout the text -- she reserves it mainly for the self-reflective stance in which she voices her intentions or her activities apart from Hans. In these lines Undine is making good on her claims from the beginning of the text, now in the present tense: she is bending over the water, and then she is in the water. The reader is alerted to Undine’s change.

\textsuperscript{194} Cf. The Book of Genesis 2.20, in which Adam is given the power to name objects.

\textsuperscript{195} This echoes Rilke’s ninth of the “Duineser Elegien”, in which the sacred act of saying marks the human contribution to the divine world: the saying or naming of a thing preserves it ontologically.
from land to water because Undine says the world is already dark and she cannot attach the sea-shell necklace.\(^{196}\) This becomes explicit in the next line: she is under water, *bin unter Wasser*. Undine uses the future tense to say there will be no more clearing, hence no more encounters. She refers to Hans as *you different from all others*, and then she is underwater.

Undine repeats the last line without a subject, which reinforces the fragmentary and poetic form of language. This formal characteristic has coursed through the text but emerges in particular when Undine speaks about herself, and becomes more pronounced as the story closes.\(^{197}\) The poetic nature of Bachmann’s language becomes poetry by the end of the text. It transforms from a lyrical short story to an ending which no longer resembles prose at all, and this passage heralds that change. The hybrid nature of this short story changes to a wholly poetic work at its close.

The language begins to strongly resemble waves in this final section: the lines roll forward, echoing the human breath. The reader is carried forward by an autonomic quality of the language, which evokes the sound of the water. The phrases follow each other like waves. The reader hears the water here, which it not unique to this section of the text, but what is significant about this section is that the reader hears Undine leaving. The sound of the water moving is the sound of Undine slipping under water. The reader experiences Undine’s leaving directly.

There is one final departure into a more prose-like form before the story ends in poetry. “Und nun geht einer oben und haßt Wasser und haßt Grün und versteht nicht, wird nie verstehen. Wie ich nie verstanden habe.” (263)

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\(^{196}\) This is a reference to Fouqué’s *Undine*, in which Undine attempts to give Bertalda a seashell necklace, which Huldrand flings back into the water.

\(^{197}\) See Achberger “Undine Goes”, 89.
This represents the last almost-encounter between Hans and Undine, and it is an encounter that cannot happen because of the position of each: Hans hates water and green and can never understand, and Undine admits she has never understood either. If this were the end of the story, than an ending, as Undine has claimed to want and announced her intention of carrying through since the outset of the work, would have taken place. As it is however, this is not the final encounter or the ending of the text.

Beinahe verstummt,
beinahe noch
den Ruf
hörend.

Komm. (263)

In the final lines of the text, the phrases are short and appear as two poems instead of lines of prose. The language of the text, Undine’s last lines, transforms fully into poetry. She is nearly silent, nearly still hearing the call. Come, just once, come. This call is the same call that Undine describes from the first time the clearing has been transformed into Hans’ home, when he is listening down the hall.

These lines enact a different kind of ending than the one Undine promised from the beginning. Who is calling to whom in the end? The call is the ending, and there is no answer about who made the call or whether it was heard. The call is the ending, and because the call assumes an answer, even though the text does not provide an answer, the ending becomes a
beginning, or another moment that precedes the clearing. Similar to the ending of “Der Fischer”, the reader cannot know with certainty what happens, but the language signals the ongoing nature of the encounter.

The encounter between Undine and Hans is characterized by sound and precipitated by Hans’ state of listening. Her call to him is a response to his call to her, when he is divided, empty, wordless, and listening. The sensory dimension of the moment of extraordinary awareness in which death and time are central is characterized by hearing and listening.

Bachmann’s language mimics the sound of water, as Goethe’s lyric does. Bachmann’s prose in this short story is the prose of a poet, and her language betrays its poetic moorings constantly. Music radiates from Bachmann’s text: it is present in this iteration of the legend despite the fact that this Undine does not sing. She gives voice to the nixie whose own voice has rarely been heard, through her words, but the text provides the music that is central to the mythology of the sirens. The nixies in each text are characterized by singing or speaking, in different ways all of them participate in the tradition of the siren motif, and this unifying thread makes the self-imposed silencing of Bachmann’s undine so disturbing.

This apparent contradiction of the silent or silenced siren, the possibility of which presents itself poetically at the end of Bachmann’s text, was treated by Franz Kafka half a century earlier in his 1917 fragment “Das Schweigen der Sirenen”. Kafka retells the encounter of Odysseus and the sirens in his fragment, albeit with striking departures. In Kafka’s version,

199 I agree with Achberger’s assessment of the Bachmann text as a struggle between melos and logos, but I depart from her claim that Undine finally chooses against language, by leaving. I read the ending as a beginning to a new cycle between Hans and Undine, and importantly also between the reader and the nixie, the dialogic engagement between text/artist and reader, an encounter which always takes place through language. Achberger “Undine Goes”, 86-87.
Odysseus stops his ears with wax and instead of hearing the sirens, he sees them. Kafka suggests the possibility that the sirens’ silence is more powerful and deadly a weapon than their singing, which turns the encounter on its head in several respects.

Nun haben aber die Sirenen eine noch schrecklichere Waffe als ihren Gesang, nämlich ihr Schweigen. Es ist zwar nicht geschehn, aber vielleicht denkbar, daß sich jemand vor ihrem Gesange gerettet hätte, vor ihrem Verstummen gewiß nicht. Dem Gefühl aus eigener Kraft sie besiegt zu haben, der daraus folgenden alles fortreißenden Überhebung kann nichts I rdisches widerstehn.

Es wird übrigens noch ein Anhang hiezu überliefert. Odysseus, sagt man, war so listenreich, war ein solcher Fuchs, daß selbst die Schicksalsgöttin nicht in sein Innerstes dringen konnte, vielleicht hat er, obwohl das mit Menschenverstand nicht mehr zu begreifen ist, wirklich gemerkt, daß die Sirenen schwiegen und hat ihnen und den Göttern den obigen Scheinvorgang nur gewissermaßen als Schild entgegengehalten. (Oktavheft G, II, 2) 200

The silence of the sirens, Kafka writes, is impossible to imagine. But what if we were to imagine it? The reader, in entertaining the possibility that Kafka holds out, in trying to imagine the impossible, would have to strain, to listen for something that doesn’t appear to be in the text.

I interpret the possibility that Kafka describes as a correlative to the reader as attentive listener, to the poetological level, in which the nixie functions as the reading activity, making possible a kind of disclosure, or a moment that transcends the normal bounds of human

experience, seen epistemologically. According to Borgmann, reading is a focal activity, “to read is to gather our past and illuminate our present.” (Holding onto Reality 85-92). For Kafka, it is the reader’s posture that holds particular importance.

Kafka recreates the human/siren encounter in this fragment. On the poetological level, the siren is the artist, and if the reader could withstand the silence of the artist, an impossibility to even imagine, the artist would have to destroy himself. He extends a possibility impossible to imagine, but in the very description, in the very holding out of this possibility, Kafka dangles it before the reader’s eye, asking the reader to assume the posture of strained listening: of readiness. Kafka brings the reader through the experience of the encounter, but not as an observer. He transforms the human/siren encounter from one read about to a transformational experience for the reader. The reader becomes Homer’s Odysseus, after the waters have calmed, just before hearing the siren’s song.

Characteristic of Kafka, what appeared at first reading to be a text that centers on sight, and in this respect is read as representing a radical departure from the passage in Homer, is in fact a most faithful representation of the original encounter, but one in which the reader might have the joy of hearing the song. The primacy of sight to hearing, as has been often attributed to this text, is an important observation 201 but misses the performative aspect of the text, possible only through listening, realized through the ear and not through the eye. 202 Ultimately the text affirms and reaffirms the importance of the faculty of attentive listening and the necessity of the

201 See for instance Stuby 28.
202 Stuby argues that Kafka’s passage affirms the centrality of gender in the myth, in which the sirens, always feminine, are robbed of their speech. In her reading, Kafka’s Odysseus is the male artist, also God, who leaves the sirens in their speechlessness. Stuby sees the siren episode as women’s speechlessness and lovesickness contrasted to male genius and creativity, to the male gaze. Despite the rigid boundaries of the gender constellation in Kafka’s fragment, I see potential for transformation on the poetological level, regardless of gender.
artist as siren. The artist must not even be imagined as silent, Kafka is saying, or likewise, must not silence himself. In trying to imagine the possibility, the reader assures the artist’s voice is heard: art is reaffirmed.

Similar to Kafka’s fragment with respect to the apparent contradiction of a siren who is silent, what appears to be the final silencing of Ingeborg Bachmann’s siren in “Undine geht” is only a momentary silence which prompts an immediate reaction: the call to return. The distance between what Undine states as her wish at the outset of the text -- the speechlessness that Kafka describes, an ending -- and what the voice of the text supports, in particular the last lines, reveal the ongoing nature of the cycle between Hans and Undine at the textual level, and between reader and text at the poetological level. There is no end, only another wave of encounters. Undine leaves but nearly still hears the call, and whether the call stems from Hans, Undine, or the reader, the cycle of encounters renews itself.

The wave-like repetition and circular nature of Bachmann’s language, in conjunction with the representation of Undine’s relationship to the human and natural realms, also gives rise to an experience of connectedness. Essentially connected to both the watery and human realms, Undine exists in a story which for her will end, seen on the textual level. She also exists on the poetological level, where for the reader, hearing the rhythm of water, and its counterpoint of human breath, no ending is possible. The tension between Undine’s nature as always connected and her claims to the contrary provides an opening through which the reader may glimpse

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203 My reading departs from the secondary literature that sees a real silencing of the Undine figure in this text. See for instance Sara Lennox, 37, 258; Kraß, 337. Fassbind-Eigenheer sees only a temporary silencing of Undine, which in her reading equates to the artist’s inspiration. In Fassbind-Eigenheer’s analysis, the inspiration must always come to an end, leaving the artist bereft, but underlies the circular nature of the text and the ending, 169-172. I argue, based on the conception of temporality found in the text structure, for a reading which sees the ending as a renewal of the cycle between both Undine and Hans at the textual level, and between reader and text at the poetological level.
another way of understanding the world as represented by this text: a world in which the subject begins as connected, in relationship with others and with the world. Similar to Goethe’s “Der Fischer”, Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” affords the reader a potentially transformative awareness of the world as connected. This is particularly forceful at the poetological level, in which the reader as attentive listener is a necessary part of the connectedness that emanates from this text. In my reading, this text aligns with Goethe’s ballad at several junctures.

Bachmann’s text opens up a possibility for the reader to understand the world as connected, through the tension between the way in which the text portrays Undine as always connected to human and watery realms and the position taken by Undine’s own claims in her monologue. Undine’s language stakes out a different position, one of distinctness and one in which an ending is desired and possible. In the distance between the two, form and content, the reader is afforded a conception of the world as connected versus divided. 204

Similarly, “Undine Geht” seen as a distinct temporality makes possible moments of exceptional awareness for the reader. The reader hears the three temporalities in Undine’s monologue, echoing the Norns of the Völuspa, but also hears a very different conception of the possibility of time from the text itself. This conception of time is, like the well of Urð, the source of the past, the present, and the future in the text, but is itself circular, repetitive, and inevitable. The conception of an independent temporality at the text level opens up several distinct structural

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204 This can be understood in terms of the Kantian divide between subject and object, as explored in Chapter two. Bachmann’s text supports a conception of the world in which the subject begins as connected in the world rather than at a distance from the world. Heidegger’s development of the notion of being-in-the-world, for instance in Sein und Zeit, or in his later essays is illustrative of the ontological posture I am describing. “Bauen, Wohnen, Denken.” or “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” both explore this notion of being as being connected. Gadamer’s theory of aesthetics also supports this understanding as to the poetological level, in which the reader both is a necessary element of and is changed by the interaction with the artwork. As an essentially dialogic activity, this interaction affords the reader a new way of experiencing the world.
possibilities for moments of realization for the reader, moments in which time, and particularly its relationship to mortality, ask to be acknowledged before time, and death with it, can be banned in that moment by the text as literature. This poetological activity brings the reader an awareness of herself as reader.

At the close of the text, the reader, listening to the sounds of water through the poetry of Bachmann’s language as Undine returns to the water, hears the call for her to return in the final lines. Listening to the water, but no longer able to hear Undine, the reader may herself be the one calling. For the attentive listener, the call is always the same, and the call itself ensures there is no ending.
Chapter 4: “Hörbar leben im Dach”: the Sound of Awakening in Johannes Bobrowski’s “Undine” (1964)

Johannes Bobrowski’s 1964 poem “Undine” opens with a call to listen. The poetic conception of the acoustic as precipitating factor in the moment of extraordinary awareness courses through this poem, linking it to the works examined in the first three chapters.

Bobrowski’s lyric “Undine” was published three years after Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” and has been interpreted as primarily a response to Bachmann’s text.\(^\text{205}\) In this chapter I suggest instead that Bobrowski’s poem is both a retelling of Goethe’s “Der Fischer” and a twentieth-century lyric iteration of the human-nixie encounter as a figuration of the epistemological confrontation between sight and hearing in its own right. Far from simply a response to Bachmann, Bobrowski’s “Undine” opens up new ways of understanding the epistemology behind the moment of encounter. Significantly, this work also gives rise to moments of extraordinary awareness on both the textual and poetological levels by means of an awakening of the acoustic faculty in conjunction with a temporary blocking of the visual faculty. Through a close reading of this lyric, I argue that in opening up new ways of understanding the encounter as key epistemological moment, Bobrowski’s “Undine” reveals the importance of the intertextuality of the literary tradition surrounding the human-nixie encounter and more broadly, illuminates the significance of poetry to the interpretation of the epiphanic potential that inheres in the human/nixie encounter.\(^\text{206}\)

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\(^\text{205}\) See for instance Andreas Kraß 342-344. He reads the Undine in Bobrowski’s lyric as silent, reflecting and picking up from the end of Bachmann’s short story, in which Undine silences herself.

\(^\text{206}\) See David Scrase’s “Reading Bobrowski.”, a helpful introduction to Bobrowski’s work, in Understanding Johannes Bobrowski 6-15. Significantly, although Bobrowski composed in the GDR during the early period of divided Germany, he was of no apparent interest to the censorship apparatus in the GDR, in sharp contrast to his
Bobrowski’s lyric opens with mystery:

Aus ihren Schatten
herauf
die ungesprochene Rede,
aus Blättern
ein gebogener Arm.

Du betrittst eine Brücke.

Du trägst eine Blüte über dem Mund.

Du verbirgst Dich an Türmen.

Du wirfst den springenden Kiesel fort.

Feuer habe ich nicht.

Im Stroh die Vögel schlafen

contemporaries. His works are political in a much broader sense than the works of his contemporaries: he was concerned with the history of the German people in the region today taken up by Poland, the Baltic states, northwestern Russia, and the far-eastern reaches of present-day Germany, a region Bobrowski calls Sarmatien, from Ptolemy’s description of the area as Sarmatia in the first century. Bobrowski’s work is particularly interested in the question of responsibility and guilt of the German people in this vast multi-lingual and cultural region, dominated since the early 12th century by Germanic peoples, first by way of the missionizing work of the Deutsche Ordnen, the Teutonic Knights. This interest stems from Bobrowski’s own family history, his childhood and upbringing in the region, and very much from his military service in Russia during WWII, which made a lasting impression on him and his work. Bobrowski claimed his time in Russia during the Second World War was the reason he began writing. Specifically, it was coming to terms with the history of German peoples in that part of the world that propelled him to begin writing. See Werner Schultz 12-13. His work found a broad reception in the former East and West, was published in both states, and is concerned with a much broader demographic/socio-political vision/ focus than that of the divided Germany, which surfaces only in a minor way in his oeuvre. He was a guest of the Gruppe 47 and won their highly sought-after prize in 1962. For these reasons, Bobrowski’s work finds itself in a category separate from that of many of his contemporaries in the former GDR, including Christa Wolf, Peter Huchel, and Stefan Heym, among others, and he is often read instead in the literary tradition of free-verse German poets, particularly Friedrich Klopstock and Friedrich Hölderlin. See Scrase, 6-10.
Hörbar leben im Dach
Flügel und Futterschrei.

Atem,
trag mich.

Dunkel,
sprich mit den Händen.

Wasseraläusch baut Nester
in die gefiederte Stille.

Unter dem Wasser die Häuser
Halten Türen geöffnet,

Fenster, aus Steinen eine
Treppe tritt vor.207

For the reader, several elements of the opening of this poem stand out. The lyric is
written in free verse.208 The perspective is auctorial: it is not clear who the narrator is and in what
relation the narrator stands to the action of the poem. The action itself is mysterious. The first
stanza does not have a verb, but the herauf, which modifies Aus ihren Schatten, suggests that
which rises up out of the shadows is the subject of the line: die ungesprochene Rede. This subject

208 With the exception of four poems, all of Bobrowski’s lyric poetry is unrhymed. He is read in this respect as
following in the literary tradition of German poets writing in free verse, particularly on the work of the first German
poet to write in free verse, Klopstock, and on the work of Hölderlin. Bobrowski dedicates poems (e.g. “An
Klopstock”, “Hölderlin in Tübingen”) to these poets, and in his notes describes the significance of their work on his
efforts as a poet. His other self-described major influences include Johann Georg Hamann, who along with
Immanuel Kant was the foremost cultural father of the city of Bobrowski’s youth and education, Königsberg,
present day Kaliningrad. See Deskau 9. Bobrowski identified strongly with Hamann and distanced himself from
what he described as Kant’s overly rational approach. Scrase 12-14.
is followed immediately by a paratactic phrase that appears to function equivalently as a subject: *aus Blättern, ein gebogener Arm*. Thus both the unspoken speech and the bent arm emerge up out of the shadows and up out of leaves, respectively, and both, in the act of up and out, function as subjects of the first stanza. It is almost impossible for the reader not to supply a verb. The unspoken speech must be rising or surfacing up and out of the shadows; likewise the arm, bent, must be appearing up out of leaves. The bent arm may also be made of leaves; the language of the first stanza leaves both possibilities open.

Of note also is that the unspoken speech is coming up out of her or their shadows. There is no way to determine with certainty whether the possessive pronoun *ihren* means *hers* or *theirs*, the language here admits of both possibilities and both are plausible for different reasons. The possibility that the unspoken speech rises up out of her shadows implies Undine's presence immediately, and in a manner that is very satisfying, since the reader hasn’t seen or heardUndine directly at this point in the poem; rather, there is only the unspoken speech and the bent arm to suggest her presence. The reader is looking immediately for a connection to Undine, an expectation set up by the title. The personal pronoun *ihren* attaches itself to Undine, creating a linguistic link that provides the reader with a bridge by which to experience Undine.

Alternately, if the unspoken speech or talk is up from their shadows, there is an immediate connection to the idea of others in the poem. The phrase *their shadows* implies *other* Undines, others in the tradition of the Undine figure in literature and myth. The unspoken speech up from their shadows might be the very speech of this poem, out of the shadows and tradition of the history of the Undine motif in literature and myth.
Further, because the German word *Schatten*, shadows, is plural, indicated by *ihren* (as opposed to *ihrem*; if it were singular) her shadows might also refer to previous literary incarnations of Undine. This unspoken speech is, in the act of reading the poem, up from, or up out of, her shadows, out of what the Undine figure has previously been.

Thus Bobrowski’s “Undine”, like Bachmann’s “Undine Geht”, is immediately and purposefully intertextual. It is, by the small but important ambiguity of the possessive adjective *ihren*, turned toward the corpus of literature and mythology that features the encounter between water nymph and human going back more than two millennia. This lyric is explicitly addressing those works that came before.

Further, the bent arm, likewise rising up out of leaves, can be convincingly read as intertextual. The leaves in the fourth line echo Bachmann’s “Undine geht”, in which the leaves wipe the water droplets off of Undine’s arm as she goes through the clearing, going from watery to human realm. The leaves may be read here likewise as around the arm, wiping it clean of water. The leaves may also refer to books, to the literary tradition that has preceded this text: leaves or *folia* as a reference to paper, books. The arm covered in leaves is both a reference and an invitation, the bent arm beckoning the reader to the act of reading itself.

The image of an arm made of leaves is both unsatisfying and uncanny: it does not supply the reader with the image of Undine, an expectation that based on the title, the reader looks for. The reader is not able to imagine Undine fully if her arm is made of leaves. This is an uncanny

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209 This is not of course the only marker of the intertextuality of Bobrowski’s work. I will argue that the entire poem is intertextual, and not only with respect to Bachmann’s “Undine Geht”; rather to the corpus that her work was itself in dialogue with. This lyric is also intertextual in the sense that it can be read as another way of reading Goethe’s “Der Fischer”.
210 Bachmann, “Undine Geht” pg. 253
211 See Borgmann on reading as focal practice in *Holding onto Reality*, 85-92.
image, recalling a dream image which is almost, but not quite the picture the dreamer wishes to see. The dream-like character of the arm rising points to a disconnect between expectations and what is given by the poem, first elicited by the unspoken speech. Both the unspoken speech and the bent arm made out of leaves or covered in leaves, or emerging from leaves, fall short of the expectation encouraged first by the title of Bobrowski’s work and second by the implicit intertextual basis of the literary tradition toward which the poem is turned, responding to, and of which the reader is on some level aware. The reader expects to find something of the Undine figure from Bachmann, Fouqué, or one of the other textual iterations of the water nixie. The more the reader has read into the Undine tradition in literature and myth, the better she will be able to read Bobrowski’s images; yet the sense of half-met expectation pervades this stanza.

In each case the images of the first stanza are intertextual, such that they plainly turn toward the literary tradition of the Undine figure and more broadly to a human encounter with the watery figure, which supplies the reader with powerful images and concepts that have come before. The poem simultaneously presents counter-images that do not conform to the reader’s expectations, based on the intense intertextuality that inheres in the poem. The visual aspect, what the reader imagines as a result of the poem’s imagery, is dream-like: a nearly-Undine, but not an Undine the reader was looking for.

See Freud’s Das Unheimliche, in which he traces the uncanny to the experience of seeing oneself or a version of oneself in the uncanny image. For a discussion of Freud’s text and literature itself as uncanny, see Robin Lydenberg’s essay “Freud’s Uncanny Narratives” 1072-1086.

I emphasize here the shrouded nature of the visual realm: the reader can neither see nor fully imagine what is being described. Dagmar Deskau addresses the difficulty of interpreting Bobrowski’s poetic work, much discussed in the secondary literature, in terms of the thematic of “Dunkelheit”, which he argues points poetically to the question of guilt/ responsibility of German-speaking people in the region Bobrowski calls Sarmatien throughout its history, and further that Bobrowski seeks to bring the distance of the prehistoric past of that region to the reader through his poetic use of darkness in his nature imagery 55-63; 63-69.

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The first stanza thus sets the tone of this work structurally by means of expectations at the poetological level, based on a strong intertextual character, and a gap between those expectations and what the poem provides. The reader is encouraged to expect and imagine an Undine that will reflect the Undine tradition in literature and myth, but the first stanza gives the reader near-images of Undine, not a whole or satisfying image. The unspoken speech and the arm, bent, up from leaves, are both dream-like and nearly what the reader wished to read about or imagine, but only nearly. The visual, in this case what can be seen in the reader’s imagination, is dream-like, close, nearly, but not quite what the reader expects to see. It is the nearness to the expectations that characterizes the poetic experience of the first stanza, and it is an experience that leaves the reader tipped forward, in a poetological sense, wishing for more.\(^{214}\)

The acoustic character of the first stanza reinforces this posture. Based on the third line, \textit{die ungesprochene Rede}, the reader is asked to listen -- to be aware of sound in the poem -- and because the unspoken speech in the third line as subject refers to the first two lines, making sense of what is rising up from her or their shadows, the unspoken speech is the semantic opening of the poem for the reader. The reader does not know what is emerging up and out of her or their shadows until the third line and unconsciously waits for the subject to make sense of things. Once the subject is clear the reader is oriented to the poem, grounded in the meaning of the text. The meaning of the first stanza flows from the unspoken speech.

For the reader to be oriented to unspoken speech is for the reader to be listening, but importantly, not hearing. After reading this line and becoming grounded in the text, the reader

\(^{214}\) In “Undine Geht”, the sense of nearly, but not quite, is very strong at the end of that text. Consider the lines, \textit{Nie hat jemand so von sich selber gesprochen. Beinahe wahr. Beinahe mörderisch wahr} 262. And later, \textit{Übers Wasser gebeugt, beinah aufgegeben}, 262.
must listen for what is unsaid, because what is unsaid is the subject, the heart of the work at this point in the poem.\footnote{This impression is strengthened by the fact that this stanza is one sentence, so that the subject is the center of these lines. The unspoken speech is central, and the paratactic bent arm functions as equivalent, but not as separate subject of its own line.} What is unsaid is reified here as subject, as something. It is an absence that represents a presence, and that absence is thematized by the position of the phrase \textit{unspoken speech} as subject. The formal features of the language support the reader’s posture of listening for something that isn’t there. This posture aligns with the images that nearly meet the reader’s expectations, but do not. Thus the poetological posture of tilting forward, wishing to see and hear more stems from both the visual and the acoustic in the text.

Further, because the unspoken speech is the subject of the first stanza, the acoustic precedes the visual with respect to the reader becoming grounded in the poem. The first subject in the lyric is the unspoken speech, thus the primary poetological posture is a posture of listening. The reader first listens for what is unspoken. The listening for something that is not there draws the reader into the poem at once. This stance of reader as listener, listener to what is not there, echoes the poetological experiences of Goethe’s “Der Fischer” as a whole, Kafka’s “Das Schweigen der Sirenen”, and Bachmann’s “Undine Geht” at that work’s end. In each case the reader becomes the listener, listening to what is not there, or in the case of “Undine Geht” and “Der Fischer”, what is no longer there.

Similar to Goethe’s “Der Fischer”, the comparison to Steven’s “The Snowman” is compelling in Bobrowski’s text as well, i.e. to seeing both the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. Because the subject of Bobrowski’s poem at the work’s opening is an absence, the reader of this text is put immediately into the position of listener \textit{to the nothing that is there}. 
This is an absence that by its very formal characteristic as subject becomes a presence. It is this presence that informs the reader’s posture of listening, but listening for *something*.

With Bobrowski’s text more so than the texts that have been examined so far, the reader is immediately listening for something, something that is not available to the reader but by its character as subject, something that is both present and central to the work and thus to the reader. The reader as listener is therefore nearly from the outset of the poem in a position to have a focal occasion, seen through a structural lens. Additionally, Bakhtin’s concept of addressivity plays an important role, as the expectations set up by the first stanza, including the title, intertextual in nature, are central to the posture that paves the way for this moment of epiphany.²¹⁶

Similar to the reader of “Der Fischer” by that poem’s end, the reader of Bobrowski’s “Undine” is listening for the nothing that is there, but immediately. This nothing is central, grounds the reader, and prepares the reader for a moment of clarity, but it is also *something*. This is not just anything, but something that comes up out of the shadows: the first possibility is that this something is the voice of Undine in her literary and mythological past. The reading of the entire lyric will suggest a fuller interpretation of what might be emerging from the shadows.

The unspoken speech as an absence points most saliently to Bachmann’s “Undine geht” by virtue of its chronological proximity, who became silent at that text’s end. Appearing only three years after Bachmann’s piece, Bobrowski’s poem seems nearly to pick up directly where “Undine Geht” ends; that is, with Undine rising once again from the water, beginning another

²¹⁶Additionally, I look to Jacques Lacan’s explication of the way in which the symbolic order may slip for a moment in the course of human life, paving the way for moments of exceptional clarity which often involve an awareness of mortality as the necessary backdrop to human life. The poetological posture of being off-balance provides the opportunity for the kind of opening that Lacan talks about. The posture of listening for something, listening for an absence that represents a presence, gives rise to a very different kind of epistemological experience than one oriented primarily to the visual.
cycle of encounters with Hans. It is the approximation to that appearance; namely that this is nearly just the next encounter that characterizes this work at its opening. Instead of seeing or hearing Undine come up out of the water, the reader first hears nothing -- but a nothing that is something -- and then sees or imagines something, namely a bent arm out of leaves, also not quite the something the reader expects to see. Bobrowski’s poem gives life to the next cycle of encounters between Undine and Hans, but its beginning is colored by nearness to that experience, rather than what the reader expects.

The bent arm out of leaves and the unspoken speech do rise up for the reader, and they seem to rise up out of the water, although the water as named object is not supplied by the poet. It is very difficult for the reader not to imagine these images rising up out of the water, based on the intertextual expectations that the poem’s title and imagery introduce. I suggest that these expectations function much like the gravitational pull: the reader is pulled by them, both to a reading in which the unspoken speech and the bent arm rise up out of the water, but also pulled into the world of the poem.

In this respect, Bobrowski’s “Undine” can be understood as either the beginning of the next encounter between Undine and Hans or as another way of understanding the cycle of encounters. In either case the unspoken speech seems to belong to Undine, as does the bent arm covered in leaves or made of leaves. In either case Undine is the subject of the first stanza but the perspective is not hers.

This is an immediate departure from “Undine Geht”: the lyrical voice in the first stanza of Bobrowski’s “Undine” is auctorial, describing things from a distance. There are few clues that tie the narrator to Undine. Undine, and the entire first stanza with her, are cloaked; marked
acoustically by absence and visually covered, by leaves. Both characteristics are obscuring and keep the reader from hearing or seeing. In the world of the poem this lack of clarity additionally prevents the reader from immediately understanding any connection between the narrator and Undine.

Further, the act of imagining Undine, a response elicited by both the poem’s form and content, is blocked by the experience of the first stanza. The arm coming up and out of the water, covered in leaves or made of leaves, and the unspoken speech both cloak more than they reveal, but they do reveal. What they reveal is a cloakedness. This characteristic of the first stanza provides the reader a structural backdrop for a focal occasion by means of an attenuation to the acoustic faculty and a blocking of the visual faculty.

The distance on the textual level between reader and Undine is a hallmark of the first stanza. Undine is present, based on readerly expectation, but cannot be heard or seen: she must be imagined. At the close of the first stanza the reader imagines Undine coming up out of the water, covered in leaves, her speech unspoken. Unable to hear what is unspoken, unable to see what is covered, the reader is immediately listening for Undine. In a posture of uneasy expectation set up by the distance between the expectations supported by the poem’s title, language, and imagery, and the experience of the poem, which nearly meets but does not meet the reader’s expectations, the reader is at once the attentive listener, straining to hear or see the something that is present only as absence in the first stanza.

The second stanza changes the perspective to the second person.

Du betrittst eine Brücke.

Du trägst eine Blüte über dem Mund.
Du verbirgst Dich an Türmen.

Du wirst den springenden Kiesel fort.

This stanza makes several distinct, radical shifts. The perspective changes to second person, and with that transition the narrator is now in the world of the poem. Not only is the narrator functionally present, he is talking to someone. Based on the reader’s expectations introduced by the title and the imagery of the first stanza, the addressee is likely Undine. Both Undine and narrator are now formally present in a manner that is new to the poem, as neither is explicitly present in the first stanza. Undine is not the sole possible addressee; however, the reader is also the addressee. Having already been pulled into the world of the poem by the poetological force of the first stanza as well as the poem’s imagery, the reader is already listening, and in a position to hear what is said, not through a mediated other, but directly from the narrator. Further, Bobrowski’s choice of “Du” as the form of address for the second person, opposed to “Sie”, implies a relationship between addressor and addressee. The narrator and the addressee already know one another.

Undine’s presence in the poem thus far is based on the pull of the title and the movement of the poem through the first stanza. Undine is likewise present in this stanza with respect to content, as the descriptions of what the “Du” is doing seem to be references in large part to moments that have come before in the literary tradition surrounding the Undine figure. More precisely, these are moments that have nearly come before.

The first line, “Du betrittst eine Brücke,” immediately places Undine or the reader above the water. The connection to water is implicit, clear, and unavoidable; although similar to the

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217 This resembles “Der Fischer”, in that the reader also has an unmediated acoustic experience.
218 See Kraß 342.
first stanza not mentioned directly by the poet.\textsuperscript{219} The presence of water in this stanza is even stronger than the half-images of the first stanza, for there can’t be a bridge without the accompanying element of water, at least as a logical complement. In seeing this bridge in the realm of the imagination, the reader sees the water as well. The expectations set up by the title and reinforced by the first stanza are strengthened through this imagery. The reader is increasingly aware that this is a poem about Undine, and the bridge helps to further moor the reader in the intertextual nature of the poem that points to the tradition of the Undine figure in literature and myth. In the reading of the first line, with the envisioning of the bridge, and therefore water, the reader’s orientation to the literary tradition is more firmly established, but left simultaneously without the full image of Undine on a bridge, above water, due to the ambiguity of the “Du”. The second person refers in one sense to Undine, but equally to the reader, and therefore does not allow the reader to imagine Undine with certainty.

The openness of the addressee of the second person voice builds upon the reader’s experience in the first stanza, in which the reader necessarily takes the posture of listening for a something which is not there, trying to see something which was covered. In the second stanza, the reader is trying to see someone who is only half-there. The bridge can be imagined, but who is on the bridge? The reader strains to imagine her. If the reader sees herself on the bridge, a likely eventuality elicited by the openness of the second-person voice, the image is likewise unsatisfying in its completeness. The reader, seeing herself on the bridge, is above water. The

\textsuperscript{219} Andreas Kraß reads this line as an indication that the bridge connects and evokes the four elements of life, 343. I agree and suggest further that Undine herself is a bridge between the watery and human realms in Bachmann’s text, but for Bobrowski’s lyric, the imagery of Undine actually standing on a bridge is important to the poetological experience that I suggest accompanies the reading of this stanza. The reader is straining to see and hear Undine at this point in the poem, and the picture of her on a bridge brings the important element of water directly to the reader’s imaginative effort.
gravitational pull is at work, poetologically speaking: the reader is oriented toward the water by virtue of being placed on a bridge by the narrator.\footnote{I refer here to the human fear of water and by extension, awareness of water as an inherently dangerous force. Lacan’s work in terms of the possibility for the symbolic order to become displaced for a moment so that the real, i.e. the backdrop or defining point that cannot be reached, that I read as mortality in human life, becomes visible, also points to a force that may be at work here for the reader. I suggest that the fear of water combined with the possibility to see death through that fear opens up a structural avenue by which the reader may have a moment of extraordinary awareness; specifically with respect to the role of death in life. This will unfold more fully in the reading of the fourth stanza, but is hinted at here.}

The pull into the world of the poem is strengthened here; the reader is drawn ever deeper, much as in “Der Fischer”, but here the reader does not even have the figure of the fisherman to occupy. Instead there is a series of images which cannot be fully imagined, against the backdrop of a speech which cannot be heard. The downward pull is similar, but the manner in which the reader experiences being pulled down into the world of the poem unfolds differently.

The fear on the part of the reader that accompanies the awareness of being pulled down toward the water is similar to the poetological experience of “Der Fischer”. The reader, placed on the bridge by the poet, is aware not only generally of water, but of water \textit{below}. This structure underscores the directionality of the poem to this stanza: the reader is drawn in and down, and in trying to imagine what is cloaked, both in the visual and the acoustic realms, the reader goes ever deeper into the poem to see and hear what has not opened itself to be seen or heard. The reader on the bridge is accompanied by a sense of fear and a glimpse of death.\footnote{For another approach to understanding a type of reader response that I suggest is at work at the poetological level, which in this respect is very similar to the reader’s experience of “Der Fischer”, see discussion afforded by the recent scholarship on literature and cognitive studies. See for instance Patrick Colm Hogan’s chapter on the complex responses readers have to literature, in which Hogan relies on recent cognitive advances to ground a broader reader response theory in cognitive science. Although this project primarily relies on a theoretical framework that stresses a hermeneutics of the aesthetic to support my interpretations, in particular drawn from Hans Georg Gadamer’s late essays, I also find important theoretical support from a psychoanalytic approach, Lacan’s discussion of the real in particular, to support my interpretation of the reader’s fear response to water and the gravitational pull, to heights, etc… and the antecedent moment of extraordinary awareness that may follow. In addition, the recent scholarly discourses that stem from a cognitive approach to the interpretation of literature seem to me to be complementary to...}

\footnote{...}

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The next line deepens the gap between expectations set up by the poem and the experience of reading the poem. The poet writes, “Du trägst eine Blüte über dem Mund.” The ambiguity of the second person voice, coupled with the poetological movement and the imagery of the poem encourage the reader to understand herself as addressee, to function as the addressee, but at once to imagine Undine as the address; namely Undine in these moments described by the poet.

As the reader imagines first Undine, and then herself on the bridge, or in the reverse order, an important poetological activity which marks this poem is unfolding: there is a back and forth between the reader and Undine, an energy which involves both beings, both parties. The poet brings the reader into direct contact with Undine by way of several distinct structural characteristics of the poem: the ambiguity of the second person voice asks the reader to imagine herself and Undine equally as addressee, and the imagery that punctuates the second stanza reinforces this back and forth: the reader sees first herself, and then Undine, on the bridge, and in the second line, carrying a blossom in her mouth.

In addition, the intertextuality of the poem brings the reader into immediate contact with Undine, setting the reader into a relationship with the tradition surrounding the Undine figure; but more importantly, the movement of the lyric itself, in the way that Bobrowski sets up expectations and then blocks the fulfillment of the expectations, puts the reader into a back and forth with Undine: expectations are compelled to give way to what the poem actually provides, the work of Lacan and other psychoanalytic approaches. Since the reader’s affective responses to water, the gravitational pull and proximity to mortal dangers in general in these works are of interest to my work, a cognitive approach as a support to the work of Lacan and other psychoanalysts in explaining possible reader responses is compelling. See for instance Chapter 6, “The Reader: how Literature Makes Us Feel.” 140-166.

leaving the reader uncertain, straining to hear and see more, unable to interpret or fully understand. Without the means to form a concrete image, the back and forth between Undine and reader is always half-imagined. A full and satisfying image seems to slip away as a dream fades before it can be written down.

The back and forth motion as the reader imagines herself and then Undine puts the two into a dialogue that characterizes the poetological experience of the poem, which is a kind of energy of the imagination that cannot grasp what it seeks but is at every line asked to further imagine, and this brings about an inevitable overlap between Undine and reader. Finally, the reader cannot keep switching back and forth between herself and Undine as addressee; instead, because both beings are the addressee at once, and both ways of imagining are true at once, the reader becomes Undine: the energy of the interplay gives rise to a union. The reader exhausts herself imagining first one and then the other: finally, the only thing that will calm these poetic swings is that the reader is on the bridge, and the reader is carrying a blossom in her mouth, but as Undine. The formal ambiguity of the language, the intertextual references particularly to “Undine Geht” but also to the broader tradition in literature and myth, the downward pull evoked strongly by the water imagery, and structurally the energy of the interplay between Undine and reader as addressee bring the reader into a unity with Undine.

The flower in the mouth echoes the lines in Bachmann’s work in which the water rises in response to Hans’ moment of realization and the water lilies bloom by the hundreds and then
die. In evoking this line, the flower carried by Undine, at once also by the reader, serves as a reminder of the beauty and danger of the watery element.

The element of water emerges as an important metaphor in the second stanza; not for the first time in the poem. The four elements of life play an important role in Bobrowski’s lyric. The first line of the second stanza evokes the idea of water and air, through the image of Undine, (and the reader) on the bridge. The second line implies earth through its imagery of the blossom covering the mouth. Water is likewise implied in the first stanza, with the emergence of the bent or beckoning arm rising up and out of something. The reader supplies water as a presence that is strongly suggested but not explicit. Similarly, the element of air and earth are both present in the first stanza: earth in the image of the leaves, and air through Bobrowski’s description of something coming up and out of the water. The fourth element, fire, is missing, which adds to the reader’s impression of absence in that stanza. In this respect also, the absence of the fourth element represents a presence. There is something missing.

The next line of the second stanza also echoes Bachmann, in which Bobrowski says “Du verbirgst Dich an Türmen.” -- you hide yourself in or on towers. In “Undine Geht”, when Undine is speaking about Hans’ great, impractical idea, she uses the word “verborgene” to describe his

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223 "Dann sind alle Wasser über die Ufer getreten, die Flüsse haben sich erhoben, die Seerosen sind gleich hundertweis erblüht und ertrunken, und das Meer war ein machtvoller Seufzer, es schlug, schlug und rannte und rollte gegen die Erde an, dass seine Lefzen trieften von weissem Schaum.” “Undine Geht”, pg. 259

224 As discussed in the previous chapter, the backdrop for this concept in literary texts is Paracelsus’ treatise of the four elements and their corresponding elementals, the spirits that accompany them, in Liber de Nymphis, Sylphis, Pygmaeis et Salamandris et de Caeteris Spiritibus. Paracelsus is drawing on the classical school of thought that claimed four or sometimes five elements made up all of creation. Kraß reads this stanza as speaking to the four elements of life, although he reads the images differently than I do, and also notices that the fourth element, fire, is missing. 343.
idea.\textsuperscript{225} Hans’ secret wish for the destruction of order in his life was hidden; the reader as Undine is here hidden in towers. Each successive image of the second stanza underscores the strong intertextual links between Bobrowski’s lyric and Bachmann’s text.

Undine hiding in or on a tower as a specific location; however, does not immediately call up imagery found in Bachmann’s work. Towers are an explicit reference of the Melusine tradition;\textsuperscript{226} likewise Undine and Knight Hulbrand live in a castle where there may or not be towers, in Fouqué’s version, but I suggest there are two important connections that the tower evokes: one is the poetic conception of height, specifically, the imagery of stairs going up and down. A tower always means stairs, and the idea of hiding in or on a tower brings stairs to mind - - someone hiding in a tower must at some point go up the stairs. Towers also suggest the element of air. Fire is again the only missing element in this stanza. The impression of height further intensifies the effect of the gravitational pull on the reader. From the bridge to the tower, the reader has gone higher, potentially inducing a sense of off-balance or fear. The reader has an impression of height, and of stairs, an impression which becomes more pronounced by the close of the fourth stanza.

Secondly, I suggest that the Grimms’ “Dornröschen”\textsuperscript{227} is evoked by the tower imagery. The tower in “Dornröschen” is structurally significant to the plot of that fairy tale: it is after climbing stairs and finding the old woman spinning that Dornröschen pricks her finger on the

\textsuperscript{225} Bachmann, “Undine Geht”: “das war eure wirkliche grosse verborgene Idee von der Welt…” 258.

\textsuperscript{226} Cf. Ringoltingen’s Melusine, in which once Melusine leaves Raymond, she flies around the castle towers three times before departing.

\textsuperscript{227} Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. Kinder- und Hausmärchen, Tale 50 (1812 edition).
spindle and the castle and its surroundings fall into a 100-year sleep.\textsuperscript{228} The image of the princess in the tower just before the castle falls into sleep suggests another element that plays a key role in the moment of epiphanic awareness in “Undine Geht”: the role of time. Dornröschen’s time is up at the moment she runs into the spinning woman. Time is present in the tower, as Murphy argues, and I suggest that time is present in this tower too (133-152).

It is the image of the tower in particular that calls up the fairy tale realm in this stanza, and with the tower reference, Bobrowski invokes the literary tradition of the fairy tale as part of the body of work that his poem is turned toward. This lyric is talking to the texts that make up the literary tradition surrounding the Undine figure, and with the tower imagery Bobrowski includes the fairy tale, particularly the \textit{Märchen} in the Grimms’ corpus, in the dialogue.

The next line, the last of the second stanza, likewise calls up a Grimm fairy tale. The poet says, “Du wirfst den springenden Kiesel fort.” The word for stone, \textit{Kiesel}, is the same word used by the Grimm brothers in “Hänsel and Gretel”,\textsuperscript{229} for the stones used by Hänsel to mark the pathway back home the first time they are taken into the forest and left there. Bobrowski’s choice of words is striking in the way it hearkens to the famous stones in the Grimm tale. Again Bobrowski’s choice of metaphors invokes intertextuality, but more broadly, points to reading itself as a key to deciphering the half- or near-images that populate his work. An understanding of the intertextual nature of the poem is not sufficient to turn the near-images into what the reader expects, but without reflection on reading, the poem remains deeply mysterious.

\textsuperscript{228} See Murphy’s interpretation of Dornröschen in \textit{The Owl, the Raven and the Dove: The Religious Meaning of the Grimms’ Magic Fairy Tales}, particularly with respect to the role of time in the fairy tale. As Murphy discusses, the spinning woman evokes the spinning Fates, a connection that is reinforced by the etymology of the English word “loom” 133-152.

\textsuperscript{229} Grimm, KHM, Tale 15.
The stone that is springing forward can be read as a skipping stone: a stone thrown onto the water. The reader’s orientation to the water is strengthened by this line, both on the textual and poetological levels. Undine and the reader, together as the addressee of these lines, are skipping stones. The water has drawn nearer than when the reader is on the bridge or in the tower: to skip stones, one must be very close to the water, if not standing in it.230

This posture bears a striking resemblance to the fisherman in the third stanza of “Der Fischer”, when his foot is touched by the water. That moment marks a break in the direct poetological experience of the poem, in that the reader cannot experience the water touching his/her foot. Another characteristic of that moment in Goethe’s lyric is that the foot is acted upon. The water is the subject. Here the skipper of the stone is the subject, but to be skipping the stone, the water must be very near, and this represents a change of location, which echoes “Der Fischer” and the poetic movement of that moment in Goethe’s poem. The resemblance to “Der Fischer” is echoed throughout Bobrowski’s lyric.

The reader’s experience in the second stanza of “Undine” overall reflects the poetological experience of “Der Fischer”. As in that poem, the experience draws on human fears associated with falling, added to the presence of water, in which the fear of drowning and death play an important role. The downward pull, which makes itself felt in the poetological motion of the second stanza, takes the reader from bridge upward to tower, and in the next line all the way down to the water’s edge. This directionality, going high into the sky to reach the towers and then all the way down to the water produces a sense of falling and with it potentially fear, which stems from the effect of coming down from a great height, intensified by the presence of water.

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230 It is possible to skip stones from a bridge, but generally in order to skip stones well one must be very near the water; almost parallel to it; thus the poetological motion takes the reader all the way to water’s edge.
The water brings with it the fear of death for the reader as well: as in “Der Fischer” when the reader has a remarkably similar experience, drawn up into the heavens and then all the way back down to the water. Similar to “Der Fischer”, the focal occasion that these structural aspects give rise to can be understood in terms of Lacan’s description of the potential for a slipping of the symbolic order such that the real, in this case the role of mortality, or death as the backdrop to life, is briefly glimpsed.\textsuperscript{231}

Further, this line reveals a shift in the epistemological character of the poem. The reader begins the experience of the poem listening for something that isn’t there, \textit{die ungesprochene Rede}. In the second stanza the reader no longer only listens, but there is now the possibility of hearing. The reader hears first the voice of the narrator as the direct addressee, as the “Du” to whom the narrator’s words are directed. This is not a full and direct hearing, because the images that the poet speaks are half-images that cloak as much as they reveal, but the functional role of the reader as addressee introduces the possibility of hearing. The reader hears the skipping of the stones. This is the first image of the poem that allows the sensory experience to change from listening to hearing. The something that is heard is the sound of water splashing. It is worth noting that the sound of water precedes the moment of epiphany in each text in this study.

At the end of the second stanza, the reader is standing at the water’s edge, imagining Undine but unable to see her fully. The back and forth between the reader and Undine, as the reader imagines herself and Undine as addressee, brings about an overlapping of reader and Undine such that the reader can hear the words of the poet addressed to her \textit{as Undine}. The

\textsuperscript{231}A realization of death in the midst of life emerges from the full reading of the poem, particularly the fourth stanza, but can be glimpsed from the way that the reader’s possible fear response in proximity to water functions in each of the first two stanzas.
reader’s attempts to visualize Undine are not successful: they are cloaked at every line, but the
acoustic experience undergoes a fundamental shift in this stanza. From the posture of listening
that the reader assumes in the first stanza, to the possibility of hearing, which flows from the
narrator’s direct speech to the reader, to the image of the skipping stones, the first line that
“sounds” in the poem, there is something to hear now, even while the images are still cloaked
and half-imagined.

The experience unfolds in this way: the reader listens for Undine and tries to imagine her,
but only unsatisfying images emerge, images that are covered, blocked even in the imagination.
The poem continues to be characterized by absence that bespeaks a presence. The reader does
not gain this visual access but leaving the first stanza, listening for the ungesprochene Rede,
hears the voice of the poet, and then experiences herself as Undine through the ambiguity of the
second person speech in the second stanza and by the lyrical energy\textsuperscript{232} which gives rise to an
interplay, which is both a relationship and a going back and forth in the imagination between the
reader and Undine as addressee, and therefore as beings in the imaginative realm. Finally the two
entities must occupy the same space and a union between the two occurs. Deep in the world of
the poem but unable to hear or see fully, having soared upwards from bridge into towers, then
down to the water’s edge,\textsuperscript{233} the reader finally hears the sounds of water in the skipping of the
stones. This marks the transition from listening to hearing in the lyric. Hearing the rhythm of
skipping stones, with half-images of Undine and the ghost of fairy tales left by the stanza’s
imagery, the reader begins the third stanza.

\textsuperscript{232} This reading hearkens to Humboldt’s conception of language as energeai, noted above.
\textsuperscript{233} Cf. Goethe’s “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh” (“Ein Gleiches”, 1815). The downward motion in the two poems is
similar, but here the reader is first oriented to water by standing on the bridge, and is finally drawn down to water’s
dge, not unlike the fisherman at the moment his foot is touched by the water in “Der Fischer”.
The third stanza changes perspective again, this time from the second-person to the first person. For the first time, the narrator’s presence is explicit in the poem. The narrator’s voice is distant and auctorial in the first stanza; and whereas he is functionally present in the second stanza as the voice addressing the reader as Undine, any real insight about the narrator as presence in the poem is not available to the reader. With the change to the first-person perspective; however, the narrator becomes a presence in the third stanza.\(^{234}\)

A structurally given relationship in the second stanza, the connection to the narrator is characterized by the limitation that the reader can do no more than see herself, and finally see herself as Undine. A connection to the lyrical voice, to the narrator, is looked-for -- the reader seeks to know who is speaking to her -- but entirely elusive. In the third stanza, the relationship begins to be filled out, as the narrator becomes an explicit presence. Further, the reader, having experienced herself as Undine in the course of the second stanza, is now Undine *relative to someone*, to a presence now explicit in the poem. The reader finds herself, as Undine, in a relationship with the narrator.

A fuller understanding of this relationship has to be found in the language of the third stanza. The first line gives the reader a concrete impression of the narrator as a presence in the poem, but as with the other stanzas, the third stanza opens with mystery.

*Feuer habe ich nicht.*

*Im Stroh die Vögel schlafen*

*Hörbar leben im Dach*

\(^{234}\) This change in status of the narrator foreshadows the poetic change from absence to presence that marks this stanza.
Flügel und Futterschrei.

The first line makes an absence present, parallel to the unspoken speech of the first stanza, in which the reader is asked to assume the posture of listening, but of listening to something that is not there. Here the first real clue to the narrator as explicit presence in the poem is characterized by what he does not have; namely fire. Fire is the first element of the line, the placement of which emphasizes its importance. Notably fire is the one element of the four elements of life that is missing in the poem to this point. The fire is still absent now, but it is an explicit absence. The suggestion is that narrator once had fire.\(^{235}\) The reader is situated in terms of what is no longer there. This not only strengthens the reader’s posture of listening to what is not there, it adds a dimension by supplying the specific image of missing fire.

The next line reads, “Im Stroh die Vögel schlafen”\(^ {236}\) This is the most concrete image of the poem to this point: there is nothing of the uncanny half-images that characterize the first two stanzas. In both stanzas there is always something missing, until the sound of the stones skipping in the second stanza, coupled with the reader’s functional role as addressee, points to the possibility of hearing. The missing fire is the focal point of the first line, but as a missing object, the gap or sense of nearly there which so strongly marks this poem is likewise at work in this line. The beginning of the third stanza thus appears to again emphasize what is not there, an absence that represents a presence. Seen from a different vantage; however, the first line of the third stanza indicates what the possibility of hearing might mean.

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\(^{235}\) Or by extension, light and warmth from the fire, or what light and warmth might signify. In Kraß’ reading the fire represents Undine, no longer there for the encounter with humanity, once she departs in “Undine geht” 343-344.

\(^{236}\) The line *Im Stroh die Vögel schlafen* also may evoke Christ’s birth in the manger.
The fire is missing, but as an explicit absence, it is a given object in the poem. Considering the poetic conception of the four elements of life that I suggest is an important backdrop to understanding Bobrowski’s poem, the missing fire is something that has been looked and listened-for, and now can be heard. The possibility of hearing, which rises up from the sequential characteristics of the reader as addressee and the audible nature of the skipping stones in the second stanza, yields the missing fire at the outset of the third stanza. The meaning potential is illuminated by the next lines.

The birds sleeping in the straw is a fully-formed image: the reader need not look for further information in order to imagine what is being described in the poem. Moreover, this is the first image that gives the reader full visual access. From the transition of the skipping stones, which signaled that listening might give rise to hearing, there is in this line presence rather than absence: the absence that characterizes the poetological posture of the reader from the poem’s outset here becomes a presence in the world of the poem.

The next line follows the formal features of the first stanza in that there is no subject, rather a description follows; a paratactic line that fills out the initial information given about the subject. This line colors the reader’s understanding and ability to imagine the birds sleeping in the straw by adding that the birds are audibly living in the rafters. The subject is the sleeping birds, audibly living up in the rafters. Considered together, the first two lines suggest both a literary genre and era in which fire is necessary and birds living in the straw would make sense.

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\[237\] The emphasis of the line is the straw. The straw as the location, as the “where”, upon which the birds are sleeping, is important. The birds are the subject and could equally occupy the first position of the sentence, but they are not emphasized in the same way by Bobrowski. The straw occupies the first position in the sentence and as such can be interpreted as the syntactic element that provides the semiotic stress for the author.

\[238\] Kraß interprets this line as the birds starving to death, 343, a view I do not share. In my reading the poetic emphasis is on the transition from sleeping to waking and the audible nature of that transition.
Given the echoing of the Grimms’ fairy tales in the second stanza and the interconnectedness of the Undine tradition in the early nineteenth century to literary discourses in which the fairy tales emerged and became influential, the first two lines of the third stanza strengthen the impression of the fairy tale.

The image of the birds sleeping in the rafters strengthens the intertextual link to the Grimms’ tales, particularly to “Dornröschen”. The pigeons on the roof are one in the series of elements that poetically demonstrate the castle going from wakefulness to sleep: the pigeons are suddenly quiet.239 Another element in the tale that marks the change from waking to sleeping is the fire in the kitchen. All the evidence of life in the kitchen is stilled as the castle goes from a tableau of vivid and chaotic life to stillness and long sleep. Two of these elements are present in this stanza of Bobrowski’s lyric: the birds and the fire. Coupled with the image of hiding in towers in the second stanza, this moment represents a further poetic echoing of “Dornröschen”.

Despite the fact that the stanza is characterized by the first-person perspective, the sleeping birds provide the first fully-formed image in the poem and form the semantic focal point of the stanza. The voice of the narrator is explicit only in the first line, but the birds become the meaningful center of the stanza. The fire that is missing sets up a contrast with the birds, but also serves as a bridge from the absence that marks the poem to the presence embodied by the birds. The fire as a poetic element gives information about the narrator, a visual linguistic marker for what he no longer has. As the fourth and missing element of life, fire is an explicit absence, now

given. The birds on the other hand, audibly sleeping in the rafters, are not missing anything.²⁴⁰ Nothing is missing for the reader to complete a fully-formed image.

Bobrowski’s choice of the word hörbar underscores the importance of the acoustic realm that changes in the course of the poem from listening for, to the possibility of hearing, to hearing something.²⁴¹ The possibility of what might be heard surfaces in the third stanza: the missing element of fire points the reader to the sleeping birds. The birds can be seen: for the first time the reader fully sees. The reader also fully hears: the birds sleep audibly, which poses the immediate question: What do sleeping birds sound like? How does the reader hear those birds?

The poet supplies the answer in the last line of the stanza. The birds sleeping sound this way: Flügel und Futterschrei, wings and sounds of feeding. This seems initially a contradiction. How can the sounds of feeding and wings, perhaps wings beating, be associated with the sound of a sleeping bird? The reader might imagine that birds move about when sleeping, perhaps even beat their wings, as dogs move about when they have vivid dreams and make noises. The sound of feeding connected to sleeping birds is more difficult. Kraß reads this line as the birds starving to death, that Futterschrei, rather than the sounds of feeding, is the sound of shrieks for food (343).²⁴² Another possibility for resolving this apparent contradiction is that the birds are no longer sleeping by the final line of the fourth stanza. Instead, they have woken up, beating their wings and crying for food. I suggest that what is audible is not the sound of sleeping birds but of

²⁴⁰ From the perspective of the formal features of the language and how the birds function as a poetic image, they have everything they need.
²⁴¹ It is noteworthy that the hörbar occupies the first place in the line, its significance indicated by Bobrowski’s usage of it as the first element in the line and arguably the semantic focal point.
²⁴² I read the line rather as the sounds that accompany awakening. There is any case a certain hunger expressed by Bobrowski’s choice of words. The reader might imagine baby birds in the nest, crying for food upon waking.
hungry birds waking up, waking up at the very moment that the reader reads the line. What the reader hears -- the absence that has become a presence -- is an awakening.

This reading further supports the echoing of “Dornröschen” in this poem. The stanza begins with missing fire and with birds sleeping in straw and ends with the sounds of awakening. Sleeping and awakening are thematized in this stanza, supported structurally by the role of the acoustic. In this stanza, the reader is an acoustic witness to the world of the poem going from sleep to waking; in other words the reader literally experiences an acoustic awakening. 

On the poetological level, in addition to listening for and then hearing the awakening of the world of the poem, the reader is in a relationship to the narrative voice that is most strongly present in the third stanza. The reader becomes aware of her relationship to the narrator in the second stanza, but through the narrator’s explicit presence in the third stanza, must acknowledge that relationship and come to terms with what the reader learns of the narrator in the third stanza. The reader here is Undine at the water’s edge, perhaps right before or after leaving the human realm and returning to the watery realm. If the reader understands the element of missing fire in the context of her own relationship to the narrator, as Undine, the poetic conception of missing fire takes on a different significance. The fire can be understood as a symbol for happiness, warmth, passion, love, or the will to live on the part of the human who is now without Undine.

This interpretation leans heavily on the ending of Bachmann’s text, but also draws on the larger interpretive possibilities for the encounter between human being and water nixie as figuration for the epistemological confrontation between sight and hearing. I read this entire stanza as a metaphor for an awakening to the moment of realization, precipitated by audial

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243 In connection with Dornröschchen, Bobrowski’s echoing of this particular fairy tale suggests the significance of going from sleeping to awakening, but through sound.
awareness. This opens with a description of the narrator, the human, without fire, followed by a
description of sleeping, followed by hearing the sounds of life awakening, a description of an
awakening to the moment of extraordinary awareness; or more precisely, an unfolding of the
moment of transformational awakening.

The loss or absence of fire characterizes the human perspective before the full sensory
experience of the awakening. Of note is that this awakening is signaled by the fourth element of
life -- fire -- which as explicit absence is formally present in the poem. The presence of all four
elements of life coincides with this awakening. The awakening is the sound of birds crying for
food, or even singing: this moment might be understood as birdsong. Seen within the context of
the human/ nixie encounter, this audible awakening might be the nixie’s song.

I understand the interpretive potential for this stanza as stemming from the essential
connectedness of the reader to the narrator, in combination with the progression of the
poetological experience of the poem, with respect to the epistemological, in which the reader
goes from blocked to full acoustic and visual access by means of the poem’s imagery. This
interpretation rests on a reading in which the reader begins the third stanza as connected to the
narrator, identifying with Undine, in a sensory transition that crosses a poetological span of
listening to the possibility of hearing, and finally to seeing and hearing.

The moment of human-nixie encounter as symbol for the epistemological character of the
experience of gaining knowledge beyond human scope is thus markedly different in this lyric
than in the texts considered previously. In Bobrowski’s text, the reader identifies with the nixie,
not the human being, and is able to see for the first time what the human side of the encounter
looks like leading up to the moment of encounter and epiphany. The possibility of this
poetological experience relies equally on a progressive acoustic experience that goes from listening to the possibility of hearing to hearing itself, and on a visual experience that is blocked throughout the poem up to the image of the sleeping birds. The confrontation between blocked visual versus acoustic access is central to the possibility for a moment of realization on the part of the reader. The reader learns not only from what is revealed, but from what is cloaked, and more precisely, in the transition from cloakedness to disclosure. On the textual level, the reader as Undine hears the awakening. The possible meanings of the awakening are illuminated in the final stanza.

The fourth stanza begins with another significant poetic shift. From the first person perspective of the third stanza, the narrator now invokes the imperative mood.

Atem,
trag mich.
Dunkel,
sprich mit den Händen.

The poetic activity of the third stanza, which gives the reader as Undine the chance to glimpse the human-nixie encounter from the nixie’s point of view, leads directly to the opening of the last stanza, and simultaneously brings the reader back to an awareness of the water through the invocation of the breath. The narrator’s command for breath to carry him invokes the sound of breath immediately, signaling a continued emphasis on the acoustic. Conceptually, the
breath as that which carries the narrator speaks to the autonomic quality of the poem, and echoes the sound of waves, which have a similar circular, autonomic character.  

The third stanza is not water-oriented, placed instead in a domicile without fire where birds are sleeping in the rafters, but by the opening of the fourth stanza the reader is brought back to the water through the invocation of the breath. As the waves carry things forward, going out and in, so it is with the breath. For the reader, whose own breath, her life force, will carry her through the poem through the musicality of the language, this poetic reification of the breath is a reminder of the water, and brings the reader back to an awareness of herself and where she last experienced herself in the poem: as Undine, at water’s edge, about to hear the narrator in the moments leading up to the moment of epiphany.

The next element the narrator implores is the darkness, asking the darkness to speak with its hands. This curious image echoes “Undine Geht”; namely the passage in which Undine describes the sign that is made with hands, when she and Hans must say farewell at the train station. The similarity is striking, and the lines that surround the specific reference in “Undine Geht” illuminate the interpretive possibilities for Bobrowski’s use of the metaphor. This section of Bachmann’s work is about endings: Undine is speaking about the ability and desire to say good-bye and the proper method of doing so. But Undine is undermined by her own language in this passage, as she is by the voice of the text itself throughout the monologue. As she speaks

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244 The invocation of breath as autonomic, as carrying one forward, is striking in its similarity to Goethe’s “Der Fischer”, in which the language, echoing waves, also brings an autonomic quality to that poem.

about endings, she says in the same breath, “Es war nie zu Ende.” (259). She is unable to end, the text is unable to end, and the encounters will go on.

For Bobrowski, the sign with hands, made by darkness, is also about endings. The narrator is asking for an end, for the sign for the end to be made. The narrator can be understood here to be speaking to death, asking for the end. The carrying of the breath and asking for the sign for the end to be made by darkness is at once also an approach toward the water, explicit in the following lines, but signaled already in these two lines by the sound of breath, echoing the waves.

This is a moment of transformation experienced from the inside, which follows the birdsong of awakening. This is not only a glimpse in which the reader conceives of two disparate ways of understanding the world, as in “Der Fischer”, but also a direct hearing of that experience on the textual level. The reader hears the awakening of the birds, which is an awakening to the moment of extraordinary awareness on the part of the narrator, and then fully experiences the transformation that follows in the fourth stanza, which takes the initial form of a summoning of the breath and darkness through the internal monolog of the narrator.

The narrator, carried by the breath, imploring darkness for the sign of the end, approaches the water.

Wassergeräusch baut Nester

in die gefiederte Stille.

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246 Death is clearly evoked by these lines. See Kraß’s reading in which death is the only way out of the prospect for humanity to live without Undine. I also see death as central to this stanza, but differ from Kraß in arguing that the realization as to our mortality is what gives rise structurally to the poetic representation of the significance and role of poetry in human life, such that the realization as to mortality is the first, not but not the only, interpretive step.
Bobrowski’s description of the sound of water building nests is another striking echo of Bachmann’s text, in which early on in her monologue Undine says of her leaving the world of men, “musste ich ins Wasser gehen, in dieses Element, in dem niemand sich ein Nest baut.” (254). In Bobrowski’s lyric; however, it is not in the element of water that nests are built; rather it is the water sounds that build nests into the stillness. The sound of water breaks the stillness and builds up a world into that quiet: a world that can be inhabited.

The feathered stillness recalls the silence of the sleeping birds in the third stanza, which gives way to their audible awakening. Here the awakening is described more fully: the awakening builds a world that can be lived in, in the former silence. The element that gives rise to that world is the sound of water. Bobrowski’s poetic conception of the sound of water as that which brings a world from silence to wakefulness, i.e. the idea of sound bringing about a world that is alive and inhabitable recalls myths of creation.

The moment of creation signaled by not only sound but song powerfully echoes the ancient Greek literary convention of the muses singing the world into creation. The first line of the Iliad, “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles...” (1) exemplifies the conception of song as the force behind the creative endeavor, poetically connected to the spark of creation itself. Although for the reader this always happens through art, the mythology suggests that the muses’ song is the force that gives rise to art, knowledge, and memory.

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247 Translation Richard Lattimore, 59. The original reads: “μὴν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος”.
248 The Muses, Mousai, are not depicted monolithically: their number in Greek and Roman antiquity is often nine, but sometimes three, and their genealogy is likewise interpreted very differently. See for instance Homer’s Odyssey 8.457, Homeric Hymns 32, Pindar Paean 7, Terpander Frag 4, Plato Theaetetus 191c, Hesiod Theogony 1 & 915, Cicero De Natura Deorum, etc... See Pucci’s discussion on the scene in Book XII of the Odyssey in The Song of the Sirens, in which he argues, affirming previous scholarship, that the sirens in the Odyssey plainly attribute the muses’ qualities to themselves, 6; or see his chapter on the muses, “The Language of the Muses”, 31–48. Cf. Genesis in which a wind, also translated as the spirit of God, moving across the water is the first sign of creation. The Book of
This moment of awakening is both heard and seen, as the first two images of the fourth stanza suggest: the breath is audible, and the signs made by darkness are visible, made by hands. It is the sound of water that builds nests into the silence. The line, “in die gefiederte Stille” conveys the sense of forward motion that the accusative case carries. This is not a building up of nests in a world that already exists; this is a forward motion into the silence, a creation of a world from stillness, by feathering the darkness. This is the moment of creation: from breath and darkness comes life. Bobrowski’s poetic emphasis on the sound of water building a world from silence is a poetic description of creation, or transformation from nothing to something, through sound.

The element of water, implicit in the first stanza, brought more clearly to the poetic foreground in the second stanza through the imagery in which the reader sees herself as Undine on a bridge, oriented to the water, is intensified by the end of that stanza in which the reader as Undine is skipping stones at water’s edge, and further evoked by the sound of breath at the opening of the fourth stanza, now explicit as sound. The stones create smaller ripples, themselves an echoing of waves. The narrator, and the reader with him, is carried forward to the water, the sound of which builds nests into the silence.

The poetic image of feathered stillness speaks to the sleeping birds, a symbol for the state of sleep that, through the acoustic experience of the poem, transforms into an awakening. The figuration of water sounds as the catalyst for the building up of a world to be inhabited is further

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*Genesis*, 1.2. The connection between the muses as transmitters of knowledge and literature is striking in its similarity to the Norns, who rising from and sitting at the *Urdabrann* also have a fundamental connection to the transmission of knowledge through literature.
colored by the final two couplets of the poem, and leads the reader to the image of nests, or homes, built under the water.

Unter dem Wasser die Häuser
Halten Türen geöffnet,
Fenster, aus Steinen eine
Treppe tritt vor.

The nest as term for home reflects Undine’s language in Bachmann’s text: Undine describes the activity of building as characteristic of the human realm, but the word she uses for building is often Nester. Characteristic of her role as a link or bridge between the two realms, Undine poetically unifies the two realms in Bachmann’s text through the specific image of home as nest, connecting the domestic activities in each realm. The nests built up by the sound of water in Bobrowski’s work take the form of homes under water: as in Bachmann’s language, these are the signs of human life. Important to Bobrowski’s work, they are also the result of creation: this is the activity of human life, first sparked by water-sounds.

That habitable world that comes into being out of silence is underwater: the narrator comes to water’s edge and sees the homes below with their doors being held open, a sign of welcome, an invitation, but not without danger. It is not only doors that are kept open but windows as well, as the next line reveals. The windows function linguistically as a paratactic phrase, connected to the lines that precede it, much like the bent arm covered by leaves in the first stanza. The narrator is welcomed to the watery realm by both open windows and doors.249

249 Birds populate Bobrowski’s lyric corpus, as do a number of recurring natural images, particularly rivers, wooded areas, and trees. The windows suggest that not only are the humans being welcomed here, the birds are as well.
This invitation is strengthened by the last couplet. The poet writes “Fenster, aus Steinen eine/ Treppe tritt vor.”, steps of stone come forward. This may be an actual staircase made of stones or stones which resemble a stairway. In either case, the stairway rises forward, meeting the narrator as he stands at water’s edge, looking into the water. The invitation into the watery realm cannot be clearer from the language and imagery of the fourth stanza. The breath carries the narrator to the water’s edge, and the homes with doors and windows kept open extend the invitation to descend.\textsuperscript{250}

The reader’s glimpses of danger and death that punctuate the poem, particularly in the first and second stanza, come into focus as the full scope of the mortal nature of human life rises up from the imagery of this underwater, but still human, realm. Bobrowski’s image of life underwater is, in my reading, a poetic description of the moment of realization, an awakening that brings life and sound where there was only silence before. The reader’s understanding of what the awakening means, i.e. life where there was only silence before -- creation itself -- is a moment of extraordinary awareness that unfolds with Bobrowski’s poetic conception of underwater domiciles. This life that comes from silence, the absence that in the course of the poem becomes a presence, is underwater: it exists in an element that cannot support human life. In other words, creation and the life that inhabits it are temporary.

This moment of epiphany, of seeing death as not only the backdrop to life, but surrounding all of human life and creation, is a transformational knowing based first on listening and in the reading of the poem, on hearing and seeing. What could not be seen or heard before now is visible and audible, and with that full sensory access comes the knowledge that what has

\textsuperscript{250} The downward poetological pull is again exerted here. As the skipping stone at some point sinks, there is an inevitability in the pull on narrator and reader towards the water.
become present for the reader -- life itself -- is not lasting. This is a moment that transcends the normal epistemological course of human life, for both narrator and reader.

I suggest this transformational epistemological experience has an additional aspect for the reader, which is the inherent relatedness of the reader as Undine to the narrator. This relationship does not begin or end in the poem: the reader as addressee begins as already related, as already connected. This structural characteristic suggests not only the essential relatedness of human and watery realms, but the connectedness of the world on the textual and poetological levels. Similar to “Der Fischer”, the poem asks the reader to see the world as connected, not divided, and further, that the reader is already a part of this connected world. There is no way for the reader to distance herself from the world of the poem or to make the experience a linear sequence. The poetological experience is one of being in a relationship, connected to the Undine figure as she has appeared in her different iterations, and to the narrator.

The revelation of the essentially connected nature of the world in Bobrowski’s “Undine” hearkens strongly to Goethe’s “Der Fischer”, as do numerous aspects of the lyric. The four stanza structure, the sequence of images, particularly in the final stanza, and most saliently, the similarity of the poetological experience as the reader is drawn down and into the poem, functionally becoming the listener: each of these characteristics argues that Bobrowski’s “Undine” can be convincingly understood as another way of reading Goethe’s 1779 ballad.

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251 This reading echoes the sentiment captured by “Media vita in morte sumus”, a Latin antiphon found in Gregorian chant, thought to be first penned in 8th-century France. Full text with response: "Media vita in morte sumus; quem quaerimus adjutorem, nisi te Domine, qui pro peccatis nostris justæ irasceris? Sancte Deus, sancte fortis, sancte et misericors Salvator, amaræ morti ne tradas nos." See prologue to Der arme Heinrich, in which Hartmann quotes the verse, using the metaphor of a candle burning to demonstrate the temporary nature of human life. Verse 93f.

252 This echoes “Undine Geht”, in which Undine begins as connected and stays connected, but also to the conception of time in that text, particularly time at the textual level as a whole, where the circularity, repetitiveness and sense of inevitability are marked.
The end of Bobrowski’s “Undine” in particular aligns with the end of “Der Fischer”. In each lyric there is a movement to the water: in the case of “Der Fischer” the water touches the fisherman’s foot; in Bobrowski’s “Undine”, the narrator seems to move to water’s edge, carried by his breath as he implores the darkness to speak. In Bobrowski’s poem the underwater world is illuminated, visible to the reader and narrator in a way that was cloaked in “Der Fischer”. Although the fisherman descends in a half-willed submergence in “Der Fischer”, a characteristic I read as indicative of both the approaching romantic era’s longing for transformation through death as well as Goethe’s insistence on open-endedness, there is no real possibility of knowledge on the part of the reader as to what exists below, what waits for the fisherman. In Bobrowski’s “Undine”, the reader cannot know whether the narrator descends -- that is what is left open -- but the reader can see and hear what lies below. This marks the strongest departure in terms of imagery from Goethe’s lyric, and simultaneously signals a difference in the epistemological experience for the reader. In Bobrowski’s poem, the reader experiences the song of awakening, heard but also seen. By the fourth stanza, what can be heard and seen comes into focus: the result of creation from stillness is the mortal nature of life. This is an epiphany that, in the scope of its epistemological fullness, is not possible in Goethe’s “Der Fischer”.

The particular poetic emphasis on epistemological fullness seen in “Undine” may be productively understood in terms of both Bobrowski’s sensibility of the magic of nature that runs through his poetic corpus and the strong intertextual nature of his work.\(^{253}\) The poetic conception of natural magic, or nature as magic, in Bobrowksi’s works is tied to his creative interest in the mythic foundations of life in Sarmatia: Bobrowski’s lyrical works in particular are replete with

\(^{253}\) See for instance “Nymphè”, “Anruf”, “Dryad”, etc…
mythical creatures and personifications of Nature set in this prehistoric, semi-fictional
landscape.\textsuperscript{254} Bobrowski’s sense of the diachronic magical power of nature creates a full-bodied
sensory epistemological experience for the reader.\textsuperscript{255}

Further, Bobrowski’s works demonstrate a clear and strong interest in intertextuality: in
the literary tradition that preceded him and will come after.\textsuperscript{256} This characteristic speaks to the
references and similarities to Goethe’s “Der Fischer”, Bachmann’s “Undine Geht”,
“Dornröschen”, and the numerous other works this lyric is turned toward, but also helps to
illuminate the departures found in Bobrowski’s “Undine”, particularly the differences in terms of
the epistemological nature of the reader’s experience.

The role of art figures prominently in the fourth stanza of “Undine” and sheds light on the
way that intertextuality surfaces and functions in the reading of the poem. The staircase rising up
from the underwater realm in the fourth stanza is empty. There is no one on it, and it is made of
stones. The stones are noteworthy because of their mention in the second stanza, in the image of
the stone springing forward; in my reading the skipping stones. The stones are the first image

\textsuperscript{254} See Scrase’s discussion of the the role of Naturmagie in Bobrowski’s lyric corpus. Scrase places Bobrowski’s
work close to the ‘Naturmagische Schule’, 30-31. This quality places “Undine” again in close proximity to “Der
Fischer”, which has likewise been read as a “naturmagische Ballade”.

\textsuperscript{255} See Schulz’s Die aufgehobene Zeit: Zeitstruktur und Zeitelements in der Lyrik Johannes Bobrowskis for an
analysis of the way in which the temporal functions in Bobrowski’s lyrics. For Schultz, there are three main
temporal dimensions at work: “eine geschichtliche, eine persönliche und eine Bewusstseinsebene”, 49. Although he
does not analyze “Undine”, I would place this lyric into the third category for the way in which the past is brought
to the reader’s consciousness, as time gone by, in the reading of the poem, characteristic of the “Bewusstseinsebene”,
50.

\textsuperscript{256} Bobrowski dedicated numerous poems to poets and historical figures, including seven poems dedicated to poets
in the third section of Sarmatische Zeit. In addition, he dedicated poems to Johann Georg Hamann, Klopstock,
Brentano, Nelly Sachs, and many others. Further, Bobrowski’s work demonstrates an interest in the earliest known
reaches of human civilization, both in Sarmatia and elsewhere. A number of his poems on Sarmatia evoke the Stone
Age while other works refer to early epics: the Gilgamesh, in “Dahinter Enkindu”, for example. See discussion in
Schulz, in which his focus is on Bobrowski’s use of historical time in his lyric corpus, 15-24. These qualities of
Bobrowski’s work coupled with his notes and correspondence, which document his interest in the literary,
mythological and personal histories of Sarmatia (but not limited there) are in my view a clear sign of the intertextual
nature of his work.
that carries a sound, and in this respect it creates a poetic bridge for the reader to go from the posture of attentive listening, of listening for an absence that represents a presence, to the possibility of hearing. Seen from this functional vantage, the image of the skipping stone is central to the epistemological experience of the poem. The skipping stones that give rise to hearing are in my reading the staircase of stones that rise up to meet narrator and reader: after creating that structural sensory bridge the stones sink, as skipping stones must, and form a staircase.

The stone staircase rising up to meet the narrator points to another aspect of the creation of life from stillness, and the realization that life is surrounded on all sides by death. Although there is no description of what or whom might be on the staircase, it is rising, rising up to meet the narrator. To understand the image of the empty staircase the reader has to go back to the beginning of the poem. What emerges from the shadows of the past: the unspoken speech; the beckoning arm covered in leaves, is the voice of Undine, as the reader first expected to find, but more broadly, this is poetry itself, rising up from the realization that in the midst of life we are in death. In Bobrowski’s lyric, art comes from the transformational knowing that our houses, our signs of life that come about and make the stillness habitable, will not last. What must be on the steps of stone that extend the possibility of hearing is the potential of art in human life, capable of transcending the element, here water, or death, that surrounds all of human life.

The idea of art as that which first rises up from her or their shadows at the poem’s opening, surfacing from the transformational knowing that illuminates the awakening the reader experiences, brings the references to reading that course throughout the poem into focus: the beckoning arms made of leaves (paper, or books), the persistent Grimms’ fairy-tale imagery, the
unspoken speech itself. The unspoken speech that first seemed to be Undine’s voice the reader is poised to hear is her voice, but it is also all of poetry.

The suggestion that art as a poetic figure opens and closes this poem also infuses the interpretation of the elusive images of the poem with clarity. Through the dynamic lyrical interplay between herself and Undine as addressee, the reader as Undine becomes the addressee, the “Du” whom the narrator addresses, but the “Du” is also poetry itself. Poetry illuminates who is on the bridge, who carries the flower in her mouth, who hides in towers, and who is skipping stones. These echoes of the Grimms’ fairy tale corpus and other works in the body of literature and myth that surround the Undine legend go from uncanny half-images to full-bodied presence in the poem, as the reader sees poetry as the unspoken speech that emerges from the knowledge that the awakening the reader experiences in the poem -- creation and human life -- leads back to stillness and death. In particular, the echoing of Dornröschen emphasizes the metaphorical transition from sleeping to awakening and suggests that this awakening refers both to the moment of creation through sound, here importantly signaled by birdsong, and points to the reader’s own moment of epiphany that unfolds in the fourth stanza. Art transcends the cycle that the reader goes through in the reading of this poem, and leads back to the beginning. Undine’s voice as poetry is, unlike the signs of human and all other life in the poem, that which can emerge from the staircase, out of the shadows of the past, beckoning.

From the initial posture of listening for an absence which represents a presence, the ungesprochene Rede, the reader assumes an ontological position that gives rise to the ability to first hear and then fully experience the moments of epiphany in this lyric. The unspoken speech

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Again the Muses are a productive reference to consider in the metaphorical transition from sleep to awakening that is signaled in Bobrowski’s lyric, in my reading, by birdsong.

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sets up the posture of attentive listening, which is awarded by the sound of an awakening, and finally, to the full imaginative embodiment of creation. It is through this initial posture and the ability to read the intertextuality of the poem that the figure of poetry provides, as it emerges from the realization that death surrounds human life, that the fullness of the epistemological experience is possible. Through listening and then knowing based on both seeing and hearing, the reader finds herself not only deeply rooted inside the world of the poem as Undine, connected to the world of the poem in a relationship that has no beginning or end, but able to momentarily transcend the cycle of creation, life, and death that is the reading of Bobrowski’s poem, through art.

This transformation begins with the acoustic but leads to a profound epistemological experience in which the reader has full access to a moment of extraordinary knowing. Lifted by the sensory experience of first listening for an absence that in the reading of the poem becomes a presence, then fully hearing and seeing what is present but temporary, the reader experiences an awakening, a song of creation that calls the epiphanic moment into being. It is the sound of water that vivifies this new world and at once defines its mortality, and it is the reader who, by listening for the unspoken speech that is this poem and by hearing the voice of Undine as poetry, brings the creative moment out of the shadows of the past, out of silence and into song.
Conclusion: Waves of Poetry and the Moment of Epiphany

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

Wallace Stevens, “The World as Meditation”

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself
Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

Stevens, “The House was Quiet and the World was Calm”

The autonomic nature of an activity that stands apart from but connected to the human
domain radiates from the two excerpts of Stevens’ poems above. In the first, Penelope daily
weaves and unweaves her idea of herself and Odysseus, so as to keep them together even while
he is away. This is a meditative and constitutive activity. It creates a being of the two of them
together at a time and place when they are not together. In the same poem the trees are mended
in the course of the seasons, quite apart from Penelope’s own meditations yet mirroring them. In
the world of Steven’s poem, there is a connection between the two realms of meditative weaving.
The internal and external bear upon each other and challenge the notion of a real separation.
Through the inner and outer making and unmaking of the world, the poem reveals the world as a
site of connection.

In the second excerpt, this notion of inner and outer symmetry is linked with the activity
of reading. The reader becomes an essential part of the activity of the meditative making of the
world. The being of the reader, the book, the house, and the summer night are interwoven and
cannot be separated. The reader affects the world around him, as the summer night affects him,
and both are bound together in one state of calm. Stevens calls this the truth of the calm world, and the reader is an essential part of making this truth.

These two aspects of Stevens’ poetry speak to the implications of this dissertation. In each of the texts I have examined, the reader is a necessary element of the making of the truth that flows from the textual encounter between human being and water nixie. The epiphany that I argue is possible and even bound to take place for the reader stems from several sources, as does the epiphany at the textual level that the human being experiences upon listening for, and then hearing, the nixie’s song.

In each of its successive versions -- from Homer’s sirens, omniscient and undescribed, Goethe’s wet maiden, rising much knowing and singing the song of the possible, Kafka’s silent sirens, who insist that the reader listen for the artist, Bachmann’s Undine, who invites the reader to glimpse her own mortality and connectedness through an experience of temporality that departs radically from the traditional human conception of time, and finally to Bobrowski’s Undine, the voice of poetry itself, rising from the transformational knowledge that our existence is temporary -- the human in the text and the reader experience a moment of transformation. This is not only transformation in a broad sense. It is transformational knowledge that comes about through a particular hierarchy of the senses and one ultimately precipitated by the ontological posture of attentive listening. It is listening and finally hearing that marks each encounter and makes a transcending of the limits of human knowledge possible, at the very least for the space and time taken up by the activity of the reader reading.

This final section will explore the implications of knowledge that results progressively from attentive listening and ultimately hearing, rather than knowledge drawn primarily from
sight. I will also present final considerations as to the role of poetry and the music that inheres within it, in the truth possibility that emanates from the activity of attentive reading.

In the encounter between human being and water nixie in the selected texts broadly seen, the sound of water frames the meeting. Water has been explored in several of its possible significations in this study; among them, as symbol for the unconscious, for birth, death, the unknown, and transformation. Water, particularly in its aspect as waves, has been explored in its connection to the breath. Both waves and human breath are cyclical: they rise and fall, and they are autonomic. Although human breath is controlled by the human being at some level, it is not at a conscious level, making it seem utterly autonomic, very like the waves that occur in water.\(^{258}\) The possible significance and role of water in the moment of epiphany is tied to its echoing of human breath. Similarly, human breath echoes the waves. This is a connection that points to the symmetry of the internal to the external and therefore to the connectedness of the world, but also finally to life and not only to death.\(^{259}\)

This connection between waves and the breath extends to music -- in particular to the music of poetry. The song of the siren is central to the mythology of the siren figure, also to the later mermaid figure, and less so to the figure of Undine. In the texts explored, song plays an explicit role in *The Odyssey*, “Der Fischer”, and in Kafka’s “Das Schweigen der Sirenen”. In the *Nibelungenlied*, “Undine Geht” and “Undine”, song is not explicitly connected to the water nixie figure, nor does it figure importantly in the texts.\(^{260}\) I argue that music plays a central role in each of the encounters, but not only as it is seen in the song of the sirens in the texts by Kafka, Goethe...

\(^{258}\) Waves are controlled also, but by an invisible force: that is the moon and the pull of the tides.

\(^{259}\) Cf. the Medieval and Renaissance use of the term “breathing” for “mortal”. This usage appears in Shakespeare; see for instance *Richard III* among other dramas.

\(^{260}\) An important note is that I interpret the sound of the birds in Bobrowski’s lyric, *Futterschrei*, as birdsong.
and Homer; rather it is present in each of the texts as poetry. Each of these texts is an example of poetry: two epic (The Odyssey, Das Nibelungenlied), two lyric (“Der Fischer”, “Undine”), and two examples of poetic language (“Das Schweigen der Sirenen”, “Undine Geht”).

Music is thus present in each text as poetry, through poetic language. The role of music to the moment of epiphany for the reader, to the possibility of transformational knowledge, depends on the presence of music in these texts: music through poetry. I read one of the central aspects of poetry, i.e. as music, with Gadamer, who in discussing the development of poetic theory and the significance of poetry in relation to truth draws on the writings of German Romanticism in order to illuminate the particular characteristic and contribution of the musical in poetry with respect to the aesthetic hermeneutic experience. As explored in Chapter 2, for poets of the German Romantic era music is a hallmark of what can be heard and felt, not what can be signified through words, and thus music plays an especially important role in the shift from an Enlightenment to a Romantic worldview in terms of epistemology.

E.T.A. Hoffmann describes the transformational experience through music in “Beethovens Instrumentalmusik”:

Jede Leidenschaft- Liebe – Haß- Zorn- Verzweiflung etc., wie die Oper sie uns gibt, kleidet die Musik in den Purpurschimmer der Romantik, und selbst das im

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261 Bachmann’s prose work followed years in which she worked mainly as a poet. The poetic nature of her prose writing has been widely discussed in the secondary literature, as has the connection to music in her works. See for instance Susanne Kogler, “Die Saite des Schweigens – Ingeborg Bachmann und die Musik. Einleitung”, 12-22. In Chapter 3 I argue that at numerous important moments in “Undine Geht” the text resembles poetry more than prose and effectively turns into poetry at the end of the text.

262 The turn in poetic theory with respect to poetry’s significance from that of mimesis of nature, roughly from Plato onwards, to its significance as music, especially important in the age of German romanticism, is discussed by Gadamer in “Dichtung und Mimesis” (1972), 80-86.

Leben empfundene führt uns hinaus aus dem Leben in das Reich des Unendlichen. (lines 28-33)

Music is seen in this context particularly in its opposition to the word, and by extension to an epistemological approach that depends on the connotation and denotation of language. Music, on the other hand, denotes nothing. Poesie, in its musical nature, also denotes nothing: better said, Poesie denotes both something, through language, and nothing, through music, and in this manner opens up a different epistemological avenue than other forms of writing, with the result that a different kind of knowledge becomes possible.

It is with this epistemological point of departure in mind, i.e. that poetic language in its musicality is able to open up a distinct epistemological avenue, one drawing on the acoustic realm and giving rise to an epistemological experience that is apart from knowledge based on the visual realm, in conjunction with Gadamer’s claim that poetic language is itself uniquely capable of revealing what is, a claim in dialogue with Heidegger’s writings on the relationship between art, including poetic language, to the truth, that I have argued in this study that poetry plays a pivotal role in the moment of epiphany, or of transformational knowing, for the reader.

Consider the moment of encounter in “Der Fischer”. I argue in chapter two that the reader, through functionally becoming the fisherman, becomes the listener in the reading of the poem. The posture of attentive listening sets the reader up for what will ultimately be a moment of exceptional awareness, when the acoustic unity of the poem is broken, and in leaning forward

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265 See Friedrich Schlegel, “Progressive Universalepoesie”. 79-80, or “Über die Unverständlichkeit”, 191. See also Novalis’ “Monolog”, 138-140.
266 See Gadamer “Über den Beitrag der Dichtkunst bei der Suche nach der Wahrheit.” (1971), 70-80, also “Dichtung und Mimesis” (1972), 80-86. See also Heidegger’s “Die Frage nach der Technik”, 5-36 or “…Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch…” 61-78.
to hear more, the reader experiences a moment of exceptional knowing in that moment of longing. I trace the possibility for the moment of epistemological transformation to both the posture of listening and to the unity that stems from several discrete sources in the lyric, namely the reader’s sequential unity with the fisherman, distance from the fisherman as the direct acoustic experience is broken for the reader, and reunion with the fisherman through longing to again hear what the fisherman hears, i.e. the song of Goethe’s nixie. The role of the poetic language is central to that moment. Specifically, the context of Goethe’s lyrical language mirrors the sound of waves. It laps and swells as the water laps and swells. This is another source of the reader being drawn in and down into the poem. This is literally the sound of water, framing and reframing the moment of exceptional awareness through hearing.

The way that the sound of Goethe’s language resembles waves speaks to poetry’s mimetic function. The language echoes both the waves and the human breath -- this is not a mere imitation of nature but a realization of the activity of breathing -- the poem is at that point breathing the reader through the reading. Mimesis is a term that encompasses much more than “mere” mirroring. Rather, according to Gadamer, “...daß etwas in sich selbst als Sinnhaftes da ist.” This is poetry as mimesis, but in the sense that the reader encounters both the representation and what is represented. The reader encounters the waves, which represent real waves; the reader also encounters waves that are in themselves meaningful and revealing, and

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267 The notion of poetry as mimesis, meant in a limited or limiting sense, betrays a misunderstanding of the scope of mimesis as Plato and Aristotle used the term, as argued by Gadamer in Dichtung und Mimesis 80-85. Gadamer argues that Aristotle in particular meant the term to be much more full-bodied than the classical notion of mimesis was later taken to mean, especially by the romantics. Gadamer therefore argues for a renewed reception of the poetic as mimetic, but in the sense that poetry brings about the opportunity to see both what is represented and what is there. In this way poetry understood in its mimetic function has the potential to reveal truth. Mimesis is not only a reference to something outside of itself, something represented, as meaningful; rather poetry as mimesis is meaningful in itself.

further, the waves are what is there: waves of breath and waves of language. In this way the poem brings the reader into the encounter with oneself that Gadamer speaks of, and at once reveals what is there: the reader hearing, breathing, and being breathed through the poem. Poetry’s function as mimesis figures therefore very importantly in the moment of epiphany: the reader hearing what is there in a way that brings about an encounter with him- or herself, a knowing not possible outside the reading of the poem.

A second productive theoretical approach to the relationship of poetic language to the truth is to consider poetry in its character as different from other kinds of written language. I rely here on Gadamer’s essay on poetry in relation to the search for truth. Gadamer argues that poetry, unique among other forms of speech in general, stands alone in how it means, in how it conveys meaning to the reader. For Gadamer, poetry holds the transience that characterizes the human condition still for the time the reader reads; further, poetry brings what is there, i.e. what it reveals, near. This activity of bringing and holding near means that for the time of the reading, the reader is closer to himself, because the nearness is also always a nearness to oneself, an encounter with oneself. Poetry holds up a mirror to the human task of feeling at home in the world, or Einhausung, a term Gadamer borrows from Hegel. This attempt to be at home in the world is something that the reader can be close to, for a time, in the reading of the poem. The poem brings that near, and that nearness to ourselves -- to our own trying to feel at home -- and

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269 See “Über den Beitrag der Dichtkunst bei der Suche nach der Wahrheit”, pgs. 70-80. As always in this area of thought, Gadamer stands in a dialogue with Heidegger’s work on poetic language. See for instance “….Dichterisch wohnt der Mensch’…” or “Die Frage nach der Technik”. In both of these essays, among others, Heidegger treats poetic language and disclosure, particularly with respect to the poetry of Hölderlin.

270 Cf. Bakhtin’s claim that poetic discourse is not dialogic but an example of monologic discourse. Bakhtin writes that, “each word must express the poet’s meaning directly and without mediation; there must be no distance between a poet and his word.” and that “everything that enters the work must immerse itself in Lethe”. “Discourse in the Novel.” 297.
to what is there, is the truth that poetry reveals. For Gadamer, the poetic word, by being there, bears witness to our own being. For a short time, the reader dwells in that nearness, in the stilling of the transience that marks our existence, and can be transformed by it. How does this way of understanding poetry’s role in the revealing of truth, in the transformative epistemological moment, manifest itself?

The poetological experience of “Der Fischer” for the reader, being drawn in and down, becoming the listener, having a direct acoustic experience of the nixie’s song, and upon the breaking of the acoustic experience feeling a longing in his or her own heart to hear more. This is the reader experiencing the world of the poem from within the poem. The reader experiences the nearness to himself and to what is there: the waves of language and breath, prophetic knowledge, the possibility of knowing the world as both connected and divided, and in so far as the reader experiences this nearness, is able to experience a nearness and another way of knowing the stilling of time while the reader is reading. The wishing to hear more of the nixie’s song, the moment of hearing the waves but no longer the nixie’s song, can be understood as a way of trying to feel at home in the world, Einhausung. This nearness, this encounter with oneself and the space and time to dwell there for a moment, to dwell in that nearness, accompanies the moment of exceptional awareness. Indeed this description is only another way of understanding the moment of exceptional awareness.

The moment in which the reader is drawn all the way to water’s edge and finds him- or herself tipped over the water, seeing her own reflection, is another juncture in “Der Fischer” in which the holding close to the nearness to oneself that Gadamer describes might be glimpsed. The reader here experiences the lapping and swelling of the water in Goethe’s rhythmic language
and imagines seeing his or her own reflection in the water. The posture of wishing to hear more gives rise to this sense of metaphoric tipping forward. At this moment of seeing oneself in the imagination, elicited by the sound of waves in Goethe’s language, mirroring the breath, the reader is closer to herself but also able to see this closeness. It is the reader seeing both the reflection and what is reflected, and it is likewise a stilling of time for that moment of encounter. The reader wishes to be at home in the world, a wish signaled by the posture of attentive listening, and sees herself wishing to be at home in the world in the reading of the poem: this is the moment of transformational knowing.

From Odysseus’s encounter with the sirens onward, the poetic encounter with the water nixie can likewise be understood as a homecoming. The beginning of that poem, “Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven far journeys…From some point here goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak, and begin our story” (1-2; 9-10) -- the invocation of the muse -- points to the necessary state of readiness for both poet and reader to hear what the muse will sing. The water nixie figure echoes both the Germanic norns in her connectedness to the making and saying of fate and the transmission of knowledge, and the muses of antiquity in her ability to create something out of nothing through sound, when invoked. The potential for epistemological transformation that inheres in the encounter with the water nixie, characterized by the acoustic realm, relies on the human posture of readiness, of wishing to be at home.

In each of the texts a similar process unfolds: the encounter with the water nixie results in a moment of exceptional knowing. The water nixie in her respective iterations brings the exceptional knowledge to the human in the text and to the reader, even when the reader functionally is Undine, as is the case in Bobrowski’s lyric, but in each text the posture of
attentive listening sets up the possibility for the moment of exceptional awareness. In each instance the human in the text and the reader communicate the readiness to experience this moment through attentive listening. This focal occasion, for it is the reader’s readiness that is central to the unfolding of this moment, that transcends the bounds of the normal epistemological course of human life begins with listening, framed by the music of the waves, and ends with the reader able to see the momentary nature of human life stilled for the time that the reader is reading. In this glimpse of beyond-human knowledge, it is not only the mortal and therefore temporary nature of human life that comes to the poetic foreground and the forefront of the reader’s consciousness, stressing the role of death in the meaning of human life; it is life itself that stands out in that moment of knowing. For through the echoing of the breath through waves and the echoing of the waves through breath, life itself is emphasized.

This meditative making of the world, internally through the waves of breath, externally through the watery waves of the natural world, and finally through the waves of poetic language that form a bridge between the two, signifies the connectedness of the world, a connectedness revealed by the world of the poem and realized through the activity of the reader reading. It is the reader as listener, signaling both the inherent connectedness of the world and the reader’s own readiness to know and fully experience that connectedness, who gives rise to this meditative poetic activity and in turn to the truth constituted by it. The diachronic encounter between human being and water nixie, characterized by epistemological transformation, is also a poetological homecoming, from Homer’s Odyssey to Johannes Bobrowski’s “Undine” 2800 years later.

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