



SILENT
CATASTROPHES
W. G. SEBALD

‘One of Europe’s most mysterious and
best-loved literary imaginations’

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Silent Catastrophes

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Also by W. G. Sebald in English translation

The Emigrants

The Rings of Saturn

Vertigo

Austerlitz

After Nature

On the Natural History of Destruction

Unrecounted

Campo Santo

Across the Land and the Water

A Place in the Country

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Silent Catastrophes

W . G . SEBALD

Essays in Austrian Literature

Translated from the German and
with an introduction by Jo Catling



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‘Silent Catastrophes’ – An Introduction

The fascination of the particular narrative genre he developed lay in the absolutely innovative linguistic and imaginative precision with which [. . .] he relates and reflects upon the silent catastrophes continually occurring in the inner life of mankind.

W. G. Sebald, *Strange Homeland*
(on Peter Handke’s *Repetition*)

Reflecting on his own origins towards the end of the long poem *Nach der Natur* (*After Nature*), his debut literary book publication, W. G. Sebald recalls how he ‘grew up / despite the dreadful course / of events elsewhere, on the northern / edge of the Alps, so it seems / to me now, without any / idea of destruction’; and how nevertheless, beneath this outwardly idyllic rural childhood, there lurked an all-pervasive sense of ‘a silent catastrophe that occurs / almost unperceived’ (‘die Vorstellung / von einer lautlosen Katastrophe, die sich / ohne ein Aufhebens vor dem Betrachter vollzieht’). This persistent theme, apostrophized as a ‘natural history of destruction’, runs through his literary and academic work alike, and seems particularly applicable to the essays translated here, in which, as in the later *Logis in einem Landhaus* (*A Place in the Country*), seemingly idyllic

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landscapes are juxtaposed with historical events and inward states which are anything but serene.

The present volume of 'Essays on Austrian Literature' 'From Stifter to Handke' – to cite in reverse order the subtitles of the two collections translated here – comprises two books of collected essays, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (*The Description of Misfortune*) and *Unheimliche Heimat* (*Strange Homeland*), published by W. G. Sebald in 1985 and 1991 respectively with the Austrian literary publishing house Residenz. The nineteen essays in these two companion volumes, arranged chronologically in each volume, have as their subjects seventeen writers – all but one (the poet Ernst Herbeck) writers of prose. Like the essays in *A Place in the Country*, they span almost two centuries, an era which saw Austria evolve 'from the vastness of the Habsburg Empire to a diminutive Alpine republic' (below p. 220). Beginning in an age of colonial expansion and emigration (Sealsfield), via Biedermeier quietism (Stifter), the upheavals of the *Vormärz* and 1848 and the age of industrialization and concomitant urbanization, they reflect and document an era of deracination and transition, demonstrated most acutely, though by no means exclusively, in the successive waves of westward migration of the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe. In the twentieth century, the essays also reflect the crises of consciousness and identity, particularly bourgeois identity, in the age of Freud (Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Altenberg, Kafka), crises of identity and assimilation which, with the two world wars of the twentieth century and their consequent diasporic migrations, again become particularly acute for the many writers of Jewish extraction discussed – as experienced and evoked, in very different ways, by Elias Canetti, Hermann Broch, Joseph Roth and Jean Améry. The Second World War and its aftermath also

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leave traumatic traces in later generations of non-Jewish writers, such as Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, Gerhard Roth and indeed Sebald himself, fiercely critical of a social reality in which the spectre of the recent fascist past continues to lurk silently beneath the seemingly unruffled surface of the prosperous post-war present. Although the apparent idyllic Alpine setting, like that of Sebald's own childhood, might at first appear far removed from such historic turbulence, its seismic effects, as Sebald writes in the penultimate essay of this volume, affect 'even the remotest regions', striking 'just as much out of the blue as ever a lightning bolt did from the clearest of skies'. 'Indeed,' he continues, 'in the end it makes little difference whether the catastrophe is caused by nature or by the workings of history, which consumes and engulfs everything in exactly the same way as fire or water' (below p. 385).

Sebald of course was German, not Austrian; but, as the narrator of *Vertigo* demonstrates, the village of his childhood is situated within walking distance of the Austrian border, and this sense of being from the margins may go some way to explaining Sebald's interest in a literature beyond the borders of West (and East) Germany, with which of course it shares a language. In a 2001 interview with Michael Silverblatt, Sebald explains that one reason for his affinity with 'nineteenth-century prose writing' (in German) is 'not least' that 'the writers all hailed from the periphery of the German-speaking lands, where I also come from . . .'. Admiration for prose style aside, this sense of being from a 'regional backwater', as he puts it in another interview, 'a peripheral zone in which a dialect was spoken which was nearly as extreme as Swiss German', also suggests an identification with a contemporary generation of Austrian writers from modest backgrounds who 'in a topographical, social and psychological sense hailed from the

periphery', as he writes in an article commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the 'avant-garde' (or 'trans-garde') literary movement, the 'Grazer Gruppe' (Graz Group) and 'Forum Stadtpark', as well as its prime vehicle, the journal *manuskripte* founded by Alfred Kolleritsch in 1960 – a movement which, Sebald claims, inaugurated what amounted to a radical, and indeed polemical, 'reinvigoration of Austrian (and beyond that German) literature which in the 1960s was in a parlous not to say desolate state'.

The Graz journal *manuskripte*, bringing together linguistically and formally innovative work by progressive (mostly) Austrian authors with re-evaluations of (mostly) Austrian literature, in fact plays a key role in W. G. Sebald's emergence as a writer. Across nine issues, from 1981 to 1988, no fewer than ten pieces of Sebald's are published there, including two essays later collected in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* and two in *Unheimliche Heimat*. The first of these, in 1981, is the essay 'A Small Traverse' on Ernst Herbeck (the only essay on a poet in the present volume), followed in 1983 by an (as yet untranslated) essay on the Bavarian writer Herbert Achternbusch, and in 1984 by the final essay in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, 'Light Pictures and Dark', bringing together the canonical nineteenth-century prose writer Adalbert Stifter with the later Nobel prizewinner from Graz, Sebald's near contemporary Peter Handke. The following issue of *manuskripte* sees the publication of what would become the central section of *Nach der Natur (After Nature)*, 'And If I Remained by the Outermost Sea' – his first literary publication since the publication of early poems in the journal *ZET* in 1974 and 1975. In 1985 there follows a German version of Sebald's second essay on Kafka, 'The Law of Ignominy', first published in English nine years earlier, and

subsequently included in *Unheimliche Heimat* – Sebald’s original English version of this essay is reprinted in the present volume. In 1986 there appears ‘In an Unknown Region’, also later included in *Unheimliche Heimat*, on Gerhard Roth’s then recently published magnum opus *Landläufiger Tod* (1984), as well as – in the same issue of *manuskripte* – the long poem ‘As the Snow on the Alps’, which was to become the first part of *Nach der Natur*. This is followed the next year by ‘Dark Night Sallies Forth’, the third and final part of that ‘Elementargedicht’. Sebald’s two final publications in *manuskripte*, in successive issues in 1988, would later become the respective first sections of *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertigo)* and *Die Ausgewanderten (The Emigrants)*. The story ‘Berge oder das . . .’ (‘Mountains or the . . .’), episodes from the life of Henri Beyle – better known under his pen name Stendhal – is published in *Vertigo* under the title ‘Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet’. Sebald’s final contribution to *manuskripte*, in the 100th issue with the theme ‘Über das Altern’ (‘On Ageing’), is the story ‘Verzehret das letzte, die Erinnerung, nicht’, which in *The Emigrants* becomes ‘Henry Selwyn’. The last two pieces stand out for their inclusion of a number of photographic images, though these differ considerably from those in the subsequent book publications.

With the exception of the two essays on Kafka from the 1970s, both first published in English, the essays translated here as *Silent Catastrophes* date from this same period, between 1981 and 1991. For Sebald, who had in 1970 been appointed Lecturer in German at the University of East Anglia (UEA) at the age of twenty-six, this was an extraordinarily fruitful decade, which not only saw him promoted in 1988 to Professor of European Literature – thanks in part to the publication of *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*

(Part One of the present volume), which also served as a *Habilitationsschrift*, giving him the option of applying for professorial positions at German universities – but also saw the publication of his first two books of, respectively, poetry and what he preferred to call ‘prose fiction’: the ‘Elementargedicht’ *Nach der Natur* in 1988, followed by *Schwindel. Gefühle.* in 1990. Thus the two volumes of essays on Austrian literature translated here bracket the crucial years in which Sebald – who had harboured literary ambitions from an early age – emerged on to the literary scene as an author in his own right; indeed it is in the contributors’ biography of the 1990 Graz volume *Trans-Garde*, in which the above-mentioned article appeared, that Sebald describes himself for the first time as ‘Autor sowie Professor’ – ‘author as well as professor’ – a telling step on the journey from academic to author.

Given this ‘Austrian’ publication history, it is scarcely surprising that Jochen Jung of Residenz, who would go on to publish both *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* and *Unheimliche Heimat*, should have thought the author of these essays an Austrian when, in January 1984, he invited him to contribute an essay on Stifter to the volume *Österreichische Porträts (Austrian Portraits)*, a collection of essays aiming to portray the lives and works of notable Austrians of the past from the point of view of ‘the most significant and brightest’ Austrian authors of the present, stipulating that it be ‘not academic research but also not a journalistic piece’: the resulting essay, ‘To the Edge of Nature’, forms the first essay in the present volume. However, as the correspondence from Jung, preserved among Sebald’s papers in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (DLA), makes clear, Sebald had by 1983 already approached him with the idea of a volume of collected essays or academic articles, an idea rejected by Jung on the grounds that such volumes did not form

part of the Residenz publishing programme (in other words, unlikely to sell). That notwithstanding, it clearly provides the basis for a fruitful collaboration; Jung, curious about this new – as he supposes – Austrian author, is quick to appreciate his talent, writing that he scarcely knows of ‘another author in this country whose textual interpretations and illuminations are so acutely perceptive, and at the same time so little academically boring as yours’. Thus encouraged, Sebald continued to submit essays to Jung, and by January 1985, having been particularly impressed by the essay on Hofmannsthal’s *Andreas* (‘A Venetian Cryptogram’), Jung is finally convinced: *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* is published almost simultaneously with the longer-planned *Österreichische Porträts*, allowing Sebald to give it pride of place among his publications in his contributor’s biography in that work. By the time *Unheimliche Heimat* is published six years later, Sebald has already made a name for himself as a writer with *Nach der Natur* (*After Nature*) and *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertigo)*, and reviewers of the essay volume are quick to note the connections, reading the essays in this light, rather than as a purely academic work – as Sebald no doubt intended.

Thus although the essays in *Silent Catastrophes*, in common with Sebald’s other articles on German and Austrian authors published in conference volumes, academic journals and indeed broadsheets in the 1970s and 1980s, may be seen as the products of an ambitious academic *Wunderkind*, following on as they do from the two books based on his MA and PhD theses on Carl Sternheim and Alfred Döblin respectively, nevertheless the boundaries between the essays and the ‘prose fiction’ for which Sebald later became justly famous are more porous than might at first appear. It is clear that, especially when it came to the essays in *Unheimliche Heimat* (*Strange Homeland*), for which he deliberately chose the subtitle

‘Essays zur österreichischen Literatur’ (‘Essays on Austrian Literature’), Sebald was keen that these be received as *Literaturkritik* – what he thought of as the Anglo-Saxon genre of literary criticism, or belles-lettres – rather than as examples of *Literaturwissenschaft* (literature as an academic discipline) or as traditional *Germanistik*, with which, following his early student years in Freiburg, he had a decidedly ambivalent, not to say polemical, relationship. As he notes in a funding application, preserved among his papers in DLA, for his next, still rather vague, ‘prose project’ (‘eine Prosaarbeit mit Bildern’ – ‘a prose work with images’), ‘my literary-critical works represent an attempt to uphold the genre of essay vis-à-vis the strictures of academic literary studies’ – something that one might paraphrase as ‘putting the literary back into literary criticism’ (N. C. Pages).

In this vein, an early review of *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertigo)* poses the pertinent question as to whether the author is ‘ein dichtender Dozent oder ein dozierender Dichter’ – ‘a (university) teacher who writes, or a writer who teaches’; and reviews of *Unheimliche Heimat*, published the following year, tend to focus on the empathetic quality of the writing, and the way in which it succeeds in capturing and at times echoing the tone of the authors, such as Peter Altenberg and Joseph Roth, discussed. Anticipating the more self-consciously literary essays in *A Place in the Country*, these essays on Austrian literature can be read as both critical appreciations and biographical ‘narratives’, a quality noted approvingly by Jochen Jung. Impressed by Sebald’s ‘willingness to take risks on the most solid of foundations’ in the ‘absolutely brilliant’ Stifter essay, he comments on Sebald’s gift for seizing on the heart of the matter (the ‘*nervus rerum*’) while showing ‘the whole man’ without feeling the need to ‘fill in all the details of his life’.

The quasi-biographical approach of the essays – albeit deeply unfashionable in the critical discourse of the time – is identified by Neil Christian Pages as ‘a critical turn to the kind of literary biography that readers familiar with Sebald’s literary work will recognize’, suggesting that, in the essays on Stifter, Sebald ‘attempts to describe a kind of disappearing act and thus to give an account of the artist’s life through his writing in the face of the conspicuous lack of overt autobiographical material. At the same time, this representation of the convergence of life and work relies on the depiction of an image that occupies a particular imagination, namely that of the reader Sebald.’ Martin Swales, meanwhile, considers the way the essays show ‘the need to define the world portrayed in any particular fiction and to extrapolate from this some sense of the universe of discourse and signification which the writer in question inhabits and to which he gives expression’.

This emphasis on reading, and a fascination with, and reimagining of, the often painful processes of creativity, the problematic interaction of life and work, suggests that Sebald’s essays and literary work are in fact two sides of the same coin: moreover, as the publication history in *manuskripte* shows, their genesis (*Entstehungsgeschichte*) is tightly interwoven. While *After Nature* sets out in its three sections the reimagined lives of the painter Mathias Grünewald, the explorer Vitus Bering and an unnamed narrator, *Vertigo* intersperses episodes in 1813 and 1913, from the lives of the writers Henri Beyle (that is, Stendhal) and Kafka (‘Dr K.’) respectively, with the semi-autobiographical adventures of the unnamed narrator abroad and *in patria*. The four stories of *The Emigrants*, too, in common with the later *Austerlitz*, all centre around the reimagined, remembered or reconstructed lives of their

respective protagonists. *Vertigo* in particular, with its Austrian and what may loosely be termed Austro-Hungarian settings, overlaps geographically with *Silent Catastrophes*: Ernst Herbeck's and Franz Kafka's affiliations to Klosterneuburg just outside Vienna; the excursion of the former and the *Vertigo* narrator to Altenberg, the town on the Danube which Peter Altenberg adopted as his own elective *Heimat*; Vienna itself, where he and so many of these authors spent their days pacing the streets or sitting in cafés; and Venice, where, arguably, all these intersect.

This overlap of fiction and research is supported by evidence of several research trips funded by the British Academy undertaken by Sebald during periods of research leave in the 1980s. In the autumn term of 1980, a field trip to research 'problems of literature and psychopathology' took in Klosterneuburg, Vienna, Venice, Sonthofen, Innsbruck and Wertach, dovetailing neatly with the narrator's travels in 'All'estero' and 'Ritorno in patria' in *Vertigo*, where the narrator recounts a visit to Ernst Herbeck; indeed, the essay on Herbeck in the present volume dates from late 1980. In the summer of 1983, a further grant from the British Academy took Sebald to Linz and Graz for research on Stifter and visits to Peter Handke and Gerhard Roth. In the summer of 1987, a further grant to research 'Heimat and Exil. Austrian Literature of the 19th and 20th centuries' – in other words, *Unheimliche Heimat* – again traced a similar itinerary, taking in Salzburg, Vienna, Milan, Verona, Riva and Innsbruck, as well as Sonthofen and Munich. Research for the essays and the settings of the contemporaneous fictional work thus appear as inextricably linked.

Although, as the early publication history in *manuskripte* shows, the genesis of the stories in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* overlaps – there is evidence to suggest they originally formed part of a single

‘prose project’ – parallels may nonetheless be drawn between the preoccupations of the essays in the earlier volume, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, with their focus on what Sebald calls ‘das Unglück des schreibenden Subjekts’ (‘the unhappiness or misfortune of the writing subject’: below p. 6) and *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertigo)* with its stories from the lives of Stendhal and Kafka, and its disoriented first-person narrator adrift in Vienna and Venice. The second volume of essays, *Unheimliche Heimat*, published the following year, with its focus on writers ‘far from home’, more closely mirrors the overarching theme of *Die Ausgewanderten (The Emigrants)*. However, as the final story in *Vertigo* ‘Ritorno in patria’ shows, even – or especially – at ‘home’ one may feel far more estranged than ‘All’ estero’ – abroad. As Sebald writes in his Introduction to *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, ‘It may be that it is precisely the narrowness and provincialism of the home country, the *Heimat*, which actively incites emigration to the most far-flung corners of the earth’ (below p. 4); and the sense of being an ‘expatriate’ or ‘emigrant’ remains all-pervasive, even, or especially, when at home, in ‘die fremdgewordene Heimat’ (‘the home country grown strange’), as Sebald writes in *A Place in the Country* of the protagonists in Keller’s ‘A Village Romeo and Juliet’. Indeed, in the twentieth century the Austrian *Heimat* becomes ‘unheimlich’ – not just ‘unhomely’ but both hostile and uncanny, strange in both senses, both for writers of Jewish extraction (featured in ten of the nineteen essays here) and for those of the post-war generation; something of course even more true of Germany, which Sebald himself chose to leave, first for Switzerland, then for England, at an early age. ‘How much home does a person need?’ asks the displaced Jean Améry, while Kolleritsch, founder of *manuskripte*, argues that home, *Heimat*, is ‘a mirage’ – a place, Sebald writes in

the essay in the *Trans-Garde* volume, ‘where none has ever been’ and yet which ‘those of us who have left it still believe we are on the point of returning to. [. . .] The imaginary or illusory status the idea of home necessarily entails came about, historically speaking, from the fact that remembering it was always a matter for those who had had to leave it.’ In this sense, the essays in *Silent Catastrophes* may be said to trace an alternative Austrian literary tradition of what Sebald calls ‘extraterritorial writing’, ‘from Altenberg and Schnitzler, Kafka and Wittgenstein down to Broch and Musil’, and on down to the contemporary writers from the Grazer Gruppe with whom he identifies: a ‘vaterlandslose Literatur’ – a literature without a Fatherland.

In his Introduction to *Unheimliche Heimat*, Sebald rationalizes the differences between the two essay volumes thus: ‘Whereas [*Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*] was more preoccupied with the psychological factors which govern writing, [*Unheimliche Heimat*] is concerned more with the social determinants of the literary world view, although naturally the one can never be completely separated from the other’ (below p. 219). And while the preoccupation with ‘ill-starred lives’, victims of catastrophes individual and historical – as Sebald writes, ‘the high incidence of ill-starred lives in the history of Austrian literature is, to say the least, somewhat uncanny’ – may seem at first to suggest, as noted above, a broadly biographical approach, this is of course not to suggest that Sebald’s critical and methodological approach is of a ‘one size fits all’ variety which would ‘force everything into a single critical or theoretical mould’ (below p. 3). Reflecting his own interest in interdisciplinarity and different theoretical and critical approaches, and in common with ‘that conscious insouciance with which Austrian literature is so often pleased to disregard traditional boundaries’, in these essays

he draws on a wide, indeed 'eclectic' range of methodologies, citing authorities from Freud to Foucault, from Benjamin (ever-present in Sebald's work) to Hans Blumenberg, Lévi-Strauss to Deleuze and Guattari.

Indeed, the writers focused on in what one might term Sebald's 'case studies', for all that many are now canonical, tend to be themselves in one way or another 'on the margins', 'liminal figures' (N. C. Pages), cast as outsiders either socially or psychologically, exiles literal and metaphorical: though, as the example of Kafka shows, it is perfectly possible for their works to be both classed as *littérature mineure* and co-opted into the canon at one and the same time. As with, say, Henry Selwyn in *The Emigrants*, both essays and prose fiction lay bare the ways in which the veneer of bourgeois respectability can conceal a deep inner estrangement from the milieu, as true of Stifter as, for different reasons, of Kafka. The struggle to assimilate and the literal expatriation of many of the writers from their original *Heimat* during the last two centuries naturally plays a part. Moreover, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* in particular presents a critique of the bourgeois conventions of heteronormative love and marriage, a state compared unfavourably, for example in the essays on Stifter, to the celibate state of the bachelor (or widower), whose 'single state represents the positive contrast to the frustrations and tensions of marriage' (below p. 35). Indeed, the bachelor, as Deleuze and Guattari write, citing Kafka, is 'the deterritorialized, the one who has neither "centre" nor "any great complex of possessions"' (below p. 173). However, Sebald's essay on Herbeck does concede that 'all that is left for the unhappy victim of unrequited love is to retreat into a life of celibacy' (below p. 172), a fate of many of the writers – or their subjects – here. That these essays deal

exclusively with male authors – a reference to Ingeborg Bachmann in the essay on Jean Améry aside – is, however, not something particularly unusual given the still male-dominated outlook of the Austrian literary scene – and indeed of *Germanistik* – at the time. Nevertheless, an early draft of the Contents list for *Unheimliche Heimat* in Sebald's archive (*Nachlass*) in DLA does suggest the possible inclusion of Marianne Fritz (as well as Christoph Ransmayr) in the final chapter.

The description of the unhappiness and misfortunes of the writing subject, 'that peculiar behavioural disturbance which causes every emotion to be transformed into letters on the page', as he writes in the Foreword to *Logis in einem Landhaus (A Place in the Country)*, is, then, a constant theme of both Sebald's academic and creative work: unlucky in love, tortured by the business of writing – for 'there seems to be no remedy for the vice of literature' – a clouded picture indeed. Yet Jochen Jung, the perceptive first reader and publisher of these essays, describes Sebald's letters, written on the ancient typewriter 'with its letters bouncing merrily up and down', on which many of the essays here were composed, as characterized by a 'heitere Melancholie' – a cheerful melancholy. Echoes of this quality may surely also be discerned in the essays which, for all the seriousness of the subject matter, are shot through with flashes of Sebald's characteristic dry wit, revealed in a turn of phrase here, a lapse into French there, or on occasion, when the subject of the essay proves rebarbatively resistant to his usual empathetic approach, a – borderline sarcastic – polemical attack.

Although they date in the main from the 1980s, an era before the all-too-brief glimmers of hope offered by the events of 1989, these essays speak urgently to current issues of migration,

displacement, environmental catastrophe and existential crisis. Yet while the brooding presence of Dürer's *Melencolia* seems inescapable, the melancholic stance – which is also a distance – is a contemplative one, a counsel not of despair but of 'resistance' (*Widerstand*), as Sebald writes in the Foreword to *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* [below p. 7]:

Melancholy, the contemplation of disaster in progress, has, however, nothing in common with a desire for death. It is a form of resistance. And on the level of art, in particular, its function is anything but reactive or reactionary. When, with a fixed stare, Melancholy considers once more how things could have come to this, it becomes clear that the mechanics of hopelessness are identical to those which drive our knowledge and insight. The description of misfortune contains within it the possibility of its overcoming.

A note on the text and translation

W. G. Sebald called translation – about which he cared deeply, having set up and directed the British Centre for Literary Translation at UEA in 1988 – an 'infernally complicated business'; and the translator of Sebald's essays faces a set of challenges which both intersects with and differs from those of translating his prose fiction. If the essays in *Logis in einem Landhaus* (*A Place in the Country*) offer a glimpse into the writer's workshop, with passages from favourite writers and considerations of how they achieve their effects of 'light and dark', the narrative thrust, carried in the prose fiction and to an extent in the essays in *Logis* by 'the unrolling of

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the narrative sentence after lovely sentence’, as Sebald writes of Gottfried Keller, is replaced in his earlier, more ‘academic’ essays – his own literary ambitions for them notwithstanding – by the often idiosyncratic, indeed iconoclastic twists and turns of the argument and a highly selective, not to say eclectic, use of quotation and paraphrase from the texts discussed, as well as from secondary literature and theory. There are many dense and complex passages, freighted with technical terms (not to mention occasional jargon) from psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and critical theory; nevertheless, where Sebald examines the prose style of an admired author, for example Adalbert Stifter (one of his favourite authors, as he says in more than one interview, precisely on the basis of what is achieved by the style) or Joseph Roth, it is possible to hear what in his fiction is later identified as the ‘Sebald Sound’ coming through in the cadencing of the sentences and the placing of words. As his last PhD student Florian Radvan notes, ‘the Sebald Sound also characterizes many of his academic texts.’

All this can make for a sometimes uneven register; what is more, Sebald’s is a polyphonic text, sprinkled with Gallicisms and quotations from French, English and Italian, as one might perhaps expect from one who has spent his professional life abroad (indeed, three of the essays here are reproduced in his own original English versions). Academic German also makes liberal use of *Fremdwörter*, loan words, which present a particular challenge to the translator, as not only are they often used to reinforce something which has already been stated in German (famous for its abstract and compound nouns), but they also rarely correspond exactly to what appears to be an almost identical term in English. The essays are also generously illustrated with quotations from the texts discussed; and as frequently with paraphrases, as Sebald adapts the

phrasing of the text to fit his German sentence – and sometimes his argument – not always, it has to be said, completely accurately. As with Sebald's prose fiction, so in the essays these different 'voices' of the text need to be retained in the translation. While there are no such finely modulated distinctions as are found, for example, between the narratorial and protagonist's voice in *Austerlitz* – themselves made up of an intarsia of literary resonances and quotations – the essays nevertheless also echo the subtle contrasts between the authorial voice, the voice of the author quoted and the – sometimes heavily ironized – language of earlier or contemporary criticism.

One way of attempting to preserve this layering in the translated text is by quoting from an existing English translation (always assuming that one exists), a method which has however to be deployed with caution, as some of the stylistic features which Sebald so admires, and which indeed form an intrinsic part of the attraction the subjects of the essays hold for him, do not necessarily carry the same emphasis or resonance within the overall context of a given published translation. In the present volume, where a published translation of a given text is accessible, I have used this translation. However, it has sometimes been necessary to adapt the published translation so as to reflect more accurately the point Sebald is making in the German; this has been indicated in the relevant endnote. Where Sebald quotes in English, this has been noted; in the case of works having both an English and a German version, as is the case with Charles Sealsfield, I have followed the English version where possible, noting where it – and Sebald's quotation – diverges from the German version he quotes. In the case of the not infrequent quotations and mottos in French and Italian, which Sebald on the whole

does not translate, a translation has been included in the Translator's Notes. These latter are indicated in the text by note cues, usually lower-case roman numerals but in a few cases alphabetic. Sebald's own endnotes also need a word of explanation: in the strictly analogue age to which he resolutely adhered, he sometimes economized on reference notes by simply repeating the number where more than one quotation is from the same page of the source, so that, for example, one may find two notes numbered 30, an idiosyncrasy to which none of his journal or *Residenz* editors seem, in those pre-digital days, to have had any objection, and which has been retained here to maintain consistency with the German text.

Three of the essays in the present volume are reproduced in Sebald's original English versions: the two essays on Kafka, 'The Undiscover'd Country – The Death Motif in Kafka's *Castle*' and 'The Law of Ignominy – Authority, Messianism and Exile in Kafka's *Castle*', first published in English in the 1970s, and the essay on Bernhard, 'Wo die Dunkelheit den Strick zuzieht [Where Darkness Draws Tight the Noose] – Some Marginal Notes on Thomas Bernhard', an English typescript of which, presumably a conference paper, I discovered in his *Nachlass* in DLA Marbach and which is published here in English for the first time. In the case of this last essay, in order to preserve the integrity of Sebald's text, translations of the original German quotations have been included as footnotes. In general, however, quotations are provided only in translation, references to which have been silently added to Sebald's own references in the endnotes, separated by a semi-colon (in such cases, as will be evident, 'Ibid.' refers only to Sebald's reference). The sole exception is the essay 'A Small Traverse', where the highly idiosyncratic poems by Ernst Herbeck are quoted first in the original

German, followed by an English translation. In all cases where no published English translations are referenced in the endnotes, the translations are my own. For clarity, further details, for example headings or section numbers, have on occasion been added to Sebald's references in the endnotes. Inaccurate quotation, as sometimes occurs, has either been silently corrected, or noted in square brackets in the endnotes, as the occasion demands.

Finally, to end at the beginning, mention should be made of the first and perhaps greatest obstacle to the translation of these essays, namely the German titles of the two respective volumes. Happy the French translator who can render *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* without further ado as *La Description du malheur*. As with the equivalent French terms *malheur* and *bonheur*, 'Unglück' – the opposite of 'Glück', meaning happiness, luck or (good) fortune – covers a range of meanings, from unhappiness through misfortune to disaster; often all three meanings can resonate in the German text. For this reason, although 'misfortune' is the most common translation used, I have sometimes flagged the reference to 'Unglück', which runs like a leitmotif through the essays of the first volume in particular; from time to time, in keeping with the title of the present volume, I have also used 'catastrophe'. A pencil note in his papers in the DLA *Nachlass* shows Sebald trying out numerous variations of the title, most featuring 'Unglück', each more untranslatable than the last. For the second volume, *Unheimliche Heimat*, Sebald was, as other notes suggest, until quite a late stage working with the – if anything even less translatable – title 'Ungute Heimat'. 'Ungut', literally un-good, but not quite as definite as bad – was one of Sebald's characteristic phrases: 'eine ungute Sache' or 'eine ungute Geschichte', he might comment ironically on, for example, a particularly heinous aspect of university affairs, where in English one

might say ‘a bad business’. ‘Heimat’ (home, homeland) is so specific to the German-speaking situation that it has mainly been left in German, while ‘unheimlich’ literally means ‘unhomely’, though it also has the sense of ‘strange’ or uncanny. Although ‘unhomely’ could capture the pun and alliteration, it seemed to the present translator in fact too homely; the air of strangeness and estrangement in ‘strange’ seemed to capture the paradox inherent in the title better. As for the other possible titles suggested in Sebald’s manuscript notes in the *Nachlass*, neither ‘Ausserfern’ – a dialect word for the region of Austria in the Tyrol just over the border from Sebald’s native Wertach, but literally meaning ‘outer (or outside) far’ – nor the more straightforward ‘Heimatlos’ (‘homeless’) offer the translator better prospects. While the Spanish and Portuguese translations, compiling selections from both volumes, opt to preserve the alliteration with *Pútrida Patria* and *Pátria Apátrida* respectively, the prize must go to the French translation for the stroke of utter genius which is *Amère patrie*; literally bitter homeland, but containing within it the implicit contrast of mother country and fatherland.

Jo Catling
Norwich, June 2024

PART ONE

The Description of Misfortune

On Austrian Literature from Stifter to Handke

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Foreword

The essays collected in the present volume make no claims to offer a new panoramic survey of Austrian literature, nor is there any intention to force everything into a single critical or theoretical mould. Rather, the various analyses aim to focus on some of the specific complexities which seem to be a defining feature of Austrian literature – if indeed such a thing can be said to exist. This eclectic method, which does not hesitate to alter its critical approach according to the particular difficulties of each case, is in keeping with that conscious insouciance with which Austrian literature is so often pleased to disregard traditional boundaries, such as, for example, those which divide its own domain from, say, that of science. Austrian literature, then, is not merely a pre-school¹ for psychology; around the turn of the century, and in the decades which follow, its psychological insights, even if not systematically formulated, are in many ways equal to, and indeed at times ahead of, those of psychoanalysis. What the works of Hofmannsthal and Schnitzler have to offer by way of case studies to the investigation of psychological development and disturbance goes far beyond mere illustration, presenting a nuanced range of psychological insights such as are all too easily stifled by the dogmatic tendencies so characteristic of science. If it is true that one should not read Schnitzler without Freud, then the reverse is equally true. No less important, it seems to me, is

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Canetti's contribution to our understanding of paranoid structures, or Peter Handke's microscopically accurate descriptions of acute schizophrenic states. The precision of observation and language with which these authors operate shines such an intense spotlight on the nature of human *dérangement* that the traditional teachings of psychology, being first and foremost concerned with the classification and administration of suffering, appear by comparison a relatively superficial and soulless affair.

It is difficult to determine where the interest in border crossings, so prevalent in Austrian literature, originates, and whether it might be related to the fact that what remains of Austria – as the end result of a protracted historical debacle – is, as Herzmanovsky-Orlando cryptically remarks, 'the one and only neighbouring state [*Nachbarland*] in the world': a statement which should roughly be interpreted as meaning that, in Austria, if one but makes a start on the business of thinking, it is not long before the point is reached where familiar territory is left behind and one is confronted with a whole different set of systems. It may be that it is precisely the narrowness and provincialism of the home country, the *Heimat*, which actively incites emigration to the most far-flung corners of the earth – a recurring theme in Austrian literature from the time of Charles Sealsfield onwards.ⁱⁱ Whether those who disappearⁱⁱⁱ in this fashion end up in the Jacinto, as landscape painters in the Andes or as extras in the *Naturtheater* of Oklahoma^{iv} – or, after a spell in the far north, set out on a slow homecoming^v via the South of France – is another story. Either way, though, the first crossing of the border brings with it the irrevocable loss of all that is familiar.

In this context it should also be remembered that Austria – or at least Vienna – was for a long time also a place of immigration,

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representing as it did the first entrepôt and emporium en route from the provinces to the wider world. And even those immigrants most willing to assimilate brought with them a quantum of that weighty and difficult quality of distance and strangeness, which is never quite resolved but becomes a ferment in a constantly shifting social and psychological system of values which is at the same time permeated by a number of archaic taboos.

From 1896 to 1907, the Kafka family lived in an apartment in the Zeltnergasse in Prague. One of the windows in this apartment looked out, not on to the outside world, but into the interior of the Teynkirche^{vi} which contained, it was said, the grave of a Jewish boy named Simon Abeles, killed by his father because he wished to convert to Christianity. If one tries to imagine the mixed feelings with which, from this singular vantage point, the young Franz Kafka may have followed, say, the lugubrious rituals of the Good Friday services, one can perhaps get an idea of how acute – extreme proximity notwithstanding – a sense of foreignness could be in the process of assimilation.

Frictions of this kind are what gave rise both to so-called Austrian culture and to its discontents – a culture whose defining characteristic was the fact that it made self-criticism into its guiding principle. This resulted, at the turn of the century, in an aesthetic and ethical calculation of the utmost complexity, designed to compensate for the deficit incurred as a result of endorsing bourgeois society with all its intrinsic authority, value systems and works of art. How challenging were the demands of this scenario is demonstrated not only in the cabbalistic imbroglios of Kafka's oeuvre, but also in the fact that not even Hofmannsthal, a number of significant compromises notwithstanding, really succeeded in achieving recognition as a

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figure of national importance. Like Kafka, in the end he too remained an outsider.

Related to the set of problems outlined here is another subject central to my investigations, namely the unhappiness or misfortune [*Unglück*]^{vii} of the writing subject – something often remarked upon as a fundamental characteristic of Austrian literature. Now of course those who take up the profession of writing are not, as a general rule, the most lighthearted of folk. How else would they come to be involved in the impossible business of trying to find the truth? Nevertheless, the high incidence of ill-starred lives in the history of Austrian literature is, to say the least, somewhat uncanny. Raimund's premature phobia of dying, Nestroy's fear of being buried alive, Grillparzer's bouts of depression, the case of Stifter, Schnitzler's references on almost every page of his journal to his fits of melancholy, Hofmannsthal's feelings of alienation, the suicide of poor Weininger, Kafka's forty-year-long tactical withdrawal from life, Musil's solipsism, Roth's addiction to alcohol, Horvath's apparently so logical end – all this has frequently led to an emphasis on the seemingly intrinsic negative tendencies of Austrian literature. The theory that a melancholic disposition is the correlative of a peculiarly protracted political decline, and thus identical with the inability to accept the changing times – identical with the wish to prolong Habsburg rule in a Habsburg myth^{viii} – is, while in many respects plausible, in the end rather a blinkered view.

Certainly, authors such as Grillparzer, Stifter, Hofmannsthal, Kafka and Bernhard consider progress to be a loss-making business. It would, however, be wrong to use this as grounds for moral or political reproach. Kafka's insight that all our inventions are devised at the moment of crashing^{ix} can no longer be readily dismissed. The slow death of nature, then as now our sole means of

survival, is the ever more obvious confirmation of this view. Melancholy, the contemplation of disaster^x in progress, has, however, nothing in common with a desire for death. It is a form of resistance. And on the level of art, in particular, its function is anything but reactive or reactionary. When, with a fixed stare, Melancholy considers once more how things could have come to this, it becomes clear that the mechanics of hopelessness are identical to those which drive our knowledge and insight. The description of misfortune^{xi} contains within it the possibility of its overcoming. There could be no clearer example of this than the two apparently so different authors, Bernhard and Handke. Each is, in his own way, of good cheer, notwithstanding the most acute of insights into the *historia calamitatum*. Neither Bernhard's peculiar brand of humour nor Handke's high seriousness could be realized as counterweights to the experience of misfortune and calamity^{xii} other than through the medium of writing. Here we may refer to the story of Rabbi Chanoch, recalling the advice given by the teacher at the elementary school to a small boy who had started to cry during the lesson: 'Look at your book. If you look inside, you won't cry.'^{xiii}

This parable of the bridge of letters spanning misery and consolation brings us to the category of teaching and learning, so important – in contrast to Imperial Germany – in the Austrian literary tradition; a subject to which, as far as I know, no one has yet drawn attention, probably because it stands in such glaring contrast to the far more conspicuous and – apparently – defeatist trait of melancholy. Stifter's provincial pedagogy; Karl Kraus, repetiteur to the nation; Kafka's didactic science; the wonderful scene in *Das Schloss* [*The Castle*] in which K. and the young boy Hans are learning from each other in the classroom; Canetti, who became a great

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teacher and remained a humble pupil; the hopes Wittgenstein pinned on life as a village schoolteacher; Bernhard's memories of his grandfather's philosophy; and Peter Handke's apprenticeship, always extended just that little bit longer: these are all aspects of an attitude which holds fast to the idea that it is worthwhile passing something on. Seen from this perspective, the expression of our personal unhappiness and collective misfortune^{xiv} also places at our disposal an experience by means of which its opposite can be attained – even if only by the skin of our teeth.

It remains for me – *pénétré d'amitié et de reconnaissance* – to thank all those who have been more or less closely involved with the making of this book. They will know who they are. In particular I wish to express my thanks to the British Academy, who through their various grants have greatly facilitated the work on this book.

W. G. Sebald
Norwich, Spring 1985

To the Edge of Nature

An Essay on Stifter

Sehen und Denken sind zwei Verrichtungen,
deren eine nicht die andere erklärt.

Seeing and thinking are two different things,
the one does not explain the other.

Franz von Baader

Much has been written about Adalbert Stifter, both hagiographical and disparaging, without however making the difficult beauty of his works any more accessible. At first it seemed as if Stifter was destined to go down in literary history as a Biedermeier poet of flowers and beetles. That, at least, was the role the Viennese salons of the *Vormärz*¹ had assigned him. Nowhere is the tone of sentimental reverence clearer than in the *billets doux* which Jenny Lind, the Swedish nightingale, sent to Stifter in the early spring of 1847, where she speaks of ‘the wonderful evenings at my dear Frau Jager’s house’ and muses, somewhat theatrically, ‘how strange that people are fated to find each other, understand and

esteem each other – and then immediately have to part for ever! My dear Herr von Stifter! as long as I live I shall never forget you!’¹

How far the thus ennobled ‘Herr von Stifter’ was affected by this touching declaration need not concern us here. At any rate, the sense of social incompatibility hinted at in Jenny Lind’s words corresponds closely with Stifter’s own feelings of inferiority, which, as he says, always made him feel rather apprehensive in the salons of the educated classes. ‘Every time I enter polite society, I feel like a schoolboy in the presence of the headmaster, the priest, or indeed the bishop.’² The sense of constraint Stifter describes here is, no doubt, one of the reasons he never really made a name for himself among the better classes of society; however, this same discomfiture was also the prerequisite for the creation of an oeuvre in which human beings are depicted as strangers not only in society, but also in their first home, nature.

The profound seriousness of Stifter’s work was a consequence of the progressive withdrawal from society of an author constitutionally incapable, either socially or psychologically, of living up to its expectations. During his time in Vienna, and particularly later, in Linz, in the Bavarian Forest, and up on the mountain at Kirchsschlag, Stifter is writing in a kind of exile, and it is this which casts the long shadows across his prose, this the source of the melancholy that lifts him far above the gilt-edged volumes of the late bourgeois era. Stifter’s affirmatory gestures were of no avail against the implicit vote of no confidence his stories contain. If, towards the end of his life and right up to the time of the First World War, Stifter was largely forgotten, this had less to do with exclusion by society – which would have liked to cultivate him – than with his own self-imposed isolation.

The rediscovery of Stifter took place in a literary climate filled

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with conviction as to its own poetic mission, which hailed the reserved prose writer as a kind of saint. It was Karl Kraus who set this in motion – albeit, as one might expect, in his own uniquely backhanded way – when, in 1916, he urged the ‘novelist mercenaries and buccaneers of opinion and the word’ to immolate themselves on Stifter’s grave, ‘upon the pyre of their grubby papers and quill pens’. Bahr saw in Stifter a successor to Goethe; Hesse in 1923 speaks of ‘an ardent soul’, ‘the essence of true humanity’, of ‘seeking and finding’ and ‘the spirit of true reverence’; Hofmannsthal, two years later, of the ‘crystal clear form’ of Stifter’s ‘delicately sketched characters’ and the ‘secret spiral of European intellectual life’. [Stefan] George’s disciple Bertram, in a speech given in 1928, cites qualities of ‘simplicity and strength’, ‘loyalty and dream’, ‘peasant-like and Benedictine’, ‘folk-like and aristocratic’, ‘loyal to the tribe and pan-German’, and a whole string of such and similar adjectival combinations.³

Views of this kind set the pattern and direction of Stifter reception for years to come. With their proverbial industriousness, the philologists set about perpetrating a conservative hagiography, a process which continued up to the 1960s and reached a dubious apotheosis in the pious paraphrasings of Emil Staiger and Walter Rehm. As Peter [J. P.] Stern has shown,⁴ the paradox of this usurpation of Stifter by an affirmatory secondary literature is that it confers upon Stifter’s work a veneer of timelessness, while itself remaining utterly in thrall to the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. For this reason, the almost infinite shelves of secondary literature contain little that might enlighten us as to the conflicts underlying the very deliberate order of Stifter’s prose.⁵ Thus it is that, after decades of oblivion – after being commandeered as the spirit of German Literature and the German Nation, forced

into the mould of an Austrian *Heimat*-poet and principal witness to a culture of renunciation – only now, perhaps, can Stifter be read properly for the first time.

Some of the first obstacles to a reinterpretation of Stifter are the interpretations, as misleading as they are unavoidable, which he in all naïvety insisted on imposing on his texts, their hermetic tendencies notwithstanding. It is striking, though, that nowhere in his work does Stifter consciously explore or analyse the affirmative constructs of his work – for example his oft-quoted Christian humility, his pious secular pantheism, the assertion of the gentle law of nature, not to mention the strict moralism of his stories. Last vestiges of a philosophy of salvation embracing both nature and history, they can be preserved from dissolution solely by a process of constant and invariable reiteration. But the meaning thus explicitly proclaimed has little to do with the inherent truth of an oeuvre whose actual focus is, by contrast, a profound agnosticism, and a pessimism extending to the cosmos as a whole. In Stifter's description of the world, there exists from the outset the uneasy suspicion that – as Kafka's fictional dog driven by a perverse desire for knowledge later puts it – 'something was not quite right from the very beginning, a small rift in the fabric of things,'⁶ and that this rift opens up to reveal the whole insanity of natural and social life. And if Kafka's restless protagonist admits that 'in the middle of the most solemn public functions'⁶ he is gripped by a sense of discomfort, then this is no less true of the author of *Witiko*, whose attempt at a grandiose *mise-en-scène* of our collective history would turn out to be the most strange and hollow of all his works. Here there can no longer be any question of the concordance between secular and sacred history so dramatically enacted in the *Haupt- und Staatsaktionen* [chief and state plays] of baroque theatre.

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Stifter is writing at a point in history where the notion of universal meaning is beginning to atrophy. And if – as Emil Staiger suggested – Stifter was actually a priest celebrating one last time the liturgy of an absolute order, then – like the poor priest in Kafka’s *Ein Landarzt* [*A Country Doctor*] – he was one who had long been secretly engaged in plucking his vestments to pieces.

The dissolution of the metaphysical world order is reflected in the shattering materialism, pervading the whole of Stifter’s work, in which, perhaps, by sheer force of observation, something of the former meaning of the world may yet be salvaged. The scrupulous registering of the most minute details, the endless enumeration of what – strangely enough – is actually there: all bear the signs of a lack of belief, and mark the point at which even the bourgeois doctrine of salvation could no longer be sustained by the progressive unfolding of the *Weltgeist* [World Spirit]. The singular objectivism of Stifter’s prose – which finds a more self-conscious equivalent in the work of his contemporary, Flaubert – places its faith in objects in the hope of lasting existence, and yet, precisely through this identification, makes apparent within them the force of time’s decay. The houses, the furnishings, the household implements, the clothes, the faded letters, all these minutely described objects which form such a striking contrast to the monotone economy of Stifter’s prose, in the end bear witness to nothing more than their own existence. And how little this can be relied upon is demonstrated in the story *Das alte Siegel* [*The Ancient Seal*], when Hugo, who for many weeks has paid daily visits to the extraordinarily beautiful woman in the little white house surrounded by linden trees, suddenly finds the locus of his erotic dreams and desires abandoned and empty. Everything is open, but there is nothing left. On the stairs lie dust and refuse, and ‘the air from the

open sky blew through the rooms . . . and the walls along which furniture, the marble table, the mirror and other things had been ranged now stood bare.⁷ The allegory of the deserted interior, with nothing remaining but the bitterness of disappointment, is the hidden side of Stifter's materialism, where, beneath the sober description of the visible world, there always lurks the fear that tomorrow all might be lost – not only love for another person, but also everything with which we have surrounded ourselves, even Nature in all her greenery, and the mountains 'in their ancient splendour and glory', and 'perhaps even this beautiful, congenial earth which now seems to us so firmly grounded and built for all eternity'.⁸

Doubtless the reason for Stifter's extreme emotional attachment in his writing to what he most feared to lose can be found in his own psychological and social predispositions, something which, however, he seems scarcely to have reflected upon. It is significant that his attempts at autobiography never went beyond a few preliminary sketches. The exception, his curious recollection of his early childhood memories, is itself only fragmentary. Similarly, he never addresses his repeated failure to become established in bourgeois society, whether critically – with regard to the hierarchical organization of society – or self-critically. Although he sometimes appears to have emancipated himself from the limitations of his – by comparison with the cultured classes – relatively underprivileged origins, he never completely succeeded in banishing the spectres of poverty and *déclassement* which haunted him from the age of twelve, on account of the altered circumstances brought about by the early death of his father. It is especially difficult to grasp why the ambitious, and in many respects exceedingly talented and adaptable, young scholar never manages to bring his studies to any

regular conclusion, nor why he continually contrives, at the decisive moment, to thwart his own strenuous efforts to achieve social recognition. Until the age of forty-five, when he is appointed *Oberschulrat* [Inspector of Schools] for Upper Austria, his financial situation was so precarious that he was continually beleaguered by creditors, and on several occasions had his assets seized. The years of service as a private tutor, which circumstances obliged him to undertake during his time in Vienna, will also have had a lasting effect on his self-esteem, ensuring that, in common with so many writers from the lower-middle classes, he remained – out of a combination of humiliation and envy – in thrall to a class to which he himself did not belong. Stifter's appointment as Inspector of Schools had little effect on his malaise, since, as he himself soon realized, this office, and the recognition and respectability it implied, was achieved at the cost of what was in effect a banishment to the provinces. Nor – because of the higher expenses associated with his post – did he succeed in achieving anything like financial security. The hopes he from time to time pinned on the state lottery were just as ill-advised as his stock-market speculations, both symptoms of a deeply insecure existence which at the same time craved security. Petitions to his publishers, and even to relatives, remain a constant feature of Stifter's correspondence. The fact that, in contrast to much of bourgeois narrative literature, money plays almost no part in his work, indicates just how keenly the sense of inadequacy associated with his own impecuniosity must have affected him.

If we also take into account Stifter's own personal misfortunes [*Unglück*] – his father's fatal accident, his boarding-school education, his unrequited love for Fanny Greipl, his long years of marriage to the almost illiterate Amalie, the early death of his first

foster daughter and the suicide of the second, Juliane, who drowned herself in the Danube at the age of eighteen, the frustrations of life as a civil servant, the endless drudgery of his art and the increasingly debilitating effects of his illness – if we take all this into account, then it is by no means illogical that he should in the end have taken his own life at the age of sixty-three. For far too long he had been struggling to maintain a semblance of self-control. The photographs we have of him show an increasingly melancholic and morose character, who to all intents and purposes appears to have systematically destroyed himself emotionally. However, the long overdue pathography of Stifter cannot easily be written, given that up to the last he remained faithful to his affirmatory precepts, scarcely ever expressing anything of his inner nightmares. What we do know, though, is that Stifter – another hunger artist! – mercilessly and systematically ate his way to an early grave via meals of truly grotesque proportions, the description and anticipation of which ultimately take up almost as much space in his correspondence as the enumeration of the increasingly prevalent symptoms of his illness. The exact correlation between his apparently insurmountable compulsive eating and the twelve-year-old's declared intention, on hearing of his father's death, of refusing all food needs no comment here. That Stifter's excessive eating habits indicate a pathological disposition is surely indisputable. What is truly pathological, though, is a pattern of behaviour which, in an attempt at healing, repeatedly turns the knife in the wound in exactly the same place, ritually re-enacting anew the removal or withdrawing of a beloved person or other object of affection. How this is expressed in Stifter's work will be shown in what follows, but first we will attempt to demonstrate, at least in outline, his systematic attempts to transcend his own misfortune [*Unglück*].

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In the nineteenth-century novel, conflicts and crises – whether financial, social or psychological in nature – constitute the dynamic centres of the narrative; conflicts and crises which have developed ‘over the course of time’ become acute, ultimately resulting in a stage of dissolution, be it of social structures or of individual fates. The idea that all this occurs *in the course of time* is a definition of the novel which, in *Der Nachsommer* [*Indian Summer*], Stifter seeks to counteract.⁹ Although Stifter refers to *Der Nachsommer* as an ‘Erzählung’ [story], what we are in fact dealing with here is a utopian blueprint for a model universe located outside of time, in a transcendental realm where everything is in harmony, right down to the very last detail. Since the notion of time is incompatible with that of utopia, in *Der Nachsommer* time, the measure of all things, appears not to pass at all. Tellingly, Stifter solves the problem this creates for him as narrator by having his characters progress from one mealtime to the next. Statements such as ‘After taking afternoon tea . . . After breakfast . . . After we had parted in the dining room . . .’ⁱⁱ etc., which occur with symptomatic frequency, help us to make it through the essentially identical days. The suspension of time corresponds to the painstakingly executed need for spatialization which is such a striking feature throughout *Der Nachsommer*. From the motionless souls of the protagonists, via the curious predilection for cold, empty interiors, the museum-like aspect of the marble hall and the apparently immutable interior layouts, down to the parcelling up of nature into lots and the repeated invocation of very similar panoramic vistas of distant regions, everything is completely in keeping with the absolute stillness of the spaces which these utopian prospects regularly evoke – which naturally goes some way to explaining the slightly paranoid atmosphere of this extremely

rationalistic work. Nowhere in *Der Nachsommer* does one encounter a living being that does not have a preordained place in the overall plan of this *orbis pictus*. Any disruptive elements, like the redstart, are ruthlessly eliminated, and in the surrounding landscape there seem to be as few people and animals as in the huge expanse of forest surrounding Hauenstein in Bernhard's *Verstörung* ['Disturbance', translated as *Gargoyles*],ⁱⁱⁱ in which the eccentric industrialist, having withdrawn to the Saurau hunting lodge in order to think, has all the animals shot so that they can no longer disturb the silence. Likewise, on the Isle of the Blessed which Stifter creates for the characters of *Der Nachsommer*, life is no longer alive. The ideal of a state of purity can only be conveyed by means of a hermetic style in which the beautiful concept of a homeostatic equilibrium within human relationships, and between man and nature, can be ontologically established once and for all. The specific stylistic artistic equivalent of this programme is the still life, or *nature morte*, which epitomizes Stifter's imagistic mode of representation.

As will be shown in more detail below, the lovingly detailed description of a dead person or thing represents the affective centre of Stifter's imagination. In such description, he finds a means of eluding suffering in and at the hands of time, a suffering perpetuated by the constant and iterative use of the imperfect tense of narrative prose. In this respect, Arno Schmidt's criticism – one shared, with reservations, by Claudio Magris – that, in *Der Nachsommer*, Stifter composed a quietist work corresponding to a darkly reactionary political position, falls short of the mark, inasmuch as Stifter's consciously constructed utopia 'is as far removed from an affirmation of what exists as its helpless form is from the latter's actual sublimation [*Aufhebung*]'.¹⁰ Seen in this

light, it makes little sense to equate Stifter's prose idyll with a resigned or conservative escapism, the more so when one considers that *Der Nachsommer* leaves not only so-called reality, but also the aims and methods of the utopian genre, far behind. Here, it is not only a question of establishing the best of all possible constitutions of society, as a counterpoint to its actual state of corruption; rather, and far more radically, the aim is a release from the uncanny nature [*Unheimlichkeit*] of time itself. Although this has scarcely been recognized to date, Stifter's images of a calm domestic idyll bear undeniably eschatological traits. The prose of *Der Nachsommer* reads like a catalogue of the Last Things, since everything in it appears under the aspect of death – or, as the case may be, of eternity.

Critics have variously commented on the apocalyptic dimension in Stifter's work, the abrupt turns of terror and the sudden irruption of monstrous and unfathomable events. Without warning, everything goes dark; the sun disappears; a dark abyss or terrible chasm opens up; or a lightning bolt strikes from a clear blue sky. Scenarios like these, with their specific atmospheric detail invoking an indifferent destructive force – in one might say almost heretical contrast to Stifter's ultramontane consciousness – are part of the traditional arsenal of nineteenth-century prose literature. It is telling, though, that Stifter elevates this extreme unpredictability – for example, of the weather – to a general principle, as illustrated in the unearthly pyrotechnics of the stories *Der Condor* [*The Condor*] and *Abdias*, which, within the framework of an affirmative narrative tradition stretched almost to breaking point, present a positively antinomian view of the world.

However, it is not solely the view of an indifferent world order – presented in such radical form in literature for the first

time – which is characteristic of Stifter’s position; no less significant is his attempt – with the lightest of colours, gradually resolving into a bright monochrome, indeed to an absolute whiteness – to bring about, so to speak in the opposite direction, a dematerialization of the world.¹¹ *Der Nachsommer* is the vision of a secularized heaven, and as such is one of the rare examples in literature of a sustained symbolic representation of an eschatological vision which has no need of the Apocalypse. Since it is easier by far to instil fear than joy, even in theology the convincing representation of heaven has always been the most difficult of undertakings. And in bourgeois literature in particular, representations of the celestial beauty of the soul inevitably tend to hover on the verge of kitsch. Stifter avoids this danger, since he neither makes a doctrine of his colour theory nor allows it to descend to the level of the merely ornamental. The touches of colour which he inserts, with the utmost circumspection and rigour, into the black and white calligraphy of his prose are the abstract equivalents of an extremely subjective emotionality which could only ever be expressed directly in a new life.

Possibly Stifter’s endeavours to immortalize beauty are most readily grasped in his descriptions of nature. In the image of the landscape, inviting us to enter, the boundaries between objective reality and subjective imagination become blurred, and nature is no longer merely that which surrounds us, in all its utter strangeness, but rather life on a larger scale, analogous to our own.

Far and wide the beautiful countryside spread out before me. Not only did I see, at noon and evening, the blue and ever bluer swathes of the great forest outlined against the sky – in the morning and at midnight I saw hills, and slopes,

and plains, and fields, and meadows, and villages, and the silver mirrors of ponds stretching away in the haze, as far as where the city of Prague in all its loveliness might lie.¹²

The poetic transformation of nature in the eye of the beholder conveys a concept of landscape in which civilization painlessly accommodates itself with that which it dominates. Via the lyrical gradations of the receding bands of blue and ever bluer ranges of hills, we come to the Elysian fields of a distant city which is as good as identified with the heavenly Jerusalem. What remains problematic, though, about such intimations of eternity, is that nature can only ever appear as ‘beautiful’ when seen from the viewpoint of civilization. Descriptions of nature – including literary ones – only came about with the commercial exploitation of the natural world, and there is something to be said for the idea that Stifter learned the art of landscape painting in prose from authors such as Cooper, Sealsfield and Irving, perhaps also from Alexander von Humboldt – authors in whose work, in terms of the history of ideas, the aesthetic representation of topography could already be seen in the context of colonialism. Stifter, of course, was anything but an expansionist. He sought to make himself at home in the narrowest of local spheres, and paradoxically it is precisely this limitation which allows him to confer on the technique of the description of nature – which for his predecessors was a largely unselfconscious and positivistic enterprise – a decisive moral aspect. Stifter was already aware that the identification of the beauty of nature represents the first step not only towards its redemption, but also towards its expropriation. The whole of the Fichtau, the epitome of a place embedded in nature, was once ‘nothing but woods’, as the

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