

Moments of Rupture:
Narratological Readings of Contemporary German Literature

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Abstract

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“Moments of Rupture: Narratological Readings of Contemporary German Literature” explores the representation of disruptive moments in contemporary German novels using a narratological framework of analysis. Joining the larger conversation on narrative practices in contemporary German literature, the dissertation focuses on key questions of literary form, narration and storytelling in four major novels published at the beginning of the twenty-first century: Christoph Ransmayr’s *Der fliegende Berg* (2006), Wolfgang Herrndorf’s *Sand* (2011), Lutz Seiler’s *Kruso* (2014) and Saša Stanišić’s *Vor dem Fest* (2014). The project investigates the use of narrative elements to relate, mend and overcome moments of personal, hermeneutical, political and social rupture. By drawing on influential works of narratology, from Aristotle’s early narratology to pertinent contemporary theories (e.g. Bakhtin, Brooks, Fludernik, Genette, Phelan), my study

shows how narratives shape and are in turn shaped by the ruptures they describe. Chapters are organized around key narrative categories, which serve to explore one literary text. The opening chapter discusses the significance of time and space in *Der fliegende Berg*. It shows how a moment of personal rupture is reflected in the transitions between physical, virtual and mythological times and spaces, and in the encounters that characterize them. Chapter two investigates the plotting of *Sand*. It examines the tension between (re)cognition and mistakes, between understanding and utter bafflement both on the level of diegesis and of reading. Chapter three examines the characters in *Kruso*. It shows how the relationship between the main figures translates into a political allegory, which stands for the failure of a utopian project and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The final chapter explores the features of the plural voice in *Vor dem Fest* and its role in preserving a post-socialist community affected by slow decline and the death of its storyteller.

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For my dad, who, I am sure,
would rejoice in seeing the completion of this dissertation.

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Introduction

Narrative is about problem solving.
 Narrative is about conflict.
 Narrative is about interpersonal relations.
 Narrative is about human experience.
 Narrative is about the temporality of existence.
 (Ryan, “Toward a Definition of Narrative” 24)

Narratives are ubiquitous in contemporary society. The stories we tell ourselves, the accounts we give to others, the way we present our lives: all these forms of narration attest to the centrality of storytelling in everyday experience. Humans appear to be natural storytellers, who use narratives to present and comprehend life events. At the beginning of *Wahrheit und Erfindung*, his recent volume on narrative theory, Albrecht Koschorke introduces the concept of *homo narrans*. The concept goes back to Walter Fisher, who, in connection to the “narrative turn” in the social sciences, proposed to apply the narrative paradigm to communication theories.¹ In support of this new approach, he writes: “human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience. I suggest that we experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends” (qtd. in Koschorke 401n4). The categories mentioned by Fisher—temporality, events, characters, plot—were already part of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and still inform our understanding of what a narrative is today.

A look at the definition of the word “narrate” reveals how narration signifies more than the act of telling. According to the OED, the word comes from the Latin *narrare* “to relate, recount, in post-classical Latin also to plead in a court of law [. . .], to recite the verdict of a jury [. . .], related to *gnārus* knowing, skilled” (“Narrate”). As the definition shows, the word has a

¹ See Keen for a concise account of the narrative turn and its impact (11-12).

complex etymology and extends to the idea of truth and knowledge. Narrating is linked to the possibility of knowing and explaining, of getting to the heart of things. As Peter Brooks explains: “While I think the term has been trivialized through overuse, I believe the overuse responds to a recognition that narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world – a part of our cognitive tool kit that was long neglected by psychologists and philosophers” (qtd. in Ryan “Toward a definition” 22). The organization of the experience of the world, which lies at the basis of the act of narration, often reflects the need to come to terms with events that are difficult to define or describe, or which originate from an ungraspable moment. In this regard, narratives often tell stories that unsettle the narrator, the narrative itself, and the reader.

This dissertation explores works of contemporary German literature that narrate destabilizing experiences, in which everything comes to a halt. These “moments of rupture,” as the title of my project defines them, take up different forms and meaning, and when put into words, yield interesting narratives. Rupture indicates a break, physical or figurative, usually related to a traumatic event. In its broader meaning, it refers, for example, to a tear or split on the level of skin or tissue; or a break on the surface of the earth, due to an earthquake. It also indicates a “breach of continuity; interruption; an instance of this.” It may indicate the outbreak of hostilities “between individuals, groups or nations; a rift, a separation” (“Rupture” OED). To the best of my knowledge, there is no cohesive conceptualization of the term in literature or cultural studies. The term is often used outside of the literary context, to refer to metaphysical or political ruptures, or to medical and physiological ones.² In my discussion, ruptures emphasize the moment in which the narrative originates or in which the narrative falls apart. At the same

² See, for example, Willi Jackson et al. (eds.), *Crisis, Rupture and Anxiety: An Interdisciplinary Examination of Contemporary and Historical Human Challenges* (2012) and Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan’s *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political* (2013).

time, the term rupture emphasizes the effect rather than the process. The term is usually translated in German as “Bruch,” “Riss,” figuratively also as “Umbruch” (“Rupture” *Langenscheidt*). Similarly to “rupture,” the word “Bruch” is often used to talk about the departure from the tradition and abrupt changes between social, historical, and literary periods or phases. My understanding of “rupture” extends beyond this single German term and comes to signify a more complex concept, which encompasses the ideas of “Abbruch,” “Zusammenbruch” and “Umbruch.” The three terms indicate, respectively, the sudden interruption of an event or activity, the act of collapsing, and the moment of reshaping or restructuring. As a matter of fact, in the novels discussed here, rupture captures the violence of the moment, the breach in continuity, and the necessity of a new beginning.

In my project, ruptures come to signify different unsettling events that affect the personal, hermeneutical, social, and political dimension in the novels. They range from the experience of human death, to amnesia and the hermeneutic tension between mistakes and (re)cognition; from the relationship between friendship and political rupture at a critical moment in history, to the survival of a community after the death of its storyteller. These moments of rupture are not only thematic, but also impact the narration, the form of the novels and their understanding on the side of the reader. And yet, narration ultimately helps articulate, mend or overcome this rupture and offers an alternative to silence. As Michael Jackson writes in his *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt*, “Although stories are typically interrupted, broken, and rendered absurd by extreme experience, storytelling remains one of our most powerful techniques for healing ourselves and restoring order to a broken world” (23). The same stories that describe a moment of rupture are the ones that allow for the continuation of narration and the (partial) return to order, often thanks to a new beginning.

In the attempt to reflect on how these different moments of rupture are narratively framed and represented in contemporary German-language novels, this dissertation combines two fields of inquiry: narratology and contemporary German literature. The first one represents the method, the second one the subject of the investigation. This project uses narrative theories as analytical tools to investigate four major novels written at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My project aims at showing how they express and make sense of moments of rupture. It explores how the key categories of narratives—space and time, plot, characters, and voice—frame the moment of rupture that the novels describe. Continuing the tradition of forms, but at the same time experimenting with it, contemporary novels perform the break they narrativize. By framing the discussion in narratological terms, my dissertation asks what narratology can contribute to the understanding of contemporary German literature. The task of my project is twofold: on the one hand, it reflects on the narrative practices used in contemporary novels to express moments of rupture; on the other, it emphasizes the narrative significance of these works, offering readings that pose relevant narratological questions that may be applied to other works of contemporary German literature. My project does not attempt to redefine narratology, but rather to use its concepts as a tool to investigate contemporary narratives. While the works under investigation are representative of the moments of rupture they describe, the same kind of analysis could be applied to other works, as well, leading to new, exciting results.

The Method: Narratology

My choice of using narratology—or narratologies as Herman proposes to call them (Nünning, “Narratology or Narratologies” 242)—as theoretical framework for my readings grows out of the conviction that such an approach helps understand how texts function and how

they manage to convey a specific message to the reader.³ Narratology can be used as an interpretive tool to understand texts and the stories they tell. A discussion of the story of narratology and a definition of the field are beyond the scope of this project, but the brief summary that follows aims at describing the main phases of its development, which are relevant for my investigation.⁴

Tzvetan Todorov first used the term “narratology” to define the discipline in his *Grammaire du Decameron* (1969), but narrative concepts had been developed prior to that, dating back to antiquity (Plato and Aristotle) (de Jong 3). At the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian formalists contributed to the decisive advancement of the field, creating the analytical categories that shaped many later discussions of narratives. Their investigations of the “grammar” of narratives led to the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzet*, as well as the typological study of plot by Vladimir Propp, which were eventually elaborated by the French structuralists. The latter came in contact with the ideas of the Russian formalists via the Prague Linguistic Circle and Bakhtin (Keen 9). The field of narratology developed mostly in the 1960s and 70s, thanks to the theorists of the so-called classical narratology and the formalist approaches of Mieke Bal, Wayne Booth, Franz Stanzel, and, in particular, Gérard Genette (de Jong 6). As Kindt and Müller comment, “Until well into the 1980s, the term narratology, when used by literary scholars, generally meant narratology à la Genette” (vi). Different international schools of scholars joined the narratological discussion. The Chicago School is one example, and its rhetorical critics, as I will explain later, influence my narratological approach. Narratology

³ In his essay included in *What is Narratology?*, Ansgar Nünning quotes Richardson: “it is probably no exaggeration to say that there has been a ‘renaissance in narrative theory and analysis’” (239). The section of the article titled “Narratology vs. Narratologies: Differences and Tensions” investigates the various approaches that characterize the narratological field and the motivations behind the use of the plural “narratologies” (241-46).

⁴ See Kindt and Müller for a clear and concise description of narratology and its phases (v-vi).

experienced its “classical phase” up to the early 1990s, when the concept of “postclassical narratology” developed, to reflect the opening of the field to intermedial inquiries, as well as various interdisciplinary approaches.⁵

In the last few decades, the field of narratology has continued to grow as the increasing number of conferences, research clusters and projects on narratological topics shows.⁶ The number and the variety of publications also confirm this flourishing phase of narratology. As de Jong writes, “many general introductions to narratology,” “two companions” (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2005 and Herman 2007), “an encyclopaedia of narratology” (Herman, Jan, and Ryan 2010), “a dictionary of narratology” (Prince in 1987, revised in 2003), and “an electronic handbook of narratology” are at the disposal of scholars interested in the field (6). In the German context, the discipline of *Erzähltheorie* has actively contributed to the discussion. In 2008, the publisher De Gruyter started a series called “Narratologia,” inviting contributions on various aspects of the subject. The first volume, fittingly titled *What is Narratology?*, inaugurated an impressive collection of scholarship, which adds up to 55 volumes.⁷ The volume *Current Trends in Narratology* (2011) concisely describes the current state of the field: “One trajectory of

⁵ For a synthetic overview of the different narratological approaches see Nünning (“Narratology or Narratologies?” 249-50). Some influential narratologists include (their major fields of inquiry are indicated in brackets): Dorrit Cohn (consciousness in fiction); Ansgar Nünning (culture, literary history, postmodern literature, and cognitive approach); and Monika Fludernik (postcolonial studies, cognitive approach, genre theory, natural narratology, and linguistics). Scholarly contributions on transmedial and intermedial narratology have also flourished. See, for example, the works by Werner Wolf and Marie-Laure Ryan included in the final bibliography in this dissertation.

⁶ Under the term “Narratology” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Jan Christoph Meister lists the institutions that have contributed most to the study and research of narratology. Among them are a number of German institutions: the “Forschergruppe Narratologie” and the “Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology” at Hamburg University, and the “Zentrum für Erzählforschung” at Wuppertal University.

⁷ The newest volume, planned for publication in September 2016, is titled *Facing Loss and Death: Narrative and Eventfulness in Lyric Poetry*. Even though the study investigates the genre of poetry, it shows a thematic affinity to some of the issues discussed in this dissertation.

scholarship works to refine existing, ‘classical’ narratological models by re-examining their foundational concepts and rethinking their original problems; the other seeks to move beyond them by applying narratological frameworks to nonliterary narratives, artifacts, and phenomena that are usually excluded from the purview of narratologists, or, for instance, by exploring the connections between mental processing and narratives” (2). And while the first trend may seem less innovative, “it extends the viability of earlier models by reflecting on them critically” (2). While narratology is often frowned upon because of its technical and classificatory language, its use in discussing literary works can be enlightening. Indeed, while it is often possible to say what the effect of a literary work is, the meaning of such a work may change when the processes behind its narrative are uncovered.

The theoretical background of my project lies in narrative theory and embraces the works of different narratologists belonging to different phases of the discipline.⁸ Aristotle’s *Poetics* constitutes a key text in my understanding of the narrative categories under discussion, but later theorizations complement the *Poetics*, which, being a study of antique tragedy, displays some limitations in its application to novels. I use Genette’s conceptualization of time from *Narrative Discourse* and combine it with the idea of space to show how the two concepts work together. I employ Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope as narrative construct to interpret the spatio-temporal configurations at work. My understanding of plot is influenced by Peter Brooks’s seminal work *Reading for the Plot*, which considers the plot in relation to the psychodynamics of narratives and their function of providing meaning. My investigation of characters is influenced by James Phelan’s rhetorical reading outlined in *Reading People, Reading Plots*, in which text and context are considered together, and the narrative is read in connection to the audience’s expectations.

⁸ While each narratological concept will be introduced and discussed in the chapter it informs, here I include the main ideas and authors that constitute the theoretical framework of my project.

The category of voice is framed both by Genette's theorization and by Michael Kearns's *Rhetorical Narratology*, which complicates Genette's definition. My approach to narratology aims at combining the study of the technicality of the narrative—which constitutes the first stage of analysis—with specific narrative theories that productively shape my interpretive model. My aim is to show how different novels work, how they construct their narrative, what kind of narrative strategies they employ and how they invite particular readings. In so doing, my project describes remarkable stories of rupture through the use of narratological tools. I investigate the interaction between form, narrative and text in the shaping of contemporary stories, and their role in creating or unsettling expectations in the reader. Before turning to the subject matter of the project, I want to quote a series of questions with which Sabine Gross closes her review titled "Surveying Narratology:" "How do we ask it [narratology] to respond to the way reality and human existence are uniquely shaped in literary texts, and how does it help us to understand, appreciate, and make sense of stories in their specificity, indeed singularity?" (558). These questions summarize, in a nutshell, the rationale behind my use of narratology to investigate contemporary German literature.

The Subject Matter: Contemporary German Literature

This project investigates works of contemporary German literature written at the beginning of the twenty-first century, thus comprising the last decade and a half of the broader field of "contemporary literature."⁹ Besides a personal interest in the works produced in these years, the decision to include only works written in the 2000s is determined by the general

⁹ Michael Braun discusses the difficulty of defining the concept of contemporary German literature. While one clear definition does not exist, spatio-temporal criteria, as well as aesthetic elements can help to limit the definition of contemporary German literature. For a detailed discussion see Braun's section "Was ist Gegenwartsliteratur?" (9-36).

tendency in contemporary German literature to consider the year 2000 as a threshold that frames the production and reception of literary works, as well as their specific forms and functions of narrating. The first decade and a half of the century has seen changes connected to the beginning of a new millennium, which reflected fears, expectations and the potential for a fresh start. A series of recent scholarly publications has investigated the literary production of the new century, using this temporal threshold to frame the subjects and styles of the works investigated. The liminality of the year 2000 has been discussed in *Chiffre 2000: neue Paradigmen der Gegenwartsliteratur* (2005), in which Ulrike Vedder and Corina Cafuff take this year as the starting point of their study. The volume edited by Evi Zemenek and Susanne Krones, *Literatur der Jahrtausendwende: Themen, Schreibverfahren und Buchmarkt um 2000* (2008) examines German and international literature published between 1995 and 2005, considering the trends in narration both before and after the beginning of the new century. Julia Schöll and Johanna Bohley's curated volume *Das erste Jahrhundert: Narrative und Poetiken des 21. Jahrhunderts* (2011) also explores the works of the first ten years, choosing the new millennium as starting point. In 2013, Silke Horstkotte and Leonhard Hermann published a volume titled *Poetiken der Gegenwart: Deutschsprachige Romane nach 2000*, which reflects on how contemporary novels address current topics using different poetologies, but showing a general oscillation between realism and fantastic narration. Because of the "newness" of the period investigated, these volumes attempt to describe the phenomenon of contemporary German literature—and international works as well—grappling with a territory that is mostly still unexplored. These works are organized mainly thematically, whereas narratological inquiries remain limited to

individual texts.¹⁰ A characteristic these volumes share is their emphasis on the description of moments of crisis, change and new beginnings.¹¹

Indeed, contemporary literature is often preoccupied with the present and, in particular, the extreme situations that characterize the current moment. German-language contemporary literature is no exception. In the postwar period, literature attempted to narrativize the horrors of the war and its aftermath.¹² During the separation between West and East Germany, novels expressed the anguish of a divided population and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many works depicted the struggles of a country and its people, who were coming to terms with the process of reunification. In the last decades, literary works address the phenomena of globalization, new transnational and transcultural mobility, and new forms of migration, questioning the parameters of national identity and what constitutes German society. German novels also reflect on human, animal and environmental catastrophes as well as global acts of terrorism and questions of personal and national violence. Even though this overview does not exhaust the thematic richness of contemporary German literature, it captures the tendency to represent moments that challenge or disrupt the established personal, social, political and cultural order. Scholars frame the discussions of these topics in different ways, but often refer to the tropes of crisis to

¹⁰ Emphasis on narrative practice is particularly evident in Schöll and Bohley's curated volume, in which the essays follow a double approach: narrative and poetological.

¹¹ A number of essays in Caduff and Vedder's book reflect on the influence of new media and pop culture and on the possible end of post-war literature; Zemanek and Krones's volume includes contributions on post-9/11 literature, as well essays on the "Endzeitstimmung;" Schöll and Bohley dedicate a section of their volume to "Krisen und Konstellationen" (69-113); in the introduction to their work, Horstkotte and Hermann present one of their questions: "Worin genau zeigt sich die 'Aktualität [. . .] von Gegenwartsliteratur [. . .]?" (4).

¹² 1945 has been considered as one of the possible temporal indications for the beginning of German contemporary literature. This has been changing. As Braun writes: "Es gibt also Indizien, sich von 1945 als Beginndatum der Gegenwartsliteratur zu verabschieden. Zumindest die Literatur der ersten beiden Nachkriegsjahrzehnte ist von einem großen Teil der heutigen Leserschaft nicht als zeitgenössische Literatur aufgenommen worden" (24).

characterize the moment of contemporary German literature.¹³ While the idea of crisis may be linked to the concept of rupture, my investigation renounces the framework of crisis, which addresses phenomena that have different proportions and impacts. I understand rupture differently from crisis, which usually indicates “a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point” (“Crisis”), now often associated with a negative state of things.¹⁴ My emphasis is on the moment of break, which has an unsettling aspect in itself, and can—but does not necessarily—turn into a crisis. This becomes most clear in the chapter that examines political rupture, in which a severance ends a male friendship due to the collapse of a political project constructed by friends, but also assumes the contours of a larger national crisis.

With thousands of books of fiction published yearly on the German market, the selection of the primary texts analyzed in this project followed specific criteria.¹⁵ All the works under investigation are novels, written by established authors in the contemporary German-language literary scene. All authors are recipients of major literary prizes. After their publication—and sometimes even preceding it—their works attracted the attention of reviewers and some of them have been examined in scholarly publications. The four novels discussed here represent the diversity of forms in contemporary German literature. In various ways, the four novels reinvent

¹³ A look at recent publications in the German field reveals this preoccupation with the topic of crisis and catastrophe. Gerstenberger and Nusser’s *Catastrophe and Catharsis: Perspectives on Disaster and Redemption in German Culture and Beyond* (2015), for example, rethinks the conception of catastrophe throughout German literature and beyond national borders, including narratives written after the Fukushima catastrophe. The volume edited by Thomas Klinkert and Günter Oesterie, *Katastrophe und Gedächtnis* (2014), reflects on the changing relationship between catastrophes and cultural memory.

¹⁴ For a theorization of the turning point as a possible conceit for change see Nünning and Sicks’s *Turning Points: Concepts and Narratives of Change in Literature and Other Media*.

¹⁵ Michael Braun opens his introduction by emphatically remarking: “‘Bücher, Bücher, aber nichts zu lesen!’ Der Stoßseufzer klingt berechtigt. 94.000 Titel erscheinen jährlich auf dem deutschen Buchmarkt, jedes sechste Buch zählt zur Belletristik, darunter Jahr für Jahr etwa 7.000 deutschsprachige Romane. Diese Vielfalt bringt Risiko und Reichtum” (7).

some key generic conventions that characterize the contemporary German novel. In this regard, all these texts present some form of experimentalism, be it in the form that they use or in the narrative they choose. *Der fliegende Berg*, for example, reinvents the adventure novel and the mountain novel; *Sand* plays with forms of crime fiction, the detective story and thriller novel in particular; *Kruso* twists the island novel into a GDR robinsonade; and *Vor dem Fest* reinterprets the village tale (*Dorfroman*). While these works abide at least in part by the literary conventions of the above-mentioned genres, they also reinvent them to fulfil their own projects. Further, these novels share some formal affinities: they all display a density and complexity that only at first can be overlooked. They include metanarrative moments, which add another layer of significance to the experience of storytelling. My understanding of the narrative practices in these works is, in part, contextual, that is, it also takes into consideration the production (as much as it is public) and the reception. Some of the authors have released interviews, published online blogs and poetological reflections, and offered annotated versions of their works, which reveal information about the process of writing.

Because some of these authors may be new to the reader of this project, I will introduce them before discussing the organization of the chapters. The dissertation opens by analyzing *Der fliegende Berg*, Christoph Ransmayr's fourth novel. Austrian novelist, author of short prose pieces, sketches, and avid traveller, Ransmayr is a well-established author in the German-speaking context, one of the "benedidenswerten Sprachkünstlern der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur, seine Prosa ist von einer Musikalität und Dichte, der nur wenige Autoren heute das Wasser reichen können" (Wittstock, *Nach der Moderne* 124).¹⁶ He has been working as a writer since 1982, when he published his first project, *Strahlender Untergang* (1982).

¹⁶ A detailed description of the author and his work can be found at his website *von und über Christoph Ransmayr*.

Written in rhythmic prose, this work depicts the end of human beings on Earth as the consequence of an experiment of desertification and dehydration, providing a grim view of the effects of scientific progress and domination for humanity. His second book, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (1984) describes the fictional travel narrative of the Payer-Weyprecht expedition to the Arctic. It introduces a theme dear to the author, the quest for the past, in a narrative that plays with form and mixes historical facts and fantastic details. Ransmayr's first big success came only with his second novel *Die letzte Welt* (1988), which tells the story of the Roman Cotta as he sets off on the traces of his friend Ovid. Cotta is searching not only for his friend, but also for a manuscript of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The novel continues the exploration of the tension between searching and getting lost: similarly to Mazzini in the previous novel, Cotta disappears as he is trying to piece together the clues that could take him to Ovid. *Morbus Kitahara* (1995), Ransmayr's third novel, presents a dystopian alternative world. It is set in Moor, once an industrial city, now a ruin that carries the signs of a tragic past—the experience of the war and of National Socialism—and no trace of modernity, in which its three main figures attempt to survive. In this regard, *Der fliegende Berg* (2006) represents a continuation in the work of the writer. The topics that this novel presents to the reader belong to the overall oeuvre of Ransmayr: the tension between nature and civilization, life and death, reality and fiction, mythological past and uncertain present. In 2012, Ransmayr published his new big project, *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*. In 70 episodes, the narrator takes his reader through real and metaphorical spaces. In this narrative atlas, all the big topics present in Ransmayr's works are mapped together.

The second chapter presents Wolfgang Herrndorf's novel *Sand*, the last work the author published during his life. Wolfgang Herrndorf began his career as an illustrator for the satiric

magazine *Titanic* and in 2002 he published his first novel *In Plüschgewittern*, a work of pop culture influenced by Christian Kracht's *Faserland* (Langemeyer). His major success came after the publication of the youth novel *Tschick* in 2010, which, in the meantime, has been adapted to become a stage performance and a movie. Already when he was writing *Tschick*, Herrndorf was afflicted by a brain tumor. The struggle with his disease is documented in his blog *Arbeit und Struktur*, which also collects the author's reflections on his writing and works. The novel *Sand* was published in 2011 and recognized with the *Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse* in 2012. Herrndorf took his life in the same year. His incomplete novel, *Bilder deiner großen Liebe*, was published posthumously in 2014.¹⁷

Lutz Seiler is the third author discussed in this project, which analyzes his debut novel *Kruso* (2014). After working as a bricklayer and carpenter, Seiler began his career as a poet in his early twenties.¹⁸ His first poetry collection entitled *berührt/geführt* (1995) went almost unnoticed and it was only with his second lyric collection *pech & blende* (2002) that critics and readers first openly took notice of Seiler's literary talent. Seiler is the author of essays and short stories, and has shaped his narrative voice throughout his career leading up to the successful appearance of *Kruso*, his award-winning debut novel. The success of the novel transcended its medium; *Kruso* was adapted into a theater performance and first staged in September 2015 at the Theater Magdeburg—followed by performances at the Hans Otto Theater Potsdam and at the

¹⁷ A volume of essays and reviews on Wolfgang Herrndorf's works, complete with a bio-/bibliographical appendix, was edited by Annina Klappert and published in 2015. For information on the author, see in particular 260-61.

¹⁸ For a complete literary profile of the author, see Marja Rauch's entry in *KLK* ("Lutz Seiler").

Theater&Philharmonie Thüringen. Moreover, the *UFA Presse* announced in March 2015 that the novel will also be filmed as part of the productions of *UFA Fiction*.¹⁹

Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* is at the center of the last chapter. Stanišić, a Bosnian-German author, arrived in Germany as a refugee when he was 14. He published his first bestseller *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* in 2006, which was translated into more than 30 languages and was a finalist for the *Deutscher Buchpreis*. *Vor dem Fest* is Saša Stanišić's second novel, which was also very well received by reviewers and readers. The novel was not only awarded the *Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse*, but also made it onto the Longlist for the *Deutscher Buchpreis*. Saša Stanišić also has a remarkable media presence and contributes critical articles at *piqd.de*. In May 2016, he published his new book *Fallensteller*, a collection of short stories which, at least in part, continues the project of *Vor dem Fest* and has been acclaimed as a book that combines “verspielte[...] Komik, Traurigkeit und brillante[...] Sätze[...]” (Schröder, “Ein heiterer Melancholiker”). Stanišić is also the author of short stories and essays, in particular “Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany” (2008), in which he debunks some myths about “immigrant” writers and their work. In a debate that occupied the pages of German feuillets between January and March 2014, the controversial author Maxim Biller prophesized the death of German literature and the dull taste of scholars and critics, who, in his opinion, abide too much by formalist norms. In the context of this debate, which generated strong reactions, contemporary German literature was reproached for being boring, too well-behaved (“brav”) and conformist. As Biller writes: “[. . .] seit mehr als einem Jahrzehnt prägt der sozrealistische Formalismus des Leipziger Literaturinstituts den narzisstischen und literarisch völlig folgenlosen Geschmack von Kritikern und Germanisten, deren Urteilen kein Leser oder

¹⁹ The full announcement can be read on the *Ufa Presse* website (“Ufa Fiction verfilmt Lutz Seilers Bestsellerroman *Kruso*”).

Buchhändler noch glaubt. In anderen Worten: Die deutsche Literatur ist wie der todkranke Patient, der aufgehört hat, zum Arzt zu gehen, aber allen erzählt, dass es ihm gut geht.” In his intervention, Biller advocates for the role of writers with migratory backgrounds in renewing German literature, refusing to adhere to the conventions dictated by the market, and criticizes authors like Saša Stanišić for telling “typical” German stories. Several comments hushed this intervention and condemned it as racist or intellectually hollow. While its line of reasoning seems indeed overall faulty, Biller’s intervention misses one major point. In his way of picturing this provincial German community, Stanišić does make a unique contribution to German literature, combining the genre of the traditional—and national—village tale with his love for word play, fantastic elements, and hybrid forms. In his essay “Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany,” Stanišić remarks:

Writing fiction also means inventing worlds which are not part of the writer's own world. Through research, travels, interviews and other methods of approaching the unknown, these experiences are within the reach of any author. Though he can choose not to, any writer can become aware of new aspects of life and, from it, construct the “tellable” by choosing a perspective or a voice that even a writer who stands in the middle of the topic might even have overlooked.

Years later, the author of *Vor dem Fest* turned these words into programmatic action and combined his characteristic mode of writing and individual perspective with the historical materials he found in the Uckermark. The result is a book that is anything but “unglaublich langweilig,” to quote Biller.

The Project and Its Chapters

The dissertation consists of four chapters. Each explores one major literary work, which introduces a particular moment of rupture. By analyzing each work on the basis of a narratological issue—time and space, plotting, characters, and voice—I offer a reading that combines a thematic approach with a narrative one. The narratological issues discussed in my project are not unique to contemporary literature, but the works that I take into consideration construct their narrative in interesting ways and their analysis can serve to reflect on broader narrative practices in contemporary German literature.

The starting point of my investigation is Ransmayr's *Der fliegende Berg* (2006). The novel describes a moment of personal rupture experienced by the first-person narrator, who loses his brother during a Tibetan climbing expedition. The attempt to make sense of this tragic event results in a narrative that translates the unsettling experience of death into a mesmerizing spatial and temporal configuration, which defies chronological and spatial order. This chapter reflects on the ways in which the articulation of time and space functions to represent the moment of rupture. My focus lies on the representational strategies of time and space in this novel, which reinvents and complicates the adventure novel and the mountain climbing story. Oscillating between life and death, the first-person narrator poses questions of memory and narration, present and past, life and death. The time-space component of the novel becomes the organizing principle and, at the same time, the continuous movement across time and space disorients the reader. Ransmayr's novel is also striking for its formal innovation, expressed in the use of the flying sentences (*fliegende Sätze*). Employing elements of the epic novel written in verse, the novel plays with conventions of pseudo-orality, while opening the narrative to new possibilities for which the hybrid generic form allows. Moving between physical, virtual, and mythical times

and spaces, the first-person narrator attempts to come to terms with the extreme rupture that human death represents. Because time and space come to be interconnected throughout the novel, Bakhtin's chronotope is used to interpret the movement across physical and metaphorical thresholds and to explain the stasis of the narrator at the end of the novel, and the interruption of his account.

The second chapter investigates the significance of plot in Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* (2011). The novel narrates the adventures of an amnesiac character, whose identity constitutes one of the mysteries in the novel, as he searches for an undefined mine, which both criminals and the CIA want from him. The chapter explores the formal, narrative and hermeneutic rupture that the novel represents. Using the concept of plot first defined by Aristotle, and complicating it with later narrative theories, in particular Peter Brooks's understanding of the term, my chapter reflects on how classical and contemporary models of plot help us make sense of this story, to understand the rupture and its significance. Building on the contamination among genres of crime fiction, plotting strategies intervene to create a labyrinthine narrative, which sustains the hermeneutic tension between (re)cognition and mistakes, between understanding and utter bafflement. My chapter asks which elements intervene to cause the moment of rupture in the novel, articulated in the tension between formal order and disorder, textual symmetry and overabundance of intertextual references. I investigate the implications of plotting on the narrative level, by discussing the construction of the novel in terms of beginning, middle and end, and by focusing, in particular, on the plotting strategies that define the middle part of the novel, before the moment of closure is achieved. The plot thickens so much that it risks eluding the reader, thus defying the aim of the work of detection, and my chapter shows how this risk is built and finally avoided. By combining a formal analysis with a narrative one and the study of

the paratextual elements, this chapter reflects on how the hermeneutic rupture is shaped through the form and narration of this work of crime fiction.

The third chapter aims to show how the category of characters in Lutz Seiler's *Kruso* lends itself to be read as a political allegory of the collapse of a utopian project at the end of the GDR. The novel is set on the island of Hiddensee, in the months immediately preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall. It follows the relationship that develops between Ed and Kruso, the main figures in the novel, and the project of the latter to build a utopian community to resist the totalitarian state. Using James Phelan's rhetorical approach to characters, my chapter shows how the mimetic, synthetic and thematic dimensions and functions of the narrative category help explain not only the progression of the novel, but also the meaning that characters acquire for the overall project that Seiler's work fulfils. Literary intertexts that Seiler uses are immediately discernible in the title of the novel and the name of the character therein. These references can help pose questions of genre and understand how this German novel may relate to the original Robinsonade written by Daniel Defoe. Intertexts play a role also in my discussion of characters, encouraging some reflections on the literary models on which Ed and Kruso are built and on the possible inversions of and differences from the models. My analysis reflects on the significance of the mimetic dimension and its function in creating plausible characters. These initial considerations combine with a study of the synthetic function of characters, their position in the character-system and the character-space they receive. For example, female characters are definitely less prominent, but also the relationship between Ed and Kruso shifts, influencing the representation of the political rupture in the novel. This aspect is particularly emphasized in the discussion of the thematic dimension and function of characters, which concludes my investigation.

The final chapter of this project focuses on Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* (2014) and the potential of the narrative voice to overcome a moment of rupture presented at the outset of the novel. The semi-fictional community of Fürstenfelde in the Uckermark is still under shock after the sudden death of the storyteller of the village, its ferryman, who drowned in one of the lakes. A we-voice expresses the concern whether this community will continue to exist—considering the constant decline of the population—and, if so, who will tell its stories. The novel represents a community suspended between mourning and excitement for the upcoming annual celebration. My focus in this chapter lies on the narrating act itself and the use of the collective—possibly choral—“wir” in the representation of the history of this village. The main issue I investigate is the nature and representation of the we-voice, which becomes the organizing principle of these stories. By complicating the Genettian notion of voice with conceptions of rhetorical and unnatural narratology, this chapter reflects on the political dimension of the voice, as well as on the inclusion of voices that transgress human boundaries. Moving among different forms of narration, such as historical chronicles, fantastic accounts and mundane episodes, *Vor dem Fest* brings to life a community, overcoming the moment of rupture that sets the narrative in motion. The question of voice mingles with questions of forms as well as with narrative authority, introducing metanarrative reflections in the novel. Further, the presence of voice and its verbal narrative is complicated by the appearance of a painter and her visual representations of the community, which encourages a reflection on different possibilities of storytelling, as well as on the relation between telling and seeing.

The Epilogue to this project is meant as a potential opening rather than a moment of closure. While it represents the final stage of this project, it shows the potential avenues of research to expand the discussion initiated here, taking into consideration narrative categories,

moments of rupture, literary works and authors that, for different reasons, are not part of the present investigation.

Chapter One

Between Life and Death: Time, Space, and Chronotopes in Christoph Ransmayr's *Der fliegende Berg*

Der fliegende Berg, Ransmayr's 2006 novel, opens with a first-person voice announcing its own death: "Ich starb/6840 Meter über dem Meeresspiegel/am vierten Mai im Jahr des Pferdes" (FB 9).¹ This bewildering incipit and the details that follow confront the reader with the firsthand experience of death and make her question not only the status of the narrative instance, but also the overall possibility of narration. How can someone tell the story of his own death, detailing inner sensations and external circumstances of the moment?² And how reliable can a narrator be who proposes to describe such an ungraspable experience like death? As this initial, disruptive moment gets partially clarified—the narrator explains he was "brought back to life" by his brother—the novel continues as a powerful narrative that depicts extreme moments of rupture, in which the reader is constantly suspended between life and death. Such a disorienting experience translates into the novel's temporal and spatial complexity, which shows how the novel makes clever use of narrative strategies in the attempt to narrate the ultimate rupture conceivable, that is, human death. As the different memories show, the novel articulates the movement towards death describing the progression through spaces, the overstepping of thresholds, and meaningful encounters, which bring the characters and the reader closer to the point of no return.

Der fliegende Berg narrates a mountain expedition to the Phur-Ri, the fictional Tibetan "flying mountain." Ransmayr, who was labeled the "langsamste[r] Schriftsteller der Welt"

¹ All quotations from *Der fliegende Berg* are taken from the following edition: Christoph Ransmayr, *Der fliegende Berg. Roman* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2006). Page numbers will be inserted directly in the text and accompanied by the abbreviation FB.

² Dirk Werle also comments on the beginning of the novel in his chapter "Christoph Ransmayrs Poetik der Zeitlosigkeit im *Fligenden Berg*" (155).

(Weinzierl), took almost ten years to complete this novel, the fourth in his career. To a certain extent inspired by the events of Reinhold Messner's expedition to the Nanga-Parbat in the summer of 1970, during which his brother Günther perished, the novel narrates the endeavors of the fictional characters Liam and Pad.³ After growing up in West Cork, the paths of the Irish brothers separate: Liam works in the computer industry on the Irish mainland, while Pad lives at sea working on cargo boats. They reunite years later on Horse Island, where the contrast between their natures escalates. Liam spends most of his time creating and observing fluid crystals, graphics and maps on the monitors that fill his house; Pad, quite indifferent to digital technology, scornfully considers him "Master Kalthertz" (FB 96). Thrilled by the image of the yet unclimbed Tibetan mountain, Liam uses the virtual world to plan an expedition to Tibet, while Pad feels like a marionette controlled by the older brother, who always manages to talk him into his decisions. The brothers finally travel across West China to Tibet, where they join the Kamphas, a nomadic clan with whom they live while preparing to climb the flying mountain. Absorbed in his arrangements for the enterprise, Liam resists any close contact with the clan; Pad, on the contrary, mingles with its members and falls in love with Nyema, who initiates him into the mythical world of storytelling. The ascent to the flying mountain proves to be fatal: on their way down, an avalanche swallows Liam and only Pad escapes with his life. As the survivor of the expedition, he goes back to Horse Island and constructs this memoir, which reads as an attempt to eternalize memories through language.

³ In an interview, available on the website Ö1 (ORF.at), Ransmayr explains that he first had the idea for the novel in the 1990s, at a time when he traveled to Eastern Tibet with his friend Reinhold Messner. To the question if he was inspired by the events in Messner's life, he replies: "Die Geschichte der Messner-Brüder hat mich ja nicht nur deshalb interessiert, weil ich mit Reinhold Messner seit vielen Jahren befreundet bin [. . .] sondern weil mich Brüdergeschichten ganz generell schon seit den Tagen beschäftigen, an denen ich zum ersten Mal von unserem Dorfpfarrer in Roitham bei Gmunden von der Geschichte der Brüder Kain und Abel gehört habe. [. . .]" (Kaindlstorfer).

Scholarly contributions on *Der fliegende Berg* focus, in particular, on the significance of the flying mountain. Often discussed in the tradition of German mountain narratives and nature discourses, the mountain lends itself to be read as a cultural, philosophical and literary construct.⁴ In his contribution to the volume *Heights of Reflection: Mountains in the German Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century*, for example, Olaf Berwald, analyzes *Der fliegende Berg* in terms of epistemic conflicts and reading routes, and discusses the irreconcilable contrast between two “competing but codependent methods of conceptual ascent” (336), that is “scientific invasiveness and mystical immersion” (335). In “Vom Erzählen zwischen Meereshöhen und Meerestiefen,” Sabine Frost offers a spatial and poetic reading that focuses on the two main topoi of the novel, mountain and sea, and their final dissolution into a “Berg im Meer,” “Strand auf einem schneebedeckten Gipfel” (93). In Frost’s reading, the flying mountain becomes the physical representation of a metapoetic space, which stands for the novel, its “formation” and narrative. Indeed, the novel makes use of a peculiar textual space, whose form and layout have often been discussed in the scholarship.⁵

My chapter complements these contributions by combining a formal and narratological analysis with a temporal and spatial investigation, in the attempt to understand how the narrative manages to represent the tension between life and death and the rupture caused by the quasi-death of the narrator. The unusual form of the novel contains the first-person narrator’s fragmented memories, which, defying chronological order, merge events that belong to different temporalities. The manifold representation of space intervenes to complicate this already mosaic narration. The story moves across different spaces, both physical and metaphorical, which are

⁴ See, for instance, Carl Niekerk’s reading in “Poetik der Metonymie: Alterität in Christoph Ransmayr’s *Der fliegende Berg*.”

⁵ See, for example, Olaf Berwald (335), Peter Brandes (733-34), Mathias Mayer (161-62), Wolfgang Müller-Funk (*Räume in Bewegung* 1-2), and Dirk Werle (153-64)

not only significant in their singularity, but most of all in their respective transitions. The multiplicity and composite nature of times and spaces prompt the following questions: to what extent do time and space become meaningful narrative devices? What is the relation between time and space in Ransmayr's text and how is it represented? When the last transition, that is, the final relocation in time—future—and in space—Tibet—fails to happen, the narration ends and brings the reader back to the beginning. What does this suggest in terms of the narrating act? Through a deeper analysis of time and space, this chapter also expands on Mathias Mayer's description of the novel as "Orientierungsstörung und Orientierungssuche" (168). I argue that, through the temporal and spatial configurations, which help intensify the experience of rupture and death, the novel moves from orientation to distortion and final dissolution. By drawing on Bakhtin's theoretical model of the chronotope, my chapter joins the conversation started by Wolfgang Müller-Funk and his reading of Ransmayr's work through the adventure chronotope, articulated in "Ausfahrt/Abenteuer/Heimkehr" ("Räume in Bewegung" 1).

The first section of this chapter reflects on the form of the novel, including its generic hybridity and references to oral storytelling. My investigation then turns to the narratological features of the novel, before examining the literary significance of time and space in Ransmayr's work. With the help of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, the chapter finally reflects on how the relationship between form, narration, time and space enlightens the process of storytelling and how these narrative strategies convey the experience of movement towards the ultimate dissolution.

***Der fliegende Berg* as Formal Innovation**

Der fliegende Berg makes use of a form that reflects and emphasizes the extreme

experience described in the novel, translating “dieses Wagnis des literarischen Alpinismus in die ihm eigene Form der Darstellung” (Brandes 730). By playing with novelistic forms and conventions, it challenges expectations on multiple levels. Already at a first glance, *Der fliegende Berg* is striking for its formal originality.⁶ As Ransmayr indicates in the *Notiz am Rand*, the work is written in “fliegende[n] Sätze[n],” a form unusual in German literature. The “flying sentence” constitutes the basic unit of the novel’s “freie Rhythmen,” which are organized in strophes. The *Notiz am Rand* particularly emphasizes the “freedom” of this form of writing, expressed through its irregularity in length and structure. Interestingly, the word “flying,” already enclosed in the title and repeated in the *Notiz am Rand*, carries a double connotation: on the one hand, it hints at a way of writing that eludes metrical and formal boundaries, thus leaving the sentences free to flow; on the other, “flying” articulates the tension between free wandering and route-guided movement. Both the title and the *Notiz am Rand* anticipate the idea of fluidity and rhythm that informs the whole narration, one that oscillates between the freedom of the irregular lines and strophes, and the structure imposed by the stanzas, the chapters, and other formal choices.

In its formal hybridity, Ransmayr’s work resists unambiguous genre classifications. While the title draws an immediate connection to other representative works of German literature, such as Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* and Adalbert Stifter’s *Bergkristall*, it likewise promises the ephemerality, the imaginary, the transcendental encompassed in the word

⁶ Even though Ransmayr’s work was received with contrasting reactions, some critics praised it as “ein Unikum, ein risikoreiches formales Experiment” (Lüktehaus). Mathias Mayer also comments: “Die Aufnahme des Buches in der Literaturkritik im Herbst 2006 war natürlich zwiespältig, - bei einigem Lob wurde vielfach die Eigenwilligkeit der Form, vor allem aber das Pathos des Erhabenen kritisiert, das Transzendente, das einige Kritiker von Kitsch nicht mehr zu unterscheiden vermochten” (162). While the form of the novel is undoubtedly innovative, Ransmayr is not completely new to the genre of the verse novel: his first work, *Strahlender Untergang* (first published in 1982 and republished in 2000), was written in rhythmic prose.

“fliegende.” The novel plays with the genre of the *Bergroman* by dedicating its title to the mountain and employing all the elements of a traditional mountain climbing story: the use of the first-person; an all-male expedition to conquer an undiscovered, white spot; the tension between brotherhood and rivalry; a female object of desire; weariness, defeat and death.⁷ Yet, at the same time, the form of *Der fliegende Berg* challenges the expectations of the genre and the indication “Roman,” provided on the book cover. The “irregular lines,” arranged into stanzas and chapters, rather evoke the layout of a poem or an epic composition, thus introducing lyrical and epic undertones into the work. However, Ransmayr seems to want to prevent his work from being confined within the genre of poetry since, as he claims, “Der Flattersatz [. . .] gehört nicht allein den Dichtern” (*Notiz am Rand*). This statement reads as a warning to the reader not to come to hurried conclusions; in other words, these free lines cannot be read as verses in the traditional sense.⁸ While the novel renounces the heroic metric system of epic, it adopts the structure of a long epic narrative divided into verses and stanzas, which it combines with the flying sentences. The relation to the epic tradition is reinforced by the content of the novel, where epic motifs, such as the heroic travels of the main figures, the relationship with the father, and oral mythical traditions, enter the novel. The war motif is also alluded to in the rivalry between brothers, the

⁷ A closer reading reveals that, already on the thematic level, Ransmayr complicates the genre tradition by posing questions of interculturality, power relations, history, and gender. In this regard Inge Stephan reads the novel in terms of “die Wiederauferstehung eben dieser Männlichkeit an einem mytisch weißen Gipfel im Grenzgebiet zwischen China und Tibet” (117).

⁸ Brandes observes: “Ransmayr setzt die Form des Flattersatzes nicht in die Relation zu einer gattungsspezifischen Fragestellung, sondern zum Referenten seines Buches: dem fliegenden Berg” (734). In contrast with this position, Zymner points out that Ransmayr’s “fliegende Sätze” are still verses, albeit free, irregular and unrhymed: “Unter literaturwissenschaftlichen Gesichtspunkten kann demgegenüber aber gar kein Zweifel darüber bestehen, dass auch Ransmayrs ‚Roman‘ in Versen geschrieben ist. Es sind zwar keine metrisch regulierten oder/und durch Reime gebundene Verse, aber immerhin doch überwiegend Prosaische bzw. Freie Verse, die durch ihre graphische Rhythmisierung ebenso wie durch ihre stilistische Gestalt die Rezeption als *Verse* bestimmen” (148).

political activism of the father, and the political situation of Tibet, while death is a recurrent, unconcealed motif.⁹ In line with the epic genre, Ransmayr's work is clearly self-conscious and makes use of specific rhetorical devices: from the proem-like *Notiz am Rand*, in which, similarly to a *captatio benevolentiae*, the author reaches out to the audience and justifies his formal choices, to the elevated use of poetic language, imbued with similes and imagery.¹⁰ Finally, the text takes up the tone of a memoir, in which the narrator recounts the story of his deceased brother. These formal choices, which represent an uncommon combination in German contemporary literature, contribute to the originality of Ransmayr's work.¹¹

The chosen form achieves results that outdo the possibilities of prose. While conventional prose texts usually show a uniform layout in which only full stops and paragraph ends signal a break, the division into irregular stanzas, in turn formed by lines with variable structure, affects both the process of narrating and reading. After pointing out the mixed reception of this formal innovation, Wendelin-Schmidt Dengler enthusiastically recognizes the value of the flying sentences: "für mich stellte die strophische Gliederung eine entscheidende Lesehilfe dar – ein Befund, der so wohl gar nicht im Willen des Autors gelegen sein mag. Indes wächst dem Text durch das, was bloß als Äußerlichkeit erscheinen mag, eine Stildimension zu, die sich ohne

⁹ See Pfeiferová's *Angesichts des Todes* (209) and "Das Ende der Welt und der 'unverrückbare' Ort" (34-37).

¹⁰ In "Epic as Genre," Richard P. Martin describes the epic genre on the basis of the following features: besides features of content, "formal features including the length of a poem; the very fact of poetic form ("heroic" verse lines); musical accompaniment or song style; highly rhetorical speeches by heroic figures; invocations or self-conscious poetic proems; similes; and "typical" or recurrent motifs" (10).

¹¹ The origin of the verse novels goes back to the epic genre, best exemplified by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. During the Middle Ages, the verse novel was the form used by many chivalric romances, i.e. *Parzival*. Differently from the form of the epic poem, employed by Wieland, Goethe and Heine, for example, the verse novel emphasizes the novelistic element besides its structure of verses. See Zymner for other examples, in the German and international context (149-50).

diesen „Flattersatz“ nicht entfalten konnte“ (qtd. in Ransmayr, *von und über Christoph Ransmayr*). The new “Stildimension” praised by Schmidt-Dengler is one that emphasizes verse caesurae, pauses and ellipses and invites the reader to slow down while reading. At the same time, sentences continue beyond the verse limit and the reader must often overcome the verse boundary to get their full meaning. This generates a tension between the necessity to respect the graphic pauses imposed by the text and the desire to speed up to the end of the line and the stanza. The three irregular lines that open the novel provide a powerful example of such dynamics.

Ich starb

6840 Meter über dem Meeresspiegel

am vierten Mai im Jahr des Pferdes. (FB 9)

The graphic layout of the text calls for three pauses, one after each line. This formal choice stresses every single line and, in particular, the first one, the shortest and the only one containing a verb. By isolating the three lines, the layout separates the key elements of the narrative: the main event of death, its location and its time. These three lines contain *in nuce* the whole tragedy that the novel describes, emphasizing already the temporal and spatial dimensions to come. At the same time, the enjambments invite us to continue reading to find out the context of these first words, revealing the “return to life” of the first-person narrator. Through its spatial form, this strong incipit introduces the narrative and thematic paradox of Ransmayr’s text: the tension between present narration and past memories, the dialectic between progression and regression, and ultimately, the conflict between life and death.

In a composition that emphasizes spatiality so much, the transitions among flying sentences and stanzas are more than mere graphic marks. Indeed, the blank spaces that interrupt

verses, lines and strophes often function as narrative bridges or jumps, both spatial and temporal. Some lines, stanzas and scenes flow, moving gently into the next, while others fail to cohere, resulting in abrupt temporal and spatial jumps, which puzzle the reader. The first chapter offers multiple examples of the latter dynamics, thus suggesting the disruptive nature of the events described. Halfway through the chapter, the narrator recalls the moment in which he and his brother lost track of each other in a drastic change of weather conditions. The thematic loss of orientation translates into a formal strategy. In accordance with the incipit of the novel, the narrator proclaims: “Ich war gestorben / Er hatte mich gefunden” (FB 11). The opening of the next stanza contradicts the previous statement and reads: “Ich öffnete die Augen. / Er kniete neben mir. // Hielt mich in seinen Armen. / Ich lebte” (FB 11). The verse caesura produces a rapid change in the events and a mysterious return to life, emphasized by the one-liner “Ich lebte.” With the next stanza, a new temporal jump brings the reader forward in time to the “heute,” from which the narrator recalls the past episode. Several verbs of perception in the present tense—“zurückdenke,” “denke,” “sehe,” “höre,” and “spüre” (FB 11-12)—reinforce the temporal and spatial jump from a death-like state to the present alertness. After five irregular stanzas written in the present, the narrator switches back to the past tense again and lingers over Nyema’s memory for a few lines before disrupting—both graphically and temporally—this thread of thoughts with the italicized insertion of the brother’s direct voice, “*Steh auf!*” (FB 12). These two words become almost a refrain in the rest of the chapter and return seven times, constantly interrupting the narration of past events. These constant changes between events and time frames affect the process of telling. In these first pages, the narration is particularly fragmentary, with stanzas that become very irregular and are sometimes reduced to one or two lines.

Stylistic features also function as a strategy to create a dialogue among stanzas.¹²

Anaphoric repetitions and variations exemplify some of the formal and rhetorical devices used for this purpose. For instance, after the narrator remembers how Nyema was the one to tell him about his brother's death, two stanzas open with an anaphoric repetition: "Ich erinnere mich, dass ich [. . .]" "Und ich erinnere mich, dass mein Bruder [. . .]" (FB 19). While emphasizing the centrality of the act of remembering, this rhetorical repetition establishes a strong connection between the two strophes, in which the second reads as an answer to the previous one. The first stanza closes with Pad inquiring about the swarm of butterflies he sees flying in the sky: "*Sind sie tot?*" (FB 19). The answer to this question comes at the end of the second stanza with the closing line "*Aber sie fliegen! Sie fliegen immer noch!*" (FB 19). The following, isolated line, "Mein Bruder ist tot!" (FB 19) encloses the tragedy of the novel. On one hand, it contrasts with the statement that comes immediately before, which celebrates the life of the butterflies; on the other, it reads as an answer to the earlier question "Sind sie tot?" Such parallel or contrasting structures are often used in the text to connect or juxtapose different episodes in the narration, and often stylistically bring together sections that are either thematically related or opposed.

In *Der fliegende Berg*, the form acquires a performative function, in which writing and reading mirror the diegetic activity of climbing and ascending. The movement towards the top of the mountain is paralleled in the spatial arrangement of the text in lines and strophes, which stretch vertically on the page, developing in a column—or replicating the shape of the mountain. But the writing and reading activities, which develop on the vertical axis, from the top to the bottom of the page, trace a movement that is opposite to the movement described in the novel. While the characters ascend to the top of the mountain, the reader digs deeper into Pad's

¹² See Zymner, who also highlights some stylist features of the narration (148).

memories. However, these two—only at first—opposite directions combine in the diegesis, in which Pad explains how the ascent of the mountain becomes a route into their past: “Wir jedenfalls gerieten mit jedem Schritt, / mit dem wir uns vom Meeresspiegel entfernten / und an Höhe gewannen, / gleichzeitig tiefer in unsere eigene Geschichte” (FB 44). Altitude and depth develop hand in hand on the level of narration and translate into the reading process: the higher the two brothers climb, the deeper the reader is brought into their story. The detailed description of the moment in which Pad and Liam reach the top of the flying mountain—end of chapter 17—represents the climax of the vertical movement. Likewise, the reader is at this point acquainted with the whole story—or at least what the narrator’s inner perspective has revealed about it—and is brought back to the present frame of the narration. Olaf Berwald asks: “Can extreme mountaineering provide helpful allegories for the risks of vertiginous reading?” (334) and his essay suggests that *Der fliegende Berg* “offers itself as a territory that invites intersecting inscriptions of reading routes” (334). Ransmayr’s novel provides a positive answer to Berwald’s question by showing how climbing, writing and reading can turn into conflating experiences through a form that performs its content. The physical route to the unconquered white spot turns into a reading route. As the younger brother gets lost and perishes on the flying mountain, the reader is likewise taken on an erratic journey through temporal and spatial memories.

The genre hybridity and experimentalism of *Der fliegende Berg* is further reinforced by the emphasis on orality. Ransmayr’s interest in oral performance is no secret and the following words confirm the significance of the spoken narration for the author: “ich träume davon eine Geschichte mal überhaupt nur als gesprochenen Text zu veröffentlichen” (qtd. in Müller-Funk, “Die unendliche Arbeit am Mythos” 58). Ransmayr’s enthusiasm for “gesprochene Narration” (Müller-Funk, “Räume in Bewegung” 1) in part explains the role of rhythm and musicality in

Der fliegende Berg and the use of the “fliegende Sätze.” Rhythm should not be understood just as an imposition of strict metrical rules, but rather as the prosody resulting from textual arrangement and rhetorical choices.

Ransmayr’s decision to release an audiobook for this novel reinforces the importance of orality, already suggested by the choice of the “flying sentences” and by the references to the epic and lyrical genres.¹³ In his review of the audiobook, Martin Kubaczek reflects on the beauty and function of the flying sentences, made even more prominent through the author’s own reading: “Gelesen hat es etwas Rufendes, wenn Ransmayr die Endsilben überdehnt und nachklingen lässt, es raunt und singt im Tonfall der Sage, bringt in Ton und Gestus viel vom Flug, vom Aufstreben, vom Wind und den Wolken zusammen über den Klippen, sei es in Tibet, sei es auf Horse Island vor der irischen Küste.” In his reading of *Der fliegende Berg*, Ransmayr partly transcends the limits of the written words, and, for example, clearly emphasizes the function and relevance of enjambments. Consequently, the text acquires a prosody and rhythm that cannot be fully anticipated in the printed version of the work. The pauses inserted by the author are sometimes different from the ones suggested by the written text and the blank spaces on the page are only partially respected in his reading. As Mathias Mayer points out, “der als Roman deklarierte Text ist als ‘fliegender Satz’ typographisch, aber nicht akustisch gegliedert – auch in Ransmayrs eigene Lesung wird über die Zeilenenden hinweggelesen” (161). The novel is read as a rhythmic prose text, in which specific words receive particular emphasis through their position within the line or the strophe, thus highlighting the musicality of the whole work, which seems to be composed to be read out aloud.

Orality is the cradle of every written text or, as Matthew Rubery writes in the foreword to

¹³ See Brandes (735).

Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies, “Textuality, sounded, evokes orality” (18). One of the recurrent claims about audiobooks is that they “bring back old forms of reading” (59), thus redefining the “roles of the narrator, reader and listener” (Rubery, “Play it again” 60). In the audiobook, Ransmayr takes up the role of the storyteller who not only reads but also performs the text for his audience, thus doubling the first-person narrator’s role on the diegetic level. As Uwe Wittstock suggests, the function of narrating goes beyond the simple recounting of actions: “Erzählen – das merkt man dann beim Zuhören – kann viel mehr sein, als nur der Bericht von einem historisch verbürgten oder fiktiven Geschehen” (*Nach der Moderne* 125-26). By becoming an oral performance, the written text fully regains its rhythm and prosody, which the rigidity of the page can only in part convey.¹⁴ At the same time, the emphasized function of orality suggests the relevance of traditional storytelling, which plays a key role in the novel. *Der fliegende Berg* encourages the reader to embrace a traditional form of narration, which insists on the importance of telling and listening for the continuation of existence and the survival of memories.

Time and Space in Narrative Theory

While the first part of the chapter highlighted the formal qualities of Ransmayr’s work, the rest of my analysis will expand on these reflections by focusing on the representation and significance of time and space in the novel. Time and space have a very long history in narrative theory. Time has been regarded as the main structuring principle by generations of scholars. In 1925, Boris Tomashevsky first developed the concepts of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, differentiating

¹⁴ On discussing *Der fliegende Berg*, Wittstock remarks: “[. . .] bei genauerem Hinhören ist schnell zu spüren, dass diese Prosa bis in die Feinheiten hinein rhythmisch durchformt und durchdacht ist, ohne deshalb in eine aufdringliche, starre Metrik zu verfallen” (*Nach der Moderne* 133).

between the chronological sequence of events and their possible achronological presentation to the reader. This distinction has become a key one in narrative theory and has informed many later discussions of time constructions (Richardson, *Narrative Dynamics*, 9), including Genette's distinction between story and discourse time. Linguistics-based approaches, such as Harald Weinrich's *Tempus und Besprochene Zeit*, first published in 1946 and revised in 2001, applied the question of time also to the textual-linguistic level, bringing together the narratological and linguistic dimension of time configurations. Not only is the narrated time relevant, but the choice of *tempora* also affects the function and significance of time for the narration. In the German narrative tradition, Günther Müller first elaborated the concepts of narrative time (*Erzählzeit*) and narrated time (*erzählte Zeit*) (1948), which also provided the ground for the analysis of time in later narrative theories. In classical narrative approaches, time is usually conceptualized as story time, discourse time and narrating time. The first category refers to the time represented in the fictional world; the second to the time of telling determined by the text; and the last category refers to the "spatiotemporal position of the narrative voice" (Scheffel, Weixier, and Werner). Still considered the most influential study on narrative time, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* uses the categories of order, duration and frequency to discuss the representation of time in literature. Time is not considered in its static dimension, but rather in the way it serves to organize the sequence of events, which in turn affects the reading and interpretation of narrative texts. Genette's discussion of time, in particular the relations between story and discourse time, constitutes the basis of my analysis. Paul Ricoeur's belief that narratives have an essential relation to time, since they are "never merely a linear sequence of discreet, successive instants, but an emplotted, dialectical whole that is projected toward a definite future and is envisaged through past experience," also guides my understanding of time in the novel (qtd. in Richardson,

Narrative Dynamics 12). In his multi-volume work on time, Ricoeur considers time a fundamental structure of existence and narrativity. And yet, as my reading attempts to show, time is only one of the two dimensions which narratives use to frame and organize their event. In Ransmayr's work, the "emplotted dialectical whole" of time cannot be understood separately from the multiplicity of space.

In the "Introduction" to their newly published volume *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative*, Ryan, Foote and Maoz capture the state of time and space discourses in narratology: "Space has traditionally been viewed as a backdrop to plot, if only because narrative, by definition, is a temporal art involving the sequencing of events" (1). Indeed, narrative theorizations of space have a more complex and delayed story compared to discussions of time. Even though the definition of space is as old as Aristotle and has developed throughout the centuries, narrative theories have shifted the focus onto space only with the development of the spatial turn in the late twentieth century.¹⁵ When discussing spatial configurations, a terminological distinction needs to be made, between the concepts of place and space. In my analysis, I will mostly refer to the spatial configurations represented in the novel as spaces. My use of the terms spaces and places follows Ryan's theorization. Space refers to the "key characteristics of the environments or settings within which characters live and act: location, position, arrangement, distance, direction, orientation, and movement. These are also characteristics of the real-world locations that are sometimes used in narratives as settings or referents. [. . .] Space might also have allusive, figurative, and connotative meaning in a given

¹⁵ Dünne and Günzel's *Raumtheorie* (2006) offers a representative collection of theories of space and spatiality, which follows the development of the concept from Descartes to the present. A significant group of texts capture the influence of the spatial turn of the 1980s in promoting interdisciplinary approaches to space, which combine the different traditions in the humanities and social sciences.

narrative” (7). Place, instead, denotes “the way environments and settings have been shaped and molded by human action and habitation, the qualities that make spaces distinctive or unique” (7). Whenever I refer to specific geographical points with or without a referential correspondence in the real world, I will use the term location.

My discussion of space will address different dimensions of the concept. I will first reflect on the “spatial form” of the text, in which spatiality, taken metaphorically, refers to the formal and compositional patterns used in the novel.¹⁶ My main focus will then shift to the narrative spaces in which the characters live and interact. In this regard, I will reflect on three main spaces, that is, physical, virtual and mythological, which represent the diegetic and metaphorical spaces in which characters move or operate. When appropriate, I will apply the idea of the so-called “spirit’ of place,” “the distinctive character of a place that grows out of human use and experience” (Ryan, Foote and Maoz 7). In my analysis of these spaces, I will also investigate the textualization of space, those techniques of representation used to convey spatial information. These techniques include description, character’s movements and the information that can be inferred from what the characters or the narrator communicate about these spaces. Finally, my reading will incorporate reflections on the thematization of space, the ways in which space acquires a deeper meaning for the understanding of the novel.

In narratives, temporality and spatiality constitute an indissoluble connection, one that is often neglected as obvious. While theories of time and space developed separately, more recently critics have reconsidered the interconnections between the two categories to be most interesting. In this chapter, I will refer to Bakhtin’s pioneering theorization of time and space, in which the critic first used the idea of the chronotope to describe the unity of time and space in relation to

¹⁶ See Marie-Luise Ryan’s definition of “spatial form” (Ryan, Foote and Maoz 5-6).

plot development. In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” Bakhtin defines the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). For Bakhtin, chronotopes serve as narrative devices but also tools for a historical analysis. Specific genres or types of novel, which developed through the centuries, make use of similar chronotopes. In his 1937-38 essay, he includes chronotopes characteristic for the Greek Romance, the Adventure Novel and the Ancient Biography and Autobiography, among others. In the artistic chronotope, as Bakhtin writes, “[t]ime [. . .] thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically viable; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history” (84). Consequently, the chronotope functions as the concrete representation of time and space, which would be otherwise difficult to picture in words. *Der fliegende Berg* lends itself to a chronotopic reading. While Müller-Funk uses the chronotope of the road to interpret Ransmayr’s work, which he complicates through the triad of “Ausfahrt/Abenteuer/Heimweh” (“Räume in Bewegung” 1), my analysis employs the chronotope of the threshold and that of the encounter to describe the composite temporal and spatial configurations in the work. As Bakhtin suggests, the coexistence of two chronotopes is not unusual since “[c]hronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships” (252). In his study on the Bakhtinian chronotope, Bart Keunen writes that “[o]nly those images possessing a strong thematic value, images that also produce an effect on the level of the plot-space, can claim a place in the category of dominant chronotopes” (40). In line with Keunen’s reading, my choice of the two chronotopes to analyze *Der fliegende Berg* is motivated by the striking significance of

movements across boundaries, both temporal and spatial, and by the importance of encounters as both cause and consequence of these movements.

Narration in *Der fliegende Berg*: A Few Remarks

The narration of *Der fliegende Berg* echoes the tension between continuation and rupture observed on the formal level. Organized in temporally distant episodes, the novel offers a subsequent narration, in which the events take place prior to the time of narrating. “Subsequent” narrating is the term used by Gérard Genette in his section on “Voice” in *Narrative Discourse* to describe “the classical position of the past-tense narrative, undoubtedly far and away the most frequent” (217). *Der fliegende Berg* is mostly written in the past tense (*Präteritum*), which is used to narrate events set both in Ireland and in Tibet. This form of narrating mingles with a simultaneous one, told “in the present contemporaneous with the action” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 217). Indeed, the tense switches, often unexpectedly, to the present time of the narrator, the unspecified “heute” from which he is telling his story—the reader only knows that “seit mehr als einem Jahr liegt er [Liam] nun/im Eis begraben” (FB 19). Being one of the two main characters in the novel, the first-person narrator offers his privileged, internal perspective to the reader. The words spoken by other characters are mostly reported using the indirect speech (*Konjunktiv I*), while the few, exceptional examples of direct speech are italicized to indicate that a different voice enters the narration. The omission of quotation marks suggests the choice to avoid these graphic signs, which could disrupt the flow of the flying sentences. If read through Weinrich’s theory of *Tempus* and *Zeit*, *Der fliegende Berg* alternates between “Tempora der erzählten Welt” (*Präteritum* and *Konjunktiv I*) and “Tempora der besprochenen Welt” (present) (32). Whereas the reader experiences the past events with a relaxed attitude (“entspannt”), the

use of the present immediately creates a tension (“gespannt”), which increases the desire to know what is going to happen next (Weinrich 47). By mixing these two forms, the text preserves its dynamism and constantly renews the tension between past death and present life, even though present and future are only hinted at in Ransmayr’s work.

Pad’s account is fragmentary, both in its structure and extension. The narration is nonlinear and the narrator tends to interrupt the telling of specific episodes, whose gaps are either later filled through analepsis or left incomplete. This fragmentary quality partly explains the difficulty of providing a complete, gapless summary of the novel, also discussed by Müller-Funk: “in diesem Erinnerungstext, der sich in seiner Virtuosität mit Klassikern wie Nerval, Schnitzler, Broch oder Thomas Bernhard messen kann, [ist] jedwede zeitliche Kontinuität gekappt. [. . .] Unmöglich, die zeitliche Abfolge der Handlung lückenlos und linear zu rekonstruieren” (“Räume in Bewegung” 2). While this narrative structure mirrors the mental processes of the narrator, it also emphasizes the significance of temporal and spatial elements and, in particular, of the transitions and gaps between them. At the end of the novel, the narrator is still waiting for the storm to calm to go back to Tibet, which suggests how he and his storytelling are trapped in the past, unable to move on to the future plans.

Events are arranged within complex temporal and spatial configurations, which become organizational and interpretive tools for the reader. Specific temporal indications are absent from the chapter titles, with the exception of the first one, which situates the narrative in the 21st century. And yet, time plays a key role in the narrative. *Der fliegende Berg* spans over decades and brings together different time layers, from the childhood of the first person narrator to the time of the expedition that gives the title to the novel, and the present of the writing. The titles of the chapters already suggest the anachronic development of the narration. By hinting at the

“resurrection” of the first-person narrator, the title of the opening chapter, “Auferstehung in Kham. Östliches Tibet, 21. Jahrhundert” already signals the beginning in medias res, or rather, after the end. The event of death has already taken place and the reader is now confronted with an exceptional “resurrection.” The second chapter, titled “Horse Island. Das Erbe in West Cork” makes an analeptic move back to Irish locations, where the story actually begins. The title of chapter three, “Schlaflos am Yangtekiang. Schlaflos in den Cahas,” highlights the anachronic structure of the novel by bringing together episodes that are temporally and spatially distant. The centrality of space also comes across by looking at the titles of the eighteen chapters. These do not only provide a visual map of the main places of the novel such as Kham, Horse Island, the Cahas, the Yangtze River, the flying mountain, the *Vogelberg*, but also foreground the Tibetan climbing adventure, by dedicating most of the chapters to it (Chapters 7 to 17 are all centered on the Tibetan trip and the brothers’ adventure). While a variety of locations constitute the setting of the novel, three main spaces stand out: physical, virtual and mythical. These constitute the three main spatial configurations, through which events unfold. The novel begins in Ireland, where the two brothers live. Liam’s searches on the internet bring them closer to virtual reality, where the desire for adventure takes shape. From here, the narration moves back to physical space, where the reader follows the two brothers in their exploration of the Tibetan mountains, and, in their access to the mythical world. Not only do these three spaces constitute diegetic spaces, which are narratively constructed, but they are also spaces through which narration and storytelling are thematized. Ultimately, they become significant for the narrating process itself and the reader’s understanding of the novel.

Moving Forward and Narrating Back: Time Representation in the Novel

The tension between narrative progression and backward movement characterizes the unfolding of events in *Der fliegende Berg*. On one hand, the novel favors narrative development as it tells the story of the two Irish brothers and their Tibetan adventure; on the other, the retrospective narration and the use of past tense emphasize backward movement.¹⁷ In fact, calling back through narration figures as a dominant pattern in Ransmayr's work. Pad, the narrator, was "narrated back to life" ("aus dem Tod / ins Leben zurückerzählte" FB 18) by his brother after getting lost in the ice labyrinth of the mountain. One year later, the first-person narrator reciprocates this narrative gesture and tries to bring back his brother by telling his story. Pad's account unfolds across four different layers of time: childhood; the life on Horse Island before the exploration and during the preparation time; the climbing adventure in Tibet; Liam's return to Horse Island (Müller-Funk, "Räume in Bewegung" 2). The frequent shifts between these temporal layers, and the use of anachronies, further complicated by prolepses, defy the idea of a linear narration. According to Genette, analepsis consists of "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (40). Prolepsis, instead, designates "any narrative maneuver that consist of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (40). The effect of such temporal configuration is a narration characterized by dynamism and kaleidoscopic temporal oscillation.

The opening of the novel, in which present and past, and life and death are juxtaposed, best exemplifies the tension between progression and regression. This incipit seems to catapult the reader to the end of the story by employing the greatest prolepsis conceivable, the one that leads to the death of the narrator and, consequently, the end of the narrating act. The reader is left

¹⁷ See Frost (96-7).

wondering who is speaking since the verbs of perception interspersed in the narration—“ich sah,” “erkennen glaubte,” “hörte ich” (FB 9-10)—contrast with the death of the speaking “I” proclaimed in the beginning. Olaf Berwald suggests one could read the novel as a “post-mortem dream-diary,” in which the two brothers come to constitute “one figure” (335). However, hardly two pages into the narration, this “Semiotik der Halluzination in personaler Perspektive” (Zymner 148) gives way to a new beginning. The lines “Ich öffnete die Augen. [. . .] / [. . .] Ich lebte” (FB 11) utterly invalidate the death of the speaking voice, marking a new beginning in the story and projecting the reader into the narrator’s present (“Wenn ich heute / an jene Mondnacht zurückdenke” FB 11). Even though the beginning in medias res produces an after-death illusion, it slowly becomes clear that the speaking voice is that of the survivor, who accompanies the reader in his temporal and spatial journey to reveal the death of the brother.

Anachronies intervene to complicate the retrospective narration of *Der fliegende Berg*. The narrative voice speaks from the present—Pad is on Horse Island waiting to leave his brother’s house to reunite with Nyema. However, the narrator constantly refers back to previous episodes, among which childhood events and, in particular, the death of the brother stand out. The main analepsis goes back one year and narrates the time of the actual climbing on the flying mountain. Anachronies, evoked through a chain of associations, open within this extensive analepsis and introduce events from earlier stages in the narrator’s life, which portray their relationship and the connections with the rest of their family. This strategy is exemplified throughout the novel, but chapter five, “Master Kaltherz. Billiard im Schnee,” provides a prime example. The chapter focuses on Liam, whose portrait emerges through Pad’s anachronic remembering. The associative strategy moves from the day of the tragedy, in which the narrator yelled out to this brother everything he had repressed for a long time, only to realize that “war

ich plötzlich allein, /war ich schon seit Stunden allein” (FB 98), to the chronologically close moment in which he engraved his words with blood in the snow. From here, the narrator remembers a moment “Monate später” (FB 100) on Horse Island, when the house was finally empty, and through associations, he inserts memories of the family house and the day in which Shona, their mother, left it to follow her lover Duffy. The narration moves to the father’s death as a consequence of “seine Wut über ihren Verrat” (FB 103) and, in an almost circular motion, back to the other dead person in the family, Liam, and the trip to Tibet. This use of associations to connect embedded anachronic episodes is exemplified with an even higher degree of complexity later in the book. Pad remembers how he felt debilitated when, together with Liam, he was close to reaching the top of the flying mountain. Liam tried to encourage him by using his childhood nickname *Mousepad* (FB 327). Here, the text opens up to include several analepses. Pad remembers when this nickname was first given to him by Liam and this memory introduces an earlier event, Captain Daddy’s choice of giving the first-person narrator the name “Pádraic” (FB 327). To this doubled analepsis, a third temporal layer is added, graphically set aside through the use of brackets. Here Pad remembers how his mom Shona, after leaving her family, reproached her husband for having picked the name Pádraic because of “jenen Pádraic Henry Pearse” (FB 327). These associations create a narration characterized by nested analapses, in which one memory opens within the other. This narrative strategy achieves a double effect: on the one hand, it highlights the time vortex in which the first-person narrator and, consequently, the reader moves; on the other, it suggests that both of them are trapped between past and present, and engulfed in past memories, which leave almost no room for future steps.

Past memories, images and sounds are not only nested within one another, but also tend to lose their contours, overlapping in a sort of superimposition. The best example of this

strategy is represented by the superimposed voices of the key female characters: Nyema, Pad's lover, and Shona, his mother. Remembering an intimate moment with Nyema, Pad narrates how her voice conflated with that of his mother singing to him during his childhood. "[I]ch glaubte aus Nyemas Mund die alten Strophen/ über ein armes, schmutziges Männlein zu hören," states the first-person narrator and then adds an analeptic episode about his mother singing while giving him a bath (FB 189). Müller-Funk describes this and similar episodes in terms of "ein teils romantisches, teils psychoanalytisches Narrativ des Déjà-vu" ("Räume in Bewegung" 5). These superimposed memories create connections with previous events and episodes in the narration and reinforce the idea of a temporally convoluted narration, of which the narrator can hardly make sense.

Not only is the story order "disarranged" in the plot, but frequency, defined by Genette as the "relations between the repetitive capacities of the story and those of the narrative" (*Narrative Discourse* 35), also intervenes to complicate the temporal configuration of *Der fliegende Berg*. The frequency with which events are narrated or omitted highlights their significance in the novel. In fact, the narrator can return to central events and narrate them repeatedly in spite of their singular nature, while glossing over actions that have happened several times but are only presented once. The account of Liam's death exemplifies these dynamics: in spite of its obvious singular nature, the event is narrated multiple times. It is first mentioned as an isolated line in the first chapter, enclosed between two longer stanzas: "Mein Bruder ist tot!" (FB 19), already highlighting the centrality of the event. On this occasion, the place of his death "im Eis begraben" as well as the cause of the tragedy "auf die donnernde Wolke jener Lawine [. . .] / in der er verschwand" (FB 19) are indicated. Liam's death is mentioned a second time in a very different form and in terms of conjecture. The first-person narrator reflects on how Liam could

be alive still if only things had gone differently “[. . .] vielleicht / wäre Liam noch am Leben, / hätten wir [. . .]” (FB 59). While revealing the significance of the tragedy on the one hand, on the other, the repetition discloses more details about the event itself: Liam and his brother had left the tent back on the ridge of the mountain to avoid carrying unnecessary weight. When the sudden change of weather surprised them, they quickly descended the mountain in search of protection “in die Irre, in den Tod” (FB 60). Liam’s death is once again mentioned in the fifth chapter, where the first-person narrator reflects on his relationship to his brother and remembers screaming at him only to realize that the brother could not hear him as he laid “geborgen, unerreichbar wie immer/ in seiner Lawine” (FB 99). The repeating narrative draws the reader’s attention to the event and highlights its omission at the end of chapter seventeen, where it would actually belong chronologically in the diegesis.¹⁸ This chapter ends instead with the brothers’ arrival on the top of the mountain before the focus shifts back to Horse Island and the present of the narrator. The representation of the triumphal ascent of the mountain counteracts the tragedy, showing the displacement and repression of memories throughout the novel.

The opposite process is used to describe the hours that Pad spends with Nyema, the “Lehrstunden” as the chapter title labels them (FB 202). The reader is informed that this activity is repeated over time (“Sprechenlernen, Lesen, Schreiben als Liebesspiel / beschäftigten Nyema und mich in den Tagen / nach unserer ersten Lehrstunde am See so sehr” FB 215), and yet the narrator includes it only once in the diegesis. By capturing the crucial moment, the “Beginn eines gegenseitigen Unterrichtens” (FB 213), this iterative strategy describes a particular scene, which becomes emblematic for further instances. The richness of details used to describe this episode provides a clear picture of the event, which fixes it in the overall plot development, making its

¹⁸ “Repeating narrative” is the term used by Genette to talk about a “type of narrative, where the recurrences of the statement do not correspond to any recurrence of events” (116).

repetition unnecessary in the narration. At the same time, this strategy emphasizes other moments of the narration, such as those experienced with the brother and the rest of the family, while conferring uniqueness to the encounters with Nyema.

The effects of frequency are further reinforced through the strategy of duration or narrative speed. Not only the number of times an event is narrated becomes significant, but also the extent of its narration. In this regard, the narrator skips the description of certain events, whereas specific moments are turned into longer scenes and narrated in their details. Entire years of the childhood are not even mentioned or are dismissed within two strophes. The return to Horse Island after Liam's death is also summarized in 14 lines (FB 358-59). By contrast, the episode of Shona leaving her family or the description of the father's participation in the Irish Republican Army parade are fully illustrated and receive great attention in the novel. The episode of the parade takes up ten pages and describes quite precisely the march and final humiliation of the father on that St. Patrick's day (FB 170-79). The duration of this episode is even more puzzling if one considers that it constitutes an analepsis within the account of the ascent to the Cha-Ri, evoked through Liam's similarity to his father. Likewise, many details and days are overlooked in the description of the mountain exploration, whereas the moment of the tragedy is fully described through the several references to it. This strategy allows the narrator to zoom in on the events that are particularly important for the narration, while only mentioning secondary ones, without the need to fully describe them. This selective representation of events contributes to the fragmented structure of the novel. By renouncing linearity in favor of a narration that resembles a mosaic of temporal impressions, *Der fliegende Berg* results in a temporally disrupted narrative, which pieces together traumatic memories and reminds the reader of the difficulty of coming to terms with the past.

“Der Weg in die Vertikale:” Spatial Orientation Through Physical Space

In *Der fliegende Berg*, physical spaces that can be topologically located constitute the setting of most events. In fact, the narration oscillates between Ireland and Tibet, which in turn include several sub-regions, such as the childhood house in West Cork, Liam’s house on Horse Island, the territory of West China, Kham and the mountain landscape in Tibet. On one hand, these locations are referential and parallel the geographical places they depict; on the other, they become narrative constructions that provide orientation in the organization of events.

Located respectively on the western and eastern side of Eurasia, Ireland and Tibet represent contrasting poles. Ireland is described as a place that can be fully mapped and explored; on the other hand, Tibet stands for an unapproachable destination, secluded through its historical and political situation, which can only be bypassed with intrigues. Ireland is the island at sea, whereas Tibet is the country of high mountains and harsh, iced peaks. Ireland denotes the place of the paternal house and family relations, whereas Tibet is the space of the clan, tent life and nomadic movement. In their difference, Tibet and Ireland represent the two extreme poles in the characters’ journey and the transitions from one place to the next mark essential steps in the narrating process and in the construction of the narrative spaces.

Ireland functions as a spatial frame that contains the events that take place before and after the trip to Tibet. It develops around two main sub-regions: West Cork and Horse Island. Pad and Liam spend their childhood in West Cork and the proximity of the Caha Mountains. Physical descriptions of this area are sparse in the novel, since the space is mostly represented by Captain Daddy’s house. The paternal house is the center of family and childhood relations, which turn out to be dysfunctional. The mother Shona leaves the family to follow her lover Duffy; Captain Daddy is described as the authoritative father, who uses military discipline in his

relationships with his kids; and Pad suffers from an inferiority complex towards his older brother, who has always been the father's "wahre[r]' Sohn" (FB 53). At the same time, the family house functions as a museum space, which gathers the history of generations in "das wahre Irland" (FB 53), "eine finstere Gallerie der Sehnsucht" (FB 55) "mit Hunderten Fotos" (FB 53) of emigrants, relatives and friends, taken on festive occasions, and hanging opposite of "jene vierquadratmetergroße Weltkarte" (FB 55), which represents the distribution of the Irish communities in the world. This space and the language used to talk about it suggest its theatrical nature. In the family space, characters are either silent, posing figures or become the actors of a performance. The first-person narrator, for instance, clearly characterizes his relationship to the brother as a show. Feeling like a placeholder in his brother's life, he describes their relationship as "Fortsetzung eines Schauspiels, in dem ich, / wenn überhaupt etwas, dann nur stumme Person, Statist, / bestenfalls Zuhörer oder Stichwortgeber gewesen war" (FB 107). The reference to his role as a mute figure, as an extra or even a stooge translates into theatrical terms the inadequacy he feels. These theatrical qualities migrate with the inhabitants of the family space from West Cork to Horse Island, where the brothers reunite decades after. Horse Island is perceived as a reenactment of the paternal house ("eine Rekonstruktion" FB 101) and the narrator remarks how only the original residents were missing in the recreated family space. Interestingly, the words he uses to talk about these missing figures are "Darsteller," "die verschwundenen Bewohner, / ich" (FB 101), which suggest that the house on Horse Island becomes the stage where family relations can be further performed, albeit with restricted cast.

As the stage for the brothers' relationship, Horse Island represents the utopian idea of an immutable place under an immutable sky, "*unverrückbaren Ort unter einem/unverrückbaren Himmel*" (FB 28). In its fixity, it symbolizes, at the same time, the point of arrival and departure:

The brothers reunite here years before leaving together for Tibet and Pad returns to Horse Island after Liam's death. The first person narrator perceives this place as "die Welt meines Bruders" (FB 58), which he only appreciates in the moment when he can finally leave it, "in jener Stunde, / in der es endlich leergeräumt, leer!, und mein Erbe/ans irische Festland [. . .] verfrachtet war" (FB 100). Horse Island oscillates between an isolated, unwelcoming place—"eine nahezu unbewohnte / und in Sturmtagen unerreichbare Insel" (FB 25) – and a secure refuge, which, in its disconnection from reality and its indestructibility, is reminiscent of a utopia – "eine umbrandete Geborgenheit, / herausgehoben aus der Zeit/ und so entrückt und unzerstörbar wie eine Utopie" (FB 28). The brothers are the only two inhabitants of the island, which they have monitored, explored and named in its entirety. Upon his return to Horse Island, the narrator finally destroys the utopia by emptying the house and getting rid of all his brother's technological devices, after deleting their data. Horse Island translates once again into a point of departure, as the narrator stands there ready for his second trip to Tibet, which, however, is not narrated in the work. In its utopian immutability, Horse Island is connected and juxtaposed to the other physical spaces of the novel, Tibet and the Phu-ri.

Tibet stands for the secluded landscape, which resists human exploration, and the flying mountain stands for the most inaccessible point in this landscape. It constitutes the endpoint of the brothers' trip through West China and Tibet, the main setting of the expedition and of its ultimate failure. A certain spatial continuity characterizes the novel in spite of the variations in the setting. As a matter of fact, on the flying mountain, the brothers continue the exploration that they already started in the mountains of Ireland, first with the father and later together on Horse Island. And yet, the Tibetan mountain distinguishes itself for its monumental proportions. When the Phu-Ri finally breaks through the clouds one morning and appears as a frozen, rocky

colossus, Pad can barely endure the vision. The following passage highlights how the narrator resorts to the language of the sublime to describe the mountain, which combines monstrosity and beautiful majesty:

Herausgelöst aus der explosiven Dynamik / und in einem Kälteschock zur Ruhe gebracht, gefroren, / ragte in der Ferne plötzlich groß, drohend, / unabweisbar eine Gratschneide auf – / sie führte von einem vergletscherten Sattel / hoch hinauf in die Nacht, bis nahe an den Zenit/und verlief so scharf umrissen wie ein Scherenschnitt / über Zinnen und Scharten, die ich kannte . . . / Zinnen, die ich wiedererkannte! (FB 277)

The language used here conveys a sense of physical violence that the overwhelming sight of the mountain triggers. Images of fire and ice come together in the explosive process, intensified by the idea of a thermal shock. The mountain “towers” there, almost as a threat that cannot be avoided, and it reaches the zenith in its hyperbolic height. The punctuation in the description above emphasizes the narrator’s awe at the view. This emotion escalates from the temporary inability to express with words what he sees, suggested by the use of dashes, to a complete loss of words, enclosed in the elliptical dots, and to a final moment of astonishment, which the exclamation point highlights. The mountain cannot be fully grasped and remains an enigma, “jenes Rätsel, das uns vom Meeresspiegel/bis zu diesen verschneiten Sommerweiden emporgeführt hatte“ (FB 278). The moment in which the narrator seems to recognize the mountain previously seen on the screen (“ich wiedererkannte”), ultimately fades away in front of the greater mystery that the mountain represents.

The natural landscape of Tibet brings together the mountains with another key natural element. Water accompanies the brothers throughout their exploration and climbing adventure.

Liam and Pad introduce themselves as men that come from the sea, “*Vom Meer. Wir kommen vom Meer*” (FB 75, emphasis in the original text). Water, the sacred element for the Khampas (FB 74-75), is a continuous source of movement, the origin and point of return for everything. Pilgrims entrust their prayers to water so that they can vaporize under the sun and go back to the earth in the form of rain or hail. Water, in the form of the river, sea or lake, also becomes a symbol for language, musicality and rhythm. It is almost personified in the river Yangtsekiang’s ability to produce “ein murmelndes Selbstgespräch” (FB 48) and “Stimmengewirr, Strophen” (FB 49). Sometimes these noises become almost human, sounding like “Worte, ganze Sätze / in jener vielstimmigen Wassermusik” (FB 50). The music produced by the river seems to double the texts entrusted to it by people. Nyema and Pad also engrave their respective names on stones that are exposed to the action of water. On a metanarrative level, the music produced by the river echoes the musicality and prosody of the text itself (Frost 104). The spatial element of water becomes an image for narration: a medium endowed with musicality, which has the role of moving the words closer to the next listener. Water and the process of writing and storytelling are connected in their relation to Tibet, which functions as a “poetic place.”

Tibet is the place where the process of writing originates in the novel. As the narrator states, his initiation to writing happens on the flying mountain. His and his brother’s names, inscribed in the snow, almost function as an act of appropriation of the mountaintop (FB 62). The process of naming the mountain, which has a long tradition in literature, takes here the form of a blood pact. After the avalanche, Liam finds himself writing with blood on the snow. This act of writing does not have anything to do with naming anymore. The narrator maintains this is real writing: “Erst jetzt, endlich, schrieb ich, schrieb ich wirklich, / nicht bloß unsere Namen, wie auf dem Gipfel / und nicht mit dem Schaft meines Eispickels, / sondern mit tobenden Fingerkuppen

in den Schnee, / unlesbare, blaßrote Zeichen" (FB 100). This unreadable, bloody engraving seems to be the translation of "die Sätze, jedes Wort flogen mir zu" (FB 99) that the narrator tried to scream to his already deceased brother, before writing them on the mountain of snow that covered him, and later inscribing them in the narration he presents to the reader.

Ireland and Tibet share an important feature: they are experienced as vertical spaces, as the "Weg in die Vertikale" (FB 79), an image that recurs throughout the novel. Indeed, the two brothers explore both Horse Island and Tibet on the vertical axis, which moves from water to the top of the mountain and back to the water. Already as kids, Pad and Liam take part in the father's "Manöver" (53) on the Caha Mountains, and continue their vertical explorations on Horse Island. The movement along the vertical axis generates a tension between the top and the abyss below. Remembering the errands on Horse Island, the first-person narrator states: "standen wir endlich da oben, / dort, wo es keine Zweifel mehr am Ziel geben konnte, / weil uns der nächste Schritt nicht mehr höher, / sondern nur noch ins Leere geführt hätte" (FB 37). Already in Ireland, Pad and Liam are confronted with the risk of falling into the void, with no support to hold them. This movement and the contrast between the top and the void below characterize also the later narration. As the majestic view of the flying mountain suggests, the mountain landscape is at the same time beautiful and dangerous. Pad summarizes the experience of the climbing expedition in the following formulation: "das Drama / eines einzelnen Schritts" (FB 354). What distinguishes the physical space from other spaces in the novel is the potential tragedy lurking in every step. Whereas the virtual explorations allow for re-clicking and undoing, and the mythological stories vanish with the beliefs that treasure them, the physical space is unforgiving and every step can lead into the tragic void.

The whole space of Tibet and the climbing routes that are covered are perceived as a representation of the tension between ascent and descent. In an interview with Uwe Wittstock, Ransmayr comments precisely on this vertical movement: “Wichtiger als die Gipfelhöhe war mir, dass der Weg dieser Brüder aus der virtuellen Realität ihrer Computer in die Wirklichkeit führen sollte, dorthin, wo Kälte, dünne Luft, die Erschöpfung und schließlich der Tod tatsächlich erlitten werden. Meine Figuren gehen ihren Weg aus der Virtualität in die Realität entlang einer vertikalen Linie, von ganz unten nach ganz oben.” The way to the flying mountain is imagined as a vertical way and, its top as a turnaround point for the way down: “und höher hinauf wollte, weil sein Ziel / auch ein *Umkehrpunkt* war, an dem er sich / [. . .] / endlich abwenden und dorthin zurückdurfte, / wo er herkam, ans Meer, nach Horse Island” (161, my emphasis). It is during the descent from the flying mountain that an avalanche swamps Liam. The descent and return, therefore, become the crucial moments of the narration.

Physical ascent and descent translate into a temporal metaphor in *Der fliegende Berg*. Ultimately, the temporal and spatial dimensions merge and the vertical way to the mountain becomes a way across time. Metaphorically speaking, the novel presents a spatialization of time. This passage, included in the sixteenth chapter of *Der fliegende Berg*, shows this synthesis:¹⁹

Und vielleicht stiegen wir tatsächlich / und vor allem aus diesem einen Grund /
gemeinsam höher und höher, / weil uns nur der Weg in eine Vertikale, / die durch
die Zeit hinab und bis ans Meer hinabführte, / auch in unsere Zukunft führen
konnte. (FB 318)

¹⁹ The sixteenth chapter, entitled “Vorläufer, Nachläufer. Eine Seilschaft,” narrates the first steps towards the top of the flying mountain and leads to the climax of the narration represented by the seventeenth chapter “In Gefangenschaft. Das Geschenk,” in which the narrator describes the difficulties during the ascent and the decision to continue climbing, before his brother gets finally swallowed up by the snow and ice.

The passage describes Pad and Liam's fatal ascent to the Tibetan flying mountain. Pad is speculating on the reasons that motivated him and his brother to climb. In his words, the spatial, vertical line of the mountain ("Vertikale"), merges with the temporal dimension, which points both towards their past ("durch die Zeit *hinab*," my emphasis) and their future ("Zukunft"). This conflation of space and time on a vertical axis is not a unique case in the novel. A few pages earlier, Pad remembers a hike on the Montblanc, the first occasion on which he realizes the temporal dimension inherent in the verticality of the mountain: "war mir die Vertikale, der Weg ins Gebirge / wohl zum ersten Mal als ein Weg / durch die Zeit erschienen" (FB 306). Thus, the journey to the top of the mountain also becomes a travel through time and history: spatial progression becomes a diachronic journey. In this light, Pad's words can be interpreted as a metanarrative commentary on the interconnection of time and space in the novel. Time and space merge in their narratological function, which inform the process of storytelling.

Despite being physically far away from each other, and very different as well, Ireland and Tibet start overlapping in Pad's narration. When he talks about these two spaces, the focus easily shifts from one to the other so that the world shrinks in the narrative imaginary. As Müller-Funk suggests, topographically distant spaces blend together in the process of storytelling ("Räume in Bewegung" 3). In the physical process of climbing described by the first-person narrator, the landscape of the flying mountain blends with the Irish childhood paths, so that the remote and the closest details come together:

verbanden uns auch Kletterrouten / schon vom ersten Aufstieg an / nicht nur mit dem Fernsten, sondern ebenso / mit dem Nächsten, Vertrautesten, // mit Erinnerungen an früheste Wanderungen, / Kindheitswege zu den hochgelegenen Torffeldern / und Schafweiden unseres Vaters / und zu sommerlichen Bergseen

in Kerry und Cork, /an deren felsigen Ufern Klettern / ein Spiel gewesen war. (FB 44)

The words “Fernsten,” “Nächsten,” “Vertrausten,” “früheste,” “Kindheitswege” suggest how distant poles and contrasting elements in physical and temporal terms come together. In the textual space of the narration, these places are connected through the dynamic movement and the associative practice that characterize their description and representation. At first, the reader can orient herself through the geographical references, but when spatial locations become temporally charged, the process of distortion begins.

From Net to Cocoon: Distortion in the Virtual World

Opening within the physical space of Horse Island, virtual reality represents another narrative space in the novel, which adds to the spatial and temporal configuration.²⁰ On the diegetic level, electronic space and internet time extend, complement and complicate physical reality. At the same time, virtual reality transforms and distorts physical space and thus affects the development of the narrative. Virtual space represents a second reality where Liam can experiment, play with the imagination, and move beyond the limitations of the physical world. Virtual space also functions as the cradle of adventurous inspiration. In Ransmayr’s contemporary climbing adventure, the desire to travel does not originate in the obsession with some historical or fictional accounts—like in *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, for

²⁰ The term “virtual reality” or “virtual space” are here used as a synonym for cyberspace, according to Michael Benedikt’s definition: “Cyberspace is a globally networked, computer sustained, computer accessed, and computer generated, multidimensional, artificial, or ‘virtual’ reality. In this reality, to which every computer is a window, seen or heard objects are neither physical nor, necessarily, representations of physical objects, but are, rather, in form, character and action, made up of data, of pure information” (122).

example—, but in the fascination with a digital image. Located beyond physical space and yet connected to it, virtual reality contributes two main aspects in the novel: on the one hand, it offers the possibility to connect remote times and places; on the other, it functions as a protective shield from the dangers of material reality. Therefore, while physical reality takes the form of a vertical path, virtual reality is best grasped through the images of the net and the cocoon.

The novel plays with the traditional models of exploration and mountain climbing, and combines them with the possibilities offered by technology in the digital age. The physical encounter with the mountain is indeed preceded by a virtual one, which takes place on a computer screen in the form of a “Schwarzweißfotografie/aus dem vergangenen Jahrhundert” (FB 38), showing “die südlichen Abstürze eines Berges/dessen Höhe ein chinesischer Bomberpilot/auf neuntausend Meter geschätzt hatte,/ein Berg höher als der Mount Everest” (FB 39). The sight of the virtual image and its record height, based solely on the estimate made by the bomber pilot flying over it, trigger the fantasy of a brotherly expedition to conquer the last white spot. The digital picture of the mountain exercises an attraction, almost a magnetic force that draws the brothers from their remote place to Tibet:

Unaufhaltsam war er auf uns zugetrieben – / zuerst als weißes, digitales
Datenfragment, /dann als wachsendes, von rasch ziehenden Wolken / immer
wieder verhülltes Trugbild [. . .] // und hatte uns in seinem Sog /aus der
Geborgenheit von Horse Island / und unseres Lebens fortgewirbelt / in die
Atemnot und in die Verlassenheit / seiner höchsten Höhen, / fort unter einen
dunklen Himmel, /der selbst am Tag Sternbilder trug. // (FB 46)

The mountain, described first as a “Datenfragment” and then as a “Trugbild,” has the energy of a current or a vortex. It unfolds as a relentless movement (“Unaufhaltsam”), which engulfs and

carries away (“Sog,” “fortgewirbelt”).²¹ From a neo-romantic phantasmagoria it becomes a brutal force that tears the two brothers out of the protection of their house. Indeed, in opposition to the safety of their dwelling, the mountain can only offer loneliness (“Verlassenheit”) and breathlessness (“Atemnot”).

The image projected in the cyberspace possesses an indissoluble relation to physical reality and a comparable significance. It functions as the interface between the subject’s imaginary, informed by the cyberimage, and the external physical space. As Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss explain, “the cyberspace [. . .] is also a space of places with identifiable addresses that take on much of the same significance [. . .] that traditional spaces enjoy” (42). Through the internet, Liam completes the whole preparatory phase relying on the tools available in the virtual world. Here, he can get in contact with the authorities to obtain the necessary permits, skillfully overcoming limits and prohibitions related to the historical and political situation of Tibet, which remains “so stumm und geheimnisvoll/ wie in einer längst begrabenen Zeit” (FB 79). Ultimately, with the help of the technological tools at his disposal, Liam can simulate a reality, in which he explores yet undiscovered sites before arriving at destination.

The internet is not reduced to a sterile world, which only provides passive stimuli to the two brothers. Indeed, this virtual reality entices and fosters creativity, in particular Liam’s, who is the master of computers and graphic design on Horse Island. On the contrary, Pad never embraces the possibilities of this world and remains excluded from it, with the result that he “nie die Rolle des Schreibers übernahm” (FB 83). The virtual images represent the tangible result of Liam’s creativity, which parallels Pad’s writing productivity and his function as a storyteller in

²¹ The image of the maelstrom (“Sog”) is a central conceit already in the arctic obsession of the young travelers in *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*. In this regard, see Torsten Hoffmann (125-44).

the mythical and physical reality. In the virtual world, instead, Liam takes up the role of a creator, “eines Schöpfers”, “[m]it seiner Beharrlichkeit, dem Erfindungsreichtum und Spieltrieb” (FB 82). In images that are filled with religious meaning, Liam becomes a God-like figure, which profits from the unlimited control and command over his creations. As the virtual God, he possesses persistence, inventiveness and ludic drive. The virtual world becomes the space of imagination and unlimited experimentation. The virtual animations that Liam creates offer him the possibility to enjoy “die Unbegrenztheit von Herrschaft” (FB 80) and projects a world that unfolds beyond the two-dimensionality—“aus der Zweidimensionalität” (FB 81)—, across past—“Farben einer prähistorischen Verwerfung” (FB 81) and future—“Selbst die Zukunft [. . .] konnte er [. . .] zeigen” (FB 81). In the digital world, abstract concepts are visualized in the form of tridimensional projections that overcome the physical laws of time and space.

In this simulated world, time and space are compressed. Indeed, the virtual reality provides an idiosyncratic temporal and spatial experience: on the one hand, it allows the reader to partake simultaneously in different temporal frames; on the other, it brings together remote spaces into one screen. In other words, the internet allows one not only to see different places – that is, to move “spatially” on the web – but also to overcome temporal gaps, which would be otherwise an obstacle. The world is experienced as one space, despite the multiplicity of places and events it encompasses. In the virtual reality, time and space become constructions that can be modified, resized and accelerated. Indeed, virtual reality, both temporal and spatial, differs from the physical one also in terms of speed. Horse Island, this remote Irish community, offers Liam and Pad the perfect environment to live “auf der Höhe der Zeit,/und wir hielten dort über das Netz/ Kontakt mit der Welt und mit einem Leben,/das tiefer in der Vergangenheit zurückreichte/und langsamer und breiter dahinflöß/als jeder Datenstrom” (FB 32). The life

outside of the digital world is defined as slow and oriented towards the past, which contrasts with the quick flux of data that transits on the internet. This text passage that describes the slowness of Horse Island stands out in opposition to a later one, in which Pad recalls the velocity of technology, the “Bruchstücke jener Bilder [. . .] über Breitband/ und Hochgeschwindigkeitstransmission” (FB 203). The alliteration stresses the words which describe the internet world itself, where fragments of images (“Bruchstücke jener Bilder”) move on the wideband (“über Breitband”). More, the compound word “Hochgeschwindigkeitstransmission” evokes the speed and continuity of the data flux of the internet.

In its connectedness, speed and compression, virtual reality is best described through the image of the net. In opposition to physical reality, which develops on the vertical axis, virtual reality moves in different directions and connects them all. In Liam’s elaborations, physical reality gets transformed into a map of numbers, coordinates, measurements, “Strophen, Kolonnen, Delirien im binären Code” (FB 81). With the help of technology, Liam reorganizes physical reality as a net of images and projections, “auf Erdsatelliten und Lasertechnik / gestützte[. . .] Landvermessung,” “geodätische Computerprogramme,” “Käfig der Koordinaten,” “dreidimensionale[. . .] Hügelketten,” “virtuelle Landschaften” (FB 40). Physical places and objects are transformed into data flow, lines, projections, and virtual threads. Liam maps all of Horse Island and manages to reach and explore other parts of the world that are far away from their physical location. Images related to spinning are used to describe the movements in this virtual world. When the narrator thinks about his brother’s achievements on the web, he comments on how “hatte Liam unsere Reise nach Kham/mit unzähligen Fäden aus dem Netz umspinnen” (FB 75). In the end, Liam’s machinations take the shape of a cocoon, spun in the two years of preparation. The image of the cocoon can also be read as another representation of

the net, in which the virtual threads come together to form a protective shell. The cocoon becomes, therefore, a spatial metaphor to describe the security and protection of the virtual, simulated reality, in which dangers and threats can be eschewed or sidestepped. As the first-person narrator says “Im Schutz dieses Kokons/nahm unser Weg zum fliegenden Berg/so allmählich und unwiderruflich Gestalt an/wie ein Insekt in der Puppe” (FB 76). This image suggests, on the one hand, the secretive nature of the expedition –Liam never reveals to the Chinese authorities the real reason for this trip—while, on the other, it emphasizes the web and connections established by Liam, which the virtual world allows for. Protected by the cocoon, the brothers can undergo a transformation from “Liebhabern bäuerlicher Kultur” and “Touristen” to “Erstbesteigern ja Entdeckern/und Landtäufern [. . .]” and ultimately “zu Abenteurern!” (FB 79). This metamorphosis from lover of the rural culture, to tourists, explorers and finally adventurers proves to be a fatal one.

Despite all its advantages, virtual reality is far from perfect. This possible world is created by the technological ingenuity of the modern subject, who can only partially control his own creation. The simulated reality designed by Liam shows an illusionary character, which partially clashes with the physical world, as it carries with itself “Irrtum, Fehlmessung, Scherz/oder bloße Lüge” (FB 41), which Liam either does not notice or does not want to acknowledge. This proves to be the case when the two brothers start climbing and Pad realizes that the physical space is different from the simulated projections on the computer screens. In one of his disputes with the brother, Pad expresses his anger and shows how “sich jeder Höhenmeter / dieser verfluchten Route deinem Programm widersetzt [. . .] alles ganz anders läuft als geplant” (FB 97). Whereas virtual reality allows for careful planning and mathematic precision, it inevitably distorts the laws of physical space and cannot deal with its unpredictability. Furthermore,

different levels of complexity distinguish physical and virtual reality. Liam defines the technology that they are using “*Steinzeittechnologie*” in comparison to the “Mysterien des Organismus” (FB 354) and physical space. Despite the possibilities it offers, the narrator can only acknowledge “Wie primitiv wirkten die binären Abläufe/in Liams Computern gegen das Drama/eines einzelnen Schritts...” (FB 354). This commentary can be read as a summary of the whole experience of the climbing expedition in Tibet, in which the primitive character of virtual reality transforms into the tragedy of a wrong step in the physical one, whose mysteries can only be partially understood through technology and lead to the final dissolution of the subject.

The Tibetan Boundless Mythical Space: Final Dissolution

Opening within the physical setting of *Der fliegende Berg*, the mythical world is not only a relevant motif, but also a metaphorical space, which develops through specific formal and narratological elements. In his reading, Müller-Funk highlights the mythical dimension of *Der fliegende Berg* by describing it as “die Geschichte eines Helden, der nach Hause findet und, dem Tod entronnen, kein Held mehr sein will und seine Heimat in der Fremde findet” (“Die unendliche Arbeit am Mythos” 59). Here, far away from Western civilization, the mythical space, which already began in Ireland, expands. And yet, while the Irish mythical space carries a strong male connotation through the stories prevalently told Captain Daddy, the Tibetan mythical space is characterized by the female and maternal presence of Nyema. Indeed, this mythical space is constructed through the stories told by Nyema and the other members of the clan. While Liam scornfully refuses to understand this mythical reality, Pad embraces it by being initiated into Nyema’s world of myths, mystery and storytelling. A specific spirit of the place, which arises from the mythological traditions and beliefs, characterizes this mythical space. The myths

that populate the novel tell cosmological stories, describe natural and supernatural phenomena, and provide moral guidance for the people who follow them.

The movement that characterizes this space is a circular one, which always goes back to the beginning. Hans Blumenberg defines myth as “eine nicht datierte und nicht datierbare, als in keiner Chronik zu lokalisierende, zum Ausgleich dieses Mangels aber in sich selbst bedeutsame Geschichte” (165). The temporal and spatial indefiniteness expressed by Blumenberg’s concept of myth also describes the mythical world of *Der fliegende Berg*. While the physical space develops on a vertical axis and the virtual one spins web-like connections, the mythical space is characterized by constant flowing, circularity and eternal return. Differently from the physical world, mythical space cannot be pinned to a map or to a historical moment, but rather stands for an atemporal, never-ending spatial configuration. The mythical world is experienced as an ever-flowing space, in which “daß, was ist, nicht bleiben kann” (FB 211). Mircea Eliade states in his study on myths that “myth narrates a sacred history, telling of events that took place in primordial time, the fabulous time of the ‘beginnings.’ Myth is thus always an account of a ‘creation’ of one sort or another, as it tells of how something came into being” (qtd. in Deutsch 44-45). As Paul Ricoeur further discusses, myths take place “in a time and space that cannot be co-ordinated with the time and space of history and geography according to the critical method” (qtd. in Deutsch 47). This conception of mythical time and space is reflected in Ransmayr’s work, where it not only affects the representation of space, but also the narration of myths. The flying mountain, which is subject to this circular nature of time and space, represents the core of the myth and becomes the symbol for ever-returning nature. It can kill but it will remain, reminding the viewer of its never-ending power.

Ireland is characterized by its own spirit of place, which surrounds both the patriarchal house—“das *wahre* Irland” (FB 53, 101, 298)—and the Irish sectarian politics—“die wahre IRA” (FB 179). The mediator to this mythological Irish world is Captain Daddy, who initiates his children into the myths. Pad and Liam grow up in a mythologized Ireland, according to what the father praises as “*wahr und wirklich*” (FB 53). He takes the children on hikes and excursions in the summer, the so-called “*Manöver*” (FB 52), which Pad perceives as missions “als müßte er seine Söhne in den Bergen/auf kommende Schlachten/um die Einheit Irlands vorbereiten” (FB 52). Captain Daddy’s house is a gallery for the Irish history and its community members, which Liam describes as “eine finstere Galerie der Sehnsucht” (FB 55).²² Driven by a sense of nostalgia, the father also belongs to the IRA, which fights for the independence of Ireland. For the father, family and national relations were always strictly connected to the mythicized image of Ireland and the wife’s betrayal was not only against him, but “*Verrat an ihm und an Irland*” (FB 169). These idealized, national images give rise to the myth of the Irish country, which the brothers still carry with them during their expedition to the top of the flying mountain.

Most mythological references belong to the world of Tibetan mythology. The cosmogonic myth of Tibetan mountain formation takes up a whole chapter (Chapter 7) and is narrated by Nyema.²³ The title of the chapter, “Der fliegende Berg: Nyemas Geschichte,” already highlights the significance of narration and of Nyema as the narrating agency. The cosmogony and orogeny of Tibet take place in a boundless, mythical reality. As Nyema recounts to Pad,

²² While the father is the main source of Irish myths, Pad recalls a story that his mother would tell him, about a king who ruled on a kingdom of ice and refused to help the sun who asked him for some earth and water. He was punished with a very warm summer, which melted and flooded his whole kingdom. The tears of the king became the seas and the oceans (FB 304-06).

²³ The myth of the flying mountain is not Ransmayr’s invention, like Müller-Funk shows, but it is actually part of the ethnographic material of several cultures (“Die unendliche Arbeit am Mythos” 63).

mountains originate from the sparks of stars and float into the sky before settling down on the flatland. In this boundless mythical time, mountains are not subject to erosion and natural phenomena, and one day these mountains will fly back to the stars. And yet, Nyema narrates her myth with the same certainty of natural laws, “wie von Naturgesetzen, die Wasser in steinhartes Eis oder Felsen in flüssige Lava verwandeln” (FB 138). The mysterious nature of some of these mountains is emphasized by the fact that they are not even listed in atlases and on maps.

Whereas the Cha-Ri, the *Vogelberg*, is a mountain known to both Liam and the people of Nyema’s clan, “ragten noch zwei weitere Berge auf, deren Namen nur im Gedächtnis des Clans, / in Geschichten und Liedern, / aber auf keiner von Liams Karten erschienen: / The-Ri, der Wolkenberg, / und Phur-Ri, ein Berg, der flog” (FB 128). In the mythical world of flying mountains, nature cannot be controlled or measured scientifically, as it is subject to a circular returning, and never-ending movement, which eschews any mathematical measuring system. In contrast with the western measurement in elevation, the value of these mountains is enclosed in their “machtvolle Namen, / Namen, die Lehren enthielten über den Himmel, / über das Leben, über den Tod” (FB 128). The focus shifts from topological precision, numbers and scientific rules to naming and language. This change points to a discrepancy between the virtual space, in which numbers and coordinates are essential, and the mythical one, where naming and storytelling constitute the key way to knowledge. However, this form of knowledge is not dismissed as fiction, but becomes for the clan “die Wirklichkeit [. . .] ein sichtbares, erlebbares Ereignis” (FB 155), in which their life is grounded.

Prohibitions, reverence and punishment are the principles that regulate the mythical space, where defying natural and divine limits can cost one’s life. The destiny of Tashi Gyeko, the father of Nyema’s child, for example, is explained in these terms. According to Nyema’s

story it was the “Zorn dieses Himmels/über die Schändung der Chromolungs,” the Tibetan name for Mount Everest, that killed Tashi Gyeko and not the Chinese soldier who shot him (FB 124). Likewise, Nyema warns Pad and Liam that one could be killed if he were to cross the “Schneegärten der Götter” (FB 128). Higher power is embodied by symbolic creatures and supernatural beings, which escape the rules of time and space. One such creature is *Dhjemo*, “[e]in auf zwei Beinen laufender, unbezwingbarer Dämon, / dessen Reich dort begann, [. . .] irgendwo an der Grenze zwischen den Moos- und Graswelten/ der Yaks und dem unvergänglichen Schnee. / Ein Wesen von übermenschlicher Größe und Kraft, / das keine Verletzung seiner Reviergrenzen duldet” (FB 196). Its reign begins “an der Grenze” between the meadows and the snow land and the border to his territory should never be transgressed. But Dhjemo spares Liam and Pad on their exploration of the *Vogelberg*, because the two could never reach the summit, or maybe because the clan invoked its mercy through their prayers. Another such creature is the “Unsichtbare[r]” (FB 206), the “Höhlenmensch” that has spent his whole life engraving prayers on the Tibetan rocks, which, as a result, contain the “Urklang des Universums” (FB 206). These creatures symbolize the atemporal sacrality of the mythical world, which contrasts with the profanity of the physical and virtual reality. Removed from any referential location, they live outside of time and space and populate the mythical narrations of the Khampas. For this reason, they can be considered an embodiment of the boundless mythical time and space that characterize the Tibet of the novel.

In the mythical world, the continuous flow of time and space is represented through the characterization of natural elements. Mountains that come and fly away, rivers that keep running and wind that brings along human sounds are all representations of this endless movement. Pad and Nyema come across some of these signs, such as the “Tausende, Hunderttausende Steine,

kieselgroße, / faustgroße, manchmal kopfgroße Steine, / im Verlauf von Jahrhunderten von Pilgern” (FB 210), which are entrusted to the ever-flowing water. Similarly, “Hundert, Tausenden / blauer und roter Gebetsfahnen, *prayer flags*, die von den Bewohnern des Klosters / an” are planted on the side of the Vogelberg (FB 146) and the wind continuously carries these prayers with itself. This ever-flowing and circular nature of time and space translates into the activities of storytelling and writing. Writing is considered as a kind of medicine that cannot cure completely but can help. After death, one can leave behind words that will remain as a gift. Indeed, writing is characterized as “das größte Geschenk, / das Menschen einander bereiten können” (FB 212) because it eludes any spatial and temporal boundary. This, in a nutshell, becomes the project of the novel.

Nyema functions as a guide and transition to the mythical world. Shrouded in mythical and religious mystery, she is described as a “Himmelsbraut, / eine von jenen Frauen, die von ihrem Clan unter diesem Titel beschützt, geehrt wurden” (FB 184), who possesses the “gültiges Recht” to be consecrated to the heavens and the spirits that give and protect life (FB 185). Nyema is not only a heavenly bride, but also a storyteller, who introduces the first-person narrator to a double mystery: on the one hand, the flying mountains and, on the other, narration itself.²⁴ Nyema’s mythical accounts are appropriated and embedded in the story told by the narrator. The process of storytelling is, therefore, doubled. Nyema’s revelations about the process of storytelling can be read as metanarrative commentary to the novel. The mythical

²⁴ Through Nyema, *Der fliegende Berg* recasts the narrative of the native woman who introduces the Westerner male visitor to her mythical terrain, thus evoking well-established ethnographic stereotypes. Brandes also comments: “Für die Literaturkritik zeigt sich der Kitsch vor allem in der Liebesgeschichte zwischen dem Ich-Erzähler und Nyema” (732). On the role of Nyema, see also Stephan (125).

space becomes a transformative space, where events and characters are shaped through storytelling and imagination.

Nyema becomes a Scheherazade-like figure, who does not narrate her whole story on one single night or day, but rather in fragments, enticing her listener into her narration. The revelation of the myth requires a certain level of preparedness and Nyema's way of narrating seems "als müsse sie / vor jeder Fortsetzung oder Erweiterung ihrer Erzählung / erneut prüfen, ob ihr Zuhörer dem Gesagten gewachsen und imstande war, darin / das Selbstverständliche zu erkennen" (FB 139). In *Der fliegende Berg*, storytelling obeys specific rules. The first-person narrator remarks how often it was not even possible to say whether the details actually belonged to the story or not. Only the process of careful listening allows for the full understanding of her narration. The myth can be passed on, but only from one person who is familiar with it to one who is eager to hear about it. Once shared, the story has the potential to be constantly transformed by the listener:

sollten sich Geschichten wie die von einem Berg, der flog, / in jedem Kopf in
etwas Neues, Unerhörtes verwandeln. / Jeder sollte draus seine eigene Erzählung,
/ seine eigene Geschichte und sie dadurch / zu etwas Unverwechselbarem,
Einzigartigem machen, / zu etwas, an das er glauben konnte wie an sich selbst. /
Der Lauf einer solchen Geschichte, sagte Nyema, / führe Erzähler wie Zuhörer
weit fort / von allem Vertrauten, manchmal tief in die Nacht, / am Ende aber doch
immer wieder dorthin zurück, / wo alles anfing, / *zurück* und immer weiter [. . .].
(FB 150)

This passage expresses *in nuce* the value and importance of mythical storytelling and the centrality of mythical time and space. In mythical storytelling, temporal and spatial dimensions

loose their fixity and so does the owner of the narration. There is no clear beginning and end because such a story knows no interruption, as it is continuously re-narrated. The narration follows a movement that brings forward, back, and again forward, “*zurück* und immer weiter,” as the text paradoxically reads. A key idea to this passage is the importance of transformation and metamorphosis in life, on the one hand, and in the narrating process, on the other. In line with the conventions of oral tradition, the text that is passed along undergoes changes before being fixed in the written manuscript. All these changes, which are technically called “*mouvance*,” can be described “as a kind of ‘incessant vibration,’ a fundamental process of instability” (Zumthor qtd. in Nagy 9). The telling of these mythical stories, like the one of the flying mountain, activates the transfer of the story, so that the new narrator can shape his own version, which remains unique. The first person narrator in the novel embraces the circular and never-ending dimension of storytelling and retells the myth he heard from Nyema. By appropriating Nyema’s story—“*ich Nyemas Geschichte / allmählich in meine eigene verwandelte*” (FB 139)—, he becomes a mediator between intradiegetic level and extradiegetic reader. By translating the stories received into his own narration, Pad abandons the role of listener to become storyteller, carrying out the project of pseudo-orality suggested by the form of the novel.

The mythical Tibetan space, which extends and complements the mythical stories of Ireland, represents not only the initiation to the myths and legends of the flying mountain but also the beginning of storytelling for the narrator. And yet, while the mythical space leads to a new beginning, at the same time, it brings about a final dissolution. Overcoming the limits imposed by mythical creatures and beliefs intensifies the tension between life and death, between past and present, and between the voices of storytelling which ultimately merge in Pad’s account of his mountain adventure.

The Chronotopes of the Threshold and the Encounter: A Bakhtinian Reading

Physical, virtual and mythical spaces return throughout the novel. Understanding their diegetic and metaphorical significance is crucial to interpreting the rupture that Ransmayr sets at the center of *Der fliegende Berg*. And yet, these spatial configurations are also temporally charged and become even more productive when read as spatio-temporal units in the narrative. For this purpose, I will use two of Bakhtin's chronotopes, the threshold and the encounter, and offer a reading that takes into account the diegetic movements of characters across time and space, and interpret them to understand the project of the novel.

Bakhtin discusses the chronotope of the threshold only at the end of his study, in the *Concluding Remarks*, noting how this chronotope is usually “connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life” (248). Within this chronotope, “[t]ime is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time” (248). *Der fliegende Berg* offers several metaphorical thresholds throughout the narration, which mark the successive steps towards the final rupture, represented by Liam's death. Even though the biographical time of the first-person narrator plays a role in Ransmayr's work, through the chronotope of the threshold time tends to blur and can no longer be grasped as biographical moment any longer. Crucial movements to a different space come to signify, through the experience of the threshold, a “breaking point of a life” or “the decision that changes life,” to use Bakhtin's own terminology. Consequently, the chronotope of the threshold helps interpret three key moments of rupture in the novel: the trip from Horse Island to Tibet in the physical reality; the discovery of the mountain as digital picture in the virtual reality; and the “initiation” into the Tibetan myths in the mythical dimension of the narrative. These movements are not only important in themselves, but also in their function of connecting different times and

spaces and of revealing the narrative progression in the novel. The second chronotope discussed in this analysis is that of the encounter or meeting. According to Bakhtin's description, "[q]uite frequently in literature the chronotope of meeting fulfills architectonic functions: it can serve as an opening, sometimes as a culmination, even as a denouement (a finale) of the plot" (98). In my reading of *Der fliegende Berg*, the motif of the meeting intervenes to complicate the overstepping of a threshold by suggesting how encounters are in fact temporal-spatial events that are responsible for the "architectural" structure of the work and for the disruptive moments that mark it.

The organization of the physical space can be interpreted as the overstepping of two major topographical thresholds. The first one is crossed when Pad and Liam leave Horse Island on their trip to the undiscovered, white Tibetan spot. The narrator describes the "Arbeitszimmer / meines Bruders" (FB 41-42) as the place of "den Anfang unseres Weges / von den Stränden Horse Islands nach Kham" (FB 41). In this workroom, which contains his technological tools, Liam makes all the necessary arrangements for the trip that takes the two brothers first through China, then to Tibet, and finally to the foot of the flying mountain. The departure from Horse Island constitutes the crucial decision for both brothers, albeit in very different ways. Liam's goal is to reach the top of the flying mountain and then turn back to Horse Island. Unable to completely take distance from his projections of the physical world, he cannot enjoy nature or the company of the Khampas. On the other hand, Pad is enraptured by the sublimity of the mountain when it finally appears among the clouds.²⁵ In this example of the threshold, time loses its biographical contours and becomes an instantaneous experience, which is reflected on the level of narration. The reader is indeed informed that the preparation for the trip has taken up two

²⁵ See Berwald and his description of the narrator's reaction to the view of the mountain (336).

years, but its narration is reduced to a few stanzas. More, the account of the departure to Tibet is blurry. There is no precise chronological indication, and its description is pretty laconic: “und nach einem müden Chor in Eamons Bar / von Dunlough nach Cork, von dort weiter / nach Dublin und London und Peking und Lhasa” (FB 84). The mentioning of the trip takes up three lines and after that, most of the narration is dedicated to the exploration through West China and the brothers’ arrival in Tibet.

The second threshold that the two brothers cross constitutes a point of no return. After joining the nomadic clan, Liam and Pad leave their travel guides behind and start ascending the mountain. The gain in elevation functions as the overstepping of a new boundary in the vertical axis of the physical space. In fact, the two brothers are moving towards “höher gelegenen Weidegründen” (FB 120), which take them closer to the flying mountain and its summit. The first-person narrator suddenly realizes that there is no possibility of turning back since they have definitely left the convoy behind: “nun auch die letzte Fluchtmöglichkeit vergeben / und allein der Weg in die Berge geblieben war, / der Weg an der Seite von Yaknomaden” (FB 120). The beginning of the climbing adventure brings Pad and Liam beyond a natural boundary, which separates lowland from mountains. With the ascent of the flying mountain, Pad and Liam separate from the clan and Nyema, a detachment which is visually marked by the shrinking of the figures that the eye cannot recognize anymore from the elevated position, “in einer Tiefe, die mich nur ihre Gestalt,/aber nicht mehr ihr Gesicht, ihre Augen erkennen ließ” (FB 311). With the overstepping of this last natural threshold, the attempt to return results in Liam’s death, suggesting the impossibility to turn back once this step is taken. These examples of the chronotope prompt the development of the plot and trigger the chain of events. Both instances of thresholds or boundaries signify the decision to leave a secure, protected space—be it the house,

the organized convoy or the tent camp—to reach a space where chance and unexpected events can take place. Ultimately, the two thresholds come to signify the slow movement from life into death, from which only the first person narrator can unexpectedly return.

Thresholds are not only overcome within the physical world, but also become connecting elements to the other narrative spaces. The chronotopes of the threshold and the encounter come together for the first time in the narrative when Liam discovers the mountain on the internet. The discovery of the mountain can be described as chronotopic, both in the virtual setting and in the physical one. A threshold is overcome with Liam's transition from the physical into the virtual world. When he sees the photo of the mountain for the first time—“war [. . .] auf diese Fotografie gestoßen” (FB 39)—he concentrates all his efforts on digitally understanding the mystery of the flying mountain. Attracted to the virtual world by the possibility of enjoying “die Unbegrenztheit von Herrschaft” (FB 80), Liam accesses this temporal and spatial dimension with voracity, enthralled by the possibility of getting in contact with physically unreachable objects, places, and people. The threshold to the virtual world constitutes the moment of epiphany in the novel, the catalyst of the action, from which all the following events develop, including the “life-changing” trip to Tibet. The narrator describes the connection between the physical and virtual world as “eine Spur [. . .] / die aus Liams matt leuchtenden virtuellen Welten / in die Wirklichkeit führte” (FB 291). The space-time of the physical and virtual world constitute contrasting spheres, which separate everyday limitations from infinite possibilities, reality from fantasy. However, the trace in the digital world becomes a threshold between virtual and physical reality. Differently from other thresholds, this is not a boundary that cannot be re-crossed. Indeed, Pad and Liam abandon the controlled fantasy of the virtual world and experience their status as climbers and adventurers in the physical world. And yet, every time a threshold is

crossed a moment of “crisis” takes place, be it the destructive obsession with the virtual image or the movement out of the virtual world into the territory of Tibet, where the fatal ascent takes place.

The chronotope of the encounter intervenes to complicate the overstepping of this threshold. According to Bakhtin, in the minor chronotope of the encounter, “the temporal element predominates, and it is marked by a higher degree of intensity in emotions and values” (243). In Ransmayr’s novel, threshold and encounter merge when the movement into cyberspace brings Liam in virtual contact with the unconquered mountain. It is an unplanned encounter, which nonetheless fulfills that “architectural function” theorized by Bakhtin. This chronotopic moment has a specific temporality—“an dieser Nacht auf einem / (vom Sturm unterbrochenen) Streifzug im Netz” (FB 38)—and brings the characters close to something foreign or unknown. Indeed, the mountain is described as a “Rätsel,” an enigma concealed in “ein kaum sichtbares Detail auf dieser Fotografie” (FB 42). The mystery becomes a fascination and obsession for Liam, whose next actions are all determined by the desire to transform that virtual encounter into a physical one. When the crossing of the threshold takes place in the physical world, the language used to describe it reminds of the first description of the virtual image. The line that separates the mountain from the infinity of the sky is described as “eine Linie, so hauchzart, so unendlich fein, / bloß ein Spinnfaden, / den ungeheuerlichsten Berg meines Lebens / vom leeren Himmel trennen konnte / abschneiden konnte . . .” (FB 349). In Ransmayr’s novel, the chronotope of the threshold and its combination with the encounter represent the “place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (Bakhtin 250). The encounter with the mountain on the computer screen and in the cyberspace triggers the journey to Tibet, exacerbates the hate and love relationship between the brothers—due to their very different attitudes to the expedition—

and leads Liam to his tragic destiny. All the following events can be read and interpreted as a consequence of the crossing of the threshold and the resulting encounter. The passage from physical into virtual world and the way back to physical reality constitute a key movement of the narrative and represent a significant transition both in narrative and thematic terms. Ultimately, the overstepping of the threshold and the encounter with the mountain solve that enigma that Liam wanted to unravel, “und das uns schließlich enthüllt wurde/als der eigene Tod” (FB 90), driving him to his own self-destruction.

But before the events lead to Liam’s death, the characters cross another threshold, or at least Pad does. While Liam seems untouched by the stories that Nyema offers, Pad is initiated into the Tibetan mythical world and becomes her favorite interlocutor and audience. Once again, the chronotopes of the threshold and the encounter come together at this point. The physical relocation to Tibet and, in particular, to the banks of the river brings Pad in contact with the mythical stories of Tibet and the flying mountain. And this can only happen through Nyema. The moment in which Nyema begins to tell her story is described in the narration as a movement from the place without dreams to the bend of the river: “Der Anfang reicht in die Tage zurück, in denen wir / aus dem kalten Nachtlager am Ort *ohne Träume* / mit unserer Yakkarawane zu den Mäandern des Flusses / hinabstiegen und dann stets in Ufernähe / dem wolkenverhüllten Talschluß entgezogen” (FB 140). This threshold is particularly relevant on the diegetic level since the first-person narrator admits having elaborated Nyema’s story and transformed it into his own narration after listening to her storytelling. The chronotope functions as a catalyst for the process of narrating as it allows the first person voice to enter a metanarrative space, from which he can draw the source of his own story.

The mythical world functions as a projection and challenge, albeit a different one from the virtual world. Within the mythical dimension, a further threshold is introduced, which relates to the climax of the action. This threshold is represented by the stories and myth surrounding the flying mountain. According to Nyema's father "Wer den Gipfel eines fliegenden Berges betrete, / gerate in Gefahr, vor seiner Zeit / aus der Welt geschleudert zu werden / oder hinauszufallen in den Raum" (FB 292). Liam's and Pad's final ascent to the flying mountain can be read as the crossing of this physical threshold imbued with sacred and mythological significance. In this case, the overstepping of the boundary becomes the final movement that "determine[s] the whole life of a man" (Bakhtin 248). The summit of the mountain becomes the ultimate separation between conquest and total loss, life and death, resurrection and demise. Whereas Pad already belongs to the mythical world, understands its value and can be narrated back to life by his brother, Liam is the one to perish after crossing the fatal threshold. Pad, on the contrary, is granted the possibility to go back to the physical reality of the house on Horse Island, which he completely empties, thus erasing any contact with the virtual reality that the brother created.

One last threshold that could represent the final twist in the plot remains, however, uncrossed. The first-person narrator informs the reader that he is ready to go back to Tibet and to Nyema, who is waiting for his return. The last chapter, entitled "Schritte," describes Pad's last steps on Horse Island, before his permanent relocation. However, the last steps are only described as future projections. In a narration that originates from the wanderings of its characters across time and space, the failure to overstep a further boundary or reenact that life-changing encounter with Nyema also signals the end of the narration. Behind every step—physical or virtual—lurks danger, but an untaken step leaves the narrator suspended between a haunting past and an unrealized future. In the present of Horse Island, the first-person voice is

left recollecting the memories of his brother's tragic death, among chaotic childhood images and hopeful future projections. Towards the end of the account, Pad proclaims: "Ich werde mich auf den Weg machen. / Ich gehe. // Noch aber muß ich warten, warten" (FB 352). The transition between the future realization and the present performative act remains unaccomplished in that double affirmation of the word "warten." Waiting turns into an experience of emptiness, which leaves the narrator oscillating between life and death.

Conclusion

Der fliegende Berg tells a story of personal rupture and shows the difficulty of giving it a coherent form through storytelling. The mesmerizing configuration of time and space which the narrative constructs reflects the tragedy marked by the sudden death of the brother. Unsettled by the extreme experience on the flying mountain, the narrator is left retracing the steps that brought him and his brother close to death, reliving the crucial encounters in the physical, virtual and mythological spaces. In their peculiarity, each of these spaces brings the reader a step forward in the narration and deeper in the story of Liam and Pad. With the help of the chronotopes of the threshold and the encounter, my analysis has shown the interconnectedness of time and space in the novel and the significance of the movement from one space to the next. And yet, the reader is left with disorienting memories, which the narrator shares in the attempt to make sense of them. While this objective may not be reached, by appropriating the stories he heard and by retelling them, Pad continues the act of storytelling. Indeed, what remains is narrating, through flying sentences, which will eternalize the memory of the deceased climber. The narrator, in the meantime, can only wait for the tempest to calm outside, hanging between the memories of death and the future life ahead.

Chapter Two

Contamination, Mistakes and Mis(re)cognitions: Plotting in Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand*

This chapter takes us from an exploration of time and space to a study of plot; from a survivor's tale that oscillates between life and death to a novel that challenges the construction of knowledge, memory and identity. The focus here lies on the second moment of rupture my project investigates: the (hermeneutic) tension between (re)cognition and mistakes, between understanding and utter bafflement. The chapter reflects on how this rupture manifests itself in Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand*.¹ Welcomed as “de[r] größte[. . .], grausigste[. . .], komischste[. . .] und klügste[. . .] Roman der letzten Dekade” (Maar 340), and awarded the *Leipziger Buchpreis*, *Sand* employs its plot to tell a nihilistic story, one which constantly unsettles the reader on many different levels.² As Herrndorf writes in his online blog, *Sand* is a “bewußter Gegenpol zu *Tschick* und seiner Freundlichkeit [. . .], die nihilistische Wüste” (A&S 17.5.2011, 206).³ Clashing with Herrndorf's first bestseller in form, content and tone, *Sand* mingles the features of detective novel and spy thriller in a narrative of crime, amnesia, error, and ambiguity. Set in the

¹ Some sections of this chapter were published, with some modifications, in my article titled “Knotty Plot and Dense Text: Crime, Detection, and Epigraphs in Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand*,” included in a Special Issue on German-Language Crime Fiction in *Colloquia Germanica* 46.2 (2013): 187-202.

² The jury's verdict for the *Leipziger Buchpreis* highlights his mastery in thickening the plot and leading the reader through narrative detours: “Man folgt diesem Erzähler gerne und in blindem Vertrauen in die abstrusesten Situationen. Lässt sich von ihm auf verwirrende, immer aber schillernde Abwege führen. Tappt mit seinem Helden zusammen im Dunkel von dessen Identität und brennt darauf, alle Puzzleteile endlich zusammenzufügen, von denen lange nicht klar ist, ob und wie sie sich zusammenfügen lassen. Was das Vergnügen umso größer macht, wenn sie es letztlich tun.” (“Nominierungen und Preisträger 2012”).

³ *Arbeit und Struktur* was first conceived as a private blog and only later reworked and edited for the public. The blog was also posthumously published as a book in December 2013. Quotes refer to the book edition: Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Arbeit und Struktur*, (Rowohlt: Berlin, 2013). They are marked by the abbreviation A&S, and accompanied by the date of the entry and page numbers.

summer of 1972, in the fictional North African city of Targat, *Sand* opens on the day in which a murderous attack destabilizes a hippie commune in the oasis of Tindirma.⁴ The unfit police officer Polidorio, a Frenchman of Arabian descent who is responsible for finding the culprit and explaining the four deaths, sets off to reach the crime scene. However, he disappears from the narrative, never to return again—at least not under this name. Indeed, a nameless character, who does not remember who he is or where he came from, suddenly turns up, confused and injured, in the second book. Helen Gliese, who passes herself off as a cosmetic sales representative, but in reality is a CIA agent hunting for a hazardous mine, rescues him in the desert and names him Carl.⁵ From this moment on, Carl’s real identity and the mysterious mine constitute the two crucial enigmas of the novel. Nobody knows what this mine really is and the novel openly plays with the ambiguity of the word: does the mine stand for a quarry, the part of a pen or an explosive weapon? Due to a series of accidents, Carl is considered the prime suspect in an international intrigue, for which he is chased and finally tortured. After he manages to escape from his underground trap, the “king of Africa,” a drunkard who lives in the desert, mistakenly associates Carl with his perpetrators and shoots him down. As the mine is also swept away during a cleanup of the city, the novel ends, while some of the reader’s confusion remains.

⁴ 1972 is the year of the terror attacks in Munich and this tragic event is likely to resonate in the mind of the reader when she finds out that the murders take place on August 23, 1972. The 1970s in general are a period of political instability and economic decline in the African colonial history, which resulted in new international intervention in the region (Baah 3). For a reading that takes into consideration the transnational politics of the novel and the elements of terrorism, see Tanja Nusser’s chapter “Transnational Politics in Friedrich Dürrenmatts’s *Der Auftrag* and Wolfgang Herrndorf’s *Sand*.” In terms of spatial referentiality, a place named Tindirma actually exists and is a small community located in the region of Tombouctou, Mali. While Targat seems to be completely fictional, its name alliterates with Tangier, the major Moroccan city located on the coast facing the Strait of Gibraltar.

⁵ Helen chooses the name after the brand of Carl’s clothing, “Carl Gross” (S 81).

This summary only partially reveals the intricacy of *Sand*, in which narrative, formal and textual complexity draws the reader into a labyrinthine story. The complexity of the novel became clear to the author himself and made him question his project throughout the process of writing.⁶ As he circulates the finished novel among the first proofreaders, Herrndorf realizes that they struggle to unravel the plot: “Daß die Handlung keiner kapiert. Drei von den fünf Lesern konnten den Amnestiker bisher nicht identifizieren, was etwa ist, als verriete ein Krimi den Mörder nicht” (A&S 6.10.2011, 256-57).⁷ The author then reflects on the difficulty of providing information while keeping the right balance between suspense and confusion, in the attempt not to spoil the novel: “Informationsdosierung. Was sagt man dem Leser, um ihn auf die falsche Fährte zu locken, was sagt man, damit er das Gegenteil von dem annimmt, was man ihm zu insinuieren versucht, was sagt man am Ende überhaupt?” (A&S 6.10.2011, 257). Commenting on the time and energy he puts into orchestrating his plot, the author compares his efforts to those of a clock maker, who needs to synchronize all the mechanisms.⁸ The result is, for Michael Maar, a work that provides just the right amount of information for the reader to make sense of the events.⁹ As Maar explains: “Wer ein Faible für raffiniert gebaute Plots hat, erlebt hier ein Fest. Hier geht alles auf, und alles rundet sich, wenn auch *auf perfideste Art*” (337, my

⁶ Herrndorf’s work on plot is documented in *Arbeit und Struktur*, which offers a valuable collection of poetic reflections on *Sand*. Herrndorf began writing his blog in March 2010, after being diagnosed with a brain tumor. Writing continued to play a major role in Herrndorf’s life in spite of the difficulties it presented. As he states in an entry from April 2010: “Am besten geht’s mir, wenn ich arbeite” (A&S 19.4.2010, 44). Reflections on his illness are mixed with his ideas on literature and writing. Consequently, the blog has both the function of a diary and a poetics, in which the author discusses his own literary practices and documents his progress and frustration in writing *Tschick* and *Sand*.

⁷ Burk and Hamann (331) and Arnold (33) also reflect on this aspect in their contributions.

⁸ “Wahnsinnig Mühe darauf verwendet, alles wie ein Uhrwerk abschnurren zu lassen” (A&S 6.10.2011, 256-57).

⁹ Maar writes: “Es gibt in *Sand* nicht viel überflüssige Information, aber auch keine fehlende” (336).

emphasis). His reading provides an enlightening interpretation of many enigmatic elements of the novel, revealing, among other things, the identity of the amnesiac man, which is never openly stated in *Sand*. And yet, his intervention only hints at the heart of the issue—the perfidiously intricate plot—without exploring the implications of the complexity for the narrating process and the understanding of the novel. The intricate plot of *Sand* forces the reader to continuously reassess the information at her disposal and to reconsider the significance of and the relation among plot elements—with the risk of failing. While this may be generally true for detective fiction, which encourages a work of investigation on the part of the reader, *Sand* pushes this game to the extreme, when, at the end of the novel, the reader is still busy piecing clues together in the attempt to determine who is who.

Sand articulates a formal and narrative rupture. It embodies the tension between a very structured form and plot patterns, which encourage a reading according to literary conventions, and an explosive richness in formal and narrative elements, which threatens to break the balance by pushing the boundaries among genres and by employing narrative strategies that defeat order and understanding. Scholars and reviewers of *Sand* all agree on the complexity of the work and reflect on how some narrative features of the novel create and sustain this complexity. Sonja Arnold, for example, presents an analysis that highlights errors, accidents and the logic of the absurd, by discussing the setting (the desert), the narrative voice, time structure and some plot patterns (such as the model of the “Wüstenroman,” 37). Maximilian Burk and Christof Hamann use the topology and topography of the novel to set up their postcolonial reading, and show how the binary structures associated with North African and Western culture are constructed and deconstructed through the articulation of narrative space, perspective and voice. Finally, Magdalena Drywa explores the relations between the novel and Herrndorf’s online blog, by

focusing on some aesthetic devices, such as genre contamination (in light of Postmodernism), narrative voice and the relation between the fictional and real. In many ways, then, other scholars have offered “readings” that either reduce or bypass the novel’s internal complexities and contradictions.¹⁰ My approach is different. This chapter embraces the problem of complexity in order to highlight how the confusion the reader experiences is the result of the form and content of the novel, combined with the multiplication of clues and pieces of evidence until the final resolution of the mysteries. I argue that what in appearance is just a baffling detective story turns out to be a text that consciously plays with and defies the conventions of the genre to ask basic questions of knowledge formation and identity loss. In particular, my contribution asks how plotting strategies combine to tell a crime story that defies cohesion and understanding, while, at the same time, making the reading of this magnificently complex work bearable. After considering the generic features of the novel and sketching the most important concepts of plot that inform my reading, this chapter looks at the plot of the novel, taking into consideration its structure and its main parts: the beginning, middle, and ending. The analysis then concentrates on specific generic features and plotting strategies, asking how amnesia, on one hand, and different forms of mistakes, accidents and ambiguities, on the other hand, function within the plot. In the last part of my chapter, I investigate the connections between plot and the reading experience and take into consideration the textual elements that affect the reader’s

¹⁰ Reviewers often point out the complexity of the novel, without discussing further what causes it. Peter Michalzik, for example, writes: “Zunächst einmal muss man einfach gut aufpassen. Man muss besser aufpassen, als die Kommissare, die in diesem Buch vorkommen. Sonst versteht man einfach nicht, worum es hier geht.” Martin Ebel comments on the reader’s sense of confusion as follows: “Dass wenigstens der Autor die Übersicht behält, kann man auch nicht sagen, und deshalb stolpert der Leser genauso trottelig wie die Personen durch die Handlung.” Similarly, Andrea Hanna Hünninger comments in the *Zeit Online*: “Wer das Buch betritt, verlässt den festen Boden gewohnter Lesegewohnheiten. Bis zum Schluss hat der Leser den Eindruck, ihm sei etwas entgangen.”

understanding, in particular the use of paratexts. My analysis aims at showing in which ways this set of intertextual references help the reader navigate the plot—or let her drown in it. My chapter offers reflections on the significance of plotting for (re)cognition while also showing what makes *Sand* such a great work in German literature.

“Was ist denn das nun eigentlich?” – Genre Contamination in *Sand*

Herrndorf’s work is striking for its use of and play with different genres, which mix entertaining episodes with moments of explicit socio-political critique. After circulating his manuscript among friends and proofreaders, Herrndorf annotates his reflections in *Arbeit und Struktur*: “Joachim hat *Sand* zur Hälfte gelesen und stellt die Frage, die ich mir auch schon lange gestellt habe: Was ist denn das nun eigentlich? Der Verlag hat es mal Richtung Thriller gelabelt, aber es ist ein weites Feld zwischen Unterhaltungs-, Schund- und Gesellschaftsroman, von Thor Kunkel bereits mäßig beackert” (A&S 25.9.2011, 251-52). Herrndorf acknowledges the breadth of his novel in terms of genre (“ein breites Feld”) and he does so by remarking how his work combines entertaining, trashy and social elements. Maar dismisses the attempt to pin down the genre of *Sand* as irrelevant: “Klar ist auch, dass sich das Genre nicht eindeutig bestimmen lässt [. . .] Alle schlechten Romane gleichen einander, jeder große Roman ist auf seine eigene Weise groß” (334). While the originality of Herrndorf’s work and its play with genres are undisputable, a discussion of its generic features can help us understand their effects on the narrating process, plot development and the reading activity.¹¹ My goal is not to categorize the novel in generic terms, but rather to reflect on the effects that the mingling of different genres achieves in terms of plot and narration.

¹¹Arnold also reflects to some extent on the genre of the novel, the blending of different genres and the play with the reader’s expectations (38).

Every reader approaches a literary text with some expectations and anticipates certain developments based on the kind of story she is told. In his work on “classical plot,” Lowe sees genre as the provider of “rule-systems” that stir narrative development: “One of the distinctive qualities of genre is that it allows a common rule-system to be assumed across a whole corpus of text” (55). In literary hermeneutics, the identification of the genre on the side of the reader is regarded as an important factor for interpretation. As Jauss writes: “It [a literary work] awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the ‘middle and end,’ which can then be intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text” (qtd. in Kent 148). Crime fiction tends to rely on precise, well-defined plot schemes and readers approach a detective novel or thriller with particular expectations—even though suspense and surprise are also key elements of these genres. Attempts to define the “rule-systems” of crime fiction go back to the half-serious “Decalogues” written in the inter-war period by S.S. Van Dine’s *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (1928) and Ronald A. Knox’s *The Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction* (1929), which highlight the formalistic concerns during the Golden Age of crime fiction (Priestman 1). In his “Typology of detective fiction,” Tzvetan Todorov points out how “As a rule, a literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre” (qtd. in Wood and Lodge 227). While in the wave of postmodernism, contemporary crime fiction has displayed higher levels of experimentalism, a successful detective novel or thriller generally still uses or, in a subversive mode, alters discernible rules. Narrators that become characters in their own texts, intertextual references that bridge different works, detectives that do not perform up to expectation, clues and

references that cannot be untangled are just some of the characteristics of postmodern crime fiction that *Sand* also displays to some extent.

Part of the complexity of *Sand* results precisely from its breaking with the generic expectations it sets up in the first chapters and from eluding the boundaries between different genres of crime fiction, in particular detective novel and thriller. The detective novel, and above all the whodunit, the classical form of detective fiction, “must have as its main interest the unraveling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end” (Knox 6). Todorov describes the work of the detective novel as a combination of two stories, which he labels “the story of the crime” and “the story of the investigation” (44-48). According to this study, the first story ends before the second begins since the crime usually takes place before the narrative starts. As a result, the whodunit is preoccupied with the second story, in which “Not much” happens. As Todorov explains: “The characters of the second story [. . .] do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective’s immunity” (44). While curiosity, investigation and understanding are crucial in the whodunit, the thriller aims at creating and sustaining suspense. Martin Rubin suggests that, in thrillers, “The original crime that is being investigated is just a thread that leads into a much larger and more complex web of conspiracy and deception, and the detective and the audience become more and more entangled in that web” (198). Combining elements of spy thriller with features of the detective novel, *Sand* articulates the tension between

the attempt to acquire knowledge, the development of surprise and suspense, and a certain degree of confusion.¹²

At its outset, the novel focuses on the police investigation of Polidorio and Canisades, who were appointed to clarify the mysterious circumstances of an atrocious murder. The elements of a detective novel are all present: a murder, in which four people are killed under mysterious circumstances; a suspect (Amadou Amadou), whom the police have in custody; and “the story of the investigation,” which includes interrogations and the testimony of thirty-one eyewitnesses. The description of the murder, committed right at the outset of the novel, however, is omitted. Thus, the misdeed is first mentioned in the story during the investigation, and the reader is ready to be guided through a story of detection and resolution by Polidorio. And yet, this detective-story-like opening soon becomes part of a larger, suspenseful, plot-driven thriller, in which action takes over investigation.¹³ The plot thickens and issues in multiple quests and mysteries that run parallel to each other, and reveal the conspiratorial nature of this story, which, in the first chapters, reads like an unprofessional investigation in an African community. Sociopolitical obstacles suddenly hinder the chase of the culprit of the initial massacre; the hunt for the unidentified “mine” introduces new groups of people into the story (the CIA, Carl, and the criminals who commissioned the mine); and the enigma of Polidorio/Carl’s identity becomes more complex, but is nonetheless withheld until the very end of the narrative, through the use of amnesia. By slowly leaving behind the first police investigation, the novel shifts its focus to the thriller-like elements of chase and action, complicated by the mystery, which surrounds events

¹² In her reading, Tanja Nusser writes: “[. . .] Herrndorf’s novel use[s] this genre [the traditional crime novel] to question exactly the subject of definite knowledge production and the possibility of one definite truth out there” (251).

¹³ See Peter Nusser for a detailed description of the elements characteristic of detective novels (26-33) and thrillers (52-56). The phase of the interrogation is usually replaced in thrillers by the chase (*Verfolgung*) (Nusser 54).

and characters.

This opening towards the thriller genre is paralleled by a complication in events. The second book of *Sand* opens with a new setting, new characters, and an inexplicable situation, all of which suggest a twist in the plot and a new beginning. “Der Dicke,” “der Kleine,” “der Unscheinbare,” and “der Vierte” (S 89) are having an animated discussion in a barn, while a nameless character is slowly regaining consciousness in the attic of the same building, feeling completely disoriented—and the reader with him.¹⁴ In the course of the book, the detective Polidorio, now a nameless amnesiac soon to be named Carl, turns into both the victim and the suspected criminal, causing a conflation of detective, victim, and villain, the three key figures of traditional detective novels. At this point, the reader still does not have all the information to understand that Carl is in reality Polidorio, but this becomes clearer by the end of the novel, when flashbacks and little details work together to reveal the correspondences between the two characters. Later, Polidorio’s colleague, Canisades, dies at the hands of the initial suspect, who has escaped and is wandering undisturbed in the desert. Ultimately, the massacre in the commune moves to the background and leaves room for the international hunt for the mysterious “mine,” which everybody wants but nobody seems to find. There is no story of the previous crime anymore, but rather “the narrative coincides with the action,” which generates the suspense typical of thrillers (Todorov qtd. in Wood and Lodge 229). Other violent deeds follow the opening massacre and build up the tension until the tragic events of the last chapters occur, precipitating into a new spiral of deaths.

Sand breaks with the traditional character constellation of crime fiction. New figures enter the story and complicate the character constellation typical of the detective novel: the CIA

¹⁴ Text passages from *Sand* are quoted from: Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Sand*, (Rowohlt: Berlin, 2011), and accompanied by the abbreviation S and the page number.

agents, the Swedish spy Lundgren who accidentally passes the “mine” on to Polidorio before being killed, the master criminal and his henchmen. The fact that this character constellation does not fit the thriller genre increases the reader’s sense of disorientation. Divided into ingroup and outgroup figures, traditionally labeled according to the moral criteria of good and bad (Nusser 58-59), figures cover specific roles in thrillers. But in *Sand* there is no such clear-cut distinction. As a matter of fact, what makes this group of figures even more complex is the play with identities and roles that characterizes Herrndorf’s work. The whole novel thematizes role-playing, false identities, the search for a forgotten name, and the past connected to it. Several characters take up identities and roles at different stages in the plot. Helen, for example, passes herself off as a cosmetic agent; Lundgren also uses the name Herrlichkoffer; Dr. Cockcroft plays the role of the psychologist; Polidorio uses a fake name to go undercover (Cetrois) and becomes later the amnesic Carl. A mistake in identities ultimately causes the escalating action and Polidorio/Carl’s death. *Sand* also complicates the figure of the hero typical of thrillers, leaving the reader wondering whether there is one in this narrative.¹⁵ In fact, the novel reads more like a story of accidental victims—victims of delusions and events—rather than like the triumph of a capable hero. While the narration focuses on Polidorio/Carl, which suggests his central role in the narrative, his lack of dynamism and his final demise question his function as hero of the novel who manages to bring back order, and rather shows how he becomes a tragic figure who succumbs to the events.

The boundaries between genres become more fluid in narrative terms at the end of the novel, when the unexpected recapitulative moment is inserted. With a sort of Brechtian move, the narrator intervenes in the novel, taking the reader by surprise. In thrillers, a recapitulative

¹⁵ In his contribution, Maar uses the term “Held” to talk about Carl/Polidorio (334).

moment is not common since the reader can follow the action, and in detective novels the detective takes up this task. But in *Sand*, the knotty plot, the multiple narrative threads and the number of characters seem to require the narrator to intervene and clarify, revealing not only how things went at the time of the events but also after the year 1972. Almost to counter the emotionality caused by the death of the main figure, by using the “wir,” the narrator takes up a whole chapter to explain “das weitere Geschehen”—this is the title of the 65th chapter (S 449)-, drawing the reader into his reflections. Once again, the borders between genres are overcome in favor of a work that plays with convention and achieves its effects by adhering to patterns but adding unexpected turns. At the same time, even in this dénouement, the narrator manages to withhold the information about Carl’s identity, never revealing his real name. What seems at first a gesture to help guide the reader turns out to be one more detour in the resolution of this crime story, which ends with unexpected deaths. *Sand* is a work that predicates originality on redundancy, twists on reiteration. This quality does not only characterize the level of genre, but also the plot. But before taking a closer look at the plotting strategies of the novel, the next section introduces important aspects and nuances of the concept of plot in narrative theory.

Plot Theories and Definitions

While most studies of plot trace the origin of the concept back to Aristotle’s *mythos*, at the same time, they insist on the term’s slipperiness and how it almost defies definition. Hilary P. Dannenberg articulates this problem in her “Introduction” to *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*:

Despite its apparent simplicity of reference, plot is one of the most elusive termini in narrative theory. The repeated attempts to redefine the parameters of the term

are symptomatic of the extreme complexity of the temporal dimension of narrative and indicate that ‘plot’ itself is too complex to be satisfactorily enclosed (or ‘plotted’) by one definition. (6)

The redefinition of parameters mentioned by Dannenberg hints at the diachronic development of related concepts, such as *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Russian formalism), *histoire* and *discours* (Genette), *story* and *plot* (Forster), *story* and *discourse* (Chatman), which have added new nuances or adjusted older meanings of plot. This series of pairs suggests the dichotomy inherent in narratives, between the events that happen in a text, and their telling by a narrator, reflecting the reader’s struggle to make sense of stories, based on the way they are organized and told.

At the same time, the term plot is often regarded skeptically and frowned upon as obvious, since “Everybody knows what plot is” (Lowe 3).¹⁶ For this reason, plot has been often excluded from narratological discussions altogether, even if “the idea of plot, in Aristotle’s *mythos*, lies at the centre of the theoretical system from which narratology begins” (Lowe 3). As Lowe suggests, “To find any extended, unembarrassed discussion of the concept one has to look underground: to the [. . .] creative-writing handbooks, with their deviant perception of Aristotle and forbidden fascination with the poetics of authorial composition” (3). As these remarks show, a tension between the resistance to use the term openly and the ongoing endeavor to come up with a better definition of it characterizes discussions of plot. But in spite of the many attempts to redefine plot, its original definition still holds its ground.

¹⁶ Culler’s words, cited by Lowe, make a case for the necessity of a clear notion of plot: “Readers can tell that two texts are versions of the same story, that a novel and a film have the same plot. They can summarize plots and discuss the adequacy of plot summaries. And therefore it seems not unreasonable to ask of literary theory that it provide some account of this notion of plot, whose appropriateness seems beyond question and which we use without difficulty” (3).

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines *mythos* as a well-organized whole with a beginning, a middle and an end (7, 1450b). This formulation does not refer so much to a sequence or chronological order, as it does to the most “inherent connections that constitute a well-made story” (Sachs, Introduction 3). Unlike a story, a plot displays not only temporal but also causal connections between the events. According to Aristotle, stories are imitations of actions, and this mimetic drive leads to what Lowe calls “narrative *transparency* – avoiding the kind of obtrusive contrivance that might call attention to the artificiality of fiction, and thus snap the audience out of its narrative trance” (12). Readers should perceive the plot as an organic whole, even though different levels of complexity are possible. Indeed, since Aristotle, plots are classified in simple and complex plots. A complex plot, Aristotle writes, “is one whose transformation contains recognition or reversal or both. And these elements should emerge from the very structure of the plot, so that they ensue from the preceding events by necessity or probability” (10, 1452a). Recognition corresponds to what Aristotle calls *anagnorisis*, the process of discovery, which usually involves more than one person, leading both of them or only one to achieve some form of knowledge (11, 1452a-b). This concept plays a key role later in my analysis, not only in its positive connotation, but also in the failure of recognition, which complicates the plot in unexpected ways.

While plot should not be artificial, it is nonetheless a construction on the side of the author. Indeed, constructedness is one of the features of plot that the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* also emphasizes: “The constructedness of plot in comparison to story is already evident in the fact that one can speak of ‘telling a story,’ but not of ‘telling a plot’.” In its constructedness, plot contains the narrative and becomes “the very organizing line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible because finite and comprehensible” (Brooks 4), allowing

for the reader's processing and understanding. Plot is not only a well-constructed whole, but also something that affects the reader. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster suggests that plot "forces us to read actively and intelligently between the lines: to use, to value, and ideally to extend our human understanding of people and causes through the process of making sense of events, whether real or imagined" (qtd. in Lowe 13-14). Similarly, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* states that "plot lies [both] in the telling and understanding of a narrative's story." The reader is moved by the desire to understand the whole story, to make sense of its constructedness and understand its turns.

Earlier attempts to define plot in terms of grammar, types, and models have evolved towards new approaches that consider plot more as a process than a construct, highlighting the dynamic aspect of plot. In this light, plot is understood as "the open, fluid, and dynamic patterning of events, precisely because, seen from a pre-closure position, plot is still moving towards the final organising telos of the narrative" ("Plot"). One of the supporters of this theory, James Phelan maintains that "Studying a narrative's progression involves investigating 'how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narrative'" ("Plot"). In these terms, plot develops from textual to existential tool, transgressing the borders between the fictional and the real.

Paul Ricoeur and Peter Brooks particularly stress the value of plot as mental construct. For Ricoeur, "emplotment" is the term which best describes the dynamic character of the plot construction. Brooks, by contrast, uses a psychological approach to emphasize that the reader of a text is driven by "narrative desire" or "textual erotics" (38). For Brooks, plot is motivated by narrative desire, which transforms the text into "a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" (xiv). Plot develops and sustains itself through narrative

movements, through obstacles and the release of tensions, which move the narration forward. This movement consumes the narrative and the reader, pushing both towards the end. For Brooks the novel displays “the paradox of narrative plot as the reader consumes it: diminishing as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making. If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for* the end” (52). Narratives are conceived as wholes moving towards the end, which constitutes the most fascinating moment, in which closure is possibly achieved. Indeed, in order for narratives to achieve “completeness,” they need not only to reach an end, but also to resolve the instabilities they sustained (“Plot”). Ultimately plot becomes “one central way in which we as readers make sense, first of the text, and then, using the text as an interpretive model, of life” (Brooks 19). In this regard, I will reflect on how plot achieves conclusion and closure in *Sand*, referring to the concept of closure developed by the American philosopher of art Noël Carroll, and how closure or the lack of it translates, in turn, into an interpretive tool.

In my reading, I understand plot as a constructed whole, which functions according to temporal *and* causal relations, inviting the reader to play along to understand the novel, to consider the connections among its parts, and to spin these connections for the interpretation of the narrative. I take into consideration how a well-organized plot is constructed; the level of complexity it achieves and the strategies it uses to do so; and the play between reading and understanding it generates. I use the term “plot” as distinct from “story,” which I consider as the set of events in their chronological order as they happen in the diegetic world, and from “discourse” or “narration,” which signify the way in which the text narrates its story, the words and discursive strategies it employs.

A Tragic Plot in Five Books

The structure of *Sand* already hints at the complexity of the work. The multiplication of narrative threads and the ensuing obfuscation generate a tension between order and disorder. On one hand, the structure of the novel imposes order on the events and its plot; on the other, the novel “explodes” with clues, evidence and traces. As a mirror to this narrative complexity, *Sand* displays an over-articulated form for a work of crime fiction.

In *Arbeit und Struktur*, Herrndorf reflects on the title of the novel. He includes a list of more than sixty titles that he considered at different stages, ranging from “Nüchterne, Supermarktkassenbestseller, Hochkultur, Parodien, Seventies, mit Gewalt und Too much” (A&S 27.1.2011, 185). The title “Sand” represents a rather unspectacular choice compared to some of the discarded options, such as “Geheimsache Sand,” “Das wüste Denken,” and “Todestango im Treibsand” (A&S 27.1.2011, 185-87). At the same time, it renounces the kitschiness and sensationalism of some other options. As a title, “Sand” discloses neither the genre nor its topic. Albeit in very general terms, it hints at what could be the location or even the protagonist of the novel, preserving the mystery of what is to come. Considered in the light of its form and plotting, “Sand” may even be read as an allusion to the structure of the novel, in which every figure and event constitute one of the grains of this composite desert story. All the grains coalesce in the end, in what reads as a novel with a strong—almost forced—closure. Actions come to a halt and mysteries are, at least in part, explained.

The novel consists of five books, divided into 68 chapters, each of which is introduced by a set of paratexts—a title and an epigraph. In his review “Tod in der Wüste: Zu Wolfgang Herrndorfs Roman *Sand*,” Peter Koch points out that the titles of the five books do not show any stringent logic and fail to clearly demarcate the boundaries between the books. In opposition to

Koch's reading, I argue that the book titles provide some spatio-temporal orientation to the reader, albeit in vague terms. In particular, the first four titles refer to the different spaces that play an important role in the story, "Das Meer," "Die Wüste," "Die Berge," and "Die Oase," even if no geographical specification is added to these general topographic denominations. Each of these four settings constitutes a part of the spatial frame for the narration: characters land in Targat via the sea and spend the rest of the narrated time moving through the desert, its mountains and oasis. "Die Nacht," the title of the last book, seems to build a contrast to the other titles. However, it can be linked back to them if one reads night metonymically, to signify the darkness of the underground tunnel where the amnesiac character is trapped. At the same time, this last title carries narrative significance in anticipating the "dark" conclusion of the novel, which closes with a new series of deaths.

The subdivision of the novel in five books draws a connection to drama, the genre for which theories of plot were originally conceived. Discussions of plot first addressed the genres of epic and tragedy, and, when Aristotle describes simple or complex plots, he does so by referring to classical drama and to Homer's *Odyssey*, respectively (*Poetics* 7-8, 1450b-1451a). The number of books, the centrality of the amnesiac character Polidorio/Carl/Cetrois, the development of action through crescendos and delays until the ultimate tragic ending of the novel—which culminates in the death of the "hero"—beg for a reading of the work in dramatic and epic terms. Further, the subdivision of the books into many chapters of variable length gives a dynamic structure to the text, which is reminiscent of theater scenes.¹⁷ Action develops quickly

¹⁷ In *Der Kriminalroman* Peter Nusser describes the characteristic structure of thrillers in terms of accumulation and release of suspense. His interpretation associates such a development with filmic, rather than dramatic structure: "Da der Held immer wieder in Bedrängnis gerät und sich immer wieder befreit, ergibt sich eine **Spannungskurve**, die sich jeweils an den Gefahrensituationen entzündet und im ständigen Wechsel ansteigt und abfällt. Die Handlung

from one chapter to the next and change is suggested through alternation in setting and groups of characters. While descriptions of characters and places are kept to a minimum, action and dialogue contribute to the movement and dynamism of the novel. The structural adherence to drama seems to counterbalance the thematic and narrative “explosion,” striving to maintain the symmetry that the novel threatens to disrupt on multiple levels.

The choice of using five books playfully adapts the practice of organizing neoclassical tragic plot around five key moments. In line with Gustav Freytag’s theorization of drama’s structure in five acts, each book entails a key step for the five-stage plot development. Introduction, crescendo, climax, twist or falling and catastrophe, are completed by three turning points: the exciting moment, the tragic moment and the moment of the last tension.¹⁸ With a similar development, the first book of *Sand* functions as exposition, that is, it presents the key information for the later actions. On one hand, it introduces the main characters: the policemen Polidorio and Canisades; the Swedish spy Lundgren-Herrlichkoffer; and Helen, the CIA agent. As with Aristotle’s tragic hero, Polidorio perishes not because he is bad or vicious, but because he displays a tragic flaw. In contrast with his name, which means “bearer of many gifts” (as the Greek etymology suggests),¹⁹ he possesses a mediocre intelligence, confirmed by his IQ of 102 “errechnet nach einem Fragebogen für französische Schulkinder im Alter von zwölf bis dreizehn

wird dadurch, ganz im Gegensatz zu der weitgespannten Konstruktion des Detektivromans, stark ins Szenische, Episodische aufgelöst – in ein ‚Szenario‘, woran sich eine starke ‘Affinität’ zwischen Roman und Film erkennen läßt” (53).

¹⁸ Based off of the three-act tragedy, Freytag’s model, presented in *Technik des Dramas*, proposes a symmetric, pyramidal development, which revolves around five main moments. For a full account of how these five parts develop, see Freytag 94-95. The significance of this dramatic model for prose and poetry is discussed, for example, by Dietrich Weber in *Erzählliteratur* (12).

¹⁹ See the definition of “Polydorus” given by the *Online Etymology Dictionary*: “Priam’s youngest son (Homer), from Latin Polydorus, from Greek Polydoros ‘one who has received many gifts,’ noun use of adjective meaning ‘richly endowed,’ from polys ‘much, many’ (see poly-) + doron ‘gift.’”

Jahren” (S 9). This comic remark turns out to be tragic when the reader considers that Polidorio is a 28-year-old policeman, in charge of investigating multiple murders. The exposition also lays out the key events, that is, the crime in the commune and the accidental exchange of the mysterious mine between Lundgren and Polidorio, whom the former mistakes for his contact person.

The second book witnesses the first complication. An amnesiac character wakes up in a barn in the middle of the desert and overhears a conversation among four men, of which he cannot make sense. The four strangers are talking about a certain man, named Cetrois, who apparently escaped on a motorcycle, leaving behind his injured partner. In representing this conversation, the opening of this book reveals the novel’s play with theatrical elements and its relationship to the dramatic form more generally. Here, the narrator employs the language of stage directions to introduce the action and the characters, who are descroned as if they were standing on a theater stage: “Ein Blick wie auf eine Theaterbühne, zwei dunkle Holzbretter rechts und links als improvisierte Vorhänge” (S 87). The amnesiac character functions both as spectator and actor and the gaze of the narrator seems to register a theatrical performance, with off- and onstage parallel scenes. When the fourth character enters the “stage,” the dialogue becomes perceptible and the focus shifts onto the main stage. At the end of their discussion, the four characters move to the off-stage until their voices fade away and “Dann nichts mehr” (S 91). The next chapter continues the theater metaphor and describes the rise of the sun as the entrance of an actor on stage: “tauchte wie ein Schauspieler auf dem Boulevardtheater hinter dem Holzbrett links die Sonne auf” (S 91). Albeit injured and disoriented, the amnesiac character manages to escape and, in the middle of nowhere, the “inciting event” takes place. The man’s path crosses that of Helen, and this causes their narrative threads, which up to this point were

running parallel to each other, to intertwine. The closing sentence of the chapter warns the reader that some undesired complication will take place: “Es war auch nicht Liebe. Es war irgendwas Schlimmeres” (S 144). This statement, which refers to Carl’s attempt to understand his feelings for Helen, builds the tension for the further development of the plot.

Similar to the third act in the dramatic structure, the third book introduces a further complication of events and leads to the climax. Carl is first kidnapped, tortured and given an ultimatum by the men of Abdil Abissir, who wants to regain control of the mine-weapon he purchased. Then, Helen and Carl enter for the first time the tunnel that will later become his prison, and meet his future murderer, the old Hakim III. The encounter between Carl and the psychologist-charlatan Dr. Cockcroft, which Herrndorf himself describes as the central chapter, represents the climax of the work.²⁰ Positioned in the middle of the narrative to include three chapters—31, 32, and 33—, the encounter represents the tragi-comic peak of the action. The conversation with Dr. Cockcroft recapitulates important details (e.g. Carl’s first memories and his relation to Helen) and also anticipates the moment of the final interrogation and torture in the tunnel. Further, Dr. Cockcroft’s lack of professionalism instills some serious doubts in Carl, which will be confirmed later in the narrative, when the events take an unexpected turn (S 220).

In the fourth book, the action seems to reverse. After the violence and encounters of the previous “act,” things take a smoother course. It finally becomes clear to Helen that the whole mystery must revolve around a mine, that is, an explosive device, which was hidden in a pen in order to be easily smuggled (S 250), and Carl focuses his actions to find it. Finally, the reader is led to believe that a happy ending is possible. Carl accidentally finds his car and in it the mysterious pen with the mine inside. However, his luck does not last long. First, he loses the

²⁰ “Das zentrale Kapitel, in dem der Psychologe den Amnestiker verhört, an dem ich wochenlang rumgeschraubt habe, liegt endlich hinter mir” (A&S 27.1.2011, 185).

mine while wandering in the desert and later the pen that contains the mine gets stolen by a group of kids who, excited by the “pen revolution” of the 1970s, see in Carl’s pen a precious object.²¹ As the four men of the opening scenes come back to chase him through the city, Carl is “rescued” by Dr. Cockcroft and his team.

What looks like an act of liberation at first, soon turns out to be a twist towards final tragedy. Indeed, the fifth book takes place in a dark tunnel, where Carl is repeatedly interrogated, tortured and then abandoned by Helen, Dr. Cockcroft and their CIA collaborators. When Carl finally manages to escape, the reader can sigh with relief. And yet, a fatal event causes the action to precipitate. When Hakim III sees Carl approaching, he takes revenge on him for the misdeeds of his presumed wife, Helen, whom Hakim III calls “der stinkende Haufen Kameldung” (S 463). The narrator’s comment on Polidorio’s initial tragic mistake as he first doubted Amadou’s guilt—“eine falsche Schlussfolgerung [. . .] den Glauben an die Unschuld eines Schuldigen” (S 452)—leaves no room for doubt that the tragic ending was inescapable for the character. Earlier in the narration, Carl had cherished the hope of getting out of his condition through a comic ending: “alles würde sich früher oder später in einer heiteren Komödie blitzschneller Dialoge auflösen” (S 304), with classical music from Verdi, and it would all turn out to be just a bad joke played on him. Carl’s remark reads like a tragic-comic commentary on the novel. His idea that “Wenn der Handlungsknoten am verwickeltsten wäre, erklingen Verdi-Arien und Champagnerkorken knallten” (S 304) is destined to fail as the narrative only allows for a tragic ending.

²¹ In the last chapter, the narrator describes the “kleine[. . .] Revolution auf dem Schreibsektor” (S 472), which took place in the spring of 1972. According to his accounts, the children of the *Salzviertel* were introduced to pencil stubs and paper, which replaced the practice of writing on wood. The ultimate “revolution” was represented by the arrival of the pen, which justifies the children’s fascination with Carl’s container for the mine.

The tension between order and disorder that runs through the novel only comes to a stop with the death of the main protagonist, which highlights the tragic quality of the work. The choice of using a book structure articulated in five moments and reflective of the plot development, concretizes the tension between the multiplications of cues, events and characters and the use of the neoclassical scheme to frame and contain them. At the same time, this choice not only hints at Herrndorf's conscious play with different forms and genres, but also suggests the significance of each part of the novel for the development of plot and action.

Narrative Extremes: Beginning and Ending in *Sand*

Beginning and ending often constitute the hooks of literary works and the parts readers remember most.²² Beginnings such as “Über dem Atlantik befand sich ein barometrisches Minimum” (Musil 9) or “Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte” (Kafka, “Die Verwandlung” 69) remain present in the reader's mind; likewise, endings like “In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu unendlicher Verkehr” (Kafka, “Das Urteil” 66) are memorable conclusions in German literature. As Marianna Torgovnick points out, “it is difficult to recall *all* of a work after a completed reading, but climactic moments, dramatic scenes, and beginnings and endings remain in the memory and decisively shape our sense of a novel as a whole” (qtd. in Krings 163). While many details in *Sand* may be easily overlooked, confused or even forgotten, the opening and ending no doubt capture the reader's attention and the tension between (re)cognition and bafflement. Through their use of parallelism and embedding strategies, they draw the reader into the narration and lead her to its end. The

²² For more insight on narrative beginnings and endings see also Brian Richardson's *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices* and *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*.

novel opens with multiple images that reinforce the idea of beginning: the sun rises over Targat; the rituals of the local daily life begin; and characters arrive in the city. The ending, instead, emphasizes the winding-down of the narration by describing death scenes and departures. While these may be canonical moves in narrative terms, the way that beginning and ending are narrated in *Sand* and the elements they share or the ways in which they differ contribute to make them essential moments in the novel.

Beginning and ending are clearly marked as such, and *Sand* makes use of parallelism to bring them together. The novel uses a traditional strategy to set the scene.²³ The title of the first chapter, “Targat am Meer,” suggests the geographical location of the events. The narrator captures the setting in a panoramic shot, which moves from the city to the horizon, stretches between the two extremes of sea and desert and touches on all the places that will later play a role in the events: the Sheraton Hotel, the *Salzviertel* and the *Leeres Viertel*.²⁴ A precise temporal indication situates the action on the “Morgen des 23. August 1972,” the morning of the massacre (S 8). But the figure standing in the foreground, shirtless and in the position of a crucified person – “wie gekreuzigt” (S 7) —, unsettles this description. A voice in the first-person plural introduces the character as “unser Freund” (S 8), but his identity remains a mystery until the very end of the novel. Indeed, the opening is paralleled, both in its spatial description and in the return of the “crucified” figure, in the very last chapter, where the man reappears, in the same standing position. This time the narrator reveals that he is Jean Bekurtz, one of the founders of the commune, and fills the reader in on his story. The function of this figure and its

²³ Constanze Krings considers the description of the location of events as a feature of traditional beginnings. Such a traditional beginning is used, for example, in *Sense and Sensibility*: “wobei die Ortbeschreibung ein weiteres Indiz für den konventionellen Charakter dieses Anfangs ist“ (169).

²⁴ Burk and Hamann state that the narrator looks at this scene “aus einer ‘sonnen’- oder ‘gott’-ähnlichen Position” (346) and refer to the concept of the god-like perspective (n 39, 346).

relation to the mine-enigma also become clearer: being a teacher in Targat, Jean Bekurtz witnessed the pen revolution in 1972, which explains the eagerness of children to obtain this new writing tool. The use of the “wir,” the correspondences in linguistic choices, and the presence of the same space-character constellation bring the initial and closing chapter into relation. The use of a parallel structure at the beginning and end of a novel can serve different functions. As Constanze Krings explains, such narrative parallelism is often used for the “Herstellung eines Gegensatzes als auch einer Entsprechung” or to convey the “Eindruck besonderer Vollständigkeit” (174). Completeness, correspondence, contrast: *Sand* evokes all three elements and, at the same time, challenges all of them.

While Herndorf’s choice first suggests the circularity between beginning and ending, the later development of the final scene reinforces the differences between them. Continuing the religious image of the crucifixion used in the opening and in the ending – Jean Bekurtz is once again described as “ein Gekreuzigter” (S 464)—the narrator closes the chapter with the description of a bulldozer, which he compares to a priest who raises his arms to show the Ark of the Covenant to the fellow believers. As if the image of crucifixion would not signify the end strongly enough, the tragic death of an innocent child is narrated. Together with her favorite doll and the mine, the little girl becomes “Schamott” (S 475) that gets swept away by the bulldozer. While the initial chapter closes with the invitation, loaded with religious undertones, “der Reichtum gehört euch allen. Holt ihn euch” (S 8), the last scene of the novel shows how debris and human life are both pushed downhill, without any distinction, thus clashing with the hopeful beginning of the novel. At the same time, such an ending, which evokes, reuses and expands the opening image, serves to mark the irrevocable conclusion, suggested by the final sweeping away of what remains. The richness promised to everybody—reader included—in the opening scene,

is exhausted when the novel reaches its end and there is nothing else to tell. Whereas the diegetic world crumbles to debris, the narrative is carefully constructed to go full circle and wind down.

Not only parallelism, but also embedding strategies contribute to frame the beginning and ending of *Sand*. The end of the first book seems to signal the conclusion of the introductory phase in the narration. Indeed, the change in focalization, the thematic switch and the temporal gap reinforce the deep divide between the first and the second book. And yet, “Tabula rasa,” the first title in the new book, suggests a process of erasure that lends itself to a twofold interpretation. On the one hand, it refers to the memory loss experienced by the nameless figure that enters the story precisely in this chapter. This male character does not remember who he is and for eleven chapters remains nameless. He knows he was hit on the head but he does not recall how or why. Even his clothes puzzle him: a European checkered suit covered by an African piece of clothing highlights early on the multiple layers that constitute his identity (S 101).²⁵ In later episodes of the narration, the amnesic man regains access to some information: for example, he realizes that he can read German, also in Gothic text; that prostitutes know him; that he has a son and a wife, even though he cannot really remember them. On the other hand, “Tabula rasa” can also be interpreted for its narrative significance. A new setting, a nameless character, and an inexplicable situation suggest a twist in the narration and a new beginning. The temporal gap between the end of the first book and opening of the second is attributed to a vaguely described accident and the resulting amnesia of the character involved. The exposition

²⁵ The suit functions as a key element in establishing the identity between Polidorio and Carl. When Lundgren accidentally meets Polidorio, his confused train of thoughts is rendered in the novel: “Als er die Augen wieder öffnete, saß neben ihm am Tische ein Mann. Der Mann in sonnengebräunter Kleidung und kariierter Haut“ (S 78). In spite of the inversion between clothes and appearance, Polidorio’s essential traits are provided in this short description.

of the first book is complicated by this new constellation, which mixes and rearranges the elements introduced in the first part.

This embedded structure of the opening is echoed in the ending. The intrusion of the narrator in chapter 65 signals that the narrative is moving towards the end. By taking up the tone of a chronicler, the narrator states: “Viel mehr als das Berichtete hat sich nicht ereignet” (S 449). However, this claim proves to be euphemistic and ironic. As the narrator reveals how the destinies of the different characters evolved, it becomes clear that a lot has actually happened. In an intervention that is dilated both in time and space and stretches well beyond the time of the events, the narrator summarizes the destiny of most characters. In particular, it becomes clear that Carl’s wife and son were executed, that this crime “wurde nie aufgeklärt” (S 449), and that Amadou Amadou was never found. The story of Karimi, a policeman who up to this point played a secondary role in the novel, is described here in detail. Quite surprisingly, the narrator mentions Heather Gliese, Helen’s daughter. He writes that, in a letter that Heather wrote him, she described how her mother, who died a few days before turning 72, had been tormented for some time by a recurring nightmare. This event clearly refers to a time that is not narrated in the novel and is proleptically presented to the reader. Whereas no details are provided about the nightmare, it can be easily imagined that it involves a man chained at the bottom of a pond, in a dark cave. The name of Polidorio is also mentioned in this chapter after a long silence. The narrator reminds the reader that the policeman had disappeared in 1972 and informs her that he was declared dead in 1983.

At this point, the focus shifts back to the amnesiac man and his destiny at the time of the narrative. After all, the reader still needs to find out what has happened to this character. The narrator plays with the reader to create suspense and first entices her into discovering what

happened to Carl through a rhetorical question “Wollen wir das?” (S 452). He then plays with the possibilities of entering the tunnel where Carl was left, before dismissing the idea altogether by blaming first the technical difficulties—“Hätten wir ein Nachtsichtgerät zur Verfügung [. . .]. Wir können allerdings auch einräumen, dass wir über ein solches Nachtsichtgerät nicht verfügen” (S 452)—and then by questioning the value of such information—“was nützte es uns in Wahrheit?” (S 452). The chapter closes with an appeal to the reader “sich das Folgende allein in seiner Phantasie vorzustellen” (S 453). And yet, the two chapters that follow describe Carl’s attempts to free himself from the tunnel. Chapter 66 finally contains the revelation of Carl’s enigma. His encounter with Lundgren, which had already been narrated in the first book from the spy’s perspective, is here presented through Carl’s eyes: the brief dialogue with Lundgren/Herrlichkoffer, Carl’s writing of his incognito name “Cetrois” –“noch bevor er die sieben Buchstaben gemalt hatte” (S 455)—and his running away with the pen from the four men in white dschellabahs, unaware that the pen contains a mine. The second to last chapter finally narrates Carl’s death. With a language similar to that used by the narrator in his explanatory entry—“in rosa und lila Dunst getauchter Täler, Schluchten voller purpurnem Schatten” (S 462)—the narrator describes Carl’s encounter with Hakim III. The old man, who was also probably mistreated by Helen and her fellow CIA agents, confuses Carl for Helen’s husband and takes revenge for her actions on him. He then burns the corpse together with his hut and moves down into the valley. This death episode precedes the narration of the death of the young girl Samaya. Both entail violence, and both signal a downhill movement, which can be read in narrative terms as the final descent of the action.

The complex articulation of the novel’s ending hints at the intention not only to end the narration, but also to achieve closure, while playing with narrative conventions. According to

Noël Carroll's definition, narrative closure is "a matter of concluding rather than merely stopping or ceasing or coming to a halt or a crashing" (2). Carroll conceives of narratives as sequences of events that are causally connected and that generate macro- and micro-questions in the reader. According to Carroll, every text poses different kinds of questions: presiding macro-questions, macro-questions and micro-questions. The first kind indicates "Questions that structure an entire text or, at least most of it" (5). Not all macro-questions are presiding, but both presiding and non-presiding macro-questions are answered with the help of micro-questions, "a question whose answer will contribute eventually to answering presiding macro-questions but which does not, on its own, answer the relevant presiding question directly and completely" (6). Carroll states that narrative closure is achieved when "all of the presiding macro-questions and all the micro-questions that are relevant to settling the macro-questions have been answered" (6). *Sand* generates several presiding macro-questions in the reader about the identity of the amnesic character and the enigma of the mine, as well as other macro- and micro-questions concerning the connections among characters, in particular among Helen, Cockcroft and Carl. By using the last four chapters to answer the questions that the narration has raised, the novel achieves not only its conclusion but also imposes closure. This move is performed in subsequent stages that address different unresolved elements and provide information to make sense of the enigmatic events. At this point, the reader needs to piece together the puzzle by reconsidering all the answers that were provided and filling the gaps interspersed in the narrative. Only one question is never answered explicitly, the one concerning the identity of the main figure, which the reader is asked to answer by herself.

To return to Aristotle's definition, every good *mythos* has a beginning, a middle and an end. Likewise, every good work of crime fiction is expected to achieve closure. By combining its

play with genres with the structure of the a five-act tragedy and embedded endings, *Sand* performs a strong sense of closure that reinforces the answers given by the narrator in the final “act.”

The Middle: Plotting Strategies

Aristotle’s definition of the middle is quite scant: “A middle is that which both follows a preceding event and has further consequences” (7, 1451a). But the middle part becomes for Peter Brooks the central one in his study on plot. Plot strives to achieve recognition, the moment of understanding, but Brooks believes that “recognition cannot abolish textuality, does not annul the middle which is the place of repetitions, oscillating between blindness and recognition, between origin and ending” (Brooks qtd. in Cave 217). The middle is the part of the novel in which narrative desire finds full expression and where tensions are built, resolved and then formed again. Brooks negates the resolving power of *anagnorisis* and prioritizes the narrative significance of the middle part of plot, where the way towards the end develops.

In *Sand*, the middle of the novel is dominated by a series of accidents and mistakes which are both the cause and effect of the main character’s memory and identity loss. Whereas the beginning and the ending feel forcefully stylized, in the middle part of the novel, narrative strategies intervene to confuse characters and plot lines. In this section of the chapter, I reflect on the use of multiple narrative strategies to convey the rupture between (re)cognition and mistakes, knowledge and confusion. The movement from ignorance to knowledge is marked by the passage from amnesia to the recovery of identity, via a brief moment of recognition. But before recognition happens, the middle part of the novel sustains and spins ignorance and uncertainty.

Amnesia

The hermeneutic challenge of *Sand*, both on the diegetic and textual level, is complicated by the use of amnesia, which, in its relation to point of view, affects narrative reliability. First introduced in the second book, amnesia plays a role in the rest of the novel.²⁶ In a diary entry from *Arbeit und Struktur*, Herrndorf criticizes amnesia as a trite and ordinary plot device: “Gibt wahrscheinlich nichts, was billiger wäre in der Fiktion zur Spannungserzeugung als Totalamnesie“ he writes, “Aber ich dachte, man muß mit einfachen Mitteln arbeiten, wenn man schwierige nicht beherrscht” (A&S 27.1.2011, 187). A similar commentary, which highlights the unexceptional quality of amnesia, appears also on the diegetic level, when the psychologist-agent Dr. Cockcroft reflects in metanarrative terms on Carl’s memory loss: “Das ist die Art und Weise, wie Amnesie für gewöhnlich in der Fiktion auftaucht, in Unterhaltungsfilmen. Man kriegt einen Schlag auf den Kopf, und die Identität ist weg. Man kriegt noch einen Schlag, und sie ist wieder da. Asterix und Obelix” (S 204). This remark, spoken by the doctor, charlatan, now improvised literary critic Dr. Cockcroft, traces the form of Carl’s amnesia back to the comics of *Asterix und Obelix*, and anticipates the future development of events. Chained in the pond at the end of the novel, Carl regains access to his name precisely by accidentally hitting his head on a metal bar: “Er schlug die Stirn gegen die Eisenstange. Mit einem Schrei tauchte er wieder auf. Er schrie den Namen, der ihm schon die ganze Zeit auf der Zunge gelegen hatte. Jetzt hallte er von den

²⁶ Amnesia is cleverly built in the narration and connected to other seemingly irrelevant plot details. The third chapter, entitled “Kaffee und Migräne,” introduces a key information: Polidorio suffers from a terrible headache “jeden Tag um vier” (S 15). As a condition that started after he moved to Africa, it can only be caused by the country itself: “Es war das Land selber” (S 16). The reference to this pain, which his later amnesia seems to cure, is a detail that highlights the connection between Polidorio and Carl, a clue in the identity game of the novel.

Wänden wieder ins Nichts” (S 444).²⁷ This stylized use of amnesia reveals how the narrator plays with a traditional narrative strategy throughout the story. *Sand* uses amnesia as a device to withhold the truth from the reader and mislead her through red herrings, until the overcoming of amnesia brings the narrative threads back together.

In spite of this apparent simplicity and hackneyed quality, amnesia functions in the novel as one of the narrative strategies that determines both plot development and the telling of events. Carl’s memory loss is the precondition for many gaps on the diegetic level, above all, the insertion of narrative ellipses and the delayed recovery of information through analepses. For example, amnesia justifies the narrative rupture between the first and second book, where the key temporal and informative gap is placed. Characters often go back to this obscure moment and Carl’s mysterious awakening in an unspecified barn. Their speculations about the course of events represent an attempt to fill in this gap.²⁸ By making use of a character that suffers from amnesia and has only isolated glimpses of his past, the text manages to create an identity enigma that can be withheld until the very end of the narration, making the most out of the scheme of the detective as victim. Further, by using Carl as his privileged point of view, by filtering many chapters through what he knows or does not remember, the text leads the reader into the mental

²⁷ Interestingly, the moment Carl overcomes amnesia reminds of a scene that belongs to a major story of recognition, the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus injures Polyphemus in the eye, the Cyclope starts screaming in the cave the name of “Nobody”—the name Odysseus used for himself—and the walls echo his name back to him (9.395-405)

²⁸ Amnesia is strongly connected to the practice of questioning and interrogation in the novel. In what looks like an attempt to make sense of events, Carl and the other characters often reflect on previous actions and recapitulate details. This process, which in the beginning is used as a form of reconstruction, later turns into torture, when Carl is trapped in the tunnel and forced to repeat his story backward and forward, again and again. This repetition becomes a narrative device characteristic of the novel.

processes of the character.²⁹ For example, when Carl wakes up in the barn, looks around and cannot understand what he sees, the reader perceives his confusion: “Eine frische Leiche, vier bewaffnete Männer in einem Jeep, ein irr blickender Fellache mit Mistgabel: Die Situation war unübersichtlich” (S 103). When Carl cannot make sense of a situation, this uncertainty is transferred to the reader without any mediating clarification.

Carl is victim of a failing memory, but subject to dreams, and hallucinations which often make it difficult to distinguish between actual events and fantasy.³⁰ When Carl spends his first night in Helen’s bungalow and thinks about the events of the night, his thoughts read: “Einmal hörte er sie mit der CIA telefonieren” (S 138). While this first impression proves to be plausible in the end, at this point of the narration, it seems to be just a form of delirium or the result of the fear of the character, who believes to be a wanted criminal. Indeed, the statement that follows, “Einmal hatte sie zwei Köpfe” (S 138), is also presented from Carl’s perspective and reinforces the idea that he is suffering from hallucinations and, therefore, cannot be entirely trusted. Likewise, when Carl, in the end remembers how his encounter with Lundgren unfolded, the reader accesses the information through Carl’s point of view and hallucinations, in which Lundgren takes up the semblance of a ghost. The inscrutability of the situation and the ghostlike qualities of memories increase the suspense in the narrative, while prolonging the sense of confusion in the reader. By offering Carl’s partial knowledge, the reader is left with the thoughts of an amnesiac character and she is ultimately responsible for choosing whether she should

²⁹ Burk and Hamann offer a helpful overview of how the narrator switches internal focalization throughout the different chapters (342). Their scheme emphasizes how events are mostly conveyed through Polidorio/Carl’s eyes, on the one hand, and by Helen, on the other. The text only makes a limited use of the point of view of Canisades, Lundgren, Michelle or Amadou Amadou.

³⁰ See also Arnold: “Dabei handelt es sich jedoch um eine Reflektorfigur, die unter Gedächtnisverlust leidet, dehydriert und halluziniert. Dies kann in der Folge dazu führen, dass sie vom Rezipienten als nicht zuverlässig eingestuft wird” (36).

believe them or not. By complicating the narrating process, amnesia encourages the reader to question narrative reliability on her path to the solution of the crime.

The narrator does not intervene to compensate for Carl's deficiency. On the contrary, while he has an omniscient knowledge of events as the end of the novel shows, he repeatedly conceals details from his readers.³¹ To continue the enigma, he renounces interventions that may clarify the events too early, thus postponing all explanations. The fact that the narrator never explicitly reveals the name of the amnesiac man, for example, can be read as an attempt to preserve suspense until the very end.³² The reader has the task of bringing together the pieces of information about the amnesic character in order to make sense of his identity and story. Even when the narrator introduces events from his perspective and focalization, he often employs hypothetical phrasing. For example, when he reveals that he stayed with his parents at the Sheraton Hotel at the same time when Helen was there, he adds: "Die Frage, ob ich am letzten Augusttag des Jahres 1972 auch dort oben gestanden und die amerikanische Touristin und den einarmigen Taxifahrer bemerkt habe oder ob hier eine Fotografie meine Erinnerung überlagert, kann ich heute nicht mehr mit Bestimmtheit beantworten" (S 49). This statement compromises the reader's trust in the omniscient narrator. His reliability is further questioned by the fact that the narrator temporarily abandons his heterodiegetic stance and reveals himself to be a character

³¹ An example for this concealed knowledge can be found in the very first scene of the novel. When he quotes the words of Jean Bekurtz, the narrator says: "Der Reichtum, wie unser Freund mit dem blauen Plastikkanister zu sagen pflegte, der Reichtum gehört allen. Holt ihn euch" (S 8). The detail "wie [er] zu sagen pflegte" shows that the narrator's knowledge extends beyond the precise time and space in the scene, to include a much broader temporal and spatial frame. Burk and Hamann also show how the narrator makes his voice heard to introduce prolepses and information that are not available to other figures or the reader (343).

³² Burk and Hamann read this omission on the side of the narrator as the clear proof of his unreliability. "Die Unverlässigkeit zählt" as they write "zu den herausragenden Merkmalen des Erzählers" (345).

in the story.³³ The letter that he received from Heather Gliese, Helen's daughter, and the fact that she is also listed in the acknowledgements at the end of the novel, among Herrndorf's friends and family, further destabilizes the reader's certainties about the narrator. The questionable reliability of the narrator, together with the amnesia of the key figure, force the reader to often reconsider the narrated events or to try to find out what is being concealed from her. In this regard, the use of amnesia reads as an invitation to the reader to strengthen her detective investigation on the level of plot and narration.

Misrecognitions and Misinterpretations

Partially the cause of amnesia and partially an effect of it, a series of mistakes, accidents, and ambiguities complicates the narrative and delays the resolution of the mystery and the coming together of the different plot lines. Mistakes include, on the one hand, misinterpretations and, on the other, misrecognitions. Examples under the first category refer, for example, to errors in the detective action or misinterpretations of words heard and/or read. Misrecognitions, instead, involve the failure of recognizing a person or the attribution of a mistaken identity, as well as the failure to reach the truth. Both entail the difficulty, and sometimes impossibility, to name and define people and things and to make sense of events. These mistakes and their consequences not

³³ Burk and Hamann also reflect on the unreliability of the narrative voice after this scene: "Die Situierung des Ich-Erzählers in diesem Romankapitel zerstört die bis dahin gegebene gleichsam 'gottähnliche' Autorität und die Glaubwürdigkeit der erzählenden Instanz: Die fiktive Wirklichkeit entpuppt sich als Erfindung eines Ich-Erzählers, der als Kind einige Wochen in Targat verbracht und sich dort auf dem Hoteldach die Zeit mit zum Teil aggressiven, Kolonialphantasien ähnlichen Träumereien vertrieben hat" (349). According to their reading, this element plays a key role in relation to postcolonial and political questions since the voice in a text has not only a narrative function, but also an ethical/political function in the way it represents the self and the other (349).

only set the plot in motion, but also keep the action going until the very last accident ends the narration.³⁴

Recognition has a long history and Aristotle's *Poetics* provides once again orientation in understanding the significance of plot elements. Aristotle claims that "tragedy's most potent means of emotional effect are components of plot, namely reversals and recognitions" (6, 1450a). Reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) can function together in the plot, or show up singularly. Recognition is usually connected to a moment of scandal because it unveils unexpected knowledge. Aristotle reflects on different kinds of recognition, which he ranks according to their mimetic effects. The highest form of recognition happens together with reversal of actions. Other forms of recognition, from the lowest to the highest according to Aristotle, include: recognition from signs or marks; recognition fabricated by the poet; recognition which arises from memory; recognition constructed through reasoning; and recognition that arises from actions themselves (16, 1454b-1455a). In all these forms, recognition

brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge, it is the moment at which the characters understand their predicament fully for the first time, the moment that revolves a sequence of unexplained and often implausible occurrences; it makes the world (and the text) intelligible. Yet it is also a shift *into* the implausible: the secret unfolded lies beyond the realm of common experience; the truth discovered is 'marvellous' [. . .], the truth of fabulous myth or legend. (Cave 1-2)

Recognition is connected to a moment of enlightening in the narrative, through which even implausible situations are suddenly explained and turned into plausible, often shocking truths. In

³⁴ See also Arnold: "Die Kette von falschen Schlussfolgerungen in einer Logik des *Knapp daneben* zieht sich durch den gesamten Roman und fungiert als Handlungsmotor" (32).

Sand, recognition is often delayed by failed recognition or misinterpretations, which move the plot forward. The novel is built on moments that could lead characters to knowledge, but usually translate into occasions for mistakes. Likewise, every time the reader is led one step forward in the solution of the international intrigue, new elements intervene to complicate and misdirect her investigations.

Polidorio's troubles begin precisely through one of these mistakes, that is, the misinterpretation of a facial expression. During the interrogation of Amadou Amadou, Polidorio looks at the face of the young man and upon trying to interpret his look he thinks: "der Blick eines Mannes (. . .) der – vielleicht unschuldig war" (S 32). It is to prove the innocence of this man that Polidorio drives to Tindirna, where he realizes that every single clue and testimony actually condemns Amadou. But when this happens, it is already too late. A second mistake facilitates the tragic unfolding of the action. While he is waiting for his contact person, Lundgren notices a man sitting next to him at the table: "Da war der Mann. Der Mann, der Mann, der Mann" (S 78). Lundgren mistakes "de[n] Karierte[n]" (S 79) for his contact man. Even though Polidorio's name is not revealed in the episode, the identity between this mistaken contact man and Polidorio/Carl becomes clearer at the end of the novel, when Carl thinks about his encounter with Lundgren in his underground trap. And yet, one fact that adds to the tragic nature of this mistake is that Carl never realizes what happened and never has the possibility to change the course of events.

The enigma that revolves around the mine is also linked to a series of mistakes, coupled with linguistic ambiguity. Polidorio/Carl is unable to make sense of the words he heard in the barn, incapable not only to interpret them, but first of all to remember them correctly. It is Helen who first insinuates in his mind the idea of a "Mine," as the center of the enigma. While Carl is

trying to recall slips of the conversation that the four men had in the barn, he plays with associations through similarity in the sounds of the words: “Wenn er *Pauline* informiert, wenn er die *Bienen* exportiert, wenn die *Maschine* funktioniert... ich weiß es nicht” (S 135, my emphasis). Clearly trapped in a labyrinth of similar sounds and words, he can only be “guided” to the solutions of his doubt by someone who is not victim of his same impossibility to “recognize.” Suddenly Helen adds a sentence that seems quite unrelated to the previous ones, except for its phonetic similarity: “Wenn er die *Mine* jetzt zerstört” (S 135). The mine, which had never even come up in Carl’s thoughts, ironically proves to be the object that everybody is trying to find. The plot starts revolving around a mysterious mine, to which nobody, for different reasons, has access, suggesting how coincidences, mistakes and ambiguities keep the action spinning.

The first difficulty consists in identifying what the mine really is, since the word lends itself to multiple interpretations.³⁵ Were the polysemantic nature of the word not confusing enough, the novel also plays with multiple languages: Polidorio speaks and thinks in French but he also reads and understands German. In the play between these two languages, the enigma of the mine becomes even thicker. The word “Mine,” “sein einziger Beitrag zur Konversation” (S 46), is first dropped in the novel by the taxi driver who brings Helen to her hotel. After Helen helps Carl in figuring out that the four men who followed him to the barn are probably looking for a mine (weapon), Helen and Carl go over the different meanings of the word “Mine.” In French, the word has a variety of meanings, ranging from face to weapon, mine and pencil: “Die Mine im Gesicht, das Bergwerk, das Sprengding und das in den Bleistiften” (S 162). Later in the novel, Carl finds a volume of the *Brockhaus* dictionary from 1953, in which the following

³⁵ In her reading, Arnold also points out this linguistic ambivalence. See in particular 39-44 in the section “Homonyme und Homophone: Die Mi(e)ne.”

meanings of the word “Mine” are listed: “Sprengladung,” “Landminen,” “Wurfmine,” “Seeminen,” “Luftminen,” “ein Bergwerk,” “Münze,” “Mine” used as surname are the items listed in the dictionary, but, as Carl notices, “Bleistifte fehlen” (S 217-18). Playing with meanings between French and German, Carl tries to understand what the mystery may be. After excluding the meanings of mine that seem too improbable and focusing on the discrepancy between French and German, Helen comes to the conclusion: “Dann bleibt uns wohl nur noch die Bleistiftmine” (S 250). The enigma seems to be enclosed in the missing element, precisely that “Bleistiftmine,” the mine of the pencil. The mine becomes for Carl the “Gegenstand, von dem sein Leben, seine Identität und alles abhängt” (S 326). Enclosed in a pencil mine, Carl’s identity is linked to the process of defining, naming and writing. Polidorio’s misadventure starts when he writes down his name for Lundgren. Naming and identifying become processes that rob the characters of their identity.

The novel initiates a game of false identities already in the first book. Polidorio and Canisades are working at the so-called “lange Nacht der Akten” in which “auf den Fluren Berge aus Papier aufgetürmt, flüchtig durchgesehen und im Hof verbrannt, eine lästige Pflicht, die oft bis zum Morgengrauen dauerte” (S 9). During a blackout, Canisades and Polidorio examine confidential files and start assuming false identities based on the names recorded on the documents (“Canisades erklärte sich zu Emerson Fittipaldi” (S 10). Later they find some still unfilled identification documents from the colonial time and they complete them with fantastic names: “Bédeux mein Name” (S 10). These documents, which at the beginning of the novel seem to be unimportant, return later in the narrative when Carl/Polidorio sees the corpse of Canisades in the desert, but fails to recognize him: “Das könnte nur Cetrois sein! [. . .] Vielleicht war das mein Freund, dachte er. Vielleicht mein Feind” (S 305). Carl/Polidorio finds the

fragments of the identity cards in Canisades's pockets but he cannot make sense of them. He tries to arrange and rearrange them but still cannot find any meaning in them. Once again Helen brings some clues into the narrative and manages to piece together these "zwölf kleine Papierschnipsel [. . .] Dreimal Ausweispapier. Dreimal 'Offizier des Tugendkomitees'" (S 336). The three IDs that Helen recomposes refer to "Aun...Bedeux...Dequat.." The element missing in the logical sequence is the identity document for "Cetrois" (S 337), which Carl/Polidorio had on himself as he was first wandering in the desert. All that remains from this document are fragments: "Name: Doppelpunkt und ein Viertelbuchstabe, ein Schnörkel nur noch. [. . .] Der Buchstabe war nach oben und links hin gerundet, ein C also oder ein O" (S 113). At this point, the attentive reader may understand that Carl is Cetrois, and that Cetrois is Polidorio, but that is not a given—and the many confused reviews of the novel prove this. Polidorio, who likes to visit prostitutes, uses the undercover name of Charly, another twist on the name Carl. The moment in which the mine passes from Lundgren's into Polidorio/Carl's hands also involves the use of an undercover identity: "Wie heißen Sie?" is the only phrase that Lundgren and Polidorio exchange. "Und jetzt schreiben Sie Ihren Namen hier – hier – hier" (S 79). Polidorio uses his undercover name of Cetrois to sign his name in front of Lundgren. Part of the linguistic sophistication of the riddle lies in the fact that there is a wordplay in the name "Cetrois" as well, since it hints at the three identities enclosed in one character: Carl, Polidorio and Cetrois precisely. As Maar writes in his interpretation of *Sand*, "Ces trois ne font qu'un" (335), which summarizes how different characters are all enclosed in one, the only one who does not remember who he is.

Recognition and its negation play a key role in the second-to-last scene of the novel. The only moment of recognition in *Sand* is brief and does not contribute to a positive reversal of the plot. After regaining knowledge of his name and managing to free himself from the underground

tunnel, Carl/Polidorio encounters Hakim III, who is now victim of delusions and misrecognition. When Carl sees that Hakim III has a Winchester, he tries to calm him and tells him that they know each other (“Wir kennen uns”), but Hakim III mistakes Carl’s identity and answers “Allerdings [. . .] ScheißAmerikaner!” (S 463). Through his connection with Helen, Carl’s position is misinterpreted and falsely associated with the perpetrators, of whom he likewise falls a victim. The possibility of recognition through memory—the third kind listed by Aristotle (16, 1454b)—is negated in this scene and transformed into a clear act of misidentification. In this tragic reversal, Carl, who has finally regained access to his memory, dies because of a mistake similar to the one he had committed at the beginning of the narrative, when he had been unable to recognize a facial expression and interpret it correctly.

Even though in the end the novel turns into a coherent whole, the reader is left with some sense of dissatisfaction. The narrative remains trapped in a circle of false identities and mistakes, suggesting how misleading the way to (re)cognition is. The moment of recognition proves to be vain because, even when the knowledge is achieved, it is not shared.

Paratexts and Epigraphs as Textual Clues

While the reader is busy piecing together the elements of this story, the rich paratextual apparatus of the novel intervenes to complicate her task. Paratexts in *Sand* not only highlight the articulated structure of the novel, but also add textual complexity to the already knotty plot. The attentive reader is invited to both understand the text that contains the story and to read the paratexts, which offer intertextual innuendos and cross-references. While paratexts are not completely foreign to the genre of crime fiction (recent examples include Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* and Stieg Larsson’s use of epigraphs in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), they are mainly used in historical crime stories, in which “writers use epigraphs and/or

footnotes or offer forewords, afterwords, glossaries and appendices which enhance, explain or simply demonstrate the historical accuracy of the backgrounds they have selected for their narratives” (Worthington 132-33). In a similar pursuit of accuracy, Golden Age detective novelists made use of paratexts “to indicate extratextual authority for their clues in their novel, even though detective novels are not generally known for using paratexts” (Effron 200). With their reference to an external authority, paratexts counterbalance the uncertainty that detective fiction usually builds and maintains as part of the genre features.

In the title of his volume dedicated to paratexts, Gérard Genette labels paratexts “Thresholds of Interpretation,” hinting at their role as mediators between the processes of writing and reading. In his discussion of the term, Genette provides the following definition of the paratext:

a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (2)

Due to the mediation of paratexts, the reader interacts with the author in the process of reading and interpreting. According to Genette, paratexts include “a heterogeneous group of practices and discourses of all kinds” (*Paratexts* 2), ranging from the publisher’s peritext to prefaces, epigraphs and notes. In the case of *Sand*, this work of mediation happens at different stages and is not limited to the novel title, book titles and chapter intertitles, but also includes the rich system of epigraphs that frame the novel. Titles have the function of naming and labeling the novel and represent the reader’s first introduction to the story. Due to their position, “regularly at

the head of the section” (Genette, *Paratexts* 149) and just below the title, epigraphs constitute the next threshold between the title and the text of the chapter. They function as a place where layers of meaning and interpretation are constructed and negotiated. Epigraphs like levers—“Brechstange[n]” is the word Herrndorf uses to label them—help transition into the narration.³⁶ At the same time, the choice of the word “Brechstange” suggests the “violence” of these paratextual elements, which intervene to complicate and modify the main text. In *Sand*, epigraphs arrest, to some extent, the flow of the text and the speed the plot-driven thriller demands from the reader. When the reader encounters the epigraph on the page, her investigation and interpretation of the main text come to a pause. The space between the end of the chapter and the new chapter number and title already creates a separation between the two, but the epigraph creates a further threshold, which, on the one hand, separates the previous chapter from the next, and, on the other, facilitates the movement into the new section. Yet, the interpretation of the epigraph and its relation to the text can become a challenge for the reader, “whose hermeneutic capacity is often put to the test,” as Genette notes (*Paratexts* 158).³⁷ Of course, the meaning the epigraphs convey and the function they carry out depend on the ability of the reader to understand and make sense of them, and, at least in part, on her familiarity with the quoted text. If the reader knows the context of the quoted text, it may be easier for her to interpret the author’s decision to insert the epigraph at that specific point in the story and, consequently, to read it in connection to the events. In an entry published on the books blog of *The Guardian*, Toby Lichtig reflects specifically on the function of epigraphs and sees them “as a lens—or a sucker punch. [. . .]

³⁶ In *Arbeit und Struktur*, the author describes his epigraphs as follows: “Über jedem Kapitel ein Zitat. Manche Kapitel nur zwei Seiten lang, und dann oben diese Brechstange” (26.5.2011, 208).

³⁷ Genette further explains the hermeneutic challenge when he defines the epigraph as “a signal (intended as a *sign*) of culture, a password of intellectuality” (160). The author chooses epigraphs that may be challenging to the reader but contribute to “his [own] consecration. With it, he chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon” (160).

Playful or authoritative, omnipotent or throwaway it acts as a kind of shadowy third figure, somewhere between the author and the audience.” In this light, the rest of the section reflects on the kind of view epigraphs enable, on the dialogue they start with the reader and on the commentary they incite on this novel and its over-complicated plot.

The title, which was discussed earlier in the chapter, is only the first of a series of paratexts that complicates the novel, in which titles and chapter intertitles regularly introduce the events. Sixty-eight intertitles frame the chapters within the five books. The titles are collected in the table of contents at the end of the novel, which provides an overview. By scrolling the list, the heterogeneity of the intertitles is immediately conspicuous. The intertitles are mostly nominal, consist of few words and the majority is written in German, while a small portion is in English or French. Only few titles make explicit reference to the crime events and the spy-like nature of the novel. One function they share is to follow the thematic development of the plot and highlight the significance of some details that may not be immediately grasped when the title is first read. Chapter intertitles carry the names of characters (e.g. “Lundgren,” “Spasski und Moleskine,” “Hakim von den Bergen”), places (e.g. “Targat am Meer,” “Das Zentralkommissariat,” “Die Madrasa des Salzviertels”), or themes (e.g. “Die Zentrifuge,” “Dissoziation,” “Ein wenig Stochastik”) that play a role in the novel. At the same time, these intertitles give a sense of the high-speed pace of the story, emphasized by the rapid succession of the sixty-eight chapters within the books.

A group of chapter titles does more than simply emphasize plot elements, highlighting also the tragicomic undertone that distinguishes the novel. “Shakespeare,” for example, is the title of a chapter that describes Helen’s painful theatrical experience at Princeton. The distress of hearing her recorded voice combines with the disgust of seeing herself performing on the stage

(S 34-36). This traumatic memory haunts the character until the end of the novel, when she hears the echo of her voice in the underground cave, and, instead of liberating Carl, she can only think of how much that sound used to repulse her (S 448). Later in the novel, “Die Banane” is the title of a chapter in which Carl proves his naivety. The banana refers to the shape of Helen’s gun case, which Carl finds among Helen’s things. Instead of seeing any danger in that, he refuses to believe she may carry a gun with her and the chapter ends with Helen pointing a banana at Carl (S 223), anticipating the threats he will receive later in the novel. The comic tone of this title is highlighted also by its position in the novel, which follows the encounter between Carl and Dr. Cockcroft, the charlatan psychiatrist and later CIA agent, who is one of the most comic characters. Dr. Cockcroft’s extravagant diagnoses, his play with words, and the theatricality of his interaction with Carl provide all the ingredients for a good laugh.

Each chapter is further introduced by an epigraph, which frames and prepares the events or comments on the narrative.³⁸ Herrndorf justifies his choice to use epigraphs in *Arbeit und Struktur* through his fascination with Stendahl’s work: “[. . .] seit ich zum ersten Mal Rot und Schwarz gelesen hab, war das immer mein Traum, auch mal so was zu machen” (26.5.2011, 208). However, the use of paratexts extends its function beyond the aesthetic level. Indeed, the result of this artistic whim is a collection of epigraphs, which Maar describes as “eine geniale Sammlung für sich” (338). But why are these epigraphs so peculiar that they are labeled “genial” and deserve so much attention in this enthralling work of crime fiction?

³⁸ This indirect comment on the text that specifies and emphasizes its meaning is the “most canonical” function of epigraphs according to Genette (*Paratexts* 157).

Multiplicity, in terms of form, type and language, characterizes the epigraphs, which Herrndorf researched meticulously.³⁹ All epigraphs are quotes that bring a polyphony of voices into the novel and establish a dialogue with various sources, authors and disciplines. For every quote, Herrndorf provides the author's name, or the title of the work, and sometimes both pieces of information, allowing the reader to trace the quotations back to their sources. The epigraphs range from literary quotations (e.g. Conrad, Stendhal and Salinger), to excerpts taken from physics, psychology, coaching, popular culture, cartoons (*Dagobert Duck*) and movies (e.g. *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, *Enter the Dragon*, *Notorius*). They also belong to different genres: some of them are taken from speeches, others from novels, movies, and other kinds of texts. As a consequence, the epigraphs in *Sand* expand and transgress both textual and media boundaries, realizing that movement of "Expansion und Transgression" discussed in Sabine Mainberger's study on paratexts (126). This transgression becomes even more obvious when the author quotes the epigraphs in different languages, ranging from German and English to French, which reenacts on the paratextual level the linguistic plurality that characterizes the diegetic play with the word "mine." Not surprisingly, a significant number of quotations belong to theoretical and literary works of crime fiction.⁴⁰ Through these references, the novel enters a dialogue with works that belong to or address a similar genre, thus making a self-referential move. A case in point is the epigraph at the beginning of chapter 7, which quotes the *Ten Commandment List for*

³⁹ The blog entry from March 16, 2010 reads: "Bei Recherche zum Wüstenroman immerhin gefunden: 'Wenn ein Hase, eine Ziege oder ein anderes Tier sich vor einem Betenden bewegen, bleibt das Gebet gültig. Die Rechtsgelehrten sind sich darüber einig, dass nur drei Wesen das Gebet ungültig machen: Eine erwachsene Frau, ein schwarzer Hund und ein Esel' (Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz)" (A&S 27).

⁴⁰ Examples include Andrew Hunt's *City of Saints*, a quotation by Dashiell Hammett and Ronald Knox's *Ten Commandment List for Detective Novelists*. The original title of Knox's rules for crime fiction is *The Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction*, but Herrndorf refers to it with a different title formulation in his novel.

Detective Novelists by Ronald Knox: “No Chinaman must figure in the story” (S 42). The use of the Chinaman in detective fiction, which Ronald Knox considers a cliché, is referenced here at the beginning of a chapter, in which a “foreign” character enters the novel. However, it is not a Chinaman, but rather a Scandinavian spy, as his name Lundgren reveals. The identity of this man remains dubious as he tells some people that he is Herrlichkoffer and others Lundgren. Even though his role remains concealed until much later in the narrative, it is nonetheless interesting that a quote from detective fiction is used in this chapter, in which an important character for the development of the plot is introduced. The self-referential gesture contained in the epigraph highlights the significance of the chapter in the context of the overall story.

Expanding on the self-referentiality of *Sand*, a quote by Marek Hahn offers a comic and powerful commentary on the work: “‘Anspielungen, in dem Buch sind Anspielungen’, dachte ich, ‘ich will sofort mein Geld zurück’” (S 258). This quote, which received particular attention in articles and reviews, functions as a meta-commentary on the narrative, and is authored by a friend of Herrndorf, who is also mentioned in the acknowledgements at the end of the novel. By mixing historical figures, fictional characters and real-life acquaintances, the novel merges fictional world and reality through the mediation of paratexts. Separate from the context in which it was uttered, this quote can only be read as a reference to the many allusions that form *Sand*, which constantly plays with cross-references both on the level of diegesis and intertextual references through the epigraphs. Every chapter contains one epigraphic allusion, which in turn may create connections to other sections of the novel. Peter Koch reflects on the structure of the novel in a subsection of his review which he entitles “Chaos und Struktur.” Here, he comments on Herrndorf’s use of quotes and their effect on his own – and in general on the reader’s – understanding of the novel: “Die Anspielungen erweitern dabei permanent den Horizont, führen

aber teilweise auch in die Irre und laufen dadurch Risiko, den Leser abzuschrecken: soll hier etwa mein Bildungsfundus getestet werden? Eins der Zitate (über Buch 38) zeigt deutlich, wie bewusst Herrndorf damit spielt.” Epigraphs expand the horizon of the plot, and at the same time, seem to test the reader’s ability to make sense of these quotations, which are incredibly diverse. In her study on Herrndorf’s work, Magdalena Drywa also points out the playful nature of some quotations: “Da Marek Hahn in einer Reihe mit Herodot, Nabokov aber auch Luke Skywalker als Zitatquelle genannt wird, zeigt sich der spielerische Effekt dieser Motti, die zumeist nachprüfbar oder sogar überaus bekannt sind, umso deutlicher” (44). What Drywa calls “der spielerische Effekt” reveals, I contend, the tragicomic tone of this whole work, which alternates moments of violence and torture with light-hearted episodes.

And indeed, the epigraphs surprise the reader not only with their variety but also with their eclectic combination: a quote from Dostoyevsky is followed in subsequent chapters by the words of Dagobert Duck and Kafka. As some blog entries suggest, Herrndorf invested time in finding appropriate epigraphs for his “Wüstenroman,” but he mentions nothing about the decisions that guided his allocation of specific epigraphs at the beginning of a certain chapter.

Most epigraphs are thematically related to the chapter that they introduce but, in their proleptic nature, they can best be understood after reading the whole chapter. Indeed, what may strike the reader as an arbitrary choice at first reveals its significance in the light of the events in the chapter. This necessary “reconstruction” of the function of the paratexts creates a parallel between the process of investigation on a narrative and textual level. As the characters in *Sand* continuously go back to previous events and try to make sense of them, so the reader can try to interpret the paratexts that open the chapters. In so doing, the reader's function as detective

becomes doubled: she is asked not only to engage in the solution of the mysteries in *Sand*, but also to take into consideration its paratexts.

A telling example of how paratexts work in *Sand* is a quotation of Helmholtz's law, which explains the formation of sand dunes and introduces chapter 12: "Strömen zwei Medien unterschiedlicher Dichte aneinander vorbei, ergibt sich eine wellenförmige Begrenzungsfläche" (S 73). At first, the scientific language of the epigraph sounds enigmatic and out of place. The previous chapter ends with Polidorio taking a two-day break from work to spend some time with his family. The title of the following chapter, "Chamsin," already situates the events in the context of the hot wind coming from the Sahara. But the quotation from Helmholtz's law is still puzzling for the reader. What are these two media with different densities? Upon reading that Carl is driving through the desert and remains trapped in a sand wind and stuck in newly-formed sand dunes, the reader can draw a thematic connection between epigraph and text. If the reader decides to ignore the quote, she will still be able to follow the events. But, if she tries to make sense of the paratext, the scientific explanation of what is narrated accompanies her reading experience and provides a background to the fictional events of the novel. Such a clean scientific explanation contrasts with the description of how Polidorio's car is stuck in a sand dune, from which only a sign with 102, Polidorio's IQ number, emerges (S 76). This juxtaposition of different language registers gives the events a comic twist.

In the case of the previous quotation, the relation to the chapter becomes ultimately clear; in other cases, it may remain obscure. This happens, for example, in chapter two, which opens with a disturbing quote by Nixon. Pronounced in 1971, in a conversation with Haldeman and Ehrlichman, the offensive commentary reveals Nixon's irritation with the introduction of a gay character in the TV show *All in the Family*: "You know what happened to the Greeks?"

Homosexuality destroyed them. Sure, Aristotle was a homo, we all know that, so was Socrates.

Do you know what happened to the Romans? The last six Roman emperors were fags” (S 9).

While a thematic connection with the chapter may not be at hand here, the quote can be read as a historical and socio-political reference to the time period in which the novel and the events take place. In this perspective, which is the only one that might clarify the use of the quotation, the narrative of *Sand* enters a dialogue with contemporary documents, expanding the context of the events recounted. In this regard, the epigraphs seem to add historical accuracy to the events, in line with the function of paratexts used in crime fiction during the Golden Age, as mentioned earlier. This is the second epigraph in the novel, which serves to establish a connection to the historical time in which the events are set. 1972 is also the year when the Watergate scandal begins, in which US-President Nixon was involved and for which he was later impeached.

Through this quote by Nixon, the novel sets the tone for the events and also creates a connection to several American characters that populate the novel, be it the group of artists that Canisades knows or Helen Gliese and the other CIA agents.

A striking feature of the epigraphs in *Sand* is the repeated use of Herodotus’s *Histories* at the beginning of each of the five books. With this gesture, the author points to the Greek historian and master storyteller, thus creating a very strong allusion to the act of narrating in the novel.⁴¹ Herodotus’s epigraphs mostly show a thematic connection with the chapter they introduce and hint at topics that will play a role throughout the novel. The epigraphs opening the first and last book respectively can serve as examples of how these paratexts also work in other sections of the novel. The opening quote of the first book, for instance, describes the frustration of a “wir” that tries to begin a dialogue with an African “ihr” that never reacts to the inquiries:

⁴¹ In chapter 65, the narrator calls his story “Chronik der unerfreulichen Ereignisse” (S 449). The choice of the word “Chronik” seems to reiterate the gesture towards Herodotus.

“Wir schicken jedes Jahr – und scheuen dabei weder Leben noch Geld – ein Schiff nach Afrika, um Antwort auf die Fragen zu finden: Wer seid ihr? Wie lauten eure Gesetze? Welche Sprache sprecht ihr? Sie aber schicken nie ein Schiff zu uns” (S 7). By articulating the opposition between the Western “we” and the foreign “you,” the epigraph sets the stage for the events. As Burk and Hamann show in their reading of the novel, “Das dichotomische Verhältnis von Eigenem und Fremdem wird bereits im ersten Motto des Romans [. . .] angedeutet” (332).⁴² The quote can be read in connection to the African setting of the first chapter, which introduces the temporal and spatial coordinates of the story. At the same time, it hints at a topic that will run throughout the novel, that is, the contrast between the local people and the foreigners that arrive here, in primis Polidorio, and his difficulty in adapting to the country in which he is now living.

The quote that opens the fifth book sets a much more somber tone and describes how the pastoral tribes used to bury their dead:

Ihre Toten begraben die Hirtenvölker wie die Hellenen, außer den Nasamonern; diese begraben sie im Sitzen und geben genau acht, wenn er das Leben aushaucht, dass sie ihn aufrichten und er nicht auf dem Rücken liegend stirbt. Ihre Häuser sind zusammengefügt aus Asphodilstängeln mit Binsen durchflochten, und können sie mit sich umhertragen. Das sind so die Sitten und Gebräuche dieser Völker. (S 383)

This quotation creates a thematic reference to the chair to which Carl is tied in the underground tunnel in the last book, where he is tortured because he cannot provide the information that the CIA expects from him. At the same time, due to its position at the beginning of the fifth book, the epigraph also hints at how the events are going to end. The talk about death and how dead

⁴² Arnold explains the significance of Herodotus as the poet “der mit seinen Beschreibungen der Wüste die Tradition des Anderen und Bedrohlichen einleitete” (26).

people are usually buried already puts a grave tone on the last book of the narrative. Thus, the choice to talk about death already evokes certain expectations in the mind of the reader.

The last chapter of the novel contains a very abrupt, unexpected ending, whose force is highlighted by the use of a section of *La Marseillaise* as epigraph. The stanza, quoted directly in French, threatens the tyrants and traitors to tremble, and seems to hint that, after Carl's death, things are not going to become easier. The tone of the stanza encourages battling and fighting, with young people dying to defeat the tyrants ("nos jeunes héros" S 464). At the same time, this stanza reads as a very dark commentary on the events narrated in the last pages. Not only has Carl died in the previous chapter while the criminals looking for the mine are still at large, but the novel also closes with the death of an innocent child, who gets run over by a bulldozer together with the mine that has become the support for her doll.⁴³ Once again, the reader is left wondering about the connection between the opening epigraph and the events portrayed in the chapter. And once again, the paratexts reveal how they are not only there to complement the plot, but also to encourage the reader's work of detection of this knotty and dense novel.

Epigraphs become multiplying clues that connect the narrative and textual level. At times, the reader suspects that epigraphs just add to the confusion of this crime story, which already contains several puzzling and mysterious elements. Adding to the play with different genres, the game of identity and role-playing, the epigraphs also risk overwhelming and disorienting the reader. And yet, upon further investigation, the paratexts reveal another function as they become elements that can redirect the reader in her investigation. If she decides to pursue and analyze the epigraphs, the author provides enough clues for her to do so, turning the interpretation into a detective game. Further, while the epigraphs are striking due to their multiplicity on many levels,

⁴³ Arnold also points out how the stanza of the *Marseillaise* quoted in the last chapter captures the final tone of the novel (38).

the choice of using an epigraph for each chapter creates a strong sense of form and symmetry throughout the novel. In a book in which narrative and thematic turns become the rule, the reader can count on the fact that each chapter will open with a title and an epigraph. And some of these may even serve as a guide in the reading process. Every title represents a further complication but also a step towards the resolution of this complex crime novel. Epigraphs, likewise, receive a new function in reorienting and redirecting the interpretive efforts of the reader. As Herrndorf notes, every epigraph is a “Brechstange.” While on the one hand it forces itself into the text, on the other it becomes a “lever,” which the reader can use to open new interpretive routes in the attempt to access and grasp the mysteries of this work.

Conclusion

The way *Sand* is plotted constitutes its strength and originality. After recognizing the generic contamination of the novel, which constitutes its first distinctive feature, my chapter has shown how the plot functions in Herrndorf’s work. A reading of the dramatic form of the plot has demonstrated how the novel manages to balance the tension between order and disorder, at the same time increasing the reader’s suspense and delaying the resolution of the mystery until the very end. While drawing on basic conventions of crime fiction, Herrndorf combines and transforms them to fit and best serve his novel, which builds and sustains the tension between understanding and bafflement. My analysis has captured the tension between (re)cognition and mistakes within this work of crime fiction, until the final rupture that unsettles the diegetic level once again, with a new spiral of deaths. A better understanding of the plot helped make sense of the reader’s disorientation. Amnesia, misrecognitions and misidentifications explain, at least in part, the hermeneutic challenge that troubles both the characters and the reader. Finally, an

interpretation of the paratexts used in the novel has revealed how the reader's investigation cannot end with plot, but constantly oscillates between narrative and text, encouraging her to intensify her work of detection to piece together all the clues of this complex desert crime story

Chapter Three

Characters' Progression as Political Allegory in Lutz Seiler's *Kruso*

This third chapter takes the reader from the quick and intricate plot of *Sand* to the complex character-system of Lutz Seiler's *Kruso*. Here action is reduced to a minimum and leaves room for the characters of the novel as they struggle to come to terms not only with their troubled past but also with the oppressive present of the East totalitarian state in 1989. In the German Democratic Republic, Hiddensee represented the only permitted "escape" from the mainland. Even though it was still part of the territory of the GDR, the island was experienced as a remote location, a place where those who could not endure the surveillance on the mainland tried to start a new life – either on the island itself or by attempting to reach Denmark, only separated by the water. For this reason, many intellectual outsiders and artists made Hiddensee their home.¹ Edgard Bendler, the protagonist of Lutz Seiler's *Kruso*, is one of them. In the attempt to leave his academic frustration and the traumatic loss of his girlfriend behind, Ed leaves Halle an der Saale and embarks on an adventure as a seasonal worker on Hiddensee. The novel starts out in the summer of 1989 and spans the months leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR. And yet, this novel has been described as an unpoliticized work, at least on the surface (Wehdeking 236). The world of the restaurant where Ed gets employed occupies a space which seems partially remote from the political events of Germany. In fact, the personnel in the *Klausner* only indirectly register the turmoil that precedes the fall of the Wall

¹ The website *Hiddensee: Künstlerkolonien in der Vergangenheit und Kulturelles in der Gegenwart* explains: "[. . .] galt sie [Hiddensee] als Nische für Andersdenkende, die sich dort in den Sommermonaten mit Saisonarbeit über Wasser hielten, aber durch die Kleinheit Hiddensees auch gut zu überwachen waren. Hiddensee entwickelte sich mehr und mehr zu einem Rückzugsgebiet vor ideologischer Bevormundung. Die seit jeher politischem Engagement skeptisch gegenüberstehende Inselbevölkerung korrespondierte in den meisten Situationen mit der Haltung Andersdenkender" (under the section "Sperrgebiet").

and the reopening of the borders. The only “voice” that unites the island with the mainland is Viola, the radio that broadcasts the news among the background noises of dishwashing. On the surface this is Edgard Bendler’s story. But on a deeper level, the novel depicts the tragedy of refugees who tried to escape from East Germany to Denmark through Hiddensee. Therefore, *Kruso* speaks to a moment of rupture relevant to contemporary literature, characterized by the urge to flee one’s own country in search of political security and personal freedom. Since the state is the oppressive entity, initiative is left to the individual, who tries to create a space of freedom within a surveilled society.²

Kruso is Lutz Seiler’s successful debut novel, which received both the Uwe Johnson Literary Prize and the German Book Prize in 2014.³ The novel tells the story of Edgard Bendler, whose full name the reader only learns 26 pages into the narrative. Ed, a student of German literature, moves to Hiddensee in the hope of healing and overcoming the loss of his two closest companions: his girlfriend G. and – on a less dramatic note – her animal companion, the cat Matthew. Arriving on Hiddensee at the beginning of June 1989, Ed soon gets recruited as a seasonal worker (“Esskaa”) at the restaurant *Zum Klausner*. His 11 colleagues become Ed’s new family, with whom he lives and works for the following months. Kruso, who is considered the king of the *Klausner* and of the whole island, and is admired and treated with respect by workers

² The novel indirectly cites historical attempts to escape the DDR, some of which actually happened via Hiddensee. Karsten Klünder und Dirk Deckert’s plan constitutes one of the bravest and most dangerous forms of escape. In fall 1986, the two young men used self-made surfboards to navigate from Hiddensee to Denmark. As a *Spiegel* article notes: “Über 5000 DDR-Bürger versuchten schwimmend, tauchend oder auf Booten dem Regime zu entkommen. Nur jeder Zehnte erreichte sein Ziel. Viele wurden verhaftet, 189 versanken im Meer” (Reumschüssel)

³ Both juries commend the elegance and power of the language, which bring to life the topics of longing and parting. The accolade of the Jury for the 2014 Book Prize reads: “Man darf die packende Robinsonade um den titelgebenden Kruso und den jungen Abwäscher Edgar als wortgewaltige Geschichte eines persönlichen und historischen Schiffbruchs lesen – und als Entwicklungsroman eines Dichters. Der Text entwickelt eine ganz eigene Dringlichkeit und ist nicht zuletzt ein Requiem für die Ostseeflüchtlinge, die bei ihrer Flucht ums Leben kamen.”

and tourists alike, makes a special impression on Ed. Between Ed and Kruso develops a profound friendship as the two men share much more than they first think: both of them not only lose the key female figures in their lives – Ed, his girlfriend, and Kruso, both his mother and his sister Sonja – but they also have in common a passion for poetry and writing. As Ed gets to know Kruso better, he also becomes his main ally in his “Wurzelrevolution,” Kruso’s project that aims at finding the root of freedom, the basis for the utopian community Kruso wants to build on Hiddensee. But as the story evolves and as the eastern borders – e.g. the border between Hungary and Austria – start opening in the summer of 1989, the people that first believed in this project slowly abandon the *Klausner* until Kruso and Ed remain alone. When Kruso is also forcefully removed from the island because of his physical and mental breakdown, Ed closes the doors of the restaurant to go back to Halle, but not without continuing Kruso’s mission to find out the truth about his sister Sonja’s disappearance.

Kruso consists of three parts, which function as prologue, middle and epilogue. The first chapter, called “Kleiner Mond,” introduces the main character – a still mysterious Ed, at this point.⁴ The body of the novel, which includes 63 titled chapters, describes the adventures of Ed on Hiddensee. A closing “Epilog,” told in the first-person by Ed himself, recounts his visit years later to the “Museums of the Drowned” in Denmark. The “prologue” and the “middle” of the novel are narrated in the third person and mostly filtered through the eyes of Ed, from whose perspective the reader gets to know the characters and events in the *Klausner*. Most of his thoughts concern his relationship to Kruso and his plan to help people discover the real meaning

⁴ All quotations from Seiler’s work refer to the following edition: Lutz Seiler: *Kruso* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014). They are marked with the abbreviation “K,” followed by the corresponding page number.

of freedom.⁵ Ed's consciousness is expressed in different ways in the novel. In *Transparent Minds*, her study on the possible modes of representing consciousness, Dorrit Cohn distinguishes among psycho-narration, narrated monologue and quoted monologue as the three main ways of bringing characters' thoughts into the narrative (14). While the first-person quoted monologue is never used in the first two parts of *Kruso*, the narrative alternates between psycho-narration, in which the narrator reports Ed's thoughts and the characters' actions, and narrated monologue, in which Ed's thoughts are directly presented, but still disguised behind the third-person. By never completely entrusting the character with his first-person thoughts and words, the narrator maintains control over words and actions. Therefore, when the novel moves to its last section, the reader is puzzled by the sudden change in the narrative person and in the way of presenting the character Ed. When Ed takes up the first person to tell how the story evolved, the reader immediately notices the break between the second and third part in the novel. This sudden change in the narrator suggests a dramatic shift in the novel and the beginning of a different project. Seiler makes no secret of the many autobiographical references embedded in the novel, especially in its last section.⁶ But while places and names may be real, throughout the novel the reader encounters a series of figures and accidents that transcend any connection with reality and extend to the realms of fiction and, in some cases, fantasy. The whole novel combines

⁵ The words used in the novel to describe the people that arrive on Hiddensee to find a better life are "Flüchtling," "Schiffbrüchig," or "Pilger." The three terms, used interchangeably, highlight different dimensions of the experience. "Refugee" pinpoints the idea of escaping from a place or a condition; "shipwrecked" the dimension of an unsuccessful journey; "pilgrim" the way towards discovery and self-enlightenment. All three dimensions play a role in the project of the novel and the choice of the three terms seems therefore justified.

⁶ In "Im Vorhof des Verschwindens," Michael Opitz includes this passage by Seiler: "Diese Geschichte hätte ich nicht erzählen können, wenn ich nicht da gewesen wäre. Ich habe im Sommer 89 da im Abwasch gearbeitet. Vieles ist dann natürlich auch in dieses Buch eingegangen, obwohl es keine Rekonstruktion der Umstände von damals ist, sondern Literatur. Es gibt aber die authentischen Anhaltspunkte, die man immer braucht, um ins Erzählen einzusteigen."

autobiographical details with fictional and sometimes fantastical elements, opening up different dimensions for the reader, which Francesca Bravi labels “Reales,” “Erfundenes” and “Phantastisches” (184). And yet, in the last part of the novel, any reference to talking animals and mysterious nightlights is suspended, and substituted by a detailed account of an archive visit, which focuses on facts, numbers and remains.

Kruso received a great deal of attention from reviewers and the early scholarly reception also praises Seiler’s project.⁷ Excited reviewers refrained to consider this work a traditional GDR novel (*DDR Roman* or *Wenderoman*) and welcomed it instead as an interesting example of GDR-robinsonade.⁸ In the online journal *Glossen*, Christine Cosentino reflects on the novel’s attempt to represent a utopian free community, which, however, fails in the end. In his contribution for *Études Germaniques*, Volker Wehdeking reads the novel in connection with other non-traditional *DDR Romane*, such as Uwe Tellkamp’s *Der Turm* and Eugen Ruge’s *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts*. In contrast to the latter two novels, which present family and generation stories set in late GDR times, Wehdeking remarks, Seiler’s island novel shows a cultural change in the narration of the GDR past. Seiler writes about the GDR and the moment of the “Wende” from a certain “epic distance” and this indirect way of narrating political events makes the novel all the more compelling, and a great contribution to German cultural memory (Wehdeking 235). Both critics highlight the singular character of the novel within the context of the GDR literature. My chapter moves beyond the scope of situating the novel within this literary

⁷ Not all reviewers were equally excited by this literary work. Among the more disillusioned ones, Peter Handke revealed in a conversation with Lothar Struck that “Lutz Seiler sei ja ein sehr guter Lyriker, aber *Kruso* sei ‘grauenhaft’” (Bravi 177).

⁸ In his review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Lorenz Jäger warns his readers: “Aber Vorsicht: Das ist kein ‘Wende’-Roman. Vielmehr spielt die dramatische Politik jener Monate nur als Radio-Rauschen und eben durch Geisterklänge herein.” Among the critics and reviewers that associate Seiler’s *Kruso* with the genre of the robinsonade are Christine Cosentino, Lothar Müller, Christoph Schröder, Paul Jandl, and Dietmar Jacobsen.

period and focuses on the significance of the narrative characters for the development and understanding of the work as a political allegory. The book cover advertises the novel as “die Geschichte einer außergewöhnlichen Freundschaft,” and the characters and their relationships are the focus of the discussion here. Due to its separation from the mainland, not much happens on Hiddensee except for the constant arrival and departure of tourists. People come to Hiddensee on a vacation or a day trip and stop to eat at the many restaurants, one of which is the *Klausner*. However, this flow of people does not constitute the most important aspect in the novel, which instead focuses on Ed and his new friend Kruso. Ed’s new life, his relationship with Kruso, the connections that spin from this friendship, and the breaks that it causes, mark the development of the narrative and the significance of storytelling. My analysis asks how the characters in *Kruso* can help interpret the political rupture happening in the background of the narrative. As my chapter will show, Seiler’s novel relies on the significance of characters, their development and their interactions. But how do these characters intervene to shape the development of the story? What is their role in presenting and narrating the events? To what extent do the instabilities among characters enlighten the moment of political rupture that the novel describes? How do the characters become an allegory for the political events in the novel? In this chapter I argue that the novel predicates rupture on three levels: on the level of characters; on the level of the narrative; on the level of the social-political context in which the story is set. After reflecting on the genre of the novel and the concepts of character that frame my discussion, I will focus my analysis on the characters that populate the narrative. I will reflect on how they develop, how the mimetic, synthetic and thematic dimensions of characters play out in the narrative, and how they ultimately come to constitute an image for the socio-political changes that the novel describes.

***Kruso*: A Contemporary Robinsonade**

The title of the novel reflects the centrality of the narrative character *Kruso*. This name immediately establishes a connection with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the tradition of the robinsonade. The fictional aspect of the novel and its references to the model of *Robinson Crusoe* are also thematized, reinforcing the conscious play with the conventions of the genre.⁹ But *Kruso* uses and inverts the generic conventions to comment on the political situation described in the novel. Drawing on the motives and figures of a robinsonade, the novel cites and recasts the original *Robinson Crusoe* and Crusoe's master relationship to Friday. Thus, the genre of the robinsonade constitutes an important point of reference for *Kruso*. Some elements of the robinsonade contribute to the development of Ed and *Kruso*'s story, while inversions play a particular role in the project that Seiler is trying to achieve with his work.

Robinson Crusoe constitutes the first and best-known robinsonade. A young Englishman, son of a German merchant, Robinson Crusoe defies his parents' will and sets off to sea. Shipwrecked on an unsuccessful journey, he is the only survivor on what he believes to be an uninhabited island—until he discovers human footprints and meets his future slave Friday. This novel initiated a genre that later came to signify a narrative centred on the “theme of island solitude” (Arthur 16). *The Oxford Companion to German Literature* defines robinsonades as “novels of shipwreck and survival deriving from Defoe's *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719)” (“Robinsonade”). Janet Bertsch also describes the robinsonade as “a story or an episode within a story where an individual or group of individuals with limited resources try to survive on a desert island” (79). An unsuccessful voyage, the landing on an

⁹ *Kruso* and Ed, for example, reflect on their relationship comparing themselves to the protagonists of *Robinson Crusoe*. This aspect will be discussed more in detail later in the chapter.

unpopulated island and the struggle with the new location and with solitude constitute some of the key features of the genre. Another generic convention consists in the undisclosed destination of the journey, which is not predetermined (80). In their struggle in and with the unknown nature, the characters come to understand themselves and, in line with religious undertones that these texts usually have, the role of God in their lives (80).¹⁰ In fact, the robinsonade as a genre is usually informed by the spiritual autobiography and a set of Biblical motifs, such as the journey to the Promised Land or Noah's Ark in the Flood (80).¹¹ And yet, even in those novels in which the spiritual and religious elements are missing, the psychological aspects of the story still play a big role. As Bertsch further explains, in order to reveal the most profound nature of characters, authors place considerable emphasis on the place where the survival takes place: "The author tells his readers about the landscape only insofar as it has meaning. [. . .] The landscape becomes a reflection of the characters as they change it, name it, transform the wilderness that surrounds them. [. . .] It [the island landscape] is the vehicle by means of which readers can learn to understand the characters and characters can learn to better understand themselves" (84). In their isolation, characters can only interact with the landscape, which they try to tame and remodel according to their—often colonial—plans and desires. In their domination of natural and animal life, the isolated figures often establish their economic system, which keeps them connected to their previous life. In this regard, Robinson Crusoe has been considered "by many economic

¹⁰ Elaborating on the Biblical motifs, Bertsch writes: "The main characters are revisiting or reenacting the origins of the human race. If their efforts are successful, the civilization they found reverses the fall of man. It is a purified society based on virtue and shared social norms. Just as the island's inhabitants become representative of a wider humanity, the island itself is a microcosm of the wider world. [. . .] The emphasis on the island as a paradise means that the characters who learn to live within the landscape are often very conscious of it as a created space, an element in God's creation" (83).

¹¹ Bertsch reflects on the literary conditions in which Crusoe was composed and how the influence it received from its contemporary works play a role in the future recasting of the genre (89).

theorists as their illustration of *homo economicus*” (Watt 63).¹² In *Global Crusoe*, Ann Marie Fallon further reflects on the traditional robinsonade and remarks how starting from the 1960s “this odd story of a man on an island came to represent the transnational anxieties around literary influence, value, and linguistic power in the second half of the twentieth century. [. . .] These revisions reveal the tensions inherent in the transnational project as people, and ideas, move across borders, not necessarily with ease, but with frequency” (10). While transnational elements were already part of Defoe’s novel—in which Robinson Crusoe functions as a slave trader in the “Black Atlantic”—the global reinvention of *Crusoe* makes the adventure of the island into a powerful means to narrate stories that describe rupture, a break with the past, and new beginnings.¹³ The “transnational anxieties” which Fallon mentions translate into personal and socio-political disquiet in Seiler’s work. In this regard, Seiler’s decision to use the conventions of the genre in a non-conventional story of “survival” serves to uncover the tensions in human relations, which, in turn, reflect the changes Germany and Europe underwent in the late 80s.¹⁴

¹² In *The Rise of the Novel*, Watt claims that “That Robinson Crusoe [. . .] is an embodiment of economic individualism hardly needs demonstration” (63). Aspects that reflect the “modern social order” in Defoe’s work include book-keeping and the law of contract that Crusoe employs on the island (63-64). Among the works that emphasize the economic aspect of *Robinson Crusoe* see Maximilian E. Novak’s extensive publications on Defoe’s novel, such as *Economics and the fiction of Daniel Defoe* (1962).

¹³ “In his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy refocuses the study of modernity and diasporic phenomena by introducing the concept of the “Black Atlantic” as a spatial construction for transnational interactions.

¹⁴ Seiler’s work is just one of the many recasting of Defoe’s novel. In the German tradition, the genre of the Robinsonade was adopted in Johann Gottfried Schnabel’s *Die Insel Felsenburg* (1731), Joachim Campe’s *Robinson der Jüngere, zur angenehmen und nützliche Unterhaltung der Kinder* (1779), Christoph Ransmayr’s *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (1984), and, more recently, Christian Kracht’s *Imperium* (2012). In the international context, several authors gave a new spin to Defoe’s original work, among them Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* (1967), Sir William Goldwin’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and J.M. Coetzee’s 1986 novel *Foe*, which subverts the gender conventions by setting a female character at the center of the narrative.

Kruso continues the tradition of the robinsonade by setting at the center of the novel a strong, male character and a particular male-male configuration. At the same time, Seiler's work renounces some conventions of the genre to emphasize other aspects that fit the larger project of the novel. In a departure from Defoe's 1719 *Crusoe*, Seiler's *Kruso* takes up a third-person narrative, abandoning the immediacy of the first-person diary and personal account. By giving up the teller-character of Defoe's work, *Kruso* builds some distance between the narrative voice and the events. Even if Ed functions as the filter of the narrative, the third-person aligns him, at least in part, with the other refugees on the island, emphasizing his role as a member of the new community that tries to rebuild the social and political order. A major difference consists in Ed's voluntary decision to leave for Hiddensee and take a break from Halle and his life. Rather than being stranded at a random location, he intentionally makes his way to the island that will become his home. The third chapter triumphantly announces: "Edgard Bendler hatte beschlossen, zu verschwinden, ein Satz wie aus einem Roman" (K 26). While ironically remarking how this sentence reads as a great line from a novel, the emphasis on the verb "hatte beschlossen" changes the key event in the genre of the robinsonade: the character does not disappear in a storm or by accident, but voluntarily leaves for a vacation, erasing all his traces to leave unnoticed. Because the island is not an uninhabited space that can be colonized and tamed as in *Robinson Crusoe* and many robinsonades after it, but a populated location, with a communal socio-economic system in place, Ed's life on the island only partially reflects the physical struggles of the original *Crusoe*. Ed has to work hard but, in this East German commune, he is fed and provided for. And yet, he still occupies the place of the "outcast" in this group of waiters, as the following description of Ed's daily routine shows: "Täglich um zwölf Uhr aß Ed seine Zwiebel. Gemeinsam mit seinem Schweigen ergab das Zwiebelritual [. . .] das

Bild eines gemäßigten Sonderlings, von dem nicht viel zu befürchten war und, ja, dessen Aufnahme keine schlechte Entscheidung gewesen sein konnte” (K 108). For large parts of the novel, Ed remains a peculiar figure who struggles for recognition among the men in the *Klausner*. In spite of all the differences, Seiler’s work echoes the relationship between Crusoe and Friday in the characters of Kruso and Ed. Kruso, here the inhabitant of the island, functions as a master for the newly disembarked servant. His role of master is embedded in his name. Kruso becomes Ed’s guide and model, to whom Ed can never really ascend, until Kruso’s final collapse. Seiler’s *Kruso* also maintains the gender constellation of Defoe’s novel, relegating the female characters to the margins of the narrative, but entrusting them with a disruptive function. But since women are lost right from the outset and men struggle to survive, *Kruso* asks the reader: Whose survival or collapse does this story celebrate? The novel engages with this question throughout its progression and follows the characters as they evolve, change and leave the narrative. But before my analysis investigates the characters in greater detail, the next section introduces the concepts of character that constitute the theoretical framework of my discussion.

The Concept of “Character” in Narrative Theory

In a chapter titled “Character,” and included in his larger project *Ariadne’s Thread: Story Lines*, J. Hillis Miller discusses the definition of the word “character.” According to the OED, “charater” has nineteen meanings ranging from literal (a brand or stamp, a mark, a sign or symbol) to figurative (including physical, moral and mental qualities, the status of a person, the person itself with her qualities) (Miller 54). All these meanings are present in a nutshell in the “‘original’ Greek word *character*, which “‘already has a triple meaning involving a figurative transfer first from the instrument for marking or engraving to the engraving itself, the impress,

stamp or distinctive mark, then to what that sign is taken as a sign of, the distinctive nature of the thing branded” (55). With its triple emphasis on the tool, the mark and its meaning, this etymological definition hints at the key dimensions that constitute literary character, which is only listed as the seventeenth meaning in the OED entry. Literary characters consist of “material” elements—the language used to construct them in a text—of distinctive features—physical qualities, interiority, and the family story that characterize them—as well as of meaning attributed to them through the act of reading and interpretation. And yet, while the concept of narrative character may seem intuitive, its story is long and intricate, and its significance has been often overlooked. In *Narrative Fiction* (1983) Rimmon-Kenan declares: “In addition to pronouncements about the death of God, the death of humanism, the death of tragedy, our century has also heard declarations concerning the death of character” (29). Indeed, the concept of character has often been neglected in works of narrative theory.¹⁵ While this shift of focus seems to be justified by the fact that psychologically centered characters are not the priority of novels anymore, the neglect of characters does not do justice to this key category of narrative theory.

In the theorization of literary character, the discussion usually develops around two major poles. On the one hand, the anti-realistic, structuralist approaches consider characters as “signs, semantic components [. . .] paradigms, words, sentences, or more generally, textuality” (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider, 73). In line with Aristotle’s prioritization of action over characters, this approach tends to reduce characters to textual constructions and subject them to the concept of action, in the belief that stories exist and develop primarily through action(s), which characters

¹⁵ In her dissertation entitled “Developing Character in the Nineteenth-century Novel,” Caroline Giordano starts from a similar premise: “Until relatively recently, narrative theorists have left character curiously undertheorized” (1).

only have the function to perform.¹⁶ Inspired by this idea, Propp developed a taxonomy of characters in fairy tales on the basis of their functions, which Algirdas J. Greimas later reworked adding the concepts of actants and acteurs as central categories in the narrative syntax. At the opposite side of the discussion, mimetic theories tend to conceive of characters as biological, psychological or anthropological beings, similar to real people. This approach proves problematic because it confuses the distinction between fiction and reality, which need to be considered in their differences. A new trend in mimetic narratology looks at characters using the framework of cognitive (social) psychology and interprets them as the interaction of texts and the mental models the reader creates in her mind. Characters reflect mind-brain processes and cognitive processes serve to understand the behavior of characters, as if they were real people (Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider 5). While both schools of thought advance the understanding of narrative characters, each of them shows certain limitations. On the one hand, the mimetic approach tries to impose a real-life model on characters considering them as a reproduction of real-life people, often neglecting that characters are, at least to some extent, textual constructs. The structuralist model, on the other hand, proves too rigid in forcing characters into the narrative syntax without considering how other dimensions play a role in the formation and understanding of characters as literary figures. Mimetic and structuralist approaches developed in opposition to each other for a long time, but attempts were made to bring together the two sets of

¹⁶ In the *Poetics* Aristotle writes: “The most important of these things is the structure of events, because tragedy is mimesis not of persons but of action and life; and happiness and unhappiness consist in action, and the goal is a certain kind of action, not a qualitative state: it is in virtue of character that people have certain qualities, but through their actions that they are happy or the reverse. So it is not in order to provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions” (6, 1450a)

theories.¹⁷ By acknowledging the different dimensions that constitute characters, a combined approach that unites the attention to mimetic elements with the significance of textual and formal features, constitutes the most productive method in the discussion of complex characters like the ones presented in *Kruso*.

James Phelan offers a holistic approach that combines the idea of character as a person with that of character as a construct. In *Reading People, Reading Plots*, Phelan reads narratives rhetorically, as dynamic events and therefore bound to progression, “one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time” (15). The narrative progresses both within the story and with reference to the world of the reader, for whom the story is created. The progression manifests itself through the overcoming of “instabilities” on the level of the narrative and “tensions” on the level of discourse (15), which leads to the ending, and possibly, completion of the narrative. Phelan considers characters as complex elements that cannot be reduced to one aspect. As a consequence, he bases his study on three dimensions of characters: mimetic, synthetic and thematic. Phelan already acknowledges in the “Introduction” to his work that all characters have an artificial component to them because they are a construct and, therefore, “*synthetic*” (2).¹⁸ At the same time, while characters are *not* real persons—even though the author might have used existing people as models—they often have traits that remind the reader of a plausible person. This is what Phelan defines as the “*mimetic*” dimension of characters (2). Finally, most characters have a representative dimension as they generate ideological statements and associations in the reader. Their “*thematic*” dimension may be more or less prominent, but should be investigated in any study of characters. While Phelan remarks that not all three

¹⁷ Uri Margolin, for example, includes in his theoretical frame “a number of other models, including texts linguistics, aesthetics, pragmatics, semiotics, and the theory of action” (Frow 18).

¹⁸ Phelan uses the term “aesthetic” instead of “synthetic” in his essay “Thematic Reference, Literary Structure, and Fictive Character.”

components are developed or foregrounded to the same extent (3), he claims that all three contribute to the complexity of narrative characters with which every reader is familiar. My reading embraces the manifold aspects of the narratological category of character and explores how its different dimensions better enlighten the understanding of the novel. In my analysis, I will use Phelan's three-part concept of character to show how the mimetic, synthetic and thematic dimensions contribute to the progression of the novel and to the meaning and significance of the narrative. My thesis is that the analysis of the characters via Phelan's three dimensions helps uncover the political message of the novel and to grasp the historical rupture represented in it.

Not only individual characters will be at the center of my investigation, but also the way characters interact and build networks among each other, what is commonly referred to as character constellation. As Eder, Jannidis and Schneider remark, "A character constellation is, however, more than the mere sum of all the characters. Its structure is determined by all relationships between the characters" (26). In an attempt to understand these relationships, I will take into consideration not only the connections between the main characters, but also reflect on the networks of the marginal figures and their interactions with Ed and Kruso. But who are the figures at the margins in this novel? And what do they contribute to the narrative from their secondary position? Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many*, a clever study on major and minor characters in realist novels, uses *character-space* and *character-system* as alternative concepts to character constellation, to highlight the power dynamics among characters. While the first one indicates "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole," the character-system stands for "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces [. . .] into a unified narrative

structure” (14). Woloch reflects on the theoretical implications of marginal characters by showing where the sense of marginality originates and what some of its consequences are. Woloch’s categories prove helpful as they account for both the amount of narrative allotted to the individual characters and the integration of the single character-spaces within the overall architecture of the narrative. Therefore, I will apply these two concepts to Seiler’s work as they help to further understand the relationship between Ed and Kruso and those figures that, in spite of their marginality, have an impact on characters’ dynamics.

The Mimetic Dimension of Characters: Ed and Kruso in Relation

Seiler’s novel opens with a quotation from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* which, by describing the relationship between Robinson and his new companion Friday, sets the tone for the novel: “Um jedoch auf meinen neuen Gefährten zurückzukommen, so gefiel mir dieser außerordentlich” (K 7). The epigraph prepares the reader for a story of friendship and companionship, foregrounding the synthetic and intertextual aspect of characters. Furthermore, the attribution to Defoe and *Robinson Crusoe* creates expectations in the mind of the reader as far as the content and characters of the story are concerned. The title also determines the way the reader is asked to approach the novel, by focusing on the single character of Kruso. And yet, as the novel progresses the reader is asked to concentrate on the relationship between the characters of Ed and Kruso. In this section, my analysis focuses on the mimetic dimension of characters, that is, on the physical, personal, and social traits that make fictional characters plausible as real-life figures. Phelan draws a key distinction between character’s dimension and function: “A dimension is any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears. A function is a particular application of that

attribute made by the text through its developing structure. In other words, dimensions are converted into functions by the progression of the work. Thus, every function depends upon a dimension but not every dimension will necessarily correspond to a function” (9, original emphasis). My analysis shows how Ed’s and Kruso’s traits form the mimetic dimension of the characters and reflects on the ways in which, if read in the context of the story world, they may fulfill a mimetic function as the narrative progresses.

Kruso is first introduced, in a chapter named after him, through a detailed physical portrait. Ed and Kruso are standing next to the kitchen sinks in the *Klausner* and Kruso introduces himself to the newly arrived Ed. The physical description that follows renders Ed’s first impressions of Kruso, highlighting both his physiognomy and his demeanor:

Er hatte schwarzes, halblanges Haar, das er bei der Arbeit im Abwasch zu einem Zopf band. Wegen eines Wirbels über der Stirn wölbte sich das zurückgebundene Haar am Ansatz, wie der dunkle, lappige Kamm eines Hahns. Das Komische dieser Verformung wurde aufgehoben von der Ernsthaftigkeit seines Blicks [. . .] Seine Nase war schmal und kantig, sein Gesicht ein langes, weiches, nahezu perfektes Oval mit großen Wangen, die Augenbrauen fast gerade, dazu die dunkle Färbung seiner Haut - Krusowitsch glich eher einem Venezuelaner oder Kolumbier, der im nächsten Moment seine Panflöte hervorziehen würde, um eine seiner trotzig-traurigen Verzauberungen anzustimmen. (K 67)

This description suggests Ed’s fascination for Kruso, in particular for his almost perfect facial features. The words used to describe Kruso belong to different semantic areas but translate into images of strength, power and conquest—also emphasized by the image of the pan flute, which brings to mind the Greek god Pan. Because of his hairdo and the shape of his head, Kruso is

compared to a rooster – the king of the henhouse. His darker complexion and the shape of his face remind the reader of an exotic figure, at least in comparison to the rest of the population on Hiddensee in 1989. Finally, due to his overall appearance, Kruso is compared to a magician, who could enchant his listeners. His tricks are defined as “trotzig-traurig,” which hints at Kruso’s stubborn nature and inner sadness, emphasized by the seriousness of his gaze. The comparison with a sorcerer plays a role in relation to Kruso’s project, which has something magic-transformative about it. Kruso’s plan, which is supported by rituals of different kinds, consists in taking the refugees on a journey of self-discovery. During three days and nights, they will be guided to understand the real meaning of freedom. The rites of passage and the number three that are part of the process are reminiscent of the heroes’ trials in fairy tales, and thus add to the magic dimension. The emphasis on Kruso’s physical aspect and the magical elements connected to his figure, together with the hint to his demeanor, contribute to create the portrait of a complex, charismatic, and yet peculiar leader, which is made all the more interesting through its references to Defoe’s character.¹⁹

Indeed, this description proves particularly interesting in relation to the original *Robinson Crusoe*, in which a similar portrait is used, but to describe the servant Friday:

[. . .] his hair was long and black, not curled like wool; his forehead very high and large, and a great vivacity and sparkling sharpness in his eyes. The colour of his skin was not quite black, but very tawny, and yet not of an ugly, yellow nauseous tawny, as the Brazilians, and Virginians, and other natives of America are, but of a bright kind of a dun olive colour, that had in it something very agreeable,

¹⁹ Later in the novel, Kruso’s physical strength is displayed once again as he is at work in the kitchen: “Kruso benahm sich, wie sollte Ed es nennen: kriegerisch. Er war ein Krieger, ein uralter Jäger, von kantiger Gestalt, beeindruckender Größe, stark behaart” (K 101).

though not very easy to describe. His face was round and plump, his nose small, not flat like the negroes, a very good mouth, thin lips, and his teeth fine, well set, and white as ivory. (Defoe 176-77)

This portrayal, imbued with racist comments, reveals the exoticism that Friday embodies for Crusoe, and emphasizes similar physical qualities to the ones Kruso possesses, as far as the face, the hair, the nose and the color of the skin are concerned. The similarity between these two facial descriptions is striking, but the inversion in the attribution between savage and master is likewise remarkable. Kruso, the “native” master, is the exotic, fascinating figure for his servant Ed. In this sense, Kruso represents the alternative not only through his corporeality, but also as the mind behind the revolutionary project of his utopian community.

Kruso’s face reveals the marks of his life history and traumatic past, which is the ultimate motivation for his utopian undertaking on the island. His traumatic family history constitutes an essential part of his characterization, which is rendered, at least in part, as quoted words by the character Kruso himself. The family past includes two major traumatic events: the death of the mother and the disappearance and presumed death of the sister. Both events are narrated multiple times in the novel, and their return emphasizes their haunting nature for the character. The reader is provided with details about the family members, their economic and social status, their feelings and their relations. All this information helps the reader form a “round” picture of the character Kruso, even though a sense of mystery remains.²⁰ The son of a German circus artist and a Russian general, Alexander Mitrijewitsch Krusowitsch is known as Kruso to most and Losch to few intimate friends on Hiddensee. During one of their evening meetings, Ed asks

²⁰ Round and flat characters are the two types E. M. Forster introduces in *Aspects of the Novel* (103). While I do not apply Forster’s terminology to my analysis, the term “round” may resonate with his well-know concept.

Kruso: “Warum sprichst du nie von deiner Schwester, Losch?” (K 188). This question generates a very emotional response in Kruso, who, for the first time, shares his complex family story.

Growing up close to the Aral Sea, Kruso lived with his authoritarian father and his melancholic mother. Even if she did not want to continue with her profession as a tightrope walker, she was forced by her husband, who ostensibly enjoyed showing her off in front of other soldiers. When Kruso and his sister were six and ten, the mother tragically died. The description of this moment is both visually and acoustically recounted in the novel: “Ein dumpfer Aufprall, wie von einem Sack. Plötzlich lag sie vor mir auf dem Boden. Ein Bein war so zur Seite gedreht, als gehöre es nicht mehr zu ihr oder als hätte es jemand an ihren Körper so herangeschoben. [. . .] Der Kopf steckte zwischen zwei Matratzen, als wollte sie weg, wegkriechen, verschwinden . . .” (K 197).

This portrait of the lifeless mother renders the impressions of the six-year-old boy who tries to make sense of the tragedy he has just witnessed. The comparison of the falling body with a sack and the way the position of the body is described has something gruesome and, at the same time, grotesque to it. The voice and emotions of the child still come through after so many years, revealing how this memory still haunts the adult Kruso. After the death of the mother and the relocation of the father to Russia, the kids were brought to Hiddensee to live with their mother’s sister and her physicist husband Rommstedt. The island becomes the setting of the second, major trauma in Kruso’s childhood.

The central aspect of the character Kruso, which becomes a narrative motive and catalyst in the novel, is indeed the relationship with the sister. After the mother’s death, Kruso found in Sonja a substitute for the mother, until she disappeared. Rommstedt, Kruso’s stepfather, tells the rest of Kruso’s story when Ed meets him in the “Tower,” the space that serves as Kruso’s fortress and observation point over the water. While brother and sister were on the beach, Sonja

walked away after saying to the young Kruso: “Hier wartest du so lange und rührst dich nicht weg” (K 301). This sentence comes back in the novel almost as a motto for Kruso’s 19-year-long stay on Hiddensee and his stubborn desire to change things on the island. His uncertainty about the sister’s destiny constitutes one of the major tensions in the novel, that is, the reader wonders whether Kruso will be able to find out what happened to his sister and be finally at peace with himself. Kruso is haunted by the circumstances under which the sister disappeared: days prior to the event, guards had been spotted patrolling along the coast. The vanishing of the sister initiates a series of tensions between Kruso and the authorities, which continue up to the present of the narrative. After this episode, Kruso had become obsessed with the patrol guards and had followed and written down all their movements for seven years, and always kept track of a green light, which in his opinion was a sign that Sonja was sending him across the waters. In memory of the sister, Kruso decides to help the “shipwrecked” to discover their inner freedom while surviving on the island, without the need to venture across waters with the risk of perishing or being imprisoned. His plan, which the stepfather Rommstedt as defines “eine ausgewachsene Wahnvorstellung” (K 306), attempts to heal the past and secure the future on Hiddensee. The mimetic story of Kruso provides him with a motive for his endeavours, for which he will find his right arm in Ed.

Even though Kruso gives the title to the novel, the character-space reserved for Ed is much more prominent, which makes the reader wonder who the real protagonist is. This imbalance results from the focalization of the narrative on Ed, whom the narrator always follows, even in the most intimate moments, whereas Kruso sometimes disappears and both Ed and the narrator lose track of him. As the narrative proceeds, the reader becomes familiar with Ed, the first character to be introduced, and learns some details about his past life and experiences. Ed

constitutes a complex figure, who unsettles the system of the twelve men in the *Klausner* through his special bond to Kruso.

Ed is a university student, who decides to take a break from his life in Halle an der Saal, and tries to start anew on Hiddensee. He is traumatized by the tragic death of his girlfriend, who was hit by a tram over a year before, and tries to leave behind a disturbed existence of suicidal thoughts, nightmares and hallucinations, which include talking animals such as a camel, a bear-horse and a fox.²¹ He decides that a vacation is what he needs: “Offensichtlich genügte dieses eine Wort [Ferien]; es enthielt alles, was man von ihm wissen musste. Alles über G., seine Angst und sein Unglück, alles über seine ständig hölzernen Gedichte aus dreizehn Schreibanfängen in hundert Jahren und alles über die tatsächlichen Gründe dieser Reise, wie sie Ed bisher selbst kaum begriffen hatte” (K 13). Ed feels he is fleeing from his unhappy existence, which consists of fearful emotions, unsuccessful writing attempts, and dysfunctional relationships. While he enjoys studying, Ed even feels excluded from the other students at the university, as this comment reveals: “Lieber hörte man ihm zu, als wäre Ed ein exotisches Wesen aus dem Zoo des menschlichen Unglücks, umgeben von einem Wassergraben furchtsamer Achtung” (K 17). His sense of uneasiness comes through in the words used in this description. He is regarded as an “exotic being,” a particularly unfortunate creature, from whom the others keep some timid

²¹ One of Ed’s favorite interlocutors in the novel is an old fox he meets on Hiddensee. The fox (which Ed calls “seiner Freund” (K 120) or “Alterchen” (K 121) seems to function as a replacement for the vanished cat Matthew. The reader is also offered a description of this peculiar animal (K 121), which Ed visits every week. Even if the fox slowly becomes inanimate, Ed continues to interact with it and the fox still replies to him, even in its afterlife existence (K 328). Other hallucinations of animals include, for example, a bear-horse, to which Ed talks (K 114). These non-mimetic characters are more prominent in the first chapters of the novel and tend to disappear once Ed takes more control of himself and defines his role in his relationship with Kruso.

distance. On the run from his past, Ed encounters Kruso, who becomes a guide and a friend, but also a challenge to his life on the island.

Ed is mostly defined according to his similarities and differences to Kruso, which the attentive reader is asked to notice. Contrary to Kruso's detailed physical description, Ed's physicality is only hinted at. The reader is informed that Ed has long hair and that his attire is characterized by "[. . .] der schweren Lederjacke, die Ed von seinem Onkel geerbt hatte, eine Motorradjacke aus den fünfziger Jahren, ein ausdrücksvolles Stück mit riesigem Kragen, weichem Futter und großen Lederknöpfen, unter Kennern als Thälmannjacke gehandelt" (K 12). In line with the GDR artists' fashion at the time, Ed wears a leather jacket, at least until he starts his job at the *Klausner*. While Kruso represents the exotic element on the island, Ed seems to fit the image of the GDR intellectual, whom Kruso is ready to welcome and help.²² The reader is also not offered extensive information about Ed's family. Ed's parents are only mentioned in few episodes and Ed consciously excludes them from his trip to Hiddensee. The family mostly emerges in the form of recollections or visions. On one occasion, for example, Ed, sees the face of his father at his window (K 280); another time, he remembers the oppressive Sunday mornings, in which he would do his math homework under the father's supervision (K 310). In this regard, the detailed family history provided for Kruso hints at the importance of the character, by whom Ed gets overshadowed. This results in a tension for the reader, who would like to know more about Ed and his story, but is never granted this opportunity.

The exploration of Ed's interiority compensates for the minimal family narrative and physical description. One detail of Ed's past plays a major role in the narrative, that is, the tragic loss of G. Loss constitutes a strong connection between Ed and Kruso, who share a state of

²² In the article "Utopia in Seepferdchenform," Christian Schröder draws a connection between Edgard Bandler and Edgard Wibeau, a prominent literary character in the GDR literature.

mourning. As a consequence of his personal trauma, the character Ed is defined as follows at the outset of the narrative: “erst vierundzwanzig Jahre alt und schon ein Wrack“ (K 37). Ed is hoping to get rid of the traumatic memories about G.’s death and start to remember her as a living, happy figure. On Hiddensee, he finally manages to come to terms with his past, which has been haunting him until now. In a conversation with his animal-friend, the fox, he voices one of his memory rants about the accident:²³

Du weißt, zuerst kommt die Straßenbahn, aber ich möchte nicht immer mit der Straßenbahn beginnen, schließlich war ich nicht dabei, werde nie dabei gewesen sein, nicht an der Haltestelle, aber jemand sagt, sie hätten gerufen, schon lange, Achtung, Vorsicht, Achtung, irgendetwas, was soll man schon rufen, quer über die Gleise, und jemand anderes, der sagt, sie hätte da gelegen, unter dem Waggon, bis zum Bauch, du verstehst, bis zum Bauch, die nackten Beine schauen raus, so warm schon Anfang Mai, aber ganz unverletzt. (K 147)

This passage includes several interrupted sentences, which combine into one long utterance so as to suggest the vehemence with which the memories emerge and the difficulty of expressing them in a coherent way. This passage acquires a special meaning in the narrative because it parallels Kruso’s description of his mother’s fatal accident. The fact that both memories focus on the position of the motionless body after the tragic accident reinforces the link between these two separate episodes. With time, Ed’s memories of G. change and the violent image of the accident finally disappears from the narrative (K 214). Hiddensee, the people in the *Klausner*, and Kruso in particular, manage to fill the gap that G. has left: “Kruso berührte etwas in ihm, das er

²³ Throughout the novel, it never becomes entirely clear whether the fox is a living animal that Ed sees on the island, or just consists of the remains of such an animal or an object that reminds him of a fox.

entbehrte, vermisste, ein alter Mangel, nagend, eine Sehnsucht nach – er wusste es nicht, es hatte keinen Namen” (K 119). That unnamed longing – maybe just the desire for a companion or a friend—finds a realization on the island, in the closeness and friendship with Kruso. Hiddensee and the *Klausner* assume a profound meaning for Ed, as they challenge him to come to terms with his past and define his new relationship to Kruso. The mimetic dimension of the characters informs the relationship between them. Kruso, presented from the outset as the stronger of the two, guides Ed in their common project. Ed, motivated by his traumatic past, opens up to his “master,” with whom he shares more than he first imagines.

The Synthetic Dimension: Ed, Kruso and Their Literary Ties

In his study on characters, Phelan describes the synthetic dimension as the formal aspects which make characters into protagonists, antagonists, minor characters or give them any other function that helps the narrative progress. Brian Richardson complicates the three-part system of characters developed by Phelan and Rabinowitz by adding the fourth dimension of intertextuality (Taha 54). My analysis considers the intertextual elements together with the synthetic dimension. The intertextual and metafictional references used in the novel contribute to transfer the synthetic dimension into the formal function and therefore, I think, should be discussed in connection with the second category developed by Phelan. In this section, I take into consideration those elements that reveal the fictional, constructed nature of characters in *Kruso*. In particular, I emphasize the strategies through which the characters of Ed and Kruso are brought together into the character-system. I examine the metafictional and intertextual elements that establish a connection with literary archetypes or models, before opening the discussion to the other characters in the novel.

The friendship between Ed and Kruso is an unstable one. During his time on the island, Ed grows very close to Kruso and he is treated with respect, but, at the same time, he feels like a tool in Kruso's hands: "ein Werkzeug Krusos [. . .] aber doch auf eine Weise lächerlich in seiner Anhänglichkeit und schwächlich in seiner gesamten Erscheinung—Ed, die Zwiebel, der Schweiger (K 179). This passage reveals instability in the character-system of the novel as Ed becomes Kruso's right arm, but never manages to become his peer. He is a shadow of his guru and, in his quasi-dependence on Kruso, he finds himself a bit ridiculous. During their time at the *Klausner*, it comes to fights between Ed and Kruso and Ed slowly realizes how much Kruso counts on him and his contribution to accomplish his project of freedom.

Ed nonetheless struggles to define his relation with Kruso because it is based on mutual silence about their most profound traumas:

Im Ganzen war es mehr als Vertrautheit und mehr als Vertrauen. Im Grunde war es eine gemeinsame Fremdheit, die ihre Freundschaft begründete. Dass es beiden unmöglich war, über das zu sprechen, was ihnen am schwersten auf der Seele lag, schien sie enger aneinanderzubinden als jedes Geständnis. Es gab die Worte eben nicht, und Verstehen bedeutete, sich nicht zu täuschen darüber. Ohnehin wäre nichts wiedergutzumachen. Woraus ihr Unglück bestand (und was ihr Handeln bestimmte), war besser aufgehoben in einem Gedicht. (K 214)

Their relationship is contradictory and based on the impossibility of being defined. As the quotation suggests, this relationship is more than intimacy and trust, but at the same time it is grounded in a sense of estrangement that distinguishes their mutual attitude. This feeling originates in the impossibility of vocalizing their individual traumas in a conversation. Poetry is the only means to express their pain and unforgettable loss. In their shared love for poetry, Ed

and Kruso find the middle ground to exchange their ideas and project, and literature functions as the synthetic element in the friendship.

Kruso constitutes the main figure in the narrative, the focal point around which Ed revolves. The two male characters are intellectually attracted to each other, through their shared ideals of freedom and their love of poetic language. The plot progresses along with their relationship and their conversations and thoughts constitute the focus of the novel. And yet, a third figure functions as the connection between the two: Georg Trakl, the Austrian poet and “character *in absentia*,” who actually plays a major role in this male poetic triad.²⁴ In an interview for the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, Kruso reveals that Trakl and his poems contribute to give speed to the plot and, indeed, in the parts in which the poet emerges, Kruso and Ed come one step closer.²⁵ Through Trakl, Ed and Kruso become the leading duo of the narrative and their exclusive connection through poetry singles them out from the rest of the characters, giving them a more prominent role in the character-system.

²⁴ In “Der Herbst des Einsamen,” a guest contribution to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Lutz Seiler reflects on his fascination with the poet Georg Trakl during his time as a student in the GDR - which had partially to do with the socio-political life in the middle 1980s and in part with his own method of poetic writing.

²⁵ In the interview, Seiler replies to the question “Che significato hanno le poesie di Georg Trakl, che entrambi amano?” “Ogni volta che compaiono, la trama ha un’accelerazione. Quando Ed salta su perché Kruso gli porta al letto la prima naufraga, recita Trakl per difendersi. Più precisamente, recita *Sonja* – la sorella morta di Kruso si chiamava così. I due hanno vent’anni, a quell’età si può essere pronti a tutto per una poesia. Ma Ed scappa: per lui le poesie sono quasi delle didascalie, quando vede il mondo.” [“What is the significance of Trakl’s poem that both [Ed and Kruso] love?” – “Every time the poems come up in the narrative, the plot speeds up. When Ed is startled because Kruso sends to his bed the first shipwrecked, he quotes Trakl as a form of defense. More precisely, he quotes *Sonja* – this was the name of Kruso’s dead sister. The two young men are twenty years old, at that age you are ready to do anything for a poem. But Ed is fleeing: For him poems are almost captions to his way of perceiving the world” (my translation)].

Trakl makes his entry in the novel early on. The name of the Austrian poet gives the title to the second chapter—the first “real” chapter after the introductory one—which depicts Ed’s obsession with Trakl’s work. Ed almost suffers from a dependence on poetry and uses it as a way to work through his sorrow for the loss of G. When Ed first discovers Trakl’s poetry, he spends two sleepless nights reading all his work: “Alles, was Ed las in dieser Zeit, prägte sich ein, wie von selbst und buchstäblich, Wort für Wort, jedes Gedicht und jeder Kommentar, alles, was ihm vor Augen kam, während er allein zu Hause saß oder an seinem Tisch im letzten Raum der Bibliothek und auf die Hütte des Hausmeisters starrte. Sein Dasein ohne G. – fast war es seine Art Hypnose” (K 17). In this hypnotic state, in which words and lines leave a mark, Ed feels his attachment for Trakl and his obsessive absorbing of every poetic expression as a burden. Once he arrives on Hiddensee, he manages to stay away from poetry for twenty-one days. His work in the kitchen preoccupies him and makes him almost forget that “drug” that fueled his university days: “Er wollte keine Gedichte mehr lesen. Von dieser Droge hatte er sich losgerissen, so konnte es Ed inzwischen sagen nach guten klaren einundzwanzig Tagen als Abwäscher auf Hiddensee” (K 138). But one night, during the *Vergabe* (a ritual for the distribution of food and the allocation of sleeping accommodations among the refugees), he unconsciously starts reciting Trakl’s poems aloud, causing a strong reaction in the audience. The chapter entitled “Trakl vorgetragen” presents Ed as he performs Trakl in front of the whole community of the *Klausner*. Kruso’s reaction – “Danke, mein Freund [. . .] Ich wusste es” (K 136) – immediately hints at a connection between the two male characters. But when Trakl reemerges from his memory, Ed feels that he has let the refugees down and he has thwarted his intentions of living without poetry: “Er hatte versagt. Er hatte Trakl vorgetragen. Er hatte sich damit den Schiffbrüchigen entzogen, ihrer süßen, hilfsbedürftigen Gestalt, ihrem Sonnen- und Treibholzgeruch” (K 139). Poetry becomes

something that Ed and Kruso enjoy in secret, as a form of personal cure and an inner bond, while devoting most of their energies to help the people fleeing the GDR.

Poetry is not only consumed as a receptive pleasure, but also becomes an activity that Ed and Kruso carry out together. Ed, who almost burnt all his writing attempts before leaving Halle, is at first not impressed by the poetry written by Kruso. But when Kruso shares with him his intention of creating a collection of poems, Ed feels very flattered and finally connected with him: “In ihrer von Gedichten gestifteten Vertrautheit hatten Kruso und Ed zueinander gefunden, und Tag für Tag festigte sich ihre Gemeinschaft” (K 213). This quotation indicates how the connection and the trust between the two characters arise from the reading and writing of poetry. Ed does not get attached to the other members of the *Klausner*, but his relationship to Kruso is a special one, which nourishes itself through poems. The thoughts and exchanges about their poetic and political projects develop throughout the narrative and become the most exciting activity in this otherwise quite uneventful story.

The experience with poetry becomes emblematic for the relationship between Kruso and Ed. The two characters progress through their hate/love relationship, which is reflected in their relation to poetry. Trakl seems to offer some form of comfort when the memory of G. resurfaces, but at the same time, it overwhelms Ed like an explosion. On a day in early July, when the memory of G.’s accident still weighs heavily on Ed, he immediately starts writing down Trakl’s poems, which come to his mind and out of his pen as an unstoppable flow of words and memories: “Zeile für Zeile hämmerte aus dem rauschenden Kompendium in seinem Schädel, Metaphern, die sich verkeilten zu Barrikaden, spanische Reiter und Verse, die wie eine Armee von Besatzern durch die Wüste seines Traumas marschierten, ein einziger Krieg [. . .]. Es war eine Art Kamikaze” (K 148). As this quotation reveals, the experience of poetry is a violent one,

which summons images of a battle or a war. The visual and auditory sensations contained in this quotation suggest different forms of violence, expressed through sounds that resemble beating and hammering, and images that call to mind medieval crusades escalating in an act of self-destructive violence, enclosed in the image of the kamikaze. Ultimately poetry, and one can say the relation to Kruso, becomes a self-inflicted harm, in which Ed sees himself and his compulsive writing – and per extension his dependence on Kruso – as the experience of a kamikaze.²⁶

Trakl's poetry shapes the synthetic dimension of characters, and, in particular, reflects their language affinities. Some of Trakl's poems, such as "*Die Verfluchten*," "*Psalm. Zweite Fassung*," "*Unterwegs*," and, in particular "*Sonja*" (K 135-36), are expressly mentioned in the novel. Trakl's poems constitute the essence of the language that Ed and Kruso share. In one episode in particular, Kruso reads a poem aloud to Ed. As the reader comes to understand later in the narrative—thanks to the references to the lines "'Sonjas weiße Brauen'" and "'Schnee, der ihre Wangen feuchtet'" (K 188)—this poem is not Kruso's own work, but rather Trakl's composition *Sonja*. And yet, Kruso reads it "mit seinen Worten," and his "eigenen Ton" (K 143). Interestingly, Trakl's linguistic traces are embedded in the narrative in scenes in which only Ed and Kruso are present. As Rüdiger Görner remarks about the novel: "Fortan aber verhält es sich eher so, dass Trakl durch diese Kapitel geistert, was besagen will: Seine Verse werden gleichsam zu Gespenstern. In prekären Lebenslagen irrlichtern sie besonders eindringlich" (255). Characters appropriate Trakl's language as if it were their own and in doing so reinforce their connection,

²⁶ When his poetic activity decreases, Ed finds comfort in diary writing. His writing is limited to five lines per day—the space his diary allows—but represents a way to express his thoughts and, for the reader, to access them: "Sicher, das Ganze glich eher einem Protokoll, aber das war es, was ihm guttat daran. Ein Protokoll seiner Ankunft und wie er nach und nach Teil der Besatzung geworden war. Und jetzt? Wie er einen Freund gewann. Gewinnen würde" (K 146).

while highlighting their distance from the other figures. Even if some of these episodes are only hinted at or remembered by Ed, their insertion strengthens this triangulation of characters through literature.

Poetry comes to embody the moral mission and the ethical responsibility that Kruso and Ed feel: on the one hand, towards the small community of the *Klausner* and, on the other, towards the larger society of the GDR and the West. Kruso strongly believes in his project, which he aims to accomplish through poetry: “Poesie war Widerstand. Und ein Weg zur Erlösung. Eine ungeheure Möglichkeit” (K 217). In their mutual love for poetry, in their shared interest in Trakl, Kruso and Ed carry out their political and social function, their attempt to resist and to experience freedom. The only thing they need is “unsere Stimme und einen Raum voller Abwesenheit – ein Ort zur Gewinnung von Zeit” (K 217). On Hiddensee and, in particular, in the *Klausner*, Ed and Kruso find that space that can resonate not only with Trakl’s words, but also with their own voices. Trakl becomes the medium of this friendship, which brings the two characters closer and allows the progression of the novel by empowering Ed and Kruso with their project to obtain freedom, for and with the refugees.

The connection among the three members of the triad becomes so strong that it translates into an almost physical association. When Ed looks into Kruso’s face for the last time, he sees Georg Trakl’s features and, as the narrative voice comments, “Nur Ed und sein Irrsinn konnten so denken” (K 420). This initial metamorphosis continues through the last pages of the main section of the novel. Ed is the only character left on the island and is taking care of the last things before leaving, when he realizes some surprising changes. First, he notices that he has taken up Kruso’s tone in writing: “Drei Blätter Kassenblock, verfasst im Ton Krusos, nicht von Kruso. Er las” (K 426). Finally, the last project that Ed carries out is the transcription of Kruso’s poems in

one single volume, fulfilling his friend's ultimate will. Before he finally abandons the *Klausner*, Ed feels that he has reached some higher brotherhood with Kruso, through poetry. His last thoughts read as follows: "Am Morgen war die Arbeit getan. Vielleicht nicht Wort für Wort und nicht jede Zeile, aber Ed könnte hören, dass es *stimmte*, er hörte den Ton. 'Wir zwei beide', murmelte Ed" (K 429). The manuscript, sitting on the table of the seasonal employees, takes up its space and becomes the past of the *Klausner* and the embodiment of Ed's relationship to Kruso.

The synthetic dimension is not only expressed in the characters' relationship via poetry. Ed and Kruso's role in the narrative also takes shape based on the literary model their story prompts, i.e. the relationship between Crusoe and Friday, which creates the frame for this friendship. References to the archetypal robinsonade pair are not limited to the epigraph that opens the novel or to the title of the work, but are interspersed throughout. The first time that Ed hears the name of Kruso, the name is rendered with the spelling of the protagonist of the British novel (K 51). The connection between the two men that occurs in Ed's head translates also typographically as a literary slip. In this appropriation of the fictional relationship, *Kruso* also repurposes the language used in Defoe's work. There, the first word that Crusoe teaches to his servant is "Master" (177); on a similar note, Ed uses the word "Meister" to describe his relation to Kruso. Consequently, the use of language reinforces the relationship, translating rhetorically the constructedness of characters based on the original pair.

Kruso first compares himself and Ed to Crusoe and Friday when he tells him about his dream which preceded Ed's arrival on Hiddensee:

Zwei Nächte vor deiner Ankunft habe ich geträumt, dass du kommst. Ich habe dich kommen sehen. Wie schon geschrieben steht: Dass jetzt die Zeit sei, mir

einen Diener und ihm zugleich einen hilfreichen Freund zu verschaffen. [. . .] Das ist nur Defoe. Ed, keine Angst. Für Robinson ist Freitag der Lotse, jedenfalls träumt er ihn so. Ein Lotse, der ihm hilft, herunterzukommen von seiner Insel, von seinem Unglück. Im Traum ist es Freitag, der ihm zeigt, welche Orte er meiden muss, um nicht gefressen zu werden, wohin er sich wagen darf und wohin nicht, oder wie er sich Lebensmittel beschaffen kann... (K 227)

In this version of the story, Kruso gives Friday the role of a guide (“Lotse”) and invests him with much more agency than Defoe’s work originally did. Ed is puzzled by Kruso’s rendering of the original story and remarks how Defoe’s novel narrates a different version of the male friendship, in which Friday is saved and educated by Crusoe. In Kruso’s attempt to invest Ed with a much more active role, the novel reinforces the connection with the model of *Robinson Crusoe* and, at the same time, creates room for adaptation and change. As the novel evolves, Ed also appropriates the same language. For the first time, he starts fantasizing of himself and Kruso as an embodiment of the relation between Crusoe and Friday, not only in terms of their relationship but also their identity and physical appearance: “Ed stellte sich ein Foto mit ihm und Losch vor, braungebrannt, mit nackten, glänzenden Oberarmen. Sie lachten, und die Bildunterschrift hieß: Robinson und Freitag beim Schach, 1990” (K 389). Kruso and Ed become the characters of Defoe’s novel against the background of the historical events around 1989. Poetic and fictional models become the basis for the definition of the character-system. Poetry is a means to create a bond between the characters of the novel, whereas they themselves are modeled after a particular fictional constellation. Ed initially serves Kruso as his master, until the relationship progresses into something different.

Since both Ed and Kruso are marked by a profound loss, they try to make up for it by establishing new surrogate family connections. In choosing to become brothers, characters enter new relations, which foster their bonding, that is, the synthetic function in the character-system. A very powerful scene consists in the blood brother pact that Ed, Kruso and the good soldier swear. The three decide, after most of the seasonal workers have already left the island, that they will stay and work together to achieve and protect their freedom. Ed's subordinate position is emphasized by the fact that he is the last one to cut his forearm and enter the pact because he is intimidated by the ritual. Ed, whose family has been almost absent from the narrative so far, suddenly rejoices in the thought of acquiring two new brothers: "sie pressten die Arme aufeinander, die Hände zu Fäusten geballt. Ed spürte, wie ein warmer Faden Blut an seinem Ellbogen hinunterzog, und das war der Moment: Langsam glitt er heraus aus seinem Kokon, durch einen Tunnel aus Seufzern, er streckte sich, er löste sich – und gewann zwei Brüder (K 322). The idea of expanding beyond one own's physical limits, outside of one's own personal cocoon, dissolving or merging with other characters become central for the future progression of the novel. The fact that Ed lives in the shadow of Kruso is changed through the blood pact. The assimilation of Kruso and Ed becomes remarkable as the narrative proceeds and moves towards the final moment of rupture, which distinguishes both the novel's progression and the socio-political events. The new family relationship substitutes for the missing or inexistent bonds, restructuring the connections among characters within the character-space.

The novel ends on an unexpected note, with Ed taking on a very different role towards Kruso. Kruso physically and mentally collapses and, therefore, needs to leave Hiddensee. In one of his anger fits, he attacks Ed and tries to drown him in the kitchen sink. As Ed calls for medical assistance, his attempt is blocked by Rebhuhn, the hygiene commissar of the island and a Stasi

officer, who has been closely observing Ed and the rest of the seasonal workers. Ed and Kruso come to the realization that their project has been betrayed. The tragic twist in the friendship mirrors the collapse of the freedom revolution. The morning after a Russian commando shows up and rescues Kruso, among them the Russian general his father. And yet, Kruso makes a royal exit from his island, leaving as triumphantly as he was first introduced:

Wie ein Pharao auf seiner letzten Reise schwebte Kruso zwischen den Soldaten, mit den Füßen voran. [. . .] Ja, für einen Moment schien es Ed, als hielten sie der Ostsee einen Heiligen entgegen, einem Märtyrer, dessen Körper sie in einem nächsten Schritt den Fluten anvertrauen würden, zur Besänftigung der Stürme, zur Verwirrung der Patrouillenboote und schließlich: Zum Zeichen der Freiheit und zum Beweis, dass sie bereits hier, im Diesseits, zu erlangen war und nicht erst auf Møn, Hawaii oder sonstwo—ja, Kruso musste geopfert werden, geopfert für die Zukunft der Insel.... (K 419)

Kruso's power, reinforced through the image of the Pharaoh, gets counterbalanced by his final demise, suggested through the use of religious connotations, which present him as a saint and a martyr, a victim who has sacrificed his life for the future of the island. Once Kruso literally exits the scene, Ed is left as the only character and that position changes the dynamics of the narrative. The synthetic function of the characters, reinforced through their poetic and literary connections, is redefined once Kruso leaves the narrative and is only remembered in the temporally removed account, in which both Trakl and Kruso return to reconstitute the triangular relationship that sustains much of the novel.

Character-System and Character-Space: Ed, Kruso and the Marginal Characters

The centrality of the characters, not only of Ed and Kruso, frames the novel and is highlighted through the use of paratexts. The novel opens with Defoe's epigraph and closes with a drawing that lists all the characters working at the *Klausner*, inserted between the end of the narrative and the thank you note.

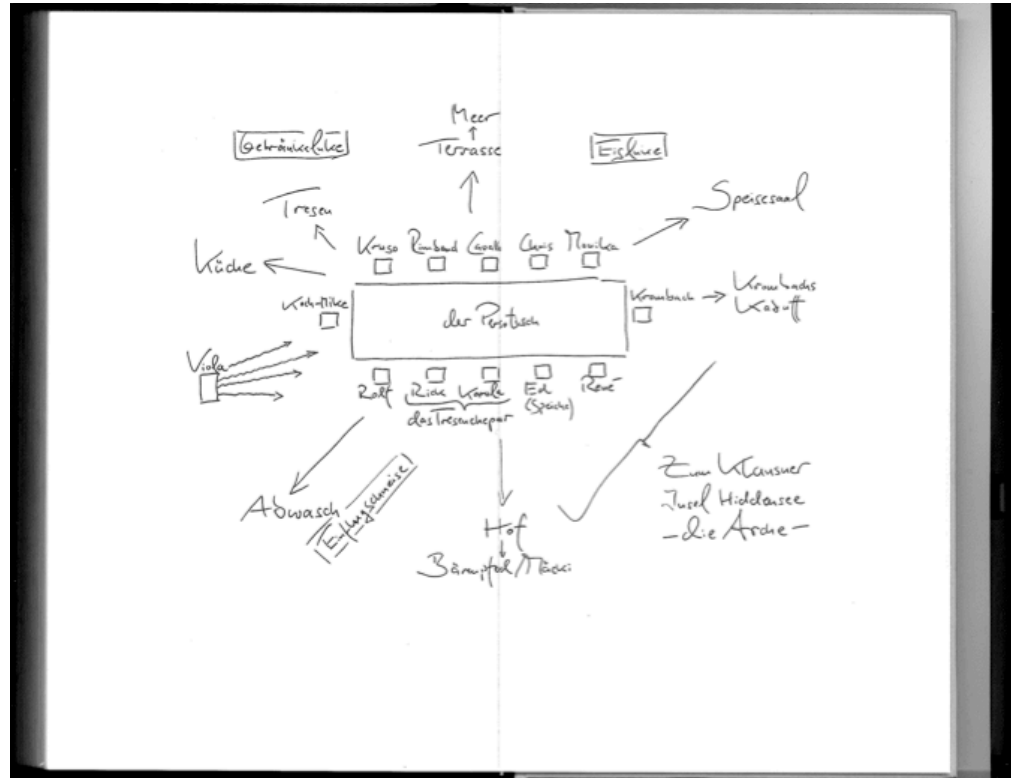


Figure 1. The drawing of the personnel breakfast table, also called “Persotisch” (K 82), included in the novel (K 478-79).

This schematic image, which proves to be helpful as the reader tries to understand the character system, provides nametags for the characters at the breakfast table (or “Persotisch”), the one

convivial moment they share in the day.²⁷ Ed and Kruso are the two key figures who, together with the rest of the crew, compose the twelve-men team that direct and organize the restaurant *Zum Klausner*. At the two ends of the table sit Mike and Krombach, the cook and the director of the restaurant, respectively. The spot on Krombach's right is reserved for his daughter Monika, whereas the spot on his left belongs to René, introduced as his son-in-law.²⁸ On the right of the cook Mike sits Rolf, his helper, also called "der stumme Rolf," due to his silent nature. The ten people who work as servers and dishwashers occupy the two sides of the table. Rick and Karola, the couple who runs the bar, sit directly next to Rolf. These two characters do not receive much space in the narrative, but Ed remarks that Rick is a good storyteller, whereas Karola is the "*Medizinfrau, eine hübsche Kräuterhexe*" (K 156, italics in original), who brings them tea while they are washing dishes and offers them massages for their backpain. On their right, Ed takes over the seat of Speiche, who has left the *Klausner* without giving any explanation. Next to Ed sits René, the iceman, who proves hostile to Ed from the very beginning and finally tries to kill him towards the end of the narrative. Kruso sits at the opposite corner from Ed, among his well-educated waiters, Rimbaud, Cavallo and Chris. What at first just looks like a restaurant and its crew turns out to be a much more articulated group. The leader Kruso has surrounded himself with enlightened waiters. Cavallo (Mirko), whose name originates in his passion for antiquity and, in particular, for horses in ancient Rome, has finished a dissertation that has been rejected. Rimbaud is a doctoral student in philosophy, who similarly to Ed has left academic life behind. According to Kruso's own words, these are exceptional waiters: "Chris, Mirko und Rimbaud aus

²⁷ In a video-interview realized by the Suhrkamp Verlag, Seiler reiterates the importance of characters, explaining who these figures are, which positions they occupy in the story and their relevance in the narrative.

²⁸ At the end of the novel, Mona leaves the *Klausner* together with Cavallo, who seems to have become her lover. Neither this relationship nor the relationship between Mona and René is discussed in the novel.

dem Service, unsere Kellnerschaft, hervorragend, ich möchte sagen *unschlagbar*. Sowohl in Schnelligkeit und Ausdauer als auch in Klugheit und Weisheit, gastronomisches und philosophisches Wissen sind hier aufs Schönste vereint” (K 84, emphasis in the original). This group of employees serves the restaurant during the day, and the shipwrecked during the night. Their skills as workers are complemented by their intellectual capabilities, which make them perfect companions for Kruso’s project.

The novel pivots around this community, made up of twelve figures that keep the restaurant running. The symbolic number 12 brings to mind references to the twelve Apostles and the little painting that hangs close to the dinner table, “eine winzige Reproduktion des *Abendmahls*” (K 86, italics in the original text), strengthens this association.²⁹ Further, the space of the restaurant is labeled “Arche,” which continues the Biblical imagery. The reference to the Arc suggests the function of the *Klausner* in keeping the refugees afloat, safe and alive. And similarly to the Biblical story, the Arc manages to keep people safe until it is finally stranded. However, Seiler pointed out in a video interview with the Suhrkamp Verlag that this company is modeled more as “eine Art Tafelrunde” since the values these men share are chivalry, pride and companionship. In line with the image of the Round Table, Kruso functions as the king. During the day, he is the king of Hiddensee, where he coordinates his team to welcome the tourists, and in the night Kruso unfolds his bigger plans, which bring together poetry and freedom. By welcoming all the refugees from the DDR on his island, he initiates them through a journey of self-discovery on the way to understanding the real idea and potential of freedom. In spite of this complex character-system, the novel becomes the story of an individual, who, together with his

²⁹ Similarly to the Apostles, these are ordinary people, mostly men, who decide to follow Kruso, not without nourishing some doubts. But, at least in the beginning, they believe in his message of the ultimate freedom and do what he asks them to.

companion, takes up the challenge of changing a socio-political situation, while all the others slowly abandon the Arc and the project. Indeed, the drawing deceptively suggests that all characters may be equally important in the narrative. This visual representation of the characters conveys a sense of equal character-space, with each of them occupying a specific spot. But this is far from accurate. Most characters receive very little attention in terms of their mimetic attributes and, while they are present as background figures, they do not contribute to the progression of the narrative for most of the story. Their major function consists in destabilizing the narrative when they exit it, accelerating its conclusion. In this regard, René's attempt to kill Ed out of jealousy, for example, is a catalyst for the subsequent events. These considerations already highlight an imbalance in the character-system, which concerns the characters in the *Klausner*, but primarily plays out for the female characters.

Characters fulfill specific mimetic and synthetic functions in *Kruso*, they receive a different amount of character-space and occupy distinct positions in the character-system. Ed and Kruso take up most of the scene becoming the prominent duo in the novel. However, even characters that at first may seem unimportant, particularly the female ones, whose mimetic traits are reduced to a minimum, become connecting and complicating elements in the narrative. Following the gender conventions of the traditional robinsonade and *Robinson Crusoe*, in which female characters are marginalized, *Kruso* makes a specific use of female characters. Most of the women are completely excluded from the drawing that closes the novel, which already positions them on the margins of the main narrative. But what is the significance of this asymmetrical division of characters and in what ways does it affect the progression of the novel?

While the male friendship and the brotherhood they create occupy a central position in the narrative –with Ed and Kruso taking up the most space in the character-system—the

margins of the story are dedicated to female characters. The women in the narrative are almost invisible and move in the shadow of the male protagonists. A key example is Mona (Monika), the daughter of the director of the *Klausner* and one of the two only women that work in the restaurant.³⁰ Ed can smell her but hardly ever sees her in the restaurant. While Mona leaves her traces behind, she plays a mostly marginal role in the character-system of the novel: “Ihr Duft begann im letzten Drittel des Korridors, am Ende des Gangs lag die Tür zu ihrer kleinen Wohnung. Innerhalb der Besatzung führte sie den Beinamen “kleine Unsichtbare.” [. . .] wisch sie alles, was es zu waschen gab, und übertrug ihren guten Geruch auf Bettwäsche, Geschirrtücher und Tischdecken, weshalb man sie öfter in unmittelbarer Nähe wähte” (K 54). Mona is present in the *Klausner* through her perfume and her scent, but otherwise moves unnoticed in the hallways of the restaurant. The reader is not provided much information about this character and when she leaves the restaurant with her lover Cavallo, the narrative would not suffer particularly from their unnoticed exit if this did not cause a series of new departures.

Dramatic differences characterize the relation between female and male characters on the island. While male characters are attributed full names, surnames or nicknames, the names of most female characters already suggest their marginality. Several names are reduced to a dotted initial, literally one character.³¹ In *Character and Figure*, John Frow notes that “Names are the nodal points in a narrative network, pulling together actions and descriptions and in turn defined,

³⁰ The other woman is Carola, who actually carries a full name. However, she always comes up in the narrative together with her husband Rick as they constitute the “Tresenehepaar.” The characters work together in the *Klausner* and also abandon it at the same time.

³¹ The third literal meaning of character included in the OED defines character as “A graphic symbol standing for a sound, syllable, or notion, used in writing or in printing; one of the simple elements of a written language, e.g. a letter of the alphabet” (qtd. in Miller 57). Seiler applies this definition of “character” as single letter to most of his female figures by giving them one-character names. By so doing, he also inscribes his characters in the tradition of Kafka’s and the protagonist K. in *Das Schloß*.

filled with semantic content, by those actions and descriptions” (189). But when a character is reduced to a letter and is denied both actions and descriptions, what remains is the performance of a type, the invisible one, who is not given any agency. C. and B. are the first and the last of the women that enter Ed’s life for a brief period. They are both “shipwrecked” women who come sliding into Ed’s bed as per Kruso’s conjecture. The reader is provided some information about them, but nothing that allows her to fully grasp them as characters, with the result that they almost seem to be unreal or the product of Ed’s fantasies. C., the first woman to whom Ed feels attracted after G., is described based on what cannot be seen of her, “das Gesicht unsichtbar” (K 176). Even in Ed’s thoughts, she becomes reduced to an object of desire: “C., die Unbeschwerte, Tanzende, Fröhliche, die Nummer 1 in seiner Reihe” (K 238). C. is number one in Ed’s sequence of women, who come, spend the night with him and then disappear again, without leaving any trace. Some of these women get a name, like Marén, for example, and a minimal physical description. But, even though Marén has a name, she is reduced to a pseudo-human creature, a goblin, as the title of the chapter “Kobold-Marén” suggests (K 228). Similarly to Mona, Grit, another character with a name, gets reduced to an ephemeral smell, “Palasthotelgeruch,” which overpowers any of her physical qualities (K 239).

One way in which the novel tends to reinforce the significance, or rather the serialized function of these characters, consists in introducing several of them, effectively reducing them to interchangeable tools in the hands of the “King of the island.” These characters come and go in the novel, as one letter replaces the next without leaving any strong mark behind. Kruso even gets upset when Ed loses sight of the ideal of freedom due to this passionate attachment to C. According to his plan, the “shipwrecked” will rediscover the roots of freedom within three days, and C., like any other refugee, can only stay until this mission is accomplished. These female

characters all seem figurines that belong to “Krusos *System*” (K 243), his network of relationships that serves to organize life on the island. The idea of a system managed by Kruso affects the system of characters in the novel. While Kruso follows his own rules to help and rescue the refugees, some of his decisions necessarily have an effect on the storyworld and the relations among characters, who become puppets in his hands.

Other female characters play a bigger role in the character-system, even though the character-space reserved for them is small. In spite of their marginality, for example, Kruso’s mother and G. manage to cause a rupture in the characters’ life. The female character that comes back more prominently in the novel is Sonja, Kruso’s sister. Her story, portrayed by Kruso and Rommsted through limited cues, determines Kruso’s behavior and actions. As a nine-year-old child playing on the beach with his sister, Kruso sees her disappear. This event affects his life goal: he has not left the island since his sister disappeared and continues to look for her or to try to solve the mystery of her vanishing. He believes that Sonja is still alive and sending him signs in the form a green light that sometimes shines across the water during the night. One uncanny element about Sonja is her physical similarity with G. Looking at a picture of Sonja that Kruso gives him, Ed comments: “Im allerersten Moment hatte Ed geglaubt, er schau in die Augen von G. Aber es handelte sich lediglich um eine Ähnlichkeit des Blicks und der Haltung” (K 143). In their tragedy, the characters Ed and Kruso are united by their grief and accordingly the female characters they lost are superimposed in their memory, becoming interchangeable “objects of mourning.”

In spite of their peripheral appearance in the novel, these female characters complicate and destabilize the character-system and, in particular, the relation between Ed and Kruso. In both Kruso and Ed’s life, traumatic events from their childhood and adult life revolve around a

female figure. The ultimate break between Kruso and Ed, which leads to Kruso's departure from the island and to Ed's return to the German mainland, is also marked by the effects of a female "character," as will be discussed in the next section. The island seems to stay together as long as Kruso and Ed remain there. But when Kruso loses his balance and disappears, or when he is transported away by his general-father, the utopia of the island collapses. The tragedy and trauma of a country is embedded in the relation between these two male figures, as well as in their failed relations to the female figures that either leave or betray them.

A Special Marginal "Character": Viola

Depicted on the left of Seiler's drawing as a box emitting sound waves, Viola, the radio in the *Klausner*, closes the series of the marginalized female characters in *Kruso*. Viola represents the connection of the character-system with the world beyond Hiddensee.³² At the same time, Viola is an object and stands for the only technology in the *Klausner*, with the exception of the necessary kitchen tools, such as cooling units, the coffee machine and the electric potato peeler. A wooden radio of the brand Violetta, Viola, or "meine Viola" as the cook Mike calls her (K 109), belongs to the furniture of the kitchen and makes her feeble, disturbed voice heard among the clinking of pots and dishes.³³ And yet, Viola receives a more detailed

³² Viola is introduced as one of the non-mimetic characters after another anthropomorphized figure gets is presented in the novel, the "Lurch," an amphibian-like conglomerate of food rests, hair and soap that accumulates at the bottom of the sink and needs to be removed from the kitchen with a special ritual (K 102-04).

³³ My use of the pronouns "she" and "her" when I refer to Viola parallels the gender of the German pronouns in the original text. This choice also reflects the anthropomorphized, feminine features of the radio. In an interview with the national German radio, Seiler comments: "Es heißt Viola, benannt, eigentlich heißt es Violetta, weil diese alten Röhrenradios alle nach Opernfiguren benannt wurden, und Violetta aus *La Traviata* hat diese Lungenkrankheit, und so ähnlich führt sich dieses Radio auch auf, es krächzt, es hustet, es ist sozusagen kein reines Programm, was dort überkommt...." (Sträßner 3).

description than some of the female characters with whom Ed interacts during his time at the *Klausner*:

Das Bord war aus rohen Stahlwinkeln gefertigt und schien stabiler als die Grundmauern des Klausners. Die Bespannung des Lautsprecherkastens war verkrustet von uraltem Fett, aus dem grünflackernd die kleine Linse des magischen Auges blinkte. Wie ein Lidstrich im Make-up einer Greisin glänzte darüber das Silber ihres Namenszugs: Viola zwinkerte Ed zu. (K 109-10)

Viola is compared to an old lady (“Greisin”), whose long existence can be read from her sturdy, old appearance. She carries the signs of time—the grease that encrusts her—but still retains a charming “eye,” which resembles that of an elderly woman wearing eyeliner. Viola has witnessed all kinds of adventures in the kitchen and her appearance and her “gaze” reveal that. She has been in the Klausner since 1985 after her owner, the cook at the time, drowned during a night swim, leaving her behind. For this reason, Viola seems to be the embodiment of the voice of the cook. At the same time, she constitutes the background noise of the kitchen, an essential element in it, to which nobody seems to pay attention, but everybody actually perceives.

Viola represents the voice of West German public broadcasting. While her voice is not always clear and sometimes sounds disturbed or gets interrupted, she incessantly produces noise, which she alternates with music and news. In this regard, the radio represents the intruder in this secluded Eastern community, as well as a cause of rupture among the characters. As Viola announces that borders are opening and movement from East to West is possible, people start abandoning the *Klausner* and Kruso’s project. Kruso realizes the disruption that Viola is causing to his project and suggests to “shut” her off: “Sie bringt einfach zu viel Unruhe, zu viel Unsinn ins Haus. Das ganze Festlandgeplapper, das nichts, absolut gar nichts mit uns hier oben zu tun

hat, mit uns und unserem Leben..." (K 194).³⁴ Viola is seen as an outsider voice, which should not be part of the community on Hiddensee. The negative words associated with her broadcasting ("Unruhe," "Unsinn," and "Festlandgeplapper") highlight Kruso's consideration of her. Viola becomes a real threat to the life of the *Klausner* once the news about the opening of the borders becomes more frequent: "Ein neuer Bericht über Flüchtlinge in Ungarn, tägliche Fluchten über die Grenze, bestimmte Worte wiederholten sich in einem fort, [. . .] die Botschaft, der Sondergesandte, hygienische Bedingungen" (K 229). The repetition of those "dangerous" words during the news cause Kruso to grow more and more concerned about the influence of Viola on the *Klausner* group in a moment in which, more than ever before, they need to stick together for the success of his utopian project. The news that Viola announces ultimately disrupts the character-system: not only do the inner connections become looser, but most of the seasonal workers decide to leave for good.

Viola creates tensions also in the relationship between Ed and Kruso. While Ed enjoys listening to the national anthem transmitted during the late night program, Kruso considers the feeble voice as a betrayer, whom he accuses of jeopardizing his friendship and plan. On the last vacation day, when the employees of the *Klausner* can hardly keep up with the guests entering the restaurant, Kruso loses his temper and damages Viola: "Er hatte ein großes Bierglas (Typ Butzenglas) in der Hand, das er ansatzlos nach Viola schleuderte, die augenblicklich verstummte. Das Glas fiel nicht zu Boden, weil die braune, fettverkrustete Bespannung des Radios zerriss und Viola es ganz in sich aufnahm. Eine unguete Stille trat ein" (K 368). Viola, the female voice from the West, gets not only objectified in a speaking box, but also physically violated by a male hand. The disquieting silence that follows marks the transition into the last

³⁴ In the interview compiled by Sträßner, Seiler reflects on his archival work with regard to the news from September 28, 1989, which he integrates in the novel (12).

phase of the *Klausner*. Ed and Kruso, now alone in the restaurant, struggle to keep up their project and grow more distant from each other.

And yet, Viola's voice is the last voice included in the novel before the "Epilog." When Ed accidentally removes the beer glass from Viola, the radio starts working again: "Viola kam zu sich – sie funktionierte" (K 434). Alone, like a tragic-comic figure in the desolation of the *Klausner*, Ed listens to Viola as she reveals to him that all borders have been open for days: "Alle Grenzen waren offen. Offen seit Tagen" (K 434). The last description of Ed in the *Klausner* captures him with Viola, the only "character" left to witness the dissolution of Kruso's plan on the one hand, and of the GDR on the other, emphasizing once more the disruptive function of this seemingly unimportant female technological and metallic voice.

The Thematic Dimension: Characters as Political Allegory

Kruso, Ed and the rest of the character-system contribute to the progression of the narrative by presenting and resolving a series of instabilities as part of their mimetic and synthetic dimensions and functions. But characters can and *should* also be read in their thematic dimension. Once again, Phelan's definition proves helpful in understanding what this dimension means: "Thematic dimensions [. . .] are attributes, taken individually or collectively, and viewed as vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character" (12). Indeed, characters in *Kruso* stand for a larger group of people or interests and they constitute the product of specific cultural and socio-political conditions. The final stage of this investigation will reveal the characters' thematic dimension and significance. Through the characters, their relations and the rupture that emerges between them, the novel encourages a reading that opens the narrative up to larger socio-political issues.

Kruso and Ed are products of their time and their relationship is the result of their encounter on Hiddensee in 1989.³⁵ The island itself plays a major role in defining the progression of Ed and Kruso's friendship. The meaning of the name "Hiddensee" already hints at the role of secretive relationships in the narrative. Historically, Hiddensee represents a place of refuge and escape. In the novel, it is described as "ein schmales Stück Land von mythischem Glanz, der letzte, der einzige Ort, eine Insel, die immer weiter hinaustrieb, außer Sichtweite geriet – man musste sich beeilen, wenn man noch mitgenommen werden wollte" (K 34). This island of mythical beauty attracts Ed as a place where he can start anew and forget his sorrows. When Ed arrives on the island, he is conscious that people can read his face and "dass er nur unterkriechen, nur verschwinden wollte, dass er im Grunde gescheitert war, aufgelaufen, ein Wrack" (K 37). The miserable state in which Ed finds himself becomes representative for a group of people that struggle to keep their life together, among them Kruso and other members of the crew at the restaurant. In this regard, Hiddensee becomes a place where outsiders and peculiar figures come together, which fuels Ed with new joy and excitement: "Gerade deshalb reizte es Ed, sich diese Menschen vor Augen zu führen, phantastische Bewohner eines fremden Planeten beim Abendbrot... 'Es ist ein Traum'. Flüsterte Ed ins Licht der rasch abtauchenden Sonne, und das neue Glück stimmte ihm zu, wenn auch auf eine verhaltene, undurchsichtige Weise" (K 62-63). Ed feels at ease within the colourful crowd on the island. As the outcast intellectual that cannot come to terms with the GDR, Ed becomes representative of a generation

³⁵ Details from the historical time seem to be part of the novel. According to Helmut Böttinger, the figure of Kruso's grandfather, the radiologist that Ed meets in the secret tower, is based on Robert Rompe. Rompe, native of Hiddensee and a physicist himself, was the grandfather of Alioscha Rompe, singer in the GDR punk group Feeling B, who died in 2000.

and a group of people that fights against multiple forms of oppression, both personal and political.

Kruso, instead, functions as a patron for all the people that leave the GDR to find a better life on Hiddensee. Kruso considers them as his protégées: “*unsere Obdachlosen*, meist aber auch nur *die Schiffbrüchigen* [. . .] Aussteiger, Abenteurer, Antragsteller, er sah Liebende, Abtrünnige, gescheitert auf irgendeine Weise und ‘Flüchtlinge in spe’, die er als seine Sorgenkinder bezeichnete” (K 125, emphasis in the original text). According to Kruso, these people, like children, need to be guided to find a new life and new values. As part of his project, he has also redesigned the physical boundaries that will accommodate his utopian community since, according to him, borders are constantly altered and changed in the interest of the official political power. In what he calls “*Karte der Wahrheit*,” Kruso has redesigned the physical boundaries of the island Rügen as well as the coast line of Denmark. He also has included “*die Wege der Toten*” (K 161), the lines that describe the paths that refugees unsuccessfully trace when they try to escape the GDR and reach Denmark. Kruso is obsessed with the idea that nobody notices or takes care of these dead, and that their identities get lost in time and space: “Aber niemand, ich wiederhole, niemand dort drüben weiß, wer die Toten sind. Es heißt, sie liegen dann auf Eis, auf dem guten kalten Eis des Königreichs und warten, dass jemand kommt, sie zu erlösen. Aber niemand wird kommen, niemand, niemals” (K 162). Kruso is convinced that the attempt to escape the GDR by water is not the right solution and that freedom should be achieved in the East at that historical moment.

Kruso also stands for the philosophy of freedom, which he discusses with Ed. In his perspective, freedom attracts the people to Hiddensee: “sie ruft, verdammt, sie ruft wie eine verdammte Sirene . . . Und jeder hört etwas. Erlösung vom Beruf. Vom Mann. Vom Zwang. Vom

Staat. Von der Vergangenheit, nicht wahr, Ed? [. . .] Drei Tage, und sie sind eingeweiht [. . .] und wir schaffen damit eine große Gemeinde, die Gemeinschaft der Eingeweihten. Und das ist erst der Anfang” (K 163). This project gives rise to a community that is nourished by a shared ideal of freedom, which is experienced as a form of liberation from any form of oppression, be it a person, a period in life, a condition. In the new community, the refugees connect through a series of rituals, which function as rites of passage. For example, all refugees get nourished with the “ewige Suppe,” a soup made with the edible leftovers from the restaurant’s guests, which constantly boils to feed whoever arrives on Hiddensee. This soup also acquires a symbolic meaning, becoming “eine Art biologischer Kreislauf, ein geschlossenes System der Versorgung – und Erleuchtung” (K 169). Refugees also take part in a kind of “Gottesdienst,” which involves bathing in the sea and sitting on the branches of the “Buddhist tree” and drinking until they fall down and somebody catches them. One of the principles of this freedom community is that people get to share life, experiences, and moments, according to the principles of freedom, order, justice and discipline, united by a healthy share of openness and generosity.

Kruso and Ed also become representatives for the narrative instance and its voicing of utopian desires. Indeed, part of the initiation process for the refugees consists in telling their stories and sharing their experiences that happened both before and on the island. The process of narrating is here thematized through Ed’s desire to hear stories and becomes a way of connecting among refugees or enlightened souls: “Aber Ed wollte hören, alles hören, er spürte die unvergleichliche Wärme des Erzählens in der Finsternis, er spürte, wie die Wärme gemeinsam würde, während er lauschte, ohne sich zu rühren” (K 256). At the same time, the experience on the island emphasizes the difficulty of finding the right words to describe such a life-changing moment: “Tatsächlich schien es keinen guten Vergleich zu geben für die Wirkung der Insel, und

viele erklärten, es existierten ohnehin keine Worte dafür. Zu sagen sei nur, dass sie es an diesem Ort, am *Großen Inselblick* nämlich, plötzlich wieder zu spüren begonnen hätten, die verschütteten Wurzeln, wie Kruso es nannte, das Bild, zu dem alle Bilder nach Hause wollen, ‘einfach heim’” (K 257). Similarly to the poetic language, which allows Ed and Kruso to define and express their friendship, the refugees can only grasp the image of the “root,” which embodies the project of freedom and its deeper meaning.

But Kruso’s final demise represents the failure of his project. The inversion of roles in the friendship, which leaves Ed as the central character in the novel, reflects a change in the political project. Ed becomes Kruso’s helper in this process, who assists the pilgrims in their journey of discovery and back to the roots of freedom. Unfortunately, this idea of freedom, which in the beginning motivates Kruso and his men, slowly fades away. As the news spreads that the borders are opening, people from the *Klausner* decide to find freedom on the mainland. While Ed and Kruso decide to keep the restaurant standing as long as they can, they soon need to surrender: The final collapse of an ideal is thematized through the instability in the friendship between Ed and Kruso. Once Kruso’s mental and physical state deteriorates, Ed starts taking care of his own master and the roles between the two get reversed. Kruso and Ed finally need to face the idea that their search for freedom has failed. As the two characters separate and the *Klausner* closes, the narrative also undergoes a major change, which signifies the thematic shift in the novel.

Images of the GDR are not prominent in *Kruso*, but the idea of the repressive state constantly reemerges in the story of the refugees who are trying to flee from it. The failure of Kruso’s project parallels the deterioration of Ed and Kruso’s relationship and the physical and psychological breakdown of Kruso. As a consequence, the collapse of the character-system, which mirrors the political rupture, leads to the end of the narrative. As the character-system falls

apart, no one is left to continue Kruso's project, except for Ed, who also decides to leave the island. When the two friends separate, there is nothing left to do and Ed can only try to piece together the story retrospectively. The novel plays with the individuality of the characters and through their search for identity attempts to capture *the* moment of crisis in contemporary German history. The search for the root of freedom is left incomplete as the friends lose track of each other. The conclusion of the novel, which reads as disconnected from the rest of the chapters, brings in a first-person voice. This narrative voice frames the final events but reinforces the idea of rupture that underlies the whole novel on multiple levels: in terms of lost identities, terminated relationships, and projects left incomplete.

“Epilog”: Ed’s Last Project

The last part of the novel is marked as “Epilog” and stands out from the rest of the narrative. “Auferstehung,” the title of the previous chapter, carries a religious connotation and hints at the possibility of redemption. It describes Ed’s transcription of Kruso’s poetry project and the return of Viola’s voice, and ends on the positive note “Alle Grenzen waren offen. Offen seit Tagen” (K 434). The following section, “Edgards Bericht,” is told in the first-person by Edgard himself. The tone and the topic of this account are very different from the preceding chapters. It is the year 2003: many years have passed since Viola’s last announcement and Hiddensee is just a faraway memory in a reunified Germany. Since Kruso left the island, Edgard has lost contact with him and the narrative starts by mentioning Kruso’s death, which happened in 1993. Ed has become a German writer in the meantime, and now lives in Berlin.³⁶ Once he learns about his friend’s death, he is immediately reminded of the promise he had made to him.

³⁶ A biographical reading is beyond the scope of my argument, but the autobiographical references to Lutz Seiler’s own career and life are evident.

After their brotherhood blood pact, Kruso had asked Ed to promise that, as his new bother, he would keep looking for Sonja: “Sie ist irgendwo da draußen. Du kannst meinen Feldstecher benutzen. Du orientierst dich an den Lichtern. Denk an das grüne Licht. Und sollte ich einmal nicht hier sein, für eine Zeit, dann – kümmerst du dich. Versprich mir das. Versprich es, jetzt!” (K 411). Triggered by Kruso’s death, Ed embarks on a journey to investigate not only the disappearance of Sonja but also the tragic destiny of many other refugees who, in the attempt to reach Denmark, had simply disappeared without leaving a trace. This trip becomes an expedition for Ed, what he himself labels “Entdeckungsreise, eine Prüfung vielleicht” (K 440), into the macabre history of many unnamed and unidentified dead.³⁷

The style of this last part of the novel reads like a scientific-historical account. While the research is framed by the promise that Ed has made to Kruso, the lyric language of the first part of the novel gives way for details, numbers and data. The first-person narrative strikes the reader because of its direct take and the matter-of-fact language. In 1993, Ed reaches the Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen, which he labels “*Museum der Ertrunkenen*” (K 441), and explains to the security guard of the building that he came to do research on a book ““about the bodies, who came here in former times”” (K 442). Although on a mission to find Sonja, Ed also hopes *not* to find her. His desire to keep his promise to Kruso, however, and uncover the history of his family, pushes Ed towards his goal. His next step in this journey of discovery is the Tyske Grave, the grave of the German dead. Here, an inscription that remembers ““siebzehn unbekannte deutsche Flüchtlinge””

³⁷ Lutz Seiler comments on this part of the novel in an interview, which reveals how the research for this last part of the novel constituted a project in itself. Seiler was supported in this endeavor by Rebecca Ellsäßer, who compiled a report with the scientific and factual details on the forensics of drowned people. The research was conducted at two institutions: the *Landesinstitut für Rechtsmedizin* in Potsdam and the *Klinikum* in Bad Saarow. For more information about this process, see the interview with Florian Zimmer-Amrhein and Rebecca Ellsäßer “Wie riecht eine Wasserleiche?”.

is added after a list of German names (K 447). The names and information that Ed was hoping to receive remain wrapped in the mystery, in which no identity can be revealed.

This first visit is counterbalanced by events that take place ten years later, that is, around 2003. Through the books, documentaries and research accounts that Ed discovers, he collects some more details on the – more or less successful – experiences of refugees in the GDR. However, information about the dead refugees is only rare and vague, and mostly reduced to a number: fifteen mysterious deaths. Ed is particularly interested in these dead without names, whose identities are wrapped in mystery and forgotten in time and space. The motivation that drives Ed is primarily Sonja, but he decides to frame the purpose of his research in more general terms: “Den Opfern ihre Identität zurückzugeben, die Anonymität der Statistiken brechen, ihr trauriges Schicksal dem Vergessen entreißen und so weiter” (K 452). This “adventure” finally leads him to the Department of the Missing People, which includes files about dead without a name. However, the first problem of this archive lies in the fact that no dead or missing person is connected with the GDR: The GDR does not even appear among the geographical locations of the dead, even when one could be almost sure that the person was coming from that area. For Ed, this research becomes the realization that these people had disappeared (or had been made to disappear) three times: 1) as fugitives, when they had left everything behind – including documents and any form of identification – to escape the GDR; 2) during the escape across the sea and the fatal conditions connected with this attempt; 3) through the final disappearance from any records (K 456-58). The death of the fugitives, especially the drowning at sea, is described in detail and through macabre images. Another shocking and saddening discovery that Ed makes on his research trip is that he is the first person to visit this archive after twenty-four years. And yet, while nobody is really looking for these people and their identity, their files will remain forever

in this archive until they are identified: “Die Toten warten, gewissermaßen. [. . .] Ihre Liegezeit ist unbegrenzt, und auch diese Akten hier werden ewig aufbewahrt, kein einziger Fall wird als abgeschlossen betrachtet, solange wir keinen Namen haben” (K 469). The problem of naming, which was already significant in the first part of the novel, particularly in reference to the marginal characters, returns here in even more tragic tones. Not only are these figures marginal, but also unknown to the extreme.

In the archive, Ed has the chance to look through the catalogues of the recorded unnamed, dead people. While he cannot find any trace of Sonja, he recognizes the remains of Speiche – the seasonal worker he had replaced when he first got to the *Klausner*. When he sees a piece of the shirt Speiche was wearing in a picture hanging in the *Klausner*, Ed is overwhelmed by emotion. As he leaves the archive, the reader is only left with this testimony about the disappeared refugees and with Ed’s comment: “Ich war kein Forscher, kein Historiker, die Wege der Aufarbeitung waren mir nicht vertraut, ich war lediglich einem Versprechen gefolgt, den Gesetzen der Freundschaft, wenn man so will, am Anfang war es nur das gewesen: Krusos Bitte” (K 472). This account, told in the first-person singular, offers a self-reflection on the part of Ed and ties all the main topics of the novel back together.

A remarkable aspect in this last section is the predominance of the mimetic dimension of the character, achieved through the many (pseudo)historical and autobiographical references. The character Ed carries his synthetic function full-circle as he reconnects the narrative threads and remembers the characters of the first part of the novel. Finally, Ed’s trip to Copenhagen reinforces his thematic dimension and function in refocusing the attention on an essential moment of rupture in German history and on many figures that, confined in their marginal role or *in absentia*, now receive more attention in the narrative. The memories from Hiddensee come

back in this epilogue through direct quotes from the conversations with Kruso, but at the same time the novel seems to suggest that a different project and form of writing are required to address larger socio-political issues. As the only surviving character who tries to uncover the traces of many unnamed dead, Ed elevates himself from "shipwrecked" to helper and finally writer-investigator, acquiring new agency, which translates in his appropriating of the first-person pronoun. The fact that Edgard is given the last words in the form of an account ("Bericht") leaves the reader wondering what the function of the novel is and whether this more fact-driven form of writing can become an alternative to the unavoidable inadequacy of the third-person story or of poetry to come to terms with such a political rupture. And yet, for the second time, the attempt to come to terms with the past fails. Ed's impossibility of completing his account and giving their identity back to the dead also marks the end of the novel, which seems to pass the baton to the reader.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the narrative significance of characters in *Kruso*. By embracing the holistic approach theorized by James Phelan, my analysis has taken into consideration the mimetic, synthetic and thematic dimensions of characters, and the ensuing functions these fulfill in the narrative. An initial study of the mimetic traits of characters highlighted their human-like features and showed how they are made into plausible figures of the historical project presented in the novel. The study of the synthetic dimension and function expanded beyond the individual features of characters and focused on the relationships among them. These bonds are formed on the level of the narrative, but are reinforced by the intertextual references to the poetic and literary works that inform the novel. As part of the analysis of the

synthetic dimensions and functions, the chapter also examined the character-system in which characters move and the character-space they receive, thus revealing the imbalance between different groups of characters or individual figures. Finally, the thematic reading of characters has showed how they become representations of the political rupture that the novel depicts, assuming a key function in the political project of Seiler's work. Besides being the story of Ed, Kruso and their male friendship, the novel addresses *the* moment of rupture that marks contemporary German history. By emphasizing the fictional characters that play a key role in resisting the oppressive state, the novel draws attention to the more "invisible" figures, the ones that occupy the margins in the narrative and remain forgotten in the historical records.

Chapter Four

Voicing the Community: We-Voice and Storytelling in Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*

This chapter examines the last moment of rupture at the center of my project. The rupture depicted in *Vor dem Fest* (2014) is signaled by a shift in narrative voice: from the unifying voice of the old storyteller, which is presented here as a memory, to the plural we-voice of the community, which acquires new layers of meanings as the narrative progresses. Rather than portraying the emptiness the rupture creates, the novel highlights the possibilities that the plurality of the we-voice opens up and the continuity it allows for in the village. When a small community loses its master storyteller, what remains is profound sadness. This is the moment of rupture that *Vor dem Fest* retrospectively depicts. Similar to Stanišić's first work, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* (2006), in its enthusiastic narration and clever play with language, this new novel embraces the fate of a village, which continues to narrate its stories even after its master storyteller has passed away.¹ The focus shifts from the Bosnian family circle and civil war in the 1990s to the past and present of an East German community, rendered through the peculiar use of a we-voice, which accompanies the reader from the first sentence. Indeed, moving away from the "I" of the first novel, *Vor dem Fest*, from the outset, gives voice to a community suspended between mourning and excitement. The narration of the past and present fills the spacetime between death and the upcoming celebration, mentioned in the title. The night before the feast becomes the central conceit of the novel: the narrator presents his readers with a

¹ *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* ended up in the shortlist for the *Deutschen Buchpreis*. *Vor dem Fest* is the recipient of the *Leipziger Buchmesse Preis* in 2014. The jury's motivation for the prize reads: "Stanišić hat ein Dorf aus Sprache erfunden, ein Kaleidoskop, einen Kosmos aus vielen Stimmen, Klangfarben, Jargons, die Welt in nuce, magisch zusammengehalten von einem kollektiven Erzähler, der dazugehört, einem, der verschmitzt ist und gewitzt und klug und ein bisschen weise. Als gälte es, das Zerrbild des Antiheimatromans geradezurichten, dessen Typologie nur das verpatzte Fest kennt" ("Nominierungen und Preisträger 2014").

night tale which privileges hearing over seeing, narration over description. In *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, the horrors of the Bosnian civil war were transformed through the eyes of an adolescent boy—later a returning refugee—which resulted in episodes rich in fantastic and carnevalesque connotations. These elements are also employed, in different forms, in *Vor dem Fest*. The festive mood of the village balances out the somber historical past, to which the descriptions of violence are confined, and the present troubles, which seem rather mundane and peaceful compared to the horrors of the war. The novel continues Stanišić’s experimentation with language and different forms of storytelling. It questions the limits of narration after the death of its main voice and embraces the possibilities, which a new, plural form of storytelling offers to overcome the rupture within this postsocialist community.²

Vor dem Fest opens on a melancholic note proclaiming: “Wir sind traurig. Wir haben keinen Fährmann mehr” (V 11).³ Fürstenfelde, a semi-fictional village in the Uckermark divided by two lakes, always relied on the ferryman to transport people across these bodies of water.⁴ But even more than his navigation skills, the community misses the ferryman’s ability to tell stories. Indeed, “Der Fährmann war ein guter Erzähler” (V 12), who enchanted his listeners with his narratives and transported them into fictional worlds. And yet, while the village is unsettled by

² Stanišić’s first novel already displays a high degree of experimentation: chapters have different forms, lists are introduced—see, for example, the chapter “Ich habe Listen gemacht” (254-97)—and the narrator constantly makes use of word plays.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Vor dem Fest* are taken from the following edition: Saša Stanišić, *Vor dem Fest* (München: Luchterhand, 2014). Page numbers are inserted directly into the text and are accompanied by the abbreviation V.

⁴ Fürstenfelde, as described in the novel, is not to be found in the Uckermark. And yet, the village can be considered a fictionalized combination of several other villages in the region, in which Stanišić did the research for the novel: Fürstenwerder, in particular, but also Fürstenberg, Fürstenwalde, and Prenzlau. In August 2015, Stanišić gave a reading of *Vor dem Fest* in Fürstenwerder, the 800-people community which mostly inspired his fictional village. The reading was accompanied by a tour, during which Stanišić showed the places that play a role in his narrative. A chronicle of this event, titled “Ich habe mal neunzig Leute mitgebracht” is available on the website *Intellectures* by Thomas Hummitzsch.

this sudden death, excitement over the upcoming celebration is also noticeable. As a result, Fürstenfelde is suspended between mourning and anticipation, on the eve of the annual *Annenfest*, which brings all the members of the community together.⁵ The narrative unfolds in the time before the celebration, covering the twenty-four hours preceding the *Annenfest* up to the official opening of the festivities. This feast is *the* tradition in Fürstenfelde even though nobody knows what it commemorates: “Unser Annenfest. Was wir feiern, weiß niemand so recht. Nichts jährt sich, nichts endet oder hat an genau diesem Tag begonnen. Die Heilige Anna ist irgendwann im Sommer, und die Heiligen sind uns heilig nicht mehr” (30). Since its origin is wrapped in mystery and the religious meaning is long lost, the *Annenfest* becomes the occasion to honor the community itself, and, above all, the fabrication of stories by its people: “Vielleicht feiern wir einfach, dass es das gibt: Fürstenfelde. Und was wir uns davon erzählen” (30).⁶ But how will this community stay together when its main voice has ceased to speak? Who will narrate all the stories, legends, and chronicles that the ferryman knew? Who will give voice to

⁵ Literary works centered on villages and rural communities have a long tradition in the German context, in which they are known as *Dorfliteratur*. The village, which can function as a cultural, political, ideological and economic construct, evolved from Romantic representations, such as the ones present in Ludwig Tieck’s *Der blonde Eckbert* (1797) and Joseph von Eichendorff’s *Das Marmorbild* (1819) to portrayals that highlight the concept of *Heimat*. Starting from the 1850s and throughout the 20th century, the concept of the village shifted to reflect modernization and the relations between rural and urban communities. On one hand, the countryside is idealized in opposition to the urban space; on the other, it reflects a more isolated and economically disadvantaged environment. The village has received new attention in literary and filmic works of the 1990s and 2000s, in which it shows new facets and is represented as the space of traditions, rituals, memories, the past, and family relations. For a detailed study on the topic, see Gansel (197-223).

⁶ In the Catholic, German-speaking world, the *Annatag* is traditionally celebrated on July 26 in honor of the holy Anna, Maria’s mother. In *Vor dem Fest*, it is already autumn when the narration begins and the last warm day of the year is coming to an end (V 16). This temporal disconnect gives a whole new meaning to this feast for Fürstenfelde. It is neither a celebration during the summertime nor the remembrance of a saint. Considering the assonance between *Annenfest* and *Ahnenfest*, it is also possible to read this celebration as a commemoration of the ancestors, of what Fürstenfelde has been and become throughout the centuries.

Fürstenfelde and make sure that the narrating, and therefore the community, continues? These questions, which run like a leitmotif through the novel, constitute the center of my investigation. Constructing the village through narration and the use of the poetic “we” becomes the project of the novel. My analysis focuses on how the loss of the main voice of this village transpires narratively, that is, on the ways in which Fürstenfelde reacts to the loss of the ferryman by appropriating his narratives to re-tell the story of the community. With little prospect for change, the poetic “we” tells and retells the present and past, fuels the community’s routine and keeps it alive. As a consequence, stories, history and storytelling become the three key elements of the novel. A plural voice, a “we,” accompanies the reader through the representation of everyday life, sudden deaths, and exceptional events, all held together by a comic tone.

This chapter reflects on how questions of voice, in particular the abundance or lack thereof, shape the narration and the community of Fürstenfelde. After introducing the composite form and structure of the novel, and defining key aspects of the concept of voice that inform my discussion, I take into consideration the complex nature of the narrative voices that form the “we,” and describe how the narrator spins the present and past of the community into an exciting, festive night tale of survival. The identity of the voices is not always discernible and not necessarily confined to humans, either. By discussing the functions and implications of different forms of narratives told by different voices, I reflect on how they inform and complicate the process of storytelling and, consequently, the representation of the community in Fürstenfelde. In the last section of the chapter, I examine the relationship between verbal and visual storytelling in order to show the triumph of words over images in this village tale.

Narrative and Formal Elements in *Vor dem Fest*

In its gradual disappearance, Fürstenfelde is trapped between nostalgia for the past and a sense of decline: “Es gehen mehr tot, als geboren werden. Wir hören die Alten vereinsamen” (V 12). This small, former East German village has an imprecise population, but a rising rate of deaths and a decreasing number of newborns. Some peculiar figures belong to the distinctive features of this community. Among the characters that receive more attention in the novel are: Frau Kranz, the 90-year-old loyal painter of Fürstenfelde; Frau Schwermuth, the custodian of the archive; Herr Schramm, whose troubled role in the National People’s Army betrays a dark past; Ulli, whose garage has become a drinking refuge for the men of Fürstenfelde; and Ditzsche, whom everybody knows and mistrusts, since he is suspected of having read the mail when he was the village postman.⁷ The younger generation is equally unremarkable, and in that sense, characteristic for this village. Lada is the tough guy with a tattoo on his back that reads “The Legend,” while Suzi is his mute friend, who follows him everywhere. Johann, Frau Schwermuth’s son, dreams of becoming the next bell ringer of Fürstenfelde, while Anna is ready to leave the village and move to Rostock to study ship engineering.⁸ The reader has the feeling of being suspended in a world outside of time, halfway between rural traditions and modern challenges, which only the narration can bridge.

⁷ Some of the characters’ names suggest their constitutive traits. Quite fittingly, Frau Schwermuth suffers from melancholia; Herr Schramm carries the “scars” from his past in his present life (“Schramme”); Ditzsche’s name reminds of his past, when he was sticking his nose in the private life of the villagers (“titschen/ditschen”); finally, the name Lada, which means “fame” and “command,” fits the role of this figure and his relationship with the other younger characters in the village.

⁸ In the initial version of the novel Anna played a much more central role and her name was also in the title. However, as Stanišić has remarked, not much has remained of this first idea: “Anna war in dieser Fassung als Hauptfigur angedacht, der Roman sollte ihrem Irren durch die Nacht folgen. Von den folgenden Seiten ist dann aber kaum etwas in das endgültige Manuskript eingegangen” (*Vor dem Fest*, Erweiterte Ausgabe “Anhang”).

In the long night preceding the *Annenfest*, much happens but none of these events disquiets the community too much. Anna, whose imminent departure seems to be the most exciting change in the village, stops a potential tragedy: Herr Schramm's dubious attempt to commit suicide; somebody breaks into the *Haus der Heimat*, the village archive, but this burglary does not cause any loss or serious consequence for the village. Only the ongoing preparations for the feast mark the slow passing of time. And yet, fairy-tale and fable elements bestow a magic aura on this night in the village. These include the errands of a female fox, one of the many night "explorers" in the novel, which takes advantage of the darkness to snatch some eggs for her cubs. Fürstenfelde, the setting and protagonist of the narrative, becomes the exciting topic of countless stories that capture the mundane, everyday life. The monotonous routine of the village is counterbalanced by the sense of plurality that characterizes the novel: plurality of characters, events and voice. This last element, in particular, contributes to the vivacity and multiplicity of the novel. A plural voice breaks the limits between the individual figures and happenings to capture the village in its different nuances and aspects. Stanišić's work uses the we-voice to bring to life a forgotten, unspectacular community in the German Uckermark, which seems to have remained excluded from the fast-paced, rapidly changing life. By combining present and past, human and non-human voices, the novel explores the possibilities of narration and shows how the absence of the main voice in the village opens up the way to a plural voice, which outdoes the singularity of the ferryman.

This multiplicity of characters and voices is organized into five books, introduced by progressive Roman numerals. The books tend to become shorter as the narration progresses. The novel moves from the first book of over one hundred pages to the last one of only four, suggesting the increasing rhythm of the narration and the trepidation for the beginning of the

feast. All the books, except for the last one, which is dedicated completely to the unveiling of the painting donated to the auction by Frau Kranz, alternate between present moments, historical events, and a mythical deep time—which only the fox knows. The novel renounces chapter titles, using only the blank spaces on the page to indicate where one chapter ends and the next starts. Some chapters span pages, while others only consist of one or two sentences. The narration develops chronologically, covering the whole night before the feast until the morning and the beginning of the celebration with the auction. But the narration of the night only functions as the main frame in which all kinds of episodes from the present and the past intervene to pause the account of the central events. Some chapters are quickly concluded to leave room for other episodes from the present day of the novel, as if the we-voice were trying to incorporate everything that it knows and witnesses. Sometimes, the order of these stories seems to be arbitrary and explainable only through decisions made by the plural voice, which keeps track of all movements in the night and goes back and forth in the village cosmos. For example, when Uwe Hirtentäschel, the artist with a troubled past, who now makes wood angels in Fürstenfelde, “verlässt das Pfarrhaus und betritt die Nacht, kurz nur, aber lang genug, um in unseren Reigen gezogen zu werden, die linke Hand nimmt der Fährmann, die rechte halten wir” (V 147). The we-voice and the deceased ferryman draw this figure into the narrative. The meta-narrative comment on the aesthetic strategy used to introduce a new character in the novel reveals how the narration works. Characters that are spotted by this voice while they wander through the night become part of the storytelling; their stories get embedded in the larger narrative, before someone or something else captures the narrator’s attention—that is, until the next episode. The narrative voice seems to get easily distracted as soon as it perceives a new figure walking through the night and feels the urge to include the figure, or a larger portion of their story, in the

novel. By following the excitement of the moment, the narrative voice playfully suggests how the narrative does not develop on the basis of strict organizational principles, but rather lets the village, with its present and past stories, seize control of the scene.

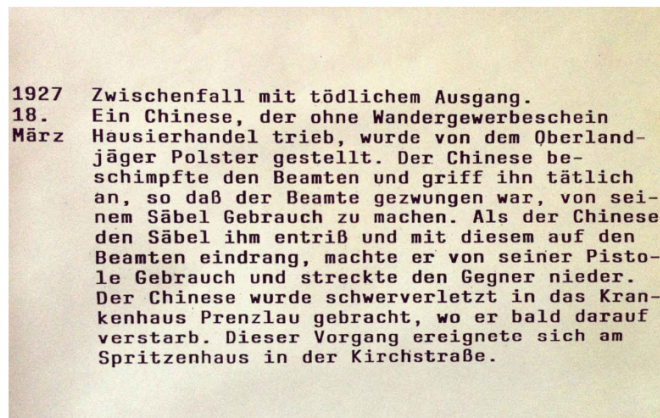
Indeed, the narrative of *Vor dem Fest* tells two kinds of stories: the stories of the mundane, the “here” and “now” of the community; and the accounts of the marvelous, the unexpected, the tragically surprising. These anecdotes, in part based on historical chronicles from the region of the Uckermark and in part completely new fictions, combine with the main narrative, resulting in two very different forms of texts: on the one hand, the narrative about the present and future of Fürstenfelde; on the other hand, the stories about the village and the region from past centuries. The narration of the present is mingled with chronicles of the village, which are preserved in the *Haus der Heimat*. Stanišić researched these materials in the archives of the Uckermark, where he gained access to historic accounts that he ultimately incorporated into his book.⁹ The appendix of the enhanced e-book published in September 2015 shows some of these sources and archival materials that went into the making of the novel. The appendix provides, for example, historical information about two fires that happened in the 18th century and that constitute the background information for a returning topic in the novel, the burning of Anna, which in turn goes back to the origin of the celebration of the *Annenfest*.¹⁰ In relation to this

⁹ In the Acknowledgments at the end of the book, Stanišić thanks the people of Fürstenberg, Fürstenfelde, Fürstenwalde, Fürstenwerder and Prenzlau, together with their museums, for the historical knowledge they contributed (V 316). In an interview for the *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen*, Stanišić maintains that many of the stories are his inventions, while others, such as the one which mentions the “Wunderferkel” (V 70-72), were taken from the historical materials preserved in the archive in Prenzlau and then reworked.

¹⁰ In the enhanced e-book, a commentary to the sentence “Wir sind froh, Anna wird verbrannt” (V 28) reads: “Der Satz gilt der Vergangenheit, dem ersten ‘Annenfest’, an dem eine junge Magd namens Anna als Hexe verbrannt wurde. Das Dorf weiß von dem grausigen Ursprung des Festtages nicht, aber die Nacht—aufgeladen mit alten Geschichten—erinnert sich in Bruchstücken daran.”

theme, the appendix also includes the historical background for the episode of Anna and Andreas, the two kids who in 1722 were forced to sleep in the oven, which caused the tragic death of one of them (V 181). The historical chronicles get transformed from neutral descriptions of events to more colorful stories, which preserve the main line of the histories, but add a new layer of meaning to them. The digital edition also includes the picture of some historical chronicles that the reader can retrace in the fictional episodes included in the novel (see fig. 2):

Quelle



Fotografiert in der Heimatstube Fürstenwerder, Quelle unbekannt.

Figure 2. Unknown source photographed in the *Heimatstube Fürstenwerder* in Saša Stanišić, *Vor dem Fest*. Erweiterte Ausgabe. E-book plus. (München: Luchterhand, 2015).

For example, Stanišić found the document of this chronicle, which dates back to March 18, 1927, in the heritage museum (*Heimatstube*) in Fürstenwerder. While the chronicle of this tragic confrontation between a Chinese and a local authority figure made it almost *verbatim* into the novel, Stanišić incorporates one major change, when he adds one last sentence: “Seine letzten Worte verstand niemand” (V 141). This one-liner, which highlights the failure of communication

in the episode, suggests the bigger project of the novel, which does not content itself with the reproduction of historical accounts, but always adds a new voice to the sources. Besides the real historical accounts, the novel also uses other literary forms to represent the past: chronicle fiction, historical anecdotes, fairy tales, in which historical elements are playfully altered or abandoned. The result is a collection of stories that span from the 16th to the 20th century. These historic episodes are absent from the first pages of the novel, but become more frequent as the narrative progresses and stop at the end of the fourth book. While, at first, these stories read like a digression and a departure from the main narration, they actually come to constitute an essential part of the novel to which they add a strong voice. As a matter of fact, all these elements extend the understanding of the community, through a play with a particular form of historical narration. By modifying the historical accounts and merging them with fictional elements, the we-voice in *Vor dem Fest* mimics history and uses it to enrich the past and present of Fürstenfelde.

As a result of the composite form of the novel, the narrative voice often bridges present stories and past memories through associations, giving the novel the form of an episodic narration. Indeed, while the main story line follows the events of the night, the accounts from the past function as self-contained episodes, which at times share thematic connections with the main events, but, at others, read like unrelated deviations from the main plotline. Digressing becomes the key narrative strategy of the novel, which makes use of these episodes to fill the waiting time until the feast. At one point, the we-narrator even exclaims: “Wir schweifen ab. / So eine Nacht ist das” (V 163). These two lines, which conclude one of the chapters that describe Fürstenfelde’s main attractions, characterize the digressive style of the narrative, which often moves between different stories. The playful auctorial “we” proves to be a voice on the move. It

is everywhere and, at the same time, nowhere because it can trace all the movements that happen in the night. This night, which precedes the celebration and creates so much expectation in the villagers, is to credit for the structure and form of the novel. In the night of the *Annenfest*, stories that have long been forgotten come back and are narrated once again, while other well known ones are told once more. No story can be heard too often and every aspect of this community finds a place in this episodic tale. Before investigating more closely the form of the voice in the novel, the next section will briefly introduce the narrative concepts that frame the rest of the chapter.

The Concept of “Voice” in Narratology

Through its articulate structure and characteristic plurality, *Vor dem Fest* raises the question of voice on multiple levels. The authorial voice which stands behind the novel’s project, the voices of characters that emerge in the narration, and the narrative voice accompanying the reader through the night all play a role in Stanišić’s work. This chapter will concentrate on the third aspect, that is on the narrative voice and the way it affects the representation of the community through storytelling. While “voice” is a widely used term in literature and narrative theory, there is no single definition of the concept. Some interesting aspects of voice concern plurality, change and forms of address. Genette first theorized the concept of voice in his 1972 *Discours du récit*, reshaping a discussion that previously interpreted voice as the “author’s style or rhetoric” (Hansen et al. 2). According to Genette, since narratives are communicative acts between a narrator and a listener or reader, the existence of a narrative means that there needs to be a voice. In contrast to his concept of mood, which describes the person “who sees” the action, voice for Genette stands for the narrative instance speaking. However, the concept is much more

complex than it first seems and “cannot be simply reduced to the question ‘who speaks,’ or to the subcategory person” (Fludernik, “New Wines in Old Bottles?” 620). For Genette, the concept of voice does not have to do with purely grammatical choices, but rather indicates “narrative postures” (*Narrative Discourse* 244), the position from which the narrative voice speaks, describes, and tells. Further, for Genette, the concept of voice includes different aspects such as narrating time, person, level, narrator and narratee, all elements that combine to constitute the complexity of voice.

Even though Genette’s theory is considered a milestone in any discussion of voice, his use of the term is not always consistent and has proved unsatisfactory in more than one respect. Genette uses the term voice in three different ways in *Narrative Discourse*: first, voice refers to a “a relation with the subject (and more generally with the instance) of enunciating”; second, Genette uses “voice” “in opposition to mood” and in relation to the question “‘who speaks?’,” which always has as answer “‘somebody’”; third, Genette seems to use the term “voice” almost as synonym for “narrative instance or narrating” (qtd. in Patron 16-18). Far from being just a grammatical category, voice takes up qualitative nuances that Genette tries to take into account. And yet, rhetorical narratologists, for example, take issue with the rigidity of the grammatical framework, because it hinders a rhetorical reading, in which the narrating instance functions as just one of the many aspects that an analysis of voice needs to address. In *Rhetorical Narratology*, Michael Kearns presents a broader set of questions that need to be addressed when discussing voice: “How many narrating voices are present? Where do these voices stand with respect to the audience? What assumptions, especially concerning values and experiences with other texts, do the narrating voices make about their audience? What discourse elements are important in transmitting the story to the actual reader?” (83). Through these questions, Kearns

aims at shifting the focus from the person of the narrator to the narrating act, which invites us to consider not only the producer of utterances—which can be human or not—but also the context in which she produces them and the narratee, the person addressed (107-08). This set of questions becomes particularly relevant for *Vor dem Fest*, in which voice functions as a complex category, a shifting and unstable one, both in terms of the “person” speaking and of his or her audience.

In Genette’s theory, and until very recently, voice was believed to have singular connotation (even the plural “we” has been considered an example of first-person singular) and could only be attributed to human agents. Indeed, studies on narrative voice have only lately become genuinely interested in “deviations” from the singular human voice and started exploring possibilities of plural voices or what are sometimes referred to as “unnatural voices,” a term that has been interpreted differently by different scholars. Brian Richardson’s definition seems particularly productive as it describes unnatural narratives as “those texts that violate mimetic conventions by providing wildly improbable or strikingly impossible events; they are narratives that are not simply nonrealistic but antirealistic” (“Unnatural Narratology” 95). For Richardson, defamiliarization characterizes these narratives (97) because they defy the conventions of what is considered a natural act of storytelling with an identifiable first-person narrator. One of these “deviations” that Richardson individuates consists precisely of the use of the “we” form, a speaking in the plural, which often strikes the reader as unusual, sometimes even unnatural because it is not “bound by the epistemological rules of realism” and it “plays with its own boundaries” (“Plural Focalization” 58), especially when the plurality is not specified or explained. But where does this sense of unnaturalness come from? And what aspects of we-narratives make them such an interesting narrative choice? Uri Margolin provides three reasons

which may explain the rarity of we-narratives: “because the exact scope of the ‘we’ may remain ambiguous and may contain different members at different points in the narrative, because the question of the narrators’ mental access of others’ minds remains inherently unresolved, and because the sense of a collective subject is more easily conveyed in lyric or meditative texts” (Richardson, “Plural Focalization” 150). The ambiguous, fluctuating, permeable nature of the plural voice, which seems to better benefit genres other than the novel, is responsible for the resistance and skepticism it causes. In *Vor dem Fest*, the fluctuations in the plural “we” are sustained by the playfulness of the voice. The authorial “we” becomes an exuberant voice that does not behave like an authorial first-person voice, but rather shifts throughout the narrative, destabilizing the reader.

Even though we-narratives may have a long tradition, narrative theories have neglected them for a long time.¹¹ The lack of attention towards this kind of narrative lies in part in the fact that narration is generally conceived as a personal, individual activity, which is traced back to one or two speakers, but seldom to a group or crowd. In her essay on we-narrative, Natalya Bekhta summarizes one of the rules that define narratology: “The act of storytelling, if one comes to think of it in terms of its production, is an exclusively singular activity” (16). This idea was dominant until the early nineties and Richardson claims that, with the exception of a few studies that looked at the plural voice (Morrison, Lanser, Woller, Britton and Margolin), the we-

¹¹ In “*Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*,” Brian Richardson summarizes the story of we-narration. For Richardson, Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1899), a work in which the we-narration is combined with a multipersonal narration, constitutes the origin of we-narration (37). Among the examples of we-narratives in German-speaking literature is Elfriede Jelinek’s *Wolken.Heim*, which employs the “wir” from the very beginning: “Das glauben wir immer, wir wären ganz außerhalb. Und dann stehen wir plötzlich in der Mitte” (9). *Der Zauberberg* uses an omniscient narrator, who accompanies the reader from the very first page: “Die Geschichte Hans Castorps, die wir erzählen wollen [. . .]” (9).

voice “was essentially unrecognized until 1992” (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 37). In recent discussions of narrative voice, the plural voice is interpreted in terms of the possibilities it achieves. Margolin and Fludernik define we-narrative as “a narrative in which a collective narrative agent occupies the protagonist role, i.e. the first-person plural narratorial pronoun comes to ‘operate both on the level of discourse and on that of the story’” (Bektha 18).¹² Not only does the plural voice tell the story, but it also plays a key role in the story itself. Ultimately, a we-narrative becomes the story of the “we,” of the ways it is narratively constructed and expressed in the act of narrating. In line with Margolin and Fludernik’s definition, the we-voice in *Vor dem Fest* does not only talk in the plural, but also encourages reflection on the ways in which the plurality of the village comes to life. Plurality characterizes both the content of a narrative and the way a story is told, and both of these aspects are central to my analysis of Stanišić’s work.

Richardson’s own study, published in 2006, aims at expanding the possibilities of narrative voice, including multipersoned and unnatural narratives. In his definition,

“We” may represent an intimate or a vast group, and its composition may - and usually does - change during the course of the fiction. [Further,] [t]he “we” form also raises interesting issues concerning reliability: insofar as it is a subjective form, it is enmeshed in issues of reliability and discordance, but these are issues that are potentially different from those in first person singular narratives since they may involve more accurate intersubjective beliefs as well as communal

¹² In “Telling in the Plural: From Grammar to Ideology,” Uri Margolin lays out the three main features of collective narratives: 1) “the argument position [. . .] is occupied by an expression designating a group”; 2) the predicates “designate the group’s holistic attributes or collective actions”; 3) “the group as such fulfills a range of thematic roles in the narrated sequence” (591). He also describes different types of collective agents, like a collection of individuals, a community, a corporate entity (591).

misprisions or even mass delusions. (38)

The plural aspect of this form of narrative opens up new possibilities that the first-person singular does not present. Because of the unusual form of narration, we-narratives push genre conventions and unsettle the reader's familiarity with first-person stories (Marcus 48). The plurality of the voice can capture communal ideas, misconceptions and delusions and the variable nature of the plural voice may change and subvert the conventions of narration. Marcus also reflects on how philosophical, socio-political and literary norms "hinder, or alternatively, foster the creation of first person plural literary works" (46-47). The "we" has been used to represent, for example, different groups of characters at war, or the opposition of a minority group to the main group and the incommunicability between them. A number of novels use "we" to articulate colonial and postcolonial discourses and mark the delineation between two groups of people. The plural voice often expresses uneasiness or a problematic situation of an oppressed or socially attacked collectivity, such as in the case of Yevgeyn Zamyatin's *We* where the "we" voices the servile condition under the Soviet state (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 43-44). In the light of these considerations, this chapter will also look at the political connotations and nuances of Stanišić's we-voice, reflecting on the groups of people that this plural voice represents and on the larger effects that the creation of a community through narration achieves.

Recent narratological studies attribute new value to voices that may be considered unnatural at first because they "tamper with or destroy outright the 'mimetic contract' that had governed conventional fiction for centuries: no more can one assume that a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being, with all its abilities and limitations" (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 1). Examples that fall within this category are "voices" of animals, which have been recently featured more often in narrative theories to account for all those texts that use

animals as focalizer and narrators and, in so doing, achieve innovative results.¹³ This point will prove relevant for my discussion of *Vor dem Fest*, in which a female fox roams through the night and is followed by the narrative voice, which describes her movements and reads her thoughts. Whereas the fox is not given her own voice, her thoughts are rendered in the third-person singular, overstepping the human-animal boundaries of conventional narratives. Indeed, the voice and thoughts of the fox are the humanized and anthropomorphized thoughts of the narrative voice.¹⁴

In my analysis, I consider the use of “we” as an example of a plural and collective voice that conveys some shared views, while leaving room for individual differences. Following Margolin and Fludernik’s definition I take into account the nature of this plural voice and the way it emerges as a protagonist in the story. Focusing on the discourse level, I discuss the transgressive moves that the “we” makes, crossing over gender and role boundaries, between the diegetic world of the characters and the extra-diegetic world, making the “we” into a shifting instance. What remains to be investigated is the role that this collective voice assumes, the features it possesses, and the way it mingles and interacts with other voices. Ultimately, my analysis shows how the we-form fulfills the project of the novel: the continuation of storytelling despite the moments of rupture described at the outset of the narrative and the representation of a community, which receives a new voice in the aftermath of the main storyteller’s death.

¹³ Some studies that expand their focus to include unconventional forms of narration include: Fludernik’s “Naturalizing the Unnatural” and Grewe-Volpp and Zemanek’s *Mensch – Maschine – Materie – Tier: Entwürfe posthumaner Interaktionen. The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* includes nonhuman narrators as examples of literary experimentation in the section “Unnatural Narrators,” 353-67.

¹⁴ In discussing the possible understanding of animals by humans, the American philosopher Thomas Nagel maintains, for example, that the human narrator can only achieve “a schematic conception of what it is like” to be a bat (qtd. in Grewe-Volpp and Zemanek 78).

Who is “We”?

The epigraph that opens the novel, a quotation taken from The Streets’ song *On the Edge of a Cliff*, introduces the key idea: continuation of life relies on transmitted knowledge and shared experiences. The epigraph reads:

For billions of years since the outset of time
 Every single one of your ancestors has survived
 Every single person on your mum and dad’s side
 Successfully looked after and passed on to you life.
 What are the chances of that like? (V 7)

The “ancestors” who “[s]uccessfully looked after and passed on to you life” (V 7) embody the leitmotif of the novel, the idea that life continues thanks to stories and traditions that connect the past with the present. The “you” addressed in the stanza carries in him- or herself the multiple voices from the past that have merged into the person he or she is today.

After this initial epigraph, the very first word of the novel is “Wir” (V 11). From this prominent position, the plural pronoun sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, which spins the stories and memories of this community. The “wir” is never clearly defined or explained in the novel and the unspecified referent of the pronoun makes its use all the more interesting. In fact, several chapters begin with the expression “Wir sind [. . .],” highlighting the communal voice of the village, which is held together by the identity and the emotions these people share. And yet, the repeated use of this pronoun raises a number of questions. Who is the “we” speaking? Who are the people “hiding” behind this plural voice? And to what extent is the “we” a homogenous voice as the concise nature of the pronoun might suggest?

At the beginning of the novel, the we-voice immediately announces its profound sadness

for the disappearance of the ferryman. And with the same immediacy, the reader starts wondering whether she is part of this plurality or how inclusive this we-voice is. Throughout the novel, the “wir” never explicitly names its identity.¹⁵ The reader is led to believe that the voice includes all the people in the village, but at the same time, this voice seems to have a privileged knowledge with respect to individual figures. More than once, for example, the voice makes no mystery of its higher position and its unlimited access to the life of the people in Fürstenfelde. While everyone is busy preparing for tomorrow’s celebration, indeed, the “we” takes up an elevated pose that playfully adapts the omniscient authorial narrator.¹⁶ Almost mocking the authoritative, plural “we,” this voice registers and comments on everybody and everything within its “radar.” On one occasion, this we-voice states: “Von hier oben, wo wir schweben, sieht es aus, als wirke Herr Schramm Magie” (V 225). While the voice seems to belong to the community, the “hier oben” highlights an elevated position as if the voice were the director of the whole scene, gaining access to events and facts that are obscured to the other figures. But the use of the word “schweben” suggests that this voice is speaking from a physically unusual position, as if it were floating over the half-awake village. This voice may be part of the community, but it never fully appropriates a single identity, which makes it difficult to associate the voice with one specific speaker. And clearly this voice plays with its position and its possibilities. The “we” seems to function as the director of the show that brings different voices

¹⁵ I am referring here to the “we” in the third-person singular to make it clear how the “we” is a collective voice, which does not allow for clear distinctions or identifications within the group. Therefore, while the “we” is clearly a plural pronoun, my reading will address it with the pronouns “it” and “its.”

¹⁶ The novel does not only play with types of voices, but also with the conventions of the narrative concept. By oscillating over the village, the voice playfully challenges the possibility of what Stanzel’s calls auktorialer Erzähler: “Wesentlich für den auktorialen Erzähler ist, daß er als Mittelmann der Geschichte einen Platz sozusagen an der Schwelle zwischen der fiktiven Welt des Romans und der Wirklichkeit des Autors und des Lesers einnimmt” (qtd. in Martínez and Scheffel 90).

on the scene. By prevalently being used at the beginning and end of the chapter-scenes, the “we” frames its role as the controlling agency of the narration. In opening and closing the chapters, this plural narrative voice reiterates its presence as the sleepless, restless voice in this night tale.

The plural voice is an unstable one, which alternates between different emotions and states. Throughout the novel, the “we” becomes “traurig” (V 11), “froh” (V 28), “unbesorgt” (V 54), “besorgt” (V 77), “von Natur aus historisch interessiert” (V 123), “argwöhnisch” (V 179), “etwas überfordert” (V 217), “gerührt” (V 275), and “erschöpft” (V 284). Through these changing emotions, the plural voice aligns itself with the different feelings that the villagers experience during the night. At the same time, this voice absorbs not only their emotions but also their different linguistic features. As a consequence, the voice changes and becomes permeable to the ways of thinking and speaking of the different characters. It adopts the jargon of the figures, imitating – and maybe even mocking – their way of speaking. This act of mimicry can be seen, for example, when the voice appropriates the thoughts of Herr Schramm or Johann, and, in particular, when it takes up the tone and style of Q and Henry, the two young men – possibly the thieves who unsuccessfully try to steal the church bells – that Anna meets while jogging. These two figures, who emerge from nowhere in the night, have a peculiar way of speaking, that is, they only produce utterances that rhyme.¹⁷ When Q and Henry enter the narrative, the language of the voice suddenly shifts to imitate the voice of the young men, even though they are not part of the village. As a consequence, the narrator also uses, for the first and only time in the novel, rhyming sentences: “Und Anna? Kreidebleich. Neugier, Beistand, Assi-Verein – alles könnten die beiden sein in der Nacht, die sie erschuf, die Flügel gefaltet, im Sneaker der Huf? Sie kann es

¹⁷ Q and Henry are the embodiment in the present of the protagonists of one of the historical chronicles narrated in *Vor dem Fest*. The episode, taken from the year 1599, tells the story of the thieves Hinnerk Lievenmaul and Kunibert Schivelbein, who get caught and condemned to death for their misdeeds (V 202-04).

nicht wissen, es geht ihr zu beschissen, ein Urteil zu fällen” (V 107). This rhythmic language, reminiscent of a hip-hop beat, suggests how the plural voice engages in a conversation with the figures that populate the narration and, at the same time, mimics them. The voice appropriates the comic mode and the slang of the young men, the grumpy tone characteristic of Herr Schramm, or Johann’s teenager expressions and ideas, signaled by changes between linguistic registers in the narration. For example, when a chapter opens saying: “Johann knallt die Tür zu. Hat es zu Hause nicht ausgehalten, Mu guckt wieder ihre Serie, und als er meinte, um Mitternacht muss er raus, Glocken läuten, ist sie ein bisschen ausgetickt” (V 48). The affectionate tone enclosed in the word “Mu” and the description of the mother’s behavior reflects the way of speaking of the young Johann. And yet, while the voice can imitate the style and language of the characters, it ultimately never renounces its plurality and goes back to the more “neutral” style of the “we,” which it uses for most of the storytelling. By never completely dismissing the “we,” the narrative does not allow a single speaker to seize total control, preserving the aspect of plurality.

A certain level of theatricality and staging characterizes the function of the voice. For instance, when the voice introduces the chronicles from the past, it acquires a different language and a style that imitates the historical voice. In the shortest of the chronicles included in the novel, the narrative voice says: “Im Jar 1618, den neunzehnden Maii, wurden allhier sechs Sonnen am Himmel gesehen” (V 199). The use of a writing style that clearly marks the difference with the rest of the novel and the topic of the fantastic and the marvelous set the tone for the historical account and, possibly, the parody of the historical chronicler. The conciseness of this account, which emphasizes the incredible event, reinforces the humoristic take on the history of this community. The plural “we” performs a quantitative, as well as a qualitative

plurality and does so by mimicking – and possibly parodying—the different voices. The “we” becomes a “Stimmenimitator,” who, oscillating between realism and mimicry, appropriates the most distinctive features of the characters’ voices and brings them to life in the novel.¹⁸

The “wir” functions as an umbrella for the different voices that resonate in the village. It manages to include, without singling out; to represent, without detailing too much. At the same time, however, it can also subtly exclude, without explicitly revealing this specific move, even though its language may suggest it. In *Vor dem Fest*, this “wir” accompanies the reader throughout the novel and only stops to leave room for one first-person voice, that of Johann. Frau Schwermuth’s son is the only figure that narrates directly using the expressions in the first-person singular, as he does in the chapter that opens with “Meine Mu wiegt doppelt so viel wie mein Pa” (V 130). Other figures are used as focalizer of the action, so that the reader gets mediated access to their thoughts and emotions through the narrator. But with Johann, the narration aligns in an unmediated way with the language and thoughts of this 16-year-old boy. This only happens once in the novel, but the use of the first-person singular extends for the whole chapter, which portrays Johann’s relationship with his mother, her role in the heritage museum and her importance for the community of Fürstenfelde. The reader may think that Johann could be the person controlling the multiple voices of this plural narrative, slipping into the singular on one occasion. It never becomes clear why Johann is granted the opportunity to speak in the first-person, but the narrator seems to follow with special interest the events in the life of this young boy, who has high ambitions and a strong attachment to Fürstenfelde. This

¹⁸ In his article for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Lothar Müller reflects on the versatility of the voice and writes: “Dieses ‘Wir’ ist anonym und sehr geräumig, es ist die Stimme des Dorfes selbst, ein Chor, den es aus der Bühne in die Prosa verschlagen hat, ein vielstimmiges Wesen, das schon viel gesehen hat. Manchmal ist es jahrhundertealt, manchmal so aktuell wie das Fernsehen und der Lokalanzeiger” (“Wir fahren übern See”).

preference for Johann may be explained if one considers that he represents the continuation of Fürstenfelde, the new bell ringer that carries on the tradition of the community and can also represent the perpetuation of storytelling. While Anna, another younger member of the community, decides to leave, creating a potential new rupture, continuation is ensured through the figure that will remain in the village and narrate the story of its inhabitants. Johann comes to represent the youthful extension of the narrative voice, which, in part, explains why he has the privilege of adopting the first-person to narrate episodes about his family.

The Function of the “du”: Protagonist or Addressee?

While the majority of the narrative is spoken in the we-voice, combined with first- and third-person to refer to specific characters and figures, a “you” is used as addressee throughout the novel—with the exception of the chronicle fictions where there is no direct form of address. The attempt to describe this second-person addressee proves slippery, to say the least. While the second-person pronoun singular is sometimes employed in the novel in direct dialogue between characters, this conventional use of the pronoun is not the most interesting one. My reflections focus, instead, on the form of the “you” that is addressed without being defined, or that is clarified but also bound to change shortly afterwards, and whose belonging to the diegetic world does not completely exclude the possibility that it may also be an “implied reader.” What is striking about this addressee is the informality with which it is referred to. The narrative voice renounces the distance that the formal address “Sie” would allow for, and rather opts for the informality of the “du,” which, to some extent, bridges the gap between storyteller and listener.

The “du” emerges from the very beginning of the narrative when, after mentioning the death of the ferryman, the “we” states: “Zu den Inseln gelangst *du* jetzt, wenn *du* ein Boot hast.

Oder wenn *du* ein Boot bist. Oder *du* schwimmst” (V 11, my emphasis). In this first example, the “*du*” cannot be clearly identified and the ironic tone of the we-voice makes the identification all the more complex. The we-voice knows its way around Fürstenfelde and how it developed after the ferryman has passed away (“Allerdings haben wir den Pfad vernachlässigt,” V 11). This familiarity contrasts with the “*you*,” which is characterized more as a stranger, who does not directly take part in the activities of the plural voice and is not so conversant with the life in Fürstenfelde. The “*you*” can be a boat owner, the boat itself, or rather somebody who is able to swim up to the village. The use of the second-person pronoun alternates with the “*we*,” creating a conversation between the choral voice and the singled out second-person addressee, who, however, never gets to respond.

While the “*you*” addressed in the beginning is open and unspecified, its attributes shift throughout the novel. The referent of the “*you*” seems to extend not only to a person that is not that familiar with Fürstenfelde, but also to an inhabitant of the village: “Kommst du von hier, weißt du so was: der letzte warme Tag” (V 16). This statement addresses somebody who lives in Fürstenfelde, who knows the traditions and the life of the village, and, based on her experience, can tell that summer is coming to an end. The narrative may provide some orientation in terms of the physical belonging of the “*you*,” but it oscillates in terms of gender. In the following example, the “*you*” seems to include both the (young) women and men in the village: “falls du ein Mädchen bist” (V 16) “falls du kein Mädchen bist” (V 16). This addressing in terms of “*Mädchen*” may suggest some information about the speaker, as well. Since this use of the pronoun is inserted in a chapter that focuses on Lada, Suzi and Johann, the “*you*” seems to be aligned with their way of speaking and thinking, showing once more how the voices in *Vor dem Fest* are permeable to different idiolects and reflect them along the way. However, at other

moments in the narrative, the “you” becomes more strictly gender coded, as the use of specific words indicate: “wenn du nach Hause willst, nachdem du den ganzen Tag über die Äcker gegondelt bist und Staub geatmet hast, dann willst du in den Straßen in der Nacht zeigen, dass du das bist: Du bist der Mann, du bist die Landwirtschaft, der Ernährer, unter deinem Tisch stehen alle unsere Füße” (V 171-72). In this example, the “you” signifies only the men, the economic providers of the family as the use of masculine terms such as “der Mann” and “der Ernährer” highlight. The “you” of this example is used in a night image, in which the narrative voice describes an imaginary male figure as he goes back home after working in the fields all day. This gender codification of the “you” starts all of a sudden, marking a strong narrative change. Here, the “you” is part of the male community of Fürstenfelde, which is described as the part of the village that provides for the family and does it so proudly that its role is specified in this form of address.

Other examples leave the nature of the “you” a bit more open, and less gender and role specific. For example, when the we-voice presents Ditzsche and his characteristic pink egg box, which he fills routinely with fresh eggs, it says: “Das ist einer der seltenen Momente, wo du ihn [Ditzsche] draußen sehen kannst” (V 173). Ditzsche’s egg box constitutes one of the elements that the villagers share and the we-voice describes it in some detail: “Manchmal, wenn du zehn große uckermärkische Eier aus der Box nimmst und zwei Euro oder auch mal zwei zwanzig da lässt, hörst du im Innenhof die Hühner gackern” (V 175). The singular use of the “du” here seems to address one of the Fürstenfelder, but at the same time, it can represent the whole village and community. By choosing to adopt the second-person, the plural voice creates a closer connection to the addressee, one that is more intimate than the impersonal pronoun “man” would be.

There is one clearer indication that the “you” may represent the personification of the whole village. It appears in an episode that describes the various changes in the community. Anna is almost ready to leave Fürstenfelde and the house of the carpenter also needs to be emptied since he passed away several months before. The we-voice maintains: “weil wenn es um unseren Tischler geht, der dem halben Dorf die Schlafstube ausgekleidet hat, dann kommst *du als Dorf* nicht gleich und entkleidest seine Schlafstube” (262, my emphasis). This form of the “you” suggests that the whole village is being included in this exchange between the “we” and the “you.” One could say that the addressee stands for the communal identity of the village, for the shared behaviors and attitudes that characterize this community in the Uckermark.

In some instances, the indefinite nature of the pronoun is completely abandoned, and the “you” refers to one specific character in the narrative. This happens, for example, when the plural voice speaks directly to Anna, who plays a major role in the novel: “Komm, wir nehmen dich mit. Zu deiner Namensvetterin, zu den Menschen, zum Tier” (V 32). By using the “du” and inviting her to follow the plural voice during its wandering through the night, the plural voice creates an intimate connection to the character, whom it guides during her last days in the village.

Sometimes the “you” takes up a very different function and becomes the form of self-address that a character uses in his or her musings. On these occasions, a character reflects in the form of an interior monologue, what Richardson calls “memory monologue,” in his discussion of second-person narratives (*Unnatural Voices* 25). For example, this is the case when Herr Schramm is thinking about his past and his thoughts are rendered in the form of an interior monologue, which allows the reader to zoom in and out, between the third-person description of the character and the self-address in the second-person singular: “Herr Schramm hat protestiert,

aber was willst du machen?" (V 183). Thinking about his time as a lieutenant colonel, Herr Schramm seems to ask this question in the you-form. Once again, the "you" acquires a very concrete reference, but at the same time never completely dismisses the possibility of representing a more general "you," which the character could also be employing as the addressee of his thoughts.

In two peculiar instances, the "you" becomes the addressee of a "how to" speech. The peculiar use of the you-form makes these two examples stand out in the novel. Richardson calls this form of second-person narration "hypothetical form," which uses "the style of the user's manual or self-help guide" (*Unnatural Voices* 29). The two examples are very different in terms of content, but their similarity in style makes a joint discussion relevant. The first example uses a "du"-form to address an unidentified second-person and instructs it on how to build the perfect coop for chickens: "Bevor du ein Hühnergehege baust, informiere dich über Hühner und über Füchse gleichermassen. Kenne die Triebe vom Huhn und die Geschichten vom Fuchs" (V 192). After this opening remark, the chapter includes the story of Heinz Durden, the last mayor of Fürstenfelde before the reunification, and his fight over the years with Ditzsche because of his failed attempt to keep chickens safe from wild animals. A refrain-like sentence comes back several times in this section: "Wenn du ein Hühnergehege baust," followed by practical advice (V 192-98). Even if the "du" is not specified, the gender of the people involved in the story – Ditzsche and Durden – suggests that the "you" is a male person from Fürstenfelde or any other rural community, who may sooner or later engage in the building of a coop and therefore, should take into consideration the recommendations listed here. The second, puzzling section in the imperative also addresses a second-person singular, but this time, incites it to be heroic. For this reason, it reads like an ode to be brave in trying, thinking, doing, judging,

questioning and other situations. The incitation, almost incantation, “Sei heldisch” comes back ten times in this ode-like passage, never revealing who the addressee is (V 211-15). This part of the novel reads like a religious canticle, reminiscent of the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes, in which codes of behavior or conduct are presented to somebody who could be a single person, as well as the whole village. In these speeches, the second in particular, the we-voice takes up a parodistic tone, which plays with advice literature, epic conventions, and a serious tone that counterbalances the more comic moments in the novel.

The “du” could also be the extradiegetic reader or, at the very least, every time the second-person pronoun returns in the narrative, the reader feels addressed and cannot but ask herself what her role is. The use of the “du,” therefore, seems to constantly evoke the possibility of transgressing the boundary between fictional and extradiegetic world. Through an unspecified appeal to the “you,” the novel elicits this kind of transgression in the reader or at least insinuates the doubt that she is the returning address of the “we,” who, at the same time, is a character in the narrative and an observer of the events. The “du” includes a character in the diegesis, an imaginary addressee, and the reader of the novel, leaving the space between these figures open to uncertainty.

Vor dem Fest is not a second-person narrative in the sense that Brian Richardson and Monika Fludernik understand it, that is, “any narration other than an apostrophe that designates its protagonist by a second-person pronoun. This protagonist will usually be the sole focalizer, and is often (but not always) the work’s principal narratee as well” (*Unnatural Voices* 19). And yet, even though the “you” does not play the role of the protagonist in the novel, it is nonetheless a constant presence to which the we-voice turns in an imaginary dialogue that never gets an answer. Similarly to the we-voice, the “you” has the characteristic of being a changing

addressee, which acquires a different function and new characteristics as soon as the referent shifts. At the same time, the use of the “you” in the continuous alternation between different voices reinforces the performative quality to the novel. *Vor dem Fest* performs narratively the same forms of storytelling that it describes. The “you” becomes one of the voices that constitute the choir in Fürstenfelde, which comments on the main actions and figures in the village. The “we” functions as the leading voice in this choir, while the “you” remains a quiet receiver of this night tale. Ultimately, it is the we-voice that continues the narration but the act of storytelling requires a listener, albeit a silent one.

Communal Storytelling: The Present of Fürstenfelde

The crisis of storytelling is not a phenomenon new to the German literature, but *Vor dem Fest* combines the element of mourning for the end of traditional narration with the welcoming of a new mode of storytelling. In his 1936 essay “Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows,” Walter Benjamin lists two categories of traditional storytellers: the “handeltreibende[. . .] Seemann” and the “seßhafte[. . .] Ackerbauer,” whose narrating skills later became even higher in the “Handwerksstand” (GS II.2, 440).¹⁹ By tracing the development of storytelling through these social types, Benjamin explains how the traditional act of narrating came into place and how stories were passed down orally. These reflections frame Benjamin’s lament about the end of storytelling as a consequence of new forms of communication. Benjamin acknowledges that “es mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht. Immer seltener wird die Begegnung mit Leuten, welche rechtschaffen etwas erzählen können” (GS II.2, 439). According

¹⁹ Benjamin’s quotations are taken from the *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 vols. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972-99). Indications of the volume, its part, and the page numbers are inserted in the text following the abbreviation “GS.”

to Benjamin, storytelling is dying because wisdom—the art of providing counseling beyond the precise moment but rather for life—is disappearing. Benjamin relates the death of storytelling to the rise of the novel, which has slowly supplanted other forms of oral storytelling. Before the genre of the novel became popular, stories were passed down orally when “gewebt und gesponnen wird” (GS II.2, 447), activities that allowed for self-forgetfulness, which constitutes the ideal condition for memorization and repetition. With this nostalgia towards traditional activities and forms of storytelling, Benjamin mourns the advent of modernity and the consequent death of oral culture in favor of its written counterpart, best represented in the novel, short story and the news article.

Almost a century later, Stanišić sets at the beginning of his novel the death of a storyteller who, in some regards, is reminiscent of Benjamin’s traditional storytellers. Similarly to Benjamin’s seaman, the ferryman from Fürstenfelde knew good stories, which he brought back not from afar, but from transporting people from one bank of the lake to the other. At the same time, like the tiller of the soil, he served his community, knew his land and people, and shared stories about the present and past of the village, passing both these elements on to the fellow villagers. Combining his nomadic and sedentary qualities, the ferryman had the gift of inventing the stories for the community, keeping the spark of storytelling alive. The corpulent ferryman, who enjoyed drinking and narrating while transporting the people across waters, replaces Scheherazade, the muse-like storyteller per excellence. But in the way he is described, the ferryman reminds more of a Charon figure.²⁰ His death and the liminal state between death

²⁰ Charon transports the souls of newly deceased people between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The ferryman, instead, transports the people of Fürstenfelde between the lake and the land, and besides doing that he lulls them in his stories. In one of the flashbacks narrated, the ferryman also interacts with what resembles a personification of death, when he encounters a “Kerlchen,” which has features of both devil and death. Differently from Charon, who always

and life prompt a new act of narration. As Benjamin claims, death brings about the necessity or desire to narrate within the community.²¹ Stanišić's narrative bemoans the end of storytelling and it shows how narration is still possible once the master storyteller has passed away. The novel prompts a metareflection on the act of storytelling, its possible end and its struggle for continuation. It explores the possibility of collective storytelling via the we-voice in a modern novel, at a time in which a traditional voice has ceased to speak. Once the ferryman is dead, the "we" takes up his role and continues to narrate. The mediating function of the ferryman gets transferred onto the "we," which becomes the intermediary between the intradiegetic narrators depicted in the novel. Indeed, one feature of the "we" is its changing nature, which comes to signify different groups of speakers and tellers in the novel. These are not only coded differently in terms of gender, but also in terms of space. Different voices occupy different environments, and these are in turn reflected in the tone and language adapted by the shifting "we."

One of the forms that this communal storytelling takes is a circle of "storytellers" that regularly meets in Ulli's garage, which, thanks to "einen Vorhang aus rot-gelbem Tüll vor das einzige Fenster [. . .] und einen Kalender mit Polinnen, die an Motorrädern lehnen" (V 19), has turned into a meeting point for the men of Fürstenfelde. The men come together in Ulli's garage to drink, watch soccer, and exchange stories and lies. In this circle of male, half-drunk storytellers, the flow of alcohol and words creates a sense of communion. The "we" seems to be part of this ritual and renders it colorfully in its narration ("Wir trinken in Ullis Garage" V 19).

required a money compensation for the ride, the ferryman only asks for stories: "[er] verlangte von manchem Ortsfremden statt Talern Geschichten zum Lohn, und die gab er im Dorfkrug an seine Fürstenfelder weiter" (V 95).

²¹ Readers of novels, in particular, are attracted to the novel because it narrates of death and lets them experience death. As Benjamin states: "Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen. Mit andern Worten: es ist die Naturgeschichte, auf welche seine Geschichten zurückverweisen" (GS I.2, 369).

In the episode described by the plural voice, it is Imboden's turn to tell his story: "Jeder kann bei Ulli eine Geschichte von früher erzählen, meistens hören die anderen zu. Imboden ist vom Pissen zurückgekommen, und Imboden hat erzählt" (V 21). The tone, style and wording of this statement are in line with the environment in which it is uttered. Here the topics of the stories recounted vary and everybody is welcome to speak up and share his tale. Imboden, for example, tells his memories of an *Annenfest* which took place in the sixties, when he first met Fräulein Zieschke. Usually the men in Ulli's garage listen carefully to the person who is narrating and they particularly enjoy stories to which they can also contribute. The narration of these stories becomes a communal, bonding moment for the men, who interact and interpolate the narration of the storyteller, especially when they are familiar with the figures and the events. As the narrator remarks: it is surprising "wie leicht die Garage abgelenkt wird, wenn in einer Geschichte jemand vorkommt, über den sie was weiß" (V 58). The garage loves to interact and ask questions, and these moments of storytelling usually create a sense of shared memories. The stories also become an autopoietic moment: storytelling is carried on and generates in turn new stories that have the purpose of continuing the existence of the community. Ultimately, the village consists of the stories it recounts and is kept alive through its own storytelling.

The men of Fürstenfelde undoubtedly have the strongest voice. Indeed, while the "we" takes parts in the stories told in Ulli's garage, it is only the receiver of the stories told by Frau Schwermuth and Frau Kranz. The voice of the women is quite distinct and separate from that of men. Even though the female figures of Fürstenfelde do not contribute to the stories told in the garage, they are also eager tellers and consumers of stories. Frau Ana Kranz, for example, has in her disposition "ein beinah körperliches Verlangen nach alten Geschichten" (V 101), stimulated by her personal history as a refugee, which she visually translates in her paintings. Frau

Schweremuth, the archivist with a voracious passion for history and an incredible knowledge of Fürstenfelde, lives for and through the stories she reads. At times she gets so involved in these stories that she confuses “fiction” with “reality.” This happens, for example, when she believes that Anna will betray the village and therefore threatens her with a gun. While Herr Schramm tries to calm her down, she deliriously explains: “Das Mädchen wird uns verraten! [. . .] Sie muss unser Versteck verraten, Fürstenfelde wird geplündert, niemand überlebt! Sperren wir sie weg, überleben wir! Hilf mir, Lutz, sonst bist du gleich als Erster dran! So steht’s geschrieben, jedes Kind weiß das!” (V 218). Frau Schweremuth suffers from delusions caused by her stories or the stories that she reads in the archive she manages. She is aware of this, but nonetheless these stories seem to cure her in ways that the medicines she took against her depression could not: “Die Geschichten seien es. Die machten sie wach, wo die Medikamente sie müde machten und fett. Die aber hielten die Geschichten unter dem Deckel. Die Geschichten und jene, die sie bevölkern” (V 240). Frau Schweremuth finds a refuge in these intradiegetic worlds, lingering in the past of these stories to escape the present of her depression—“Mu lenkt sich mit der Vergangenheit von der Gegenwart ab,” Johann remarks (V 132). Whether out of desire or necessity, the figures of Fürstenfelde long to listen or tell and retell these stories.

Other minor female figures become storytellers in Fürstenfelde, but their act of narration also functions as a solitary gesture. Britta Hansen, the astrologer of the village, for example, translates her predictions into stories for the community. Her horoscope loops on the television that stands in the *Haus der Heimat*. The language that Britta Hansen uses to interpret the star configurations also belongs to the world of storytelling: “Stellen Sie sich vor, jedes Zeichen erzählt eine Geschichte. Sie sind der Held oder die Heldin dieser Erzählung und durchwandern die Zeichen” (V 160). Her activity as astrologist becomes a process of translation of signs into

language, which makes the stories of the universe accessible to the people in Fürstenfelde. On the Friday before the narration starts, Britta announces the following horoscope for the Cancer sign: “Das Wochenende wird dynamisch, schnell und hitzig. Der Sonnabend startet verwirrt. Falls Sie an Schlaflosigkeit leiden, stellen Sie sich ein auf eine schlaflose Nacht. Geben Sie alles, und Sie werden Sinn entdecken” (V 162). In these sleepless hours, all the different voices come together in what really seems a confused (“verwirrt”) night. But by paying close attention to the different voices, even the most confused listener can learn something (“Sinn entdecken”).

When the traditional storyteller ceases to speak, new voices can emerge in the night. And yet, storytelling remains differently coded for men and women. For the men, narrating becomes a moment of sharing and bonding. For the women, it is a solitary gesture to either represent the community or to cope with everyday reality. While for the women it is a therapeutic way to indirectly come to terms with themselves, for the men it is a moment to share and to find consent within the male community of Fürstenfelde. In spite of the apparent cohesive nature of the “we,” the choral voices allow for different nuances to emerge in this night tale. Indeed, the plural “we” brings together several voices in the novel and, at the same time, highlights the differences among them. In the silence of the night, narration can continue, and the attentive listener can discern the different tones in this colorful choir of speakers.

Voices from the Past: Chronicling the Village

While the present of the community takes the form of a plural we-voice, the past of Fürstenfelde also intervenes to enrich the narration in different forms. One of the characteristic chapter openings in the we-voice manifests the narrator’s historical interest: “Wir sind von Natur aus historisch interessiert. Wer an uns historisch interessiert ist, besucht das Haus der Heimat”

(V 123). Indeed, the village's compulsion to collect and narrate stories from the past is embodied in the *Haus der Heimat*, the heritage museum in Fürstenfelde. This place treasures the stories and chronicles of the village, which are proudly showcased to the visitors and tourists. Despite the rural location of Fürstenfelde, Frau Schwermuth insisted on having an electronic lock on the door of the archive to prevent these precious materials from being stolen—or from disappearing from the community. When, on the night before the *Annenfest*, Frau Schwermuth and Herr Schramm enter the archive, in which a window was broken during an attempted theft, the reader is introduced to rooms full of books, booklets, papers, and parchments. It is at this point that the we-voice affirms: “Das Leder an den Wänden schimmert und rührt sich. Eine Haut aus Geschichten ist das, die uns wächst” (V 241). The leather on the walls flickers and moves, and a connection is immediately established to the skin of the people in Fürstenfelde. A skin of stories grows on them and comes to define the identity of the village. The association between the skin of people and the walls of the heritage museum becomes even more meaningful when one considers how the community embodies the tension between the necessity to archive the past and the desire to open it up, to display it, and narrate it. This desire for openness is also accompanied by the fear that, when shared, stories may escape: “Wenn bei uns irgendwo ein Fenster eingeschlagen wird und offen steht, dann haben wir mehr Angst vor dem, was entkommen sein könnte, als vor dem, der vielleicht eingestiegen ist” (V 163). The window of the archive that is broken in the night before the *Annenfest* symbolizes a wound to the skin of the community, which immediately fears that something may happen to their stories, traditions and the materials treasured in the museum. And yet, the burglary is not perceived so much as an intrusion, but rather as an opportunity for the past to flee—and to enter the narrative.

These stories from the past are introduced by a very short chapter, which anticipates the

mingling of present, past and future. The narrative voice announces: “Die Nacht trägt heute drei Livreen: Was War, Was Ist, Was Wird Geschehen” (V 64). The three different cloaks in which the night is wrapped represent the past, present and future, the three directions in which the stories told in the novel move. While the present of the community is the central moment, and the gaze towards the endangered future of Fürstenfelde is a recurring theme in the novel, the past constantly interrupts these two temporal dimensions. Tales of local history are inserted into the novel to carry out the narrative project, which, in part, aims to tell the region’s history by playfully using and adapting historical sources, as well as fictional genres, all brought together through the mimicry of the chronicler’s voice.

The act of narrating that shapes the novel goes hand in hand with the process of remembering and an almost frantic desire to tell stories. Stories seize the characters, who suddenly feel a compulsion to narrate, and this desire opens up new narrative worlds in the novel. Even Herr Schramm, who “liest nicht so gern” (V 241), becomes a storyteller for Anna, when the two accidentally meet on the road in Fürstenfelde. Anna is enjoying her last jog in her home village, while Herr Schramm is debating whether he should use his gun to commit suicide or destroy a cigarette dispenser. Anna prevents a possible tragedy. The two start talking and Herr Schramm shares episodes from his time as a soldier. When Anna asks him: “Geht es Ihnen heute Nacht auch so, dass Sie ständig Erinnerungen haben?,” Herr Schramm replies: “Ich [. . .] habe ständig ständig Erinnerungen” (V 185). Herr Schramm, like Frau Schwermuth and Frau Kranz, seems to be anchored in a past that keeps coming back, in part to isolate and in part to protect him from his present. As if to reinforce his need to escape into a world of stories, he suddenly announces to Anna: “Märchenstunde” (V 186), leading into one of the most remarkable insertions in the novel. In this digression (see fig. 3), like many others, it is not clear who the

narrative voice is.²²

DER RING DES KESSELFICKERS

Etwas einmal, namens Jochim
 Ein alter Kesselflicker ~~der in Schramm~~
~~seiner~~ ~~Zuhause~~ hatte. ~~Es~~ ~~war~~ ~~ein~~ ~~armes~~ ~~Paar~~,
 das außer einen kleinen Kessel
 nicht viel besaß: einen Kessel zum
 Kochen, einen Teller für das Essen,
 und um darauf mit seinem Köpf
 Klutik zu machen, dazu zwei Wämbe
 zum Wechseln und einen altes-
 tümlichen Zylinderhut, den er auch
 im Schlaf auf dem Kopf trug. Die
 Leute bezeichneten den Kesselflicker
 mit ~~aprob~~ ~~um~~, wie das oft der Fall ist
 wenn einer mit sich selbst und seines
 Kopfbedeckung ~~habe~~ ~~spricht~~ ~~als~~ ~~mit~~
~~seiner~~ ~~gleichem~~ ~~!~~ ~~an~~ ~~dem~~ ~~Kieser~~
~~Das~~ ~~Kesselflicker~~ holte eines Tages vom ~~Gemeinde~~ ~~hoff~~ trockene Äste,
 um sich für den Winter mit etwas Brennholz zu versorgen.
 Es ~~hieß~~ ~~den~~ ~~Finow~~, ~~was~~ ~~das~~ ~~ves-~~
 wildeste ~~old~~ ~~am~~ ~~Geherschen~~ ~~Gehöft~~
~~ab~~, ~~und~~ ~~wie~~ ~~er~~ ~~sich~~ ~~unter~~ ~~der~~
~~Eiche~~ ~~ausst~~, ~~ist~~ ~~es~~ ~~so~~, ~~als~~ ~~st~~: ~~je~~
~~Kesselflicker~~ ~~die~~ ~~dort~~ ~~ab~~ ~~geh~~ ~~haben~~ ~~müch~~ ~~hat~~.
 ihm ein ~~zwei~~ ~~g~~ ~~den~~ ~~Zylinderhut~~ ~~von~~
 Kopf. So ~~er~~ ~~ihm~~ ~~würde~~ ~~auf~~ ~~hebt~~,

Figure. 3. The first page of the fairy tale “Der Ring des Kesselflickers,” inserted in the novel (V 187).

This fairy tale strikes the reader both from a narrative and visual point of view. First of all, it is the only text inserted in the novel to carry a title, “Der Ring des Kesselflickers” (V 187).²³ This

²² When the conversation between Herr Schramm and Anna resumes several pages later, there is no reference to this fairy-tale anymore. In an interview with Wolfgang Tischer from *literaturcafe.de*, Stanišić comments on this fairy-tale and its form as a manuscript. He states that the calligraphy is that of a woman because, in the fiction of the novel, this is Frau Schwermuth’s story, and the graphic alterations reflect her changes to the original fairy-tale. Despite this statement by the author, the way in which the story is built into the narrative, right after Herr Schramm’s word “Märchenstunde,” seems to suggest that the voice telling this story is that of Herr Schramm, rather than Frau Schwermuth.

²³ As an annotation at the end of the expanded e-version of the novel reads, “Das Märchen *Der Ring des Kesselflickers* findet sich im Band ‘Die rote Feuerkugel – Sagen aus der Uckermark’, 2009 im Schibri-Verlag erschienen. In Teilen freie Bearbeitung der Quelle durch Saša Stanišić. [sic]” (318).

fairy-tale, which is also Frau Schwermuth's favorite story, tells the adventures of a tinker, who, after finding a gold ring in an apple, becomes invisible and can finally avenge himself on the people who mistreated him in the past. This manuscript-like text, which graphically stands out from the rest of the novel, contains hand-written annotations that reveal the editing of the originally typed text. This remarkable visual choice proves all the more interesting when one considers how the editing changes the printed text. The first of these changes calls attention to the genre of the text. Indeed, through the insertion of the phrase "Es war einmal" at the very beginning of the story, the text reads like a fairy tale (V 187). This reinforces the project of the novel, setting the tone for a narrative that brings together present and past, historical and fictional events, as well as fabulous and magical elements. The second edit is the erasure of the original topography—"in Schönemark"—to allow the events to play "in Fürstenfelde" (V 187). This geographical change turns the fairy tale, with its traditional indefinite location, into a regional tale of the village. Finally, as the struck-through text still reveals, the new version of the fairy tale allows the flicker to get his revenge instead of just disappearing unnoticed from the village. By retelling this fairy tale, the narrative voice manages to reinvent, change and complicate the original story, highlighting the transformative power of storytelling.

This fairy tale is only one of the many narrative digressions that bring voices from a remote past into the novel. More than 20 historical stories set in Fürstenfelde mingle with the main narrative, which takes place at the time of the *Annenfest*. The use of the *Präteritum* clearly marks a contrast with the narration in the present and sets them aside from the main narrative. These stories clearly state the year in which they took place, providing temporal orientation for the events. Listing this detail at their very beginning, they already establish the tone of chronicles, to which the style of the narrative also contributes. The richness of detail, in terms of

characters and events, also seems to obey the desire for historical realism. At the same time, due to their brevity and incisiveness, some of these stories read as if they were accounts with a moral, in the style of short parables.

These stories do not share a common structure, and in their form of short chapters, they tell significant anecdotes from the past. These episodes remain confined within the chapters, without ever being mentioned or referred to afterwards in the narrative. The formal connections among these stories consist in the use of the past tense, a precise temporal setting and the narration of some unexpected event. The stories also often end with a strong conclusion that highlights their exemplarity, both in terms of behaviors and moral lessons that can be learnt. These conclusions make these stories stand out from the rest of the novel and, at the same time, make them memorable for the reader. Sometimes they even end with invocations like “O deß unergründlichen Gottes Barmherzigkeit” (V 159) or “O ein mächtiger und schrecklicher Gott! O dummer, dummer Mensch” (V 181), which adds an even more emphatic, fatalist tone to the narrative. This tone is clearly different from the one used by the we-voice, thus highlighting how these stories represent a different kind of narrative.

Some of these stories display a clear connection with the present of the community, as they took place during different *Annenfeste* over the centuries. Others are only thematically related and seem to be evoked mostly through aesthetic associations. These associations consist mainly of thematic affinities, motives that emerge at the end of one story and come back at the beginning of the next one. For example, the chapter in which Anna is jogging and taking in her fields one last time before leaving ends with the hint that this field may “have killed” throughout the centuries and may contain human remains. The chapter closes with the suspenseful line: “Anna will es nicht wissen” (V 81). Quite fittingly, the chapter that follows describes the

“Nachweis von Funden zweier Aussergewöhnlicher Geweihe an Lokalitäten nahe dem uckermärkschen Fürstenfelde,” with reference to the mysterious discovery of antlers and bones in 1849 (V 82). While this story may read, at first, as a pure digression, the leitmotif of the remains creates a segue between the chapters and connects present and past events.

All these stories show a connection to the life of the community, but also add an unexpected twist to it. The characters that populate these stories are the older inhabitants of the village, like Popo von Blankenburg and Bruno Brendenkamp, whose names stand for the history of Fürstenfelde. Other figures include the innkeeper of the village (*Krüger*), the chairwoman of the community (*Schulzin*), a tightrope walker (*Seiltänzer*), thieves, a tinker, all characters that seem to emerge from a fairy-tale like world. These stories also share some kind of sensationalism and often narrate fascinating or extraordinary events, which took place in Fürstenfelde or in its proximity over the centuries. At the same time, they make extensive use of gruesome elements and often contain accounts of violence, death and macabre details. These stories mix popular beliefs with more or less fantastic events and introduce figures such as a wonder piglet, an innkeeper who tricks his guests by mixing water into beer, a mysterious Chinese who gets killed; or events like the appearance of enormous quantities of food that suddenly disappear; the killing of a child, and the arrival of a mysterious ship full of mentally deranged people. Some of these stories are particularly gruesome, reminiscent of fairy-tales collected and written by the Grimm Brothers. These extraordinary tales, however, are turned into chronicles and rendered in the form of accounts by pseudo-historical figures. A case in point is the story of a little girl, who in 1807 died because of her “Wolfshunger” (V 228). The twelve-year-old girl grew so hungry that no food could sate her appetite. At the same time, however, nothing would remain in her stomach. Once she was deprived of food to see if this would help, the girl bit her arm and hand and ate her

own flesh. The girl managed to survive and only died a few days later after craving a particular type of apple that her father was not able to find. This chronicle, which is reported according to the account of Michael Harthsilber, traveling barber, wound-healer and dentist, is one of the most graphic and extreme stories narrated in the novel. It comes unexpectedly and remains an isolated episode among the other stories. This example combines the gruesome realism of the historical description, which seems to originate from a diary, with the extraordinary event it narrates. It mingles history and fiction, fantastic elements with a somber tone, showing how historical events are transformed into sensational stories, encouraging the reader not to stop at the first layer of this narrative.²⁴

The language of these stories, which is modeled on older forms of German, constitutes another distinguishing feature. The Baroque German singles the stories out from the rest of the narrative and adds a new voice to the novel. This voice is much more poetic than in the rest of the narrative and encourages a different reading activity. Every time one of these stories is introduced, it breaks the flow of the main story, bringing it to a halt before returning to it pages or chapters later. A powerful example of how this language works can be found in the first of the chronicles, which reads: “IM JAR 1587 UM OSTERN TRUG SICH ZU, daß deß Müllers Sau allhier beym Pranger am Tiefen See ein Wunderferkel gebar, denn es war zwar dasselbe aller Gestalt nach wie ein Ferkel, hatte aber einen rechten Menschenkopff” (V 70). Not only does the change in tense throw the reader into a world of past events, but the language used also suggests

²⁴ The enhanced edition of the e-book includes an earlier version of this story, based on an original text found in *Philosophical Transactions, Giving Some Accompt of the Present Undertakings, Studies and Labours of the Ingenious in Many Considerable Parts of the World*. In the first version, some differences emerge: the events are set in 1740 rather than 1807; the protagonist is a young boy, not a girl, and has none of the social issues that the final version shows; the child craves strawberries instead of an apple, and the father does not make any attempt to find the desired fruit.

a change in the narrating agent. But while the historical precision clearly marks this as a historical account, the language and content point more towards the realm of fables, myths and legends, infused with talking animals and supernatural creatures. This first story is set in 1587 and narrates the extraordinary adventures of the miller's sow, which gave birth to a wonder piglet, that is, a piglet in all its features except for the human head. After a long discussion, the village agreed that the piglet was the result of a devil's act, the more so when the piglet survived after being thrown into the deep lake. This is a clear example, and it is not the only one in the novel, of how thin the boundary between life and death is and how it is precisely in this seamless threshold that the fascination for storytelling resides. In the present of the narrative, the feast itself represents that moment in which marvel and violence come together. The excitement for the *Annenfest* is accompanied by the joy for destruction and fire: "Wir sind froh, Anna wird verbrannt" (V 28). In this vein, the stories reiterate, in different forms and styles, the same logic that underlies the whole novel: the feast is a moment of terrible joy, in which life and death possibly meet.

It is not clear who the narrator of these stories is, but a strong voice keeps them all together. Sometimes the first-person singular and plural used in these accounts are explained, for example, when the stories are taken from diaries or letters precisely indicated and dated. However, even when a we-form is used, this voice seems very distinct from the other we-form used in the narrative referring to the present of the *Annenfest*. The distance in terms of time and language makes it clear that the voices collected under the plural pronoun are not the same ones that narrate the preparation for the festival. While the "wir" speaks in the present and its memory seems to reach only back to the life of the ferryman and the past of the inhabitants of Fürstenfelde, the "we" of the chronicles uses a very different tone and style. This exaggerated,

parodistic use of language by the plural voice brings the style of the past back into the present of Fürstenfelde. All in all, these stories make themselves heard as another collection of voices, ones that complicate the community of Fürstenfelde and add historical and fictional testimonies to the life and past of the village. This compilation of stories represents the cultural memory of the village, and if one reads them all together, they become a collective project that gathers the memories and past of a region. Jan Assmann's concepts of communicative (*kommunikatives Gedächtnis*) and cultural memory (*kulturelles Gedächtnis*) may help explain the form of this project.²⁵ According to Assmann, communicative memory is a non-institutionalized form of memory, which is not formalized and relies on interaction and communication to be transmitted (Erll and Nünning 110). Cultural memory, instead, has an institutional dimension and it is "exteriorized, objectified, and stored away" (Erll and Nünning 110). The project of Fürstenfelde brings these two kinds of memory together, combining the act of storytelling of the plural voice with the stories archived in the *Haus der Heimat*. As a result, the narrative reads like a mixture between oral accounts and written chronicles, which combine the wonderful and the terrible, and turn into stories which can imprint themselves in the reader's mind. In these accounts, the plural voice functions both as chronicler and storyteller. Benjamin's 1936 essay states that "*Die Erinnerung stiftet die Kette der Tradition, welche das Geschehene von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht weiterleitet*" (GS I.2, 453). In *Vor dem Fest* there is a narrator-chronicler at work, who mingles the story of one community with the "history" recorded in the chronicles of Fürstenfelde. The result is an account that spans across centuries, stories and characters, infusing them with historical facts and fictional curiosities. Stanišić's novel reads like the narrative attempt to recreate the lost orality of the community. By transferring the oral accounts onto paper and, at

²⁵ For a full elaboration on the two concepts see the chapter "Erinnerungskultur" in Assmann 29-86.

the same, by emulating the oral style, *Vor dem Fest* represents a triumph of voices, in which local legends and facts, the gruesome and the marvelous all come together. The walls in the *Haus der Heimat* contain the stories cherished in the museum; likewise, the we-voice allows the community to take shape and survive in these stories that it reinvents and continuously transforms.

Between Deep Memories and Present Roaming: The Role of the Fox

In Stanišić's novel, stories and memories of the past are depicted not only as a human activity, but also as something that humans and animals have in common. The narrative voice sometimes interrupts the narration in the "we" to follow the animal protagonist of the novel, *die Fähe*. This female fox roams through the night to find some eggs for her cubs, thus witnessing the preparations for the feast and the restlessness of some of the other narrative figures. The night before the *Annenfest* is her last time to provide food for the little ones, so that the celebration of the feast also comes to signal the beginning of a new phase in the animal life. This rite of passage establishes a further relation between human and animal life: like the cubs, which will soon have to provide for themselves, Anna is leaving her home village to start college, while Johann is about to take the exam to become the bell ringer. The night becomes a rite of initiation, which ends in an unfortunate way for the fox—she can smell the wolf and cannot find her cubs anywhere. In its central role, the fox does not only observe the night events, but also complicates the representation of the community, contributing her own memories to the story of Fürstenfelde.

The choice of using a fox as a central animal in the novel can be explained by considering the role of this animal in pop culture and its significance in the literary imagination. The fox is traditionally represented as a cunning, greedy, mischievous animal, which takes advantage of

situations. In *Vor dem Fest*, the fox is one of the sleepless figures that roam through the night while part of the village is asleep. The use of a fox as focalizing figure seems to evoke specific literary traditions such as fables, on the one hand, and magical realism, on the other. The fox is the protagonist of Aesop's most famous fables, such as "The Fox and the Crow" or "The Fox and the Stork," in which it is used to produce a moral and carry out a didactic purpose. At the same time, magical realist novels grant important roles on non-human creatures, allowing animals and plants to be the protagonists and talking agents in the narration. By using the fox in the novel, Stanišić is consciously playing with different literary traditions, which he uses as intertexts in the novel. And yet, differently from animals in a fable, the fox does not really interact with the humans, it does not talk to them and is confined to its natural world. The novel does not renounce the mimetic drive completely, but still transgresses the boundaries between humans and animals, when it allows the narrative voice to read the thoughts of the fox.

The narrative voice reveals to the reader that the fox knows stories from the past and memories, which reach back to the (pre-)history of Fürstenfelde. In the first of the eight chapters in which the adventures of the fox are described, the narrative voice explains: "Die Fähe ahnt die Zeit, da die Seen noch nicht existierten und keine Menschen hier ihr Revier hatten. Sie ahnt Eis, das die Erde horizontlang zu tragen hatte. Eis schob Land vor sich her, brachte Gestein, höhnte die Erde aus, hob sie zu Hügeln, die heute noch sich wellen, Zehntausende von Fuchsjahren später" (V 22). These vague memories or intuitions from a remote past refer to a time that precedes the arrival of human beings and the geological formation of Fürstenfelde. They encompass thousands of fox years and become intertwined with the memories of the villagers. Not only does the fox possess a deeper intuition of time compared to humans, but she also knows the figures that populate the novel, who ignore her presence. While Anna is completely unaware

of the presence of the fox, the narrative voice remarks: “Die Fähe kennt das Weibchen, seit es ein Junges war. Sie hat gelernt, das Weibchen ist keine Gefahr” (V 63). The knowledge of the fox goes beyond the human awareness; as a consequence, the fox complements the image of the village, which the narrative voice passes on to the reader.

The narrator follows the fox throughout the night and often uses it as a focalizer of the action. Indeed, the fox is included among the protagonists of this night tale. Observing the figures that are still active at night, the narrative voice remarks: “In den Straßen: die Jägerinnen. Frau Schwermuth. Die Fähe” (V 172). The fox cannot speak the human language and the novel does not break completely with the conventions of realism, but the thoughts of the fox do not seem very different from the ones that cross the minds of the human characters. The narrator uses the third-person singular to talk about the fox, making it clear that this animal is outside of the “we.” At the same time, the narrator is capable of reading the animal’s thoughts, putting into words her sensory perceptions and narrating her memories, as if the narrative voice was in the body and mind of the animal. In this sense, the fox is given a “voice” or at least her thoughts are captured by the narrator. The fox becomes another character in this night adventure, which prepares itself for the next day festival, while also experiencing the melancholy brought about by the past and the present. Further, the fox gives the novel a higher sense of fabulism, contributes to the fantastic elements and opens up a mythical world.

The choice of having a non-human protagonist can serve different purposes. In *Vor dem Fest*, the thoughts of the fox bring into the narrative a different perspective and an awareness that stretches beyond the limits of human life. In the extended e-version of the book, the fox takes up a metanarrative role and becomes the signpost for the hyperlinks in the novel. By following the icon of the fox, the reader is brought to images, historical materials and pages of the manuscript

that did not make it into the final version of the printed book. Similarly, in the printed novel, the fox functions as a guide through the night, a pathfinder among characters and places. The fox arouses both a sense of defamiliarization and empathy in the reader. In “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” Baernaerts et al. use these two terms to describe the effects of non-human narrative voices. On the one hand, defamiliarization is the result of something that is not perceived as “normal or predictable” (73) causing “a sense of strangeness or puzzlement, which may invite readers to self-consciously attend to their expectations” (73). At the same time, readers may also be moved towards empathy, “the imaginative process whereby readers temporarily adopt the perceptual, emotional, or axiological perspective of a fictional character” (73). These two poles also characterize *Vor dem Fest*. On one hand, the reader faces the unexpectedness of a narrative voice that can read the mind of a wild animal, whose memories extend beyond the limits of human history and acquire tones that remind her of a cosmological myth. On the other hand, the fox experiences the worries of a humanized figure, roams through the night to find food, fights, and suffers when she cannot find her cubs anymore. The reader is moved between distance and empathy as the fox encounters a badger, then a wolf, before letting herself go in despair. The description of her feelings and sensual perceptions are so vivid that the reader cannot but feel a connection with this animal, which exits the narrative in book three, never to return again. The episodes of the fox fill the gaps in the narrative, beyond past and present, human and non-human. Furthermore, the narration of the adventures of the fox add a new layer of meaning to this regional tale, in which animals and humans coexist. The fox playfully extends the possibility of the narrative voice and lets the reader wonder who stands behind this “we,” which can read the thoughts of animals in the night. The narrative voice once again playfully employs all the tools at its disposal to create a vivid, colorful narration of this

community, in which people and nature restlessly await the beginning of the feast.

“Wer verrät uns?” The Metanarrative Voice

While the we-voice is busy following figures and animals through the night and giving them expression in the narrative, it also initiates some reflections on the writing process and the writing agency. Mingling it with the present and past of Fürstenfelde, the narrative voice adds a metanarrative level to this complex novel. In *Vor dem Fest*, the we-voice emulates oral storytelling in written form. The we-voice articulates the writing process as a problem connected to questions of authorship, knowledge and, quite unexpectedly, betrayal. One chapter, in particular, brings all these issues together. It opens by asking: “Wer schreibt die alten Geschichten? Wer errichtet dem Schrecken ein Denkmal?” (V 222). Here the narrative voice inquires about the identity of the storyteller, who, it maintains, erects a memorial to terror. But why would the monument of storytelling be one of terror? This question is not answered in the text, but it suggests a connection between storytelling, the continuation of narration, and fear, thus setting a somber tone for the chapter. As these lines reveal, storytelling has the function of allowing for continuation, while commemorating the horrors of the past. Indeed, violence and death are confined to the past and will remain there as long as a voice continues to narrate the community. In this perspective, the novel aligns itself with Benjamin’s concept of history as the account of barbarism and horror.²⁶ By celebrating a feast that has its origin in the witch-hunt, and the burning of a young woman named Anna, the novel echoes the idea of a tragic history.

The lines quoted above are included in a text passage that narrates a story within a story,

²⁶ In his seventh thesis in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Benjamin reflects on the role of the historical materialist and writes: “Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein” (I.2, 696).

the adventure of Lutz and Anna. This story is told three times in the novel, by different figures and with variations. The first figure to mention it is Frau Schwermuth, who seems to be in some delusional state, and confuses Anna and Herr Schramm with Anna and Lutz, the figures of a story she knows (V 217-18). In the next chapter, the novel presents the story in the characteristic form of a chronicle, dating from 1636 (V 220-21). Finally, the chapter that follows includes the questions mentioned above, and reads as a metanarrative reflection on the composition of Anna and Lutz's story. The chapter combines its overall inquiring tone with an exquisite play with language. It opens with a list of questions that, written one after the other, also stand out typographically:

Wer verrät uns, was wir wissen sollten?

Wer verrät uns, was wir wissen?

Wer verrät uns was? Wir.

Wer verrät uns was?

Wer verrät uns?

Wer verrät?

Wer? (V 222)

This strophe asks, in the form of a poetic experiment, some key questions about author and voice. The continuous repetition of the word "Wer" emphasizes the centrality of the narrating agency, whose identity is never fully disclosed. Noteworthy is also the repeated use of the word "verraten," which comes back six times within seven lines. In the context of Frau Schwermuth's story, the word "verraten" refers to Anna's betrayal and her conspiracy against the community. In the stanza spoken by the we-voice, however, the verb "verraten" accompanies the word "wissen," linking the idea of knowledge to that of disclosure. Read in those terms, the stanza

asks which are the sources of knowledge that reveal us what we should know. A connection is established to the multiple sources used in the novel to tell the stories from the past. As shown above, Stanišić makes clear that some of these stories are based on actual traditions and popular accounts.²⁷ As a consequence, this stanza also becomes a reflection on the process of the novelist's work, which encourages some thoughts on the steps that belong to novel writing.

This short stanza is a clear experiment and play with language and the visual layout of the words emphasizes their relations and meaning. A powerful example is the consonance between the words “Wer” and “wir,” a rhetorical choice that links the agent with the plural voice. Interestingly, halfway through the poem a one-word answer is provided to the preceding questions, condensed into the word “Wir,” which constitutes the only declarative statement in this passage. The source-storyteller seems to be once again the community, a plural voice, who reveals the chronicles from the past and narrates them to its own members. Moving from top to bottom, the lines in the stanza become shorter and shorter, but still manage to produce meaningful sentences. By shrinking the questions to the final line “Wer?,” this experiment manages to isolate the key word that encloses the narrating agency. Cutting one word per line, the strophe moves from connecting disclosure and knowledge to isolating the unknown agent of disclosure. What follows in this chapter of *Vor dem Fest* is almost a writing reflection, in which words are discussed, pondered, and if necessary, questioned and changed. The first-person plural

²⁷ The sources seem to be various and the new e-version of the novel, which contains additional materials, pictures, embedded videos and readings by the author, reproduces some of them. There are some original sources, like for example, *Der Fährmann vom Kornow-See*, which is used to describe the origins of Fürstenfelde. As the author comments, “Auf ähnliche Weise fand etwa ein Dutzend Quellen Eingang in den Roman” (“Anhang”). Stanišić also indicates other sources, such as contemporary news, or texts which inspired the events in the novel (e.g. the above mentioned *Philosophical Transactions, Giving Some Account of the Present Undertakings, Studies and Labours of the Ingenious in Many Considerable Parts of the World*).

reflects on the writing choices necessary to tell the story of Anna and Lutz—and, per extension, the rest of the novel. It seems that while the “we” narrates the story, it also reflects on and dreads the work that goes into writing.

The question of authorship and the identity of the voice are motifs that run throughout the novel. This metanarrative chapter seems to summarize the questions that the reader has been asking herself since she saw the word “wir” on the first page of the novel. And once again, *Vor dem Fest* approaches the reader playfully. Instead of proposing an answer to this set of questions, the poem deconstructs the initial inquiries, playing with language and words. The chapter follows a circular route and closes by repeating once again the question presented at the outset: “Wer schreibt die alten Geschichten?” And the only way to move beyond this question is by posing another one, which reads “Wer tut sich das an?” (V 224). This final question, which asks who takes on him- or herself the task of writing these stories, suggests how painful storytelling can be. A couple of pages later, however, in an isolated sentence, a possible answer to these questions seems to be provided: “Einer. Einer schreibt. Einer hat es immer geschafft” (V 227). The continuation of storytelling is ensured thanks to somebody who will continue narrating, be it the plural “we” or the alter ego of the narrative voice, Johann, who will remain in Fürstenfelde. And yet, this unanswered question remains lingering in the background: “Who is this agency that writes and tells these stories?” This we-voice, which questions narration, functions, at the same time, as the red thread through the novel, a metanarrative principle that poses questions about the process of writing and narrating.

Voice and Eye: Narrating and Painting the Community

The necessity and desire to portray the community and its history find expression in

different ways throughout the novel. Different members of the community use different media to represent Fürstenfelde, in the hope that their works will remain to shape the memory of the village. On more than one occasion, the “we” shows its concern for the future of the community. This anxiety is voiced at the very beginning in relation to the death of the village’s prime storyteller, the ferryman. All the stories that populate the narrative represent an attempt to continue storytelling, to keep the community together through past memories and present events. A similar concern returns when the narrative voice announces that Fürstenfelde also risks losing its painter. Fürstenfelde’s historic painter, Frau Kranz, is 90 years old, and the narrator voices his fear for the future in this sequence of questions: “Wer wird uns malen, wenn Frau Kranz nicht länger malt? Wer malt unser Werkzeug und unsere Hände, die es halten? Wer malt die Kochlöffel, die wir schnitzen? [. . .]” (V 87). Frau Kranz is a refugee who escaped from the Banat and hid from the Russian soldiers until the ferryman came and rescued her. From that moment on, Frau Kranz became the loyal painter of Fürstenfelde and translated into her artistic projects what this village in the Uckermark offered to her.²⁸ While the community voices its stories through words, Frau Kranz depicts it with images. In a novel which makes use of different voices, local history painting also becomes a source for storytelling. The paintings that the journalist sees when he visits Frau Kranz’s atelier are rendered only through their titles and some brief description filtered, once again, through the words of the we-voice.

The narration ultimately brings to life this quite unremarkable village, which is frozen in images that are striking for their banality. The iconography that the village chooses to represent

²⁸ With regard to Frau Kranz’s skills, the we-voice offers an ironic commentary, which highlights how the paintings produced by the old lady may not be real masterpieces. Talking about the paintings, the “we” says: “Sie bilden die Welt selbstgenügsam ab. Erzählen nicht mehr als das Sichtbare. Mal ist die Farbwahl freier, mal sind die Proportionen ungewöhnlich, aber das hat eher damit zu tun, dass es Frau Kranz mit den Proportionen nicht genau nimmt” (V 86).

itself consists of rather insignificant images. The four postcards available for purchase to the few tourists that come to Fürstenfelde constitute a case in point. They represent, respectively, the heritage museum known as *Haus der Heimat*, the two lakes that surround Fürstenfelde, a horse in front of the city wall (“zwei Sehenswürdigkeiten mit einem Schlag” V 174), and a plastic pink egg box, a symbol for Ditzsche’s chickens and hens. These postcards, actually photographs taken by Frau Kranz, are only described in the novel ekphrastically, and the objects they represent fall flat in comparison with the vivid narration by the plural voice. Similarly, the painting that closes the novel is not visually shown, but rather rendered through ekphrasis. Eye and voice complement each other to represent the past and present of this community, but the last word is reserved for the plural voice, which can describe what may not be there to be seen. The depicted subjects and objects may be banal, but narration intervenes to yield the stories behind the clichés, to create historical depth, and to add linguistic variety.

On the day of the feast, Frau Kranz wants to offer a painting for the auction and the plural voice follows the progress of her work throughout the night. Accompanying her through the dark landscape, the plural voice remarks: “Wir sind unbesorgt. [. . .] Frau Kranz ist gut gerüstet” (V 54). For this year’s *Annenfest*, Frau Kranz has decided to honor the community with a night portrait, which is causing her big troubles as she cannot do justice to this night landscape. Fog, darkness and confusion are the only elements that make it into her painting and, more than once, the narrator captures Frau Kranz’s unhappiness with the project. And yet, when the morning of the feast comes, Frau Kranz shows a painting that is very different from the one the narrator has been witnessing during the night: “Es ist mindestens doppelt so groß wie das von heute Nacht, aber das wissen die wenigsten” (V 311). The last two chapters are mostly dedicated to the unveiling of this majestic painting in front of the community of Fürstenfelde—more than 200

people who gathered for the special occasion—and contains the ekphrastic description of the work of art. Like the novel, which serves to show the continuation of storytelling, the painting within the diegesis proves that the community will continue existing by perpetuating its representation. And yet, it is once again the narrator that assembles the final picture where everybody is present at once, freezing the moment, and bringing together past and present. Only words manage to represent the vivid simultaneity of what happens in the night, showing the priority of narrating over describing.

The narrative voice draws on the artistic creation of its figures to once again address and represent the community. The painting serves as the closing image of the novel, the final act of narration that immortalizes the community. The fifth book of the novel suggests that this is the key moment of the narration since it opens by declaring “All das war Vorgeplänkel,” simple preparation for this final scene (V 311). All the figures that the narrator has been following through the night come together and become part of the painting. In describing Frau Kranz’s work of art, the narrator at first abandons the “wir.” The collective voice is not part of the description of the painting, which addresses the community as “they,” “die Leute” (V 313). While it touches on different figures, the plural voice seems to have its strength in encompassing them all. The three young guys of the village, Lada, Suzi and Johann, are all included in the painting. Likewise, the three elder men of the community are depicted: the old bell ringer, Imboden and Eddie the carpenter, who is already dead at the time of the narration, but whom Frau Kranz decides to include in this immortalization of Fürstenfelde. There are also Frau Schwermuth, ironically described as “dick und weiß und merkwürdig wie die Kreidefelsen auf Rügen” (V 313); Herr Zieschke is playing the violin, Herr Schramm is smoking and the beautiful Anna is also present. After describing the young lady, the we-voice enters the narration once

again to comment on the community depicted: “Wir sind entschlossen, entspannt, entrückt. Fürstenfelde ist das” (V 313). The repetitive use of the verb “sein” reinforces the essence and existence of this community, exorcizing at the same time its possible extinction. The description of the painting then continues to include Hirtentäschel, and Frau Steiner reading the tarots to Frau Schober. Ditzsche is represented as a separate figure from the rest of the group, as a consequence of the mistrust everybody nourishes toward him. Suzi’s mom, Manu, Poppo von Blankenburg, Ulli with his two families—his own and the family of his fellow “storytellers”—Gölow and his wife are all there, as well as other figures that are identified as “dieunddie” and “derunder” (V 314). The painting is complete with the figure of the ferryman, who looks asquint at his community, “Sein Fürstenfelde ist das im seichten Wasser” (V 314), and the *Güldenstein*. Frau Kranz is also part of the painting, and is depicted with her easel in the foreground. The voice—which now functions also as the eye—scans the painting and stops on the single figures to identify them and provide a little description. The narrative gaze seems to zoom in on some figures to fix some peculiar features, also in relation to the other figures. The way the voice pans over the figures gives a sense of distance and relationality between the characters and, for example, it grasps Ditzsche’s isolation in relation to the rest of the group.

The narrated painting has the potential to contain at once successive moments and fragmented stills, eternalizing the present, of which the painter herself can be part. The painting overcomes temporal and physical boundaries, bringing together figures that belong to different times and phases of the village.²⁹ Frau Kranz—or maybe the narrative voice—manages even to

²⁹ These possibilities and limitations of visual and poetic arts are the same ones discussed in Lessing’s *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie* (1766). Visual arts are synchronic, spatial, beautiful and usually represent the central moment; poetic arts, on the other hand, are diachronic, temporal and open to represent both beautiful and ugly objects. In *Vor dem Fest*, the painting that the reader can only imagine portrays the whole scene at once. The

include the ferryman in the painting, giving him back to his community. “Auch der Fährmann ist da, guck, auf dem Steg [. . .]” (V 314). Ana Kranz, who does not want to be considered a “Heimatmalerin” (V 288), offers to the community of Fürstenfelde what they expect and want from her: “eine Heimat – unsere Uckermark [. . .] unsere Erinnerungen, [. . .] unsere Kindheit, die jungen Gesichter unserer Eltern und Großeltern, Arbeit und Alltag dreier Generationen im Wirbel der Zeiten. Kranz’ Gemälde sind nicht weniger als Reisen in die Vergangenheit” (V 288). By representing the community through these images, the painting manages to combine present and past in a harmonious composition that moves across time and generations. Further, through her art, Frau Kranz joins the choir of voices that populate this novel. The mourning for the death of the storyteller, with which the novel opens, finds its consolation in a picture and its narration that allows for the ferryman to continue existing among his fellow Fürstenfelder.

While several images are described throughout the novel, this last painting plays a central role in *Vor dem Fest*. Because of its position, at the very end of the novel, the subject it depicts and the way it is narrated, this painting serves as a synthesis of the stories that the we-voice has been telling throughout the novel. This is the first scene in which all characters come together and are represented in a single chapter, through one big image. After all their stories have been told, the narrator assembles them in one scene for the feast. The *Annenfest* can now begin and the we-voice uses the occasion to make itself heard once more. This voice, which functions as a big-brother eye, sees and knows everything and everybody and can then decide what to reveal through its words. The fact that the preference is given to words rather than to images, suggests the centrality of voice, storytelling and narrative, as the we-voice manages to render what the

narration, presented in the we-voice, necessarily renounces this unity and breaks the scene into successive moments, which, nonetheless, confer new vibrancy to a painting that the reader cannot see.

characters on the diegetic level can only see or admire. And, interestingly, the last words of the novel are reserved precisely for the we-voice, which outbids Anna during the auction for the painting and exclaims: “wir bieten zwölf” (V 315). With these last words, the narrative concludes affirming that “we” with which it had opened. The *Annenfest* ultimately turns into a moment of reverence for the specific act of narration that the novel represents, a triumph of the plural voice. Through the juxtaposition of visual and vocal narrative, of painting and voice, the novel represents the project of storytelling, which by encompassing different media and different sources, aims at continuing the existence of the community, at celebrating the past of the village, while assuring its survival. The plural voice manages to overcome the rupture produced in the community by the death of the storyteller and averts potential future threats. The “Scheiterhaufen” (292-93), which reminds of the macabre origin of the celebration and the burning of the “witch” Anna, remains empty this year and the village can now celebrate. The novel ends right at the moment before these celebrations, with the plural “wir” echoing in the mind of the reader.

Conclusion

Vor dem Fest exemplifies how the narrative voice fills the gap left by the storyteller in the community, thus overcoming the moment of rupture, which could have caused the village to collapse. By renouncing a clear identification with one single voice and by leaving the addressee undefined as well, the novel forces the reader to constantly reassess the act of storytelling. The instability and mutability of the plural voice, combined with the changing addressee, creates a narrative that undoes points of reference and orientation for the reader. The play among stories, history and acts of storytelling produces a complex narrative. New layers of meaning and

complexity are added every time a new voice or a new story enters the narrative, enriching the constellation of characters and events depicted in the novel. The striking image that the we-voice chooses to describe the progression through the night is the “Reigen” (V 147), a round dance, a playful choreography of figures and voices, which preserves openness.

This chapter has shown how the communal we-voice keeps this complex narrative together. Moreover, it has investigated the stories contained in the novel. These include historical and fictional accounts, as well as metareflections and ekphrastic renderings of postcards and paintings. Stories, in all their forms and styles, become materials that form the community and keep it alive. The possible disappearance of this village in the Uckermark is overcome through the continuing of narration. As the “we” claims: “Es wird gehen. Es ist immer irgendwie gegangen” (V 12). As long as storytellers exist and stories are told in Fürstenfelde, the community will survive and renew itself through its narratives. Ultimately, it is the process of storytelling that forges the collective identity of the village. The described picture that concludes the novel represents the climax, which assembles all the members of the collective voice. Thanks to these stories, the community will endure the passing of time and survive the future challenges that may temporarily destabilize it. The we-voice employed in *Vor dem Fest* embodies the new possibility of storytelling and gives the community a sense of cohesion that bridges present, past and future.

Epilogue

This project has shown that a narratological approach is fruitful in investigating moments of rupture in contemporary German literature. Time and space, plot, characters, and voice were explored to show how a clearer understanding of these elements helps understand their key role in the texts. A closer look at these narrative categories has revealed how they come to signify specific disruptive moments. The complex temporal and spatial configuration in *Der fliegende Berg* betrays the difficulty of coming to terms with the experience of death. The complexity of the plot in *Sand* mirrors the loss of identity of the protagonist and his difficulty remembering the details that could solve the riddles of the novel, and regaining his most constitutive feature, that is, his name. The friendship between Ed and Kruso in the homonymous novel shows that the relationship among characters translate into an allegory of the failure of a utopian project and the end of the German Democratic Republic. Finally, besides being a playful narrative strategy, the use of the we-voice in *Vor dem Fest* manages to represent the cultural identity of a post-socialist village in the former GDR and its attempt to preserve a rural community after the leading voice ceased to speak.

The works analyzed are representative examples of contemporary German literature and the narratological readings focus on central narrative categories. In this Epilogue I would like to envision how this project could develop into a broader investigation. I am going to sketch here three main avenues of research: 1) the gendering of authorial and narrative voice; 2) the representation of radical ruptures, such as humanitarian tragedies; 3) the applicability of narratological readings to pedagogic purposes. The rest of this Epilogue will discuss each of these possibilities in greater detail.

This study could acquire new significance by taking into consideration the forms and effects of the gendering of authorial and narrative voices in contemporary German literature. This aspect, combined with the study of the narratological categories of focalization and point of view, could help understand how these narrative categories reveal concealed ideologies and worldviews. The addition of texts written by German female authors and of stories narrated from the perspective of female figures would allow me to reflect on gender dynamics and the kinds of ruptures contemporary fictional works describe in this respect. Feminist narratological contributions could prove particularly productive in framing the discussion. Scholars of narratology have been working to fill the gap in the discussion on the gendering and queering of narrative categories. Susan Lanser, for example, has dedicated a volume to questions of voice in relation to female authors from international contexts, in the time period between the 1740s and the present. Titled *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992), Lanser's study proposes to combine "social identity and narrative voice" (6) to discuss the implications of the authority given to a specific voice. Moreover, she recently edited a volume with Robyn Warhol titled *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (2015). Peggy Phelan's contribution to this volume, in particular, reflects on the function of "hypothetical focalization," "the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisites perspective on the situations and events at issue" in queer narratives (Herman qtd. in Phelan 82). Applied to contemporary German novels, this approach could clarify how an uncertain focalization and the appropriation of a distorted vision by the author or the narrator reveal ruptures in perception or in the representation of characters, ideas, and power relations.

A second line of investigation could explore narrative representations of radical ruptures in contemporary German literature. Thematically, these could range from natural catastrophes to humanitarian tragedies. In regard to the latter aspect, texts that describe the refugee crisis that Germany and, more generally, Europe currently experience, can serve as a starting point. One productive way to frame the discussion could be by analyzing the roles of events and eventfulness in the texts. In its most basic definition, an event constitutes “a change of state,” which can assume different levels of complexity (Hühn “Event”). In stories that describe radical ruptures, this narratological category could help explore the ways in which major, life-changing events are presented or maybe omitted from the narrative. One could expand the analysis to reflect on the ethical implications of the actions described and, in particular, on the representation of verbal, physical or ideological conflicts. The field of narrative ethics, recently discussed in Lothe and Hawthorne’s collection *Narrative Ethics* (2013), could help read these events, their representation, and their consequences for the interpretation of the literary works in which they appear. The representation of events connected to human tragedy necessarily generates emotional responses in the readers and it raises questions concerning the relationship between the fictionalization of events and the forms used in narrating them, between fictionality and documentary literature, between narrators’ attitudes and readers’ reactions.

A third avenue of research could lead to the development of a narratological reading of a contemporary text for didactic purposes. Exploring the intersections between literature, narratology and moments of rupture, this dissertation has demonstrated the possibilities that such readings offer in improving our understanding of contemporary texts, revealing textual and formal dynamics that at first may remain concealed. As a next step, the analyses proposed here could be elaborated into model readings that help instructors and students use narratology for the

analysis of complex texts. In literature and advanced language classrooms, a narratological reading would complement the thematic approach, which provides a framework to investigate relevant questions, but does not exhaust the interpretation of literary texts. The application of narratology to the teaching of literature and narratives in different media has been at the center of discussions and a volume titled *Teaching Narrative Theory* (2010) was recently published with the intent of helping instructors at different institutional levels implement the terms and concepts of narrative theory in the classroom. My contribution would add to this scholarship by proposing model readings that are specific to the teaching of contemporary German literature, but transferable to other literatures and, possibly, narrative forms. I could envision offering a model reading of *Vor dem Fest* to guide the discussion of voice in narratives. The novel lends itself to be divided into sections, which can be analyzed using different narratological approaches. Addressing aspects of plurality, gender, and politics, this reading could demonstrate how narratology as a theoretical framework opens up to various discourses that can help dig deeper into literary texts.

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