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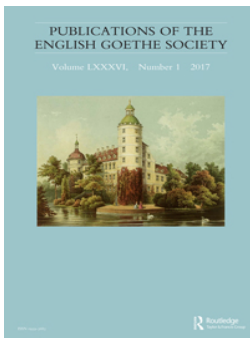
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‘Winterabende’: A Romantic and Post-Romantic Motif in Friedrich, Büchner and Stifter

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the motif of winter evening in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, in Georg Büchner’s *Lenz* and in Adalbert Stifter’s *Bergkristall*, showing how it is used to convey Romantic convictions about death and transcendence, and how it is subsequently a vehicle of post-Romantic explorations of finitude. The article argues that winter ‘Abenddämmerung’ is in Friedrich a central element of the Romantic subject’s relation to landscape and is related to Schleiermacher’s thoughts on religion; that in *Lenz* it is associated with the subject’s dislocation; and that in *Bergkristall* it is a moment in which a form of historical life fades and changes.

KEYWORDS

Winter; evening; twilight; ‘Dämmerung’; death; religion; art; Caspar David Friedrich; *Winterlandschaft mit Kirche*; Georg Büchner; *Lenz*; Adalbert Stifter; *Bergkristall*; *Winterbriefe aus Kirchsschlag*

Evenings which are cold and snow-laden, and either already dark or haunted by the winter sun’s last streaking glow, have less classical heritage than evenings in which warmth and light fade gradually, occasioning reverie amid the leaving off of activity, and a certain pastoral reflectiveness. These things belong to the long Virgilian tradition of evening, powerfully attached to idyll and elegy and summer and autumn, which extended through many beautiful serenities of neo-classical painting and came to special modern florescence in the Romantic period.¹ In German Romantic literature and art, meaning both the body of German contributions to the European movement of Romanticism and the subset of figures commonly called the ‘German Romantics’, the Virgilian imprint was remoulded by the characteristic concern to connect the new Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy of subjectivity with aesthetics, religion and politics. The results shimmer in the evening settings of Hölderlin, Eichendorff and Caspar David Friedrich, not to mention the sunsets of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. It is easy to find here instances of that Arcadian ‘mixture of sadness and tranquillity’ said to be Virgil’s bequest to the European imagination of evening.² But there is an equally particular interest, not distinct from the defining philosophical concerns of the Romantic age or from these literary and artistic figures, in the transitions of evening as they occur in the coldest time of the year. Winter evening is linked

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¹See Christopher R. Miller, *The Invention of Evening: Perception and Time in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 14–20, 51–52; also Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Anchor, 1955), p. 300: ‘With only slight exaggeration one might say that he [Virgil] “discovered” the evening.’

²Panofsky, *Meaning*, p. 300.

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Figure 1. Caspar David Friedrich: 'Winterlandschaft mit Kirche' (1811) © The National Gallery, London.

to death in a more existentially urgent way than are paradisiacal settings tinged with the thought of 'et in arcadia ego', or even than are Eichendorff's subjects in landscape at summer nightfall. And it belongs directly to the framework of the Romantic wanderer motif. Both features of the winter evening were obliquely acknowledged in the twentieth century by the most developed philosophical treatment of the theme, Heidegger's reading of a poem ('Ein Winterabend') by Trakl.³ In the Romantic context on which those later writers were to draw, death and wandering were definitively united in the winter landscapes of Friedrich, who conjoined them with one of the most universal, and elusive, tropes of German Romanticism: 'Dämmerung', with its constitutive ambivalence (dawn or dusk?).⁴ Moreover the relationship between finitude, wandering and 'Dämmerung' continued to give shape to the theme of winter evening as it was taken up by nineteenth-century writers for whom the Romantic ambitions had become, more or less traumatically, a thing of the past.

In Friedrich's *Winterlandschaft mit Kirche* (1811, Figure 1) the ambiguities of 'Dämmerung' are acute. A reddening sky seems to suggest both the setting of the sun, rooted figuratively in a wanderer's arrival at his final rest — 'the endpoint of his journey' at which 'he passes, in death, out of this world'⁵ — and its rising at dawn, complete with implications of resurrection. Linking the two is a depth of night darkness seeping in from the edges of the scene. The wanderer, having discarded two crutches which lie in the foreground, leans against a large rock and looks

³Martin Heidegger, 'Die Sprache', in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 12th edn (Stuttgart: Neske, 2001 [1959]), pp. 11–33.

⁴Cf. Miller, *Invention of Evening*, on the old participial sense of English 'evening' (p. 5), and on 'twilight' as 'the phenomenon of both dawn and evening skies' (p. 6).

⁵Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd edn (London: Reaktion, 2009 [1990]), pp. 24, 35.

up, in a pose of prayer, at a crucifix rising in a thicket of firs. To the background left the outline of a Gothic church, perfectly matching the contours of the trees, looms as a somewhat ghostly presence: hidden from the wanderer on his approach and obscured to him even now by the fir at his left. And death, moreover, is conjoined by Friedrich with history — not with the representable, legible history of legend or epic, but with the fact of the subject's (the wanderer's) having a history, its being historical. The markers of this conjunction are the crutches, since they suggest, simultaneously, that the wanderer will not resume his journey through the snow, and that he has come from somewhere. In the wanderer's dying vision, a history that is unrepresented finds its culmination in a symbol of redemption whose significance is indistinct from subjective longing, the wanderer's and ours: the image presents the thicket to us in turn (through the church in the background) as a symbol, in nature, of the sacred. This longing is the desire, which is unfulfillable except perhaps (as the wanderer suggests) in death, for our historically embedded perspective on the material world to give access to an objective meaning associated with religion yet no longer secured by it.⁶

Longing's object, in the painting, is the church. The church hovers spectrally, its contact with the ground either obscured or non-existent. It relates to the wanderer not as 'fulfilment' or present reality but as 'hidden promise.'⁷ And it has a powerful contemporary philosophical connotation: Kant's notion of the 'invisible church' ('unsichtbare Kirche'), which is beyond the world of appearances because it is the ideal vanishing point that gives direction to historical faith.⁸ Kant's ideal church, also in its modified Romantic forms, has a pervasive importance in Friedrich's image. For us as viewers of the painting, an ideal content is present in a way that for the wanderer it is not. While the painting performs an abundant 'gathering of symmetries', extending to a central parallel between the wanderer looking at the crucifix and the viewer looking at the painting,⁹ the symmetry must also exceed itself. The church whose invisibility within the scene is so elaborately established by Friedrich does of course appear, is visible: namely to us, in Friedrich's work of art. Reflecting that we relate to the painting as the wanderer relates to the crucifix, we reflect that the relation cannot be an absolute fit. For what the sign signifies is present to us at the same level of perception as the sign itself, as it is not to the wanderer. The material sign upon which *we* look, the painting, shows us the wanderer having a horizon. And it shows us that which gives the horizon shape: 'the church, the divine, the Idea.'¹⁰ Now the appearance of an 'idea' (such as the 'idea' of the one true, necessarily 'invisible,' church) is a Kantian impossibility; but in the artwork, said Schelling going beyond Kant, there is a unity, or as he called it an 'indifference', of the real and the ideal.¹¹ If the typical function of Friedrich's observer figures is to allow the viewer to observe themselves observing,¹² and if the wanderer here can be said to perform that function, then our self-conscious looking at the winter world, and our finding it to be the site of (fragile) symbolic meaning, is correlated strictly to the revelatory claim of art.

When Friedrich, in a later landscape, repeats the central thicket of *Winterlandschaft mit Kirche* but in a daylight setting on the Dresden Heath (*Fichtendickicht im Schnee*, circa 1828,

⁶Cf. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen lesen: Über eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur* (Munich: Hanser, 2011), p. 92.

⁷Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, p. 25.

⁸Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Königliche Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 4 sections (Berlin: Reimer, 1902–), I, 6, pp. 101–02.

⁹Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, p. 26.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p. 28.

¹¹See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Werke*, ed. by Manfred Schröter, 13 vols (Munich: Beck, 1946–62), III, p. 400.

¹²[...] sich selbst im Akt des Beobachtens zu beobachten': Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen lesen*, p. 90.



Figure 2. Caspar David Friedrich: 'Fichtendickicht im Schnee' (ca. 1828) bpk | Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

Figure 2), against a deep sky and with melting snow, the wanderer's gaze has become the viewer's own. We have happened upon a scene in nature whose apparent beckoning — but indefinite — interpretability is in no way separate from the way the painting presents the scene to us as occurring within our experience.¹³ The snow of *Winterlandschaft* melts away in the daytime image. Gone are the explicit signs of faith and transcendence: crucifix and church. Their reference is entirely interiorized in our sense of the scene as revelation, and specifically as revelation occurring through the framing effects of the picture, through art. But the reference is insecure because the revelation is of nothing we can name — perhaps it used to cohere. The thicket with its main trinity of firs and their space of would-be sanctuary might be the visible manifestation of an ideal meaning, the Church appearing in Nature; but if so then the meaning comes to presence as something lost, elusive and vestigial. Winter landscapes in snow communicate this because they show things standing forth, offering themselves as elements of experience and the interpretation of experience, and yet also inseparable from a concealing background blankness. And the elusive presence entails

¹³See Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, p. 19, and generally on this image pp. 12–20.

melancholy, insofar as this suggests awareness of a weight of significance that cannot be grasped and so appears fragmented and already past.¹⁴

Melancholy in Friedrich, the feeling induced by this scene in its viewer and the characteristic affective stance suggested by his *Rückenfiguren*, is produced by this fixing on particular, finite detail against the often indecipherable backdrop of the infinite. The special particularity of finite things was called by Friedrich's contemporary (and acquaintance) Schleiermacher their 'Eigentümlichkeit', and the highest form of its contemplation was for him to be found in a subjective 'feeling' ('Gefühl') experienced when things, having revealed themselves to our sensible intuition ('Anschauung'), seize us as intimations of infinity.¹⁵ This feeling was for Schleiermacher the definition of religion. Friedrich is Schleiermacher's clear counterpart in finding a religious aura in contemplated finitude. Moreover, his work provides a definitive example of art fulfilling the 'mediating' role which Schleiermacher attributed to it, and by which Schleiermacher gave his own answer to the question of the invisible church and the vehicles of its appearance: art presents the 'Eigentümlichkeit' of things to our contemplative attention and so allows it to achieve 'infinite' significance.¹⁶ But Schleiermacher also defined (Christian) religion as a type of melancholy ('heilige Wehmuth'), because the longing triggered in the contemplation of things can never be satisfied, its 'great object' never reached: 'das Gefühl einer unbefriedigten Sehnsucht, die auf einen großen Gegenstand gerichtet ist, und deren Unendlichkeit Ihr Euch bewußt seid.'¹⁷ Schleiermacher saw this melancholy ambivalence as a necessary element of modern religion. Friedrich seems clearer, in his sense of religious meaning as something past and haunting, that the ambivalence does not found a form of sacred community, even one whose centre or mediator ('Mittler', in Schleiermacher's term) would be art.¹⁸ And that occasions perhaps a greater melancholy. Evening, 'one of melancholia's traditional icons',¹⁹ is the time of this realization because it is the time of passing and fading. In *Fichtendickicht im Schnee*, evening is present uncannily: both in the snowy residue remaining from the thicket's earlier appearance in *Winterlandschaft mit Kirche*, and in the implication that here in daylight the passing of some earlier meaning, into an aesthetic awareness which cannot fully compensate it, is complete.

Drawing on and subverting the Romantic wanderer motif as exemplified by Friedrich, Büchner's *Lenz*, published (in 1839) one year before Friedrich's death, is post-Romantic because it presents longing not as correlated to a horizon which the self intuits yet does not reach, but rather as detached from any structure of direction and in excess of any determinate object.²⁰ In *Lenz* longing never fixes on any particular ('eigentümlich') aspect of the external world, and so returns to the self and fissures it. The result is that Lenz in his restlessness, his constantly stated searching for 'Ruhe', can be seen as disrupting the 'placement' within 'an order located in experience' which Friedrich's figures and landscapes

¹⁴On Friedrich's relationship to the iconographic tradition of melancholy see for example Tina Grütter, *Melancholie und Abgrund: Die Bedeutung des Gesteins bei Caspar David Friedrich* (Berlin: Reimer, 1986), pp. 120–24.

¹⁵On 'Eigentümlichkeit' see Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, in Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (KGA), ed. by Hans-Joachim Birkner and others, 3 sections (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980–), I, 12, p. 162.

¹⁶See for example KGA, I, 12, p. 173. On Friedrich and Schleiermacher see Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, pp. 69–70, and especially Werner Busch, *Caspar David Friedrich: Ästhetik und Religion* (Munich: Beck, 2003), pp. 159–85.

¹⁷KGA, I, 12, p. 290.

¹⁸On 'Künstler' and 'Kunstwerk' as 'Mittler' in Schleiermacher see Busch, *Ästhetik und Religion*, pp. 164–65.

¹⁹Matthew Bell, *Melancholia: The Western Malady* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 177.

²⁰See John Walker, "Ach die Kunst!... Ach, die erbärmliche Wirklichkeit!": Suffering, Empathy, and the Relevance of Realism in Büchner's *Lenz*, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 33 (1997), 156–70 (p. 160).

suggest.²¹ And indeed, *Lenz* is preoccupied with the theme of art both conceptually, as an expression of the truth of human reality, and in relation to specific artworks which Lenz discusses. At the core of the story is the so-called *Kunstgespräch*, where Lenz elaborates a theology and ethics of art with reference to two Dutch paintings, unfolding a vision which stands in tragic relation to his own subsequent experience.

Lenz is a winter story: 'Den 20. ging Lenz durch's Gebirg', and we know from Büchner's sources that the month is January.²² But it is also a story of evening time, specifically of the gathering dusk. It is saturated with instances of 'Dämmerung', characteristically of the verbal form 'dämmern', and Büchner radicalizes and undermines its Romantic usage, partly by exploiting its association with psychological processes of occurrence or realization, and hence with mental states. The opening passages let us hear the urgency with which Lenz wants evening to mean rest, some alleviation of desire and the frantic play of light: the peace of mountains at dusk, the silent tender promise exemplified in Goethe's 'Über allen Gipfeln'. That is also the promise of death. But in *Lenz* death is less a promise than the unreached end of a lonely, continuing diminishment (the text's final words are 'so lebte er hin', 250). Looking at the opening passage we see that evening's onset in the mountains is mentioned at the beginning of two consecutive sentences: 'Gegen Abend kam er auf die Höhe des Gebirgs, auf das Schneefeld, von wo man wieder hinabstieg in die Ebene nach Westen, er setzte sich oben nieder. Es war gegen Abend ruhiger geworden' (226). The time is presented factually, objectively, but something in the repetition takes 'Abend' up into the motion of Lenz's inner compulsion, such that the quietness too remains eerily implicated in the subjective desire which is without end or fulfilment. The rest of the sentence confirms this: 'Es war gegen Abend ruhiger geworden; das Gewölk lag fest und unbeweglich am Himmel, so weit der Blick reichte, nichts als Gipfel, von denen sich breite Flächen hinabzogen, und alles so still, grau, dämmernd; es wurde ihm entsetzlich einsam' (226). 'Dämmern', with its association of dynamic transition, is employed here to signify almost against itself: to name a foreboding intensity of stasis, or the impossibility that nature could resolve for the perceiving self into a context of meaning.

Lenz experiences 'Ruhe', uniquely and briefly, when, preaching in Oberlin's church, he finds solace in a sense of suffering as shared. His engagement with the community affects him deeply because it draws him out of self-absorption and into an objective ethical world. In sharing the people's troubles, Lenz enters a context of symbolic meaning that is both public and personal, and following the episode this is expressed as the achievement of a twilight restfulness for which he has longed ('endlich dämmerte es in ihm', 232; emphasis added). Here Büchner wrests 'Dämmerung' from its (typical) Romantic function as natural correlate to subjective mood, and makes it fully a characterization of inner experience.

But Lenz's new and different sense of being ('ein anderes Sein', 231) is undercut even in the moment of its expression. As he falls asleep, overcome by sympathy ('Mitleid', 232), a glimpse of night-time mountain radiance as if out of Friedrich, or perhaps Eichendorff, takes shape: 'und Alles war ruhig und still und kalt, und der Mond schien die ganze Nacht und stand über den Bergen' (232). As with 'gegen Abend' earlier, what gives the vignette away is repetition: the neurotically additive 'und', suggesting that the vision is being pieced together from fragments of something lost, of which the Romantic winter imagination can

²¹Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, p. 20.

²²Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe und Dokumente*, ed. by Henri Poschmann, 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992), I, p. 225. On the sources see Poschmann's commentary, I, p. 816. Subsequent references to *Lenz* are given in the text.

be an apt emblem. The rest of the story describes the collapse of Lenz's empathetic state into profound alienation. If the text makes us feel that cold moonlit vista *as art* — as Romantic constellations, as something late ('verspätet', 231) within the text's own sensibility — then it is anticipating Lenz's attempts to understand reality in terms of an aesthetic vision developed passionately by him in the *Kunstgespräch*.²³ In wanting to live out that vision, Lenz paradoxically slips further and further away from the imperative of 'Mitleid' which the vision articulated, and in which it found art's ethical, and religious, basis. 'Dämmern', in the later stages of *Lenz*, is associated with the sense that this organic experience is needful but elusive, and these later instances stand in implied contrary relation to the evening time idealized by Lenz in the *Kunstgespräch*, namely the setting of Carel van Savoy's *Christ in Emmaus* ('Es ist ein trüber, dämmernder Abend', 235).²⁴ Lenz's involvements with others show his attachment to a promise of art to be irreconcilable with the actual complexities of an ethical world. 'Gegen Abend kam Lenz wieder', we are told following his fateful encounter with a dying girl in Fouday: 'es dämmerte in der Stube' (241). Shadows lengthening in a room are identical with the projections of grief: 'Es ist mir dabei oft, als fühlt' ich physischen Schmerz, da in der linken Seite, im Arm, womit ich sie [the child] sonst faßte. Doch kann ich sie mir nicht mehr vorstellen, das Bild läuft mir fort' (240–41). Beneath the anguished realism, we can make out a philosophical language encompassing 'representation' and 'image' ('vorstellen', linked to 'Bild') that goes back to Lenz's vision of the function of art, in relation to religion and suffering, in the *Kunstgespräch*. This passage subsumes a relationship between embodied finitude, religious meaning and (aesthetic) image. But it also shows the relationship disintegrating, not least in a hairline fracture between perception and experience (it *seems* to Lenz that he feels pain). The girl's ethical substance cannot be made present; the image, which would preserve it as an object of empathetic attention, dissolves.

The atmospheric medium of the breakdown is, explicitly, the twilight which suffuses the domestic setting here. This 'Abenddämmerung' holds neither a sense of death as meaningful, let alone as met by resurrection (the symbolic transition to 'Morgendämmerung' deployed by Friedrich in *Winterlandschaft mit Kirche*), and the latter is travestied in Lenz's 'religiöse[] Quälereien' (241), specifically his mad, blasphemous attempt to bring the dead girl back to life; nor does it suggest a passing that can become the occasion for elegy, and so for a form of aesthetic recuperation. In Friedrich what emerges from 'Dämmerung', in the daylight of the Dresden Heath, is (nothing but) the image. In Büchner there is no result of emergence, and certainly not in art, for the fading evening light is the loss of the image itself as a meaningful dimension of the way the self relates to its world. The night which follows this dusk is presented as a recapitulation of the earlier vignette of mountains and moonlight, but this time in the frenetic motion of collapse. Indeed it is presented — extraordinarily — as the disappearance of 'landscape', of the Romantic setting for experience: '[...] dann jagte es ihn auf, hinaus in's Gebirg. Wolken zogen rasch über den Mond; bald Alles im Finstern, bald zeigten sie die nebelhaft verschwindende Landschaft im Mondschein' (242). Clouds which, curiously, 'show' the landscape disappearing, imbue this moment with a sense that landscape is disappearing as an image or symbolic structure. Overwhelmingly Büchner's

²³See Walker, "'Ach die Kunst!... Ach, die erbärmliche Wirklichkeit!'", pp. 167–68.

²⁴See for example Paul Requaadt, 'Zu Büchners Kunstanschauung: das "Niederländische" und das Grotteske, Jean Paul und Victor Hugo', in idem, *Bildlichkeit der Dichtung: Aufsätze zur deutschen Literatur vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Fink, 1974), pp. 106–37 (pp. 108–113).

scene recalls and disrupts the way Friedrich, ‘in the concealing and revealing fogs, mists and clouds of his painted landscapes [...] emblemizes nature [...] as a process parallel to his art.’²⁵ What has been gathering in the ‘Dämmerung’ of evening, and now unleashes itself in a rapid, lunatic flickering of cloud and moonlight, is the destruction of that understanding of nature in which evening and ‘Dämmerung’ took on their prominence as analogues of a self overshadowed by death but projecting into infinite horizons. Now, in Lenz’s final estrangement, the horizon of landscape is narrow, constricting, and the text rings with this oppressive quality, jarring us with rhymes as we read and Lenz stumbles: ‘die Landschaft beängstigte ihn, sie war so eng, daß er an Alles zu stoßen fürchtete’ (245).

In the story’s last moments, as Lenz is taken from Waldbach towards Strasbourg on the evening of 8th February, we see him receding against the backdrop of a winter sunset which is evoked with intractable complexities of warmth and cold, hardness and a dancing play of light: ‘Gegen Abend waren sie im Rheintale. Sie entfernten sich allmählig vom Gebirg, das nun wie eine tiefblaue Krystallwelle sich in das Abendrot hob, und auf deren warmer Flut die roten Strahlen des Abend[s] spielten’ (250). The interplay of contrary elements, and the ‘gradual’ opening of distance between Lenz and the evoked natural setting, correspond to a transition in the evening framework itself. For we see that the story concludes in the time of ‘Dämmerung’, which is now described rather than named, and from which Lenz himself is detached to the greatest possible degree: ‘Lenz starrte ruhig hinaus, keine Ahnung, kein Drang; nur wuchs eine dumpfe Angst in ihm, je mehr die Gegenstände sich in der Finsternis verloren’ (250). The connection between ‘becoming’ in nature (‘Es wurde finster’) and emergence (‘wuchs’) in Lenz’s subjective state subsists in the negation of any possibility that the darkening motion could reveal something to the viewing self. What emerges in Lenz is, we might say, the opposite of emergence or motion: impassivity, dumb fear. In fact the disappearance of ‘things’ (‘Gegenstände’) in the growing darkness, and the mood this produces in Lenz, subvert an assumption of Romantic religion as formulated by Schleiermacher. For Schleiermacher religion, in its attachment to the particularity of things, raises them out of the anonymous mass of objects and ‘macht Alles zu einem Gegenstande für sich.’²⁶ The melancholy character of the attachment, rooted in longing, found definitive expression in the evening ‘Dämmerungen’ of Friedrich. By the close of *Lenz*, however, a devastating inversion has taken place. ‘Dämmerung’ now returns ‘things’ to an oppressive blankness. And as Lenz lives on in a state of bare existence, longing itself (‘kein Drang [...] kein Verlangen’, 250) is dead.

Büchner’s *Lenz*, the story of a theologian’s gradual alienation, is full of tensions which are recognizably those of post-Romantic Germany: most clearly, it reflects an awareness of religion’s secularization in art as a problem. But outside the local German dialectic between (Protestant) religion and art, it was possible to invoke the presiding spirits of the German intellectual tradition without joining in the tradition’s particular subsequent crises. Thirty years after *Lenz*, in his *Winterbriefe aus Kirchschatz* (1866), Stifter presented as an occasion for awe the winter’s night as it could be experienced in pockets of rural human society amid swathes of forest and vast mountain regions:

Und doch kann auf der Spitze des Berges unter der ungeheuren Himmels-glocke, wenn in klaren Winternächten die millionenfache und millionenfache Welt über unsern Häuptern

²⁵Koerner, *Subject of Landscape*, p. 225.

²⁶KGA, I, 12, p. 153.

brennt, und wir in Betrachtung unter ihr dahin wandeln, ein Gefühl in unsere Seele kommen, das alle unsere kleinen Leiden und Bekümmernisse majestätisch überhüllt und verstummen macht, und uns eine Größe und Ruhe gibt, der man sich beugt.²⁷

The evocation here is latently Kantian, infused both with an ambience of sublimity and with famous imagery from the end of the second *Critique*: ‘der bestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir’.²⁸ And in his preface to *Bunte Steine* (1853) Stifter — drawing probably on Kant’s pupil Herder — wrote that ‘So wie es in der äußeren Natur ist, so ist es auch in der inneren, in der des menschlichen Geschlechtes’.²⁹ That statement, on the surface so reasonably epigrammatic, so settled and perhaps eighteenth-century in the parallels it invokes, has slippery implications which unfold in the narrative technique of Stifter’s stories: especially in the single most intense account of winter evening in nineteenth-century literature in German, *Bergkristall*.

Though Stifter’s ‘Größe und Ruhe [...] der man sich beugt’ conjures the Kantian matrix, these qualities are revealed in Stifter’s stories as never a matter of individual existence, experience or moral self-formation.³⁰ In his landscapes ‘submission’ to silent grandeur is much less related to any possible purposiveness of the self (even to Lenz’s abyssal searching for rest) than it is a mode of heightened exposure to vastly indifferent, endlessly stratified nature. Nature threatens the fragile traditions of meaning comprising human culture. As Konrad and Sanna in *Bergkristall* trudge on into Christmas evening amid the blinding whiteness of snow, their feet seem to make contact with a layer of unnameable geohistory. Typically for Stifter, the contact is registered as impinging faintly and darkly at the edge of awareness. And there is a curious distance between consciousness and sensation. Their feet (actually, even more oddly, ‘their foot’) are described as ‘feeling’ — having ‘Empfindungen’ — in their own right, as it were in a condition of distinction from the cognizing subjectivity which ‘notices’ this: ‘Sie merkten auch, dass ihr Fuß, wo er tiefer durch den jungen Schnee einsank, nicht erdigen Boden unter sich empfand, sondern etwas anderes, das wie älterer gefrorener Schnee war’.³¹ There are precedents for this, notably Büchner’s insertions of a gap between what Lenz thinks and what he feels. But Stifter’s tiny suggestion of discontinuity, we might say between Herder’s terms ‘Erkennen’ and ‘Empfinden’, ramifies in the reader’s lasting uncertainty as to the meaning of the experience of nature that is being narrated. Insofar as Stifter takes up the wanderer motif in the children’s journey, he detaches it from the domain of reflective synthesis and suspends it above a suggestion of primordial depths, ‘etwas anderes’, which threaten much more than the discrete self (as is the case in *Lenz*). Rather, the hinted depths might swallow the entire evolved forms of ethical being — expressed for example in the ritual language of the sibling bond, Sanna’s constantly repeated response to her brother: ‘Ja, Konrad’ — through which the continued existence of communities is possible.

In *Bergkristall* the theme of winter’s evening is made to mean Christmas: ‘mitten im Winter [...] so heißt er bei uns der heilige Abend’ (183). That is the context of human community, and metaphysical meaning, overlaying the children’s journey into snow and their

²⁷Adalbert Stifter, *Winterbriefe aus Kirchschatz*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gustav Wilhelm, 25 vols (Reichenberg: Kraus, 1935), XV, 2, p. 280.

²⁸Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 5, p. 161.

²⁹Adalbert Stifter, *Werke und Briefe: Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Alfred Doppler and Wolfgang Frühwald (since 2001 Alfred Doppler and Hartmut Laufhütte), 10 vols in 35 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982–), II, 2, p. 12. On this passage see Martin and Erika Swales, *Adalbert Stifter: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 31.

³⁰Cf. Nicholas Boyle, *Eine kleine deutsche Literaturgeschichte* (Munich: Beck, 2009), p. 230.

³¹*Werke und Briefe*, II, 2, p. 216. Subsequent references to *Bergkristall* are given in the text.

experiencing, in the icy hospice of a cave, ‘Ruhe’ and a certain ‘Größe’, which are manifest as a fearlessness before the dark: ‘so ruhten die Kinder enge aneinander sitzend, und vergaßen sogar die Finsterniß zu fürchten’ (223). The text insists on the analogue so strenuously that it seems brittle, the top layer of cultural deposit — formed out of natural mechanisms of habitation and survival — but the strenuousness is utterly serious. On the one hand the ‘metaphysical’ frame of interpretation — the children’s communion with flasks of coffee in the cave under the stars, its emphatic chronological parallel to the Christmas Mass in the village, landscape details merging into the iconography of Nativity — seems to be loosened into the past the more emphatically it is evoked. At the end of the story the narrator, with the voice of considered retrospect and a certain distant, anthropological precision (marking him as a contemporary of, for example, Feuerbach), gives us a closing view of the punctual ‘event’ (‘Ereignis’) being subsumed into the processes of a claimant will to survival: ‘Die Kinder waren von dem Tage an erst recht das Eigentum des Dorfes geworden, sie wurden von nun an nicht mehr als Auswärtige sondern als Eingeborne betrachtet, die man sich von dem Berge herabgeholt hatte’ (239). That would make us apparently dispassionate observers of the power of mythmaking in the creation of identity. On the other hand, no means of survival is envisaged that would be distinct from commitment to the moral codes embodied in the community’s traditional practices, from the context of assumptions within which Sanna tells her mother: ‘Mutter, ich habe heute Nachts, als wir auf dem Berge sassen, den heiligen Christ gesehen’ (239). This complex, climactic moment is an unresolved refraction of ‘äußere’ and ‘innere Natur’, where the objective truth of what Sanna says is neither definitively challenged by any perspective the text adopts nor recoverable from a subjective interiority into which it does not venture and which plays no constitutive part in its narrative structure.

As this example shows, there is in Stifter’s stories a pure narrative surface which in *Bergkristall* has a perfect analogue in the smooth, treacherous texture of ice (‘sehr glatt und fein geschliffen’, 221). And in Stifter’s approach ‘Dämmerung’ is relieved of any fixity it has as a Romantic narrative trope, including in post-Romantic modifications of it which nonetheless remain within the individualist subjective horizon.³² In *Bergkristall* ‘Dämmerung’ is neither an external correlate to, nor an internal expression of, a subjective state of mind. As in *Lenz*, it is the decisive atmospheric element of the story’s temporal structure. But unlike Büchner, Stifter invokes the term with extreme economy (five times in total). There is one occurrence of the (nominalized) verb, in the narrator’s initial account of the village’s topography and surroundings, and it differs from Büchner’s usage on two scores. It secures the landscape as a form of idyll (sketched by the narrator in the colours of Biedermeier political sentiment) while detaching ‘Dämmern’ from any particular structure of subjective viewpoint, thus quietly suggesting that the fragrant idyll is indifferent to what it frames:

In den hohen Gebirgen unsers Vaterlandes steht ein Dörfchen mit einem kleinen aber sehr spitzigen Kirchturme, der mit seiner rothen Farbe [...] aus dem Grün vieler Obstbäume hervorragt [...] und wegen derselben rothen Farbe in dem duftigen und blauen Dämmern der Berge weithin ersichtlich ist. (185)

Twilight (‘Abenddämmerung’) in *Bergkristall* equates to a slippage between security and threat, and between the possibilities of interpreting experience which the story holds open (and whose relation it does not resolve). Stifter’s expansive narrator establishes it as having religious symbolic significance:

³²Cf. Gerhard Lauer, ‘Der Trost der Poesie: Stifters *Abdias*’, *German Life and Letters*, 68 (2015), 569–83 (p. 572): ‘Stifters hoher Anspruch an das Erzählen erfolgt mit modernen Mitteln jenseits der Romantik.’

Man pflegt den Kindern die Geschenke zu geben, die das heilige Christkindlein gebracht hat [...] Das thut man gewöhnlich am heiligen Abende, wenn die tiefe Dämmerung eingetreten ist [...] Die Kinder dürfen nicht eher kommen, als bis das Zeichen gegeben wird, daß der heilige Christ zugegen gewesen ist. (184)

Here, characteristically for the story, 'Dämmerung' is evoked as almost over, on the point of becoming night. And the capacity for evening to signify Advent is linked to bonds of social (domestic) solidarity: 'Mit dem Kirchenfeste ist auch ein häusliches verbunden' (183). In the course of the story the ever-present threat to the social and ethical bond portends (to the reader) a different sense of 'Dämmerung', namely one where the infinite proximity to night would be a last flicker before belief in the traditional meanings is taken up in the survival and strife of indifferent, pre-human nature.

When 'Dämmerung' next occurs, in the adumbrating account of Konrad's and Sanna's excursions into the surrounding area, it is associated with danger thankfully still held off, but therefore with the possibility of an ominous transgression of boundaries, beyond known reaches: 'Er führte sie oft über den Wald hinaus [...] aber er führte sie wieder zurück, und brachte sie immer vor der Abenddämmerung nach Hause, was ihm stets Lob eintrug' (202–03). In the central portion of the story, telling of the children's experience lost in the snow, the boundaries give way and 'Dämmerung' becomes a principle of temporal, and narrative, confusion — its shifting, ungraspable quality is linked to the dark immeasurable extents of time which are sensed in the icy vastness. Here the narrator's tone of apparent authority persists without abashment. Yet it expresses uncertainties in the perception of time that call into question the stabilizing temporality of chronicle and tradition which the narrator inhabits. 'Aber es war auch endlich finster geworden. "Sanna", sagte der Knabe, "Wir können nicht mehr hinab gehen, weil es Nacht geworden ist"' (221). Shortly afterwards these categorical, perfective declarations seem exiguously rescinded, and night is still in (rapid) onset: 'So weit sie in der Dämmerung zu sehen vermochten, lag überall der flimmernde Schnee hinab [...] Die Nacht brach mit der in großen Höhen gewöhnlichen Schnelligkeit herein' (223). This is a recapitulation, in a dwelling of stone and ice, of the 'tiefe Dämmerung' that was named as the setting of domestic Christmas, and the narrator imposes the connection as a convergence of natural and cultural time which, typically, has force because it seems constructed in a retrospect that can pretend to omniscience: 'Das war der Zeitpunkt, in welchem man in den Thälern die Lichter anzuzünden pflegt' (224). But the recapitulation, and the narrator's keenness to draw the moment back into the rhythms of a continuing tradition (of present-tense custom, 'pflegt') serve to alert us to the possibility that what is passing in Stifter's 'Dämmerung' is the primacy, over against nature, of the historical (religious) meanings which the narrator elaborates and represents.

Recapitulation as a form of development, practised by Stifter as a narrative technique, was a central term of the evolutionary theories, contemporary with his writing, which sought to uncover nature's own, vaster, history.³³ Stifter's recapitulative narrative pattern is focused on developing, and never fixing, the possible significance of that point of evening's becoming night: from Christmas around the family hearth ('mitten in der Stube', 184), via the culmination of the children's journey in the 'Dämmerung' which surrounds the surrogate home ('Häuschen', 221) of the cave and lifts to reveal starry infinities, to the tantalizingly

³³See for example Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 531–33.

(im)precise moment (“Spät gegen Abend”) when, against the backdrop of restored domestic community (‘da einige Nachbarn und Freunde sich in der Stube eingefunden hatten’, 239), Sanna tells her mother of the revelation she experienced on the mountain. The theological status of what she says, and of the life of the community she has re-entered, is left utterly ambiguous. Her mother takes her words up into the narrative pathos of family piety: “O du mein geduldiges, du mein liebes, du mein herziges Kind,” antwortete die Mutter, “er hat dir auch Gaben gesendet, die du bald bekommen wirst” (239). But the mother is emphatically interested (‘Auch ihre Mutter Sanna war nun eine Eingeborne von Gscheid’, 240), and the scope of the reader’s possible assent is radically open: do we see a religious affirmation or an instance of will to survival? The story has suggested that neither interpretative possibility offers us much security.

Late evening ‘Dämmerung’ in *Bergkristall* is far either from being a Romantic analogue of longing, or from expressing the negation of subjective longing which was the tension of *Lenz*. By the end of Stifter’s story it is, rather, a moment of fading in which the foundations of a form of historical life seem to begin appearing in a different light. But Stifter does not presume to answer definitively the question of value which this shift raises, and presents the traditional forms as internally intuitive — however strained they may appear to the outside eye — to the end. In the last sentence the initial ‘idyll’ of ‘Dämmern’ and mountain blue is recapitulated by the narrator in a (comically) restorative domestic vein, as if the experience of winter’s evening becoming night had given way to nothing but summer garden daylight and morals to be drawn:

Die Kinder aber werden den Berg nicht vergessen, und werden ihn jetzt noch ernster betrachten, wenn sie in dem Garten sind, wenn wie in der Vergangenheit die Sonne sehr schön scheint, der Lindenbaum duftet, die Bienen summen, und er so schön und so blau wie das sanfte Firmament auf sie hernieder schaut. (240)

The temporality of tradition, of future-tense projection anchored in a memorial past, is maintained, if creakingly. At the same time the narrator’s partiality has never been more to the fore than in this blandly repetitious (‘sehr schön [...] so schön’), personifying final vision, with its attachment to tropes of ‘Heimat’ and its suggestion of that ‘strangled didacticism’ which has been seen as an aspect of Stifter’s anguished political subjectivity.³⁴ At the end of *Bergkristall*, a sunny imagining of home and mountains and the firmament is associated so forcedly with a community whose future existence is being conjured in cliché that the narrative voice describing that future already seems to be tipping into past-ness. Summer, we might say, is already passing, and evening will draw on. In the gathering darkness the certainty of the narrator’s vision will fade. Moreover, the subtle, not to say inscrutable, prospect of fading vision summoned when Stifter evokes summer and daytime is a culmination in a lineage we have identified running through Romantic and post-Romantic art and literature in the German-speaking lands. In this lineage the motif of winter evening, and its many ambiguous shades of ‘Dämmerung’, reflect death and desire and the complexities of historical consciousness. Winter evening undergoes decisive change in its transition from the realm of Romantic longing to forms of characteristically post-Romantic distance, but from Friedrich to Stifter it has a continuous emblematic relevance to the intellectual and existential concerns of the nineteenth century.

³⁴Michael Minden, *Modern German Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 73.

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