

'WARUM NUN DIESES?': *VERBLENDUNG* AND *VERSCHULDEN* IN THE STORIES OF ADALBERT STIFTER

HELENA RAGG-KIRKBY

ABSTRACT

'Warum nun dieses?' This is a question that people have been asking for hundreds of years. Why do terrible things happen? On the surface, Adalbert Stifter claims that there is a simple, God-given explanation for everything – and that all will be clear to us once we have obtained the 'right perspective'. Below their serene surfaces, however, his texts suggest something more sinister. For not only is our own blindness such that we mostly only ever see what we imagine or invent – but, if we *do* ever see the 'truth', then what we will see is that we ourselves are responsible for the disasters that so inexplicably befall us. In this respect, Stifter's fiction is Kafka's *avant la lettre*: Stifter is so to speak Kafka in a different key – apparently sunnier, but in truth even more menacing.

Ich fand mich einmal wieder in dem Entsetzlichen, Zugrunderichtenden [...] Dann war Klingen, Verwirrung, Schmerz in meinen Händen und Blut daran, die Mutter verband mich, und dann war ein Bild, das so klar vor mir jetzt dasteht, als wäre es in reinlichen Farben auf Porzellan gemalt. Ich stand in dem Garten, der von damals zuerst in meiner Einbildungskraft ist, die Mutter war da, dann die andere Großmutter, deren Gestalt in jenem Augenblicke auch zum ersten Male in mein Gedächtnis kam, in mir war die Erleichterung, die alle Male auf das Weichen des Entsetzlichen und Zugrunderichtenden folgte, und ich sagte: 'Mutter, da wächst ein Kornhalm'. Die Großmutter antwortete darauf: 'Mit einem Knaben, der die Fenster zerschlagen hat, redet man nicht.' Ich verstand zwar den Zusammenhang nicht, aber das Außerordentliche, das eben von mir gewichen war, kam sogleich wieder; die Mutter sprach wirklich kein Wort, und ich erinnere mich, daß ein ganz Ungeheures auf meiner Seele lag, das mag der Grund sein, daß jener Vorgang noch jetzt in meinem Innern lebt. (MSB 604)¹

The details of Stifter's death are well known: his gruesome and messy suicide (he slit his throat, but was stitched up again and died two days later) has been pored over and interpreted by most modern critics.² We instantly encounter a contradiction: the man who preaches 'Mäßigung' and the 'sanftes Gesez' dies an unimaginably dreadful, self-inflicted death. But is this self-mutilation really at odds with the rest of his life? 'Mein

¹ Page references are cited as follows: all references with the prefix *NS* relate to *Der Nachsommer*, Munich 1969; references prefixed *MSB* relate to *Die Mappe meines Urgroßvaters/Schilderungen/Briefe*, Munich 1979; references prefixed *GW* relate to *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt a.M. 1959; references without a prefix are to the *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Alfred Doppler and Wolfgang Frühwald, Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne/Mainz 1978ff.

² It is typical that critics even disagree about how Stifter died. For conflicting views, see Hermann Augustin, *Adalbert Stifters Krankheit und Tod. Eine biographische Quellenstudie*, Basel/Stuttgart 1964, pp. 135–7, and Andreas Markus, *Der Tod Adalbert Stifters*, Neudeln/Liechtenstein 1967, p. 5.

Leben' suggests not. Here Stifter recounts an incident from his earliest years – and his primal experience is one of fracture, terror, pain, alienation, impending destruction, 'das Entsetzliche' and 'das Zugrunderichtende'. This is his first memory: a memory of trauma, a look into the abyss at a very young age. A monstrous dimension ('ein [...] Ungeheueres') suddenly opens up beneath the surface harmony. His mother initially does what all mothers do and bandages his injured hands ('die Mutter verband mich') – but she then does the impossible, the unthinkable: she betrays him ('die Mutter sprach wirklich kein Wort'). Kafka will later touch a similar nerve: 'Der Mensch kann nicht leben ohne ein dauerndes Vertrauen zu etwas Unzerstörbarem in sich, wobei sowohl das Unzerstörbare als auch das Vertrauen ihm dauernd verborgen bleiben können'.³ Such an illusion of 'ein dauerndes Vertrauen' is abruptly shattered in Stifter's childhood, and this experience is played out in his fiction in countless different guises. A surface of continuity, meaning, moderation (signified in 'Mein Leben' by his words: 'Mutter, da wächst ein Kornhalm') repeatedly cracks open to reveal a monstrous void beneath; 'Wonne und Entzücken' (*MSB* 602), '[das] Süße [und das] Stillende' (*MSB* 603) give way to '[das] Jammervolle [und das] Unleidliche' (*ibid.*), which threaten to destroy him ('[drang] fast vernichtend in mein Wesen', *MSB* 602). The abyss opens up early for Stifter, and he spends his entire creative life trying and failing to close it, trying in vain to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

This attempt to close the abyss is, for Stifter, largely related to how we see things: if we look properly, so he suggests, we will be able to bridge the void and make sense of the way in which terrifying Otherness, 'das Außerordentliche', can descend upon a hapless child. In 'Abdias', it is God-given 'Vernunft' which is offered as the 'right' perspective: it is said to be 'das Auge der Seele' (1,5: 238). We find a similar formulation ten years later in the *Bunte Steine* 'Vorrede', in which Stifter draws a distinction between the 'Blik des Unkundigen und Unaufmerksamen', which is attracted to the ostentatious but ephemeral 'Ergebnisse einseitiger Ursachen', and the 'Geisteszug des Forschers', which is concerned with the world-sustaining 'Ganze und Allgemeine' (2,2: 10). Significantly, he does not merely apply this distinction to any one individual; rather, the development towards Reason through a particular manner of seeing is related to the development of humankind as a whole:

Da die Menschen in der Kindheit waren, ihr geistiges Auge von der Wissenschaft noch nicht berührt war, wurden sie von dem Nahestehenden und Auffälligen ergriffen, und zu Furcht und Bewunderung hingerissen: aber als ihr Sinn geöffnet wurde, da der Blik sich auf den Zusammenhang zu richten begann, so sanken die einzelnen Erscheinungen immer tiefer, und es erhob

³ Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, ed. Brod, [Frankfurt a.M.] 1953, pp. 90–1.

sich das Gesez immer höher, die Wunderbarkeiten hörten auf, das Wunder nahm zu. (2,2: 11–12)

The same rationalist, even scientific, perspective is evoked when he speaks of 'das geistige [Auge] der Wissenschaft' (2,2: 11), by means of which man may ultimately achieve an 'Überblik über ein Größeres' (2,2: 15). This is the phrase which he uses to convey a state of being that has achieved complete objectivity and is able to see the ultimate order of Reason, the 'gestaltvolles vernunftgemäßes Ganzes' (2,2: 14). Stifter, then, links the 'right' perspective to *Vernunft*: man has been given a capacity for rational thought so that he may comprehend the unfailingly orderly workings of the world.

'Order' and 'orderliness' throughout the universe imply, of course, an 'orderer', and it is again the human mind with its analytical and connective powers which, in Stifter's view, enables mankind to perceive the *divine* orderedness of things. This is particularly evident in the opening paragraphs of 'Die Sonnenfinsternis', where the narrator rejoices that the power of man's *Verstand* enables him to experience the majesty of the eclipse which is truly divine:

Vor tausendmaltausend Jahren hat Gott es so gemacht, daß es heute zu dieser Sekunde sein wird; in unsere Herzen aber hat er die Fibern gelegt, es zu empfinden. Durch die Schrift seiner Sterne hat er versprochen, daß es kommen werde nach tausend und tausend Jahren, unsere Väter haben diese Schrift entziffern gelernt, und die Sekunde angesagt, in der es eintreffen müsse; wir, die späten Enkel, richten unsere Augen und Sehröhre zu gedachter Sekunde gegen die Sonne, und siehe: es kommt – der Verstand triumphiert schon, daß er ihm die Pracht und Einrichtung seiner Himmel nachgerechnet und abgelernt hat – und in der Tat, der Triumph ist einer der gerechtesten des Menschen. (MSB 504)

The religious tenor of this passage makes it quite clear that the term 'Überblik über ein Größeres' implies not a cold, detached understanding of the mere *mechanics* of the universe, but an essentially *religious* awareness of their marvellous God-given-ness. Stifter's Enlightenment/Age of Science view is one which sees the development from metaphorical infancy to the realisation of the powers of the human mind. Moreover, he sees exactly the same development in *moral* terms. The *locus classicus* of this view is again the 'Vorrede', where he actually speaks of the 'sittliche Geschichte der Menschen' in which the 'Überblik' effects a transformation from 'heftige Empfindungen und Leidenschaften' to 'Recht [...] und Großmuth gegen den Feind und Unterdrückung seiner Empfindungen und Leidenschaften zum Besten der Gerechtigkeit [...] [und] Mäßigung' (2,2: 15). In the chapter on Stifter in his book *The German Novelle*, Swales rightly points out that the 'Vorrede' closes with reflections on man's development to ethical maturity: a development which, he states,

'expresses itself above all in a change of perspective'.⁴ Indeed, this connection in human history between full moral development and a change in perspective is found in microcosm fifteen years after *Bunte Steine* in *Der Nachsommer*. Despite being apparently free from such 'heftige Empfindungen und Leidenschaften' from the very outset of the novel, Heinrich Drendorf is seen to progress via 'die natürliche Entwicklung der Dinge' (1,5: 445) towards ethical maturity; a progression which is charted through his altering perspective on the statue which dominates Risach's marble staircase. After several visits to the Rosenhaus, Heinrich says of this 'Mädchengestalt': 'sie kam mir heute ganz anders vor' (NS 326); later, he remarks: 'Ich sah die Gestalt lange an, sie war mir wie bei jedem erneuerten Anblicke wieder neu' (NS 599). That Heinrich's ethical development is accompanied by a shift in perspective is clear from the way in which he finally comes to realise the true beauty of the statue. This connection, moreover, is made explicit by Stifter in the following conversation between Risach and his young disciple:

'Warum habt Ihr mir denn nicht gesagt', sprach ich weiter, 'daß die Bildsäule, welche auf Eurer Marmortreppe steht, so schön ist?'
 'Wer hat es Euch denn jetzt gesagt?' fragte er.
 'Ich habe es selber gesehen', antwortete ich.
 'Nun dann werdet Ihr es um so sicherer wissen und mit desto größerer Festigkeit glauben', erwiderte er, 'als wenn Euch jemand eine Behauptung darüber gesagt hätte.' (NS 327–8)

It is Heinrich's progress towards achieving this full moral potential which brings about the change in his perception of the world around him. Having learnt from both his father and Risach, not to mention from his own observations of nature, he declares, using terms which instantly call the 'Vorrede' to mind: 'Großes ist mir klein, Kleines ist mir groß' (NS 189). The true essence of the objects which make up the 'vernunftgemäßes Ganzes' (2,2: 14) can only be perceived and appreciated once man has realised his inner potential, and in the course of this process they steadily take on 'ein anderes Aussehen' (NS 296).

Throughout his creative life, then, Stifter clearly postulates a 'right' perspective – and, moreover, makes this one of the central themes of his prose. Swales is again sensitive to this aspect of the fiction, stating: 'in Stifter's narrative art the act of interpretation, of establishing perspective, is part of the central theme';⁵ this, as we shall see, is particularly true in the case of 'Abdias'. More specifically, and no less pertinently, Watanabe-O'Kelly suggests that 'perhaps the greatest Stifterian theme of all [is] seeing and seeing truly [...] if one sees with the eyes only, one is blind. One

⁴ Martin Swales, *The German 'Novelle'*, Princeton 1977, p. 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

must see with the heart'.⁶ This is clearly the ethical thrust of 'Brigitta'. In the opening paragraph, the narrator remarks:

In dem Angesichte eines Häßlichen ist für uns oft eine innere Schönheit, die wir nicht auf der Stelle von seinem Werthe herzuleiten vermögen, während uns oft die Züge eines andern kalt und leer sind, von denen alle sagen, daß sie die größte Schönheit besitzen. (1,5: 411)

Implicit in this passage is the distinction between appearance and reality – a distinction which presupposes an unproblematic reality. Only the heart can perceive this true beauty which is an essentially moral reality ('Daß zuletzt sittliche Gründe vorhanden sind, die das Herz heraus fühlt, ist kein Zweifel', *ibid.*). Of course, this belief pervades not only the first paragraph, but is – on one level, at least – the principal theme of 'Brigitta'. 'Oft wird die Schönheit nicht gesehen, weil sie in der Wüste ist, oder weil das rechte Auge nicht gekommen ist' (1,5: 445–6), comments the narrator halfway through the story, as he embarks upon his account of the eponymous heroine's barren childhood. He pursues the theme of 'true' seeing throughout the chapter 'Steppenvergangenheit', lamenting three pages later: 'Wenn nur einer gewesen wäre, für die verhüllte Seele ein Auge zu haben, und ihre Schönheit zu sehen, daß sie sich nicht verachte' (1,5: 448). Brigitta's errant husband, meanwhile, is made to recognise and repeat the moral of the story: 'ja, es zieht uns das Gesetz der Schönheit, aber ich mußte die ganze Welt durchziehen, bis ich lernte, daß sie im Herzen liegt' (1,5: 473). 'Abdias' is even more explicit in its postulation of a 'true' perspective which comes from the heart. For instance, after smallpox has hideously scarred Abdias's exceptionally handsome face and left him repellent to his wife, Deborah, the narrator immediately comments on her partial vision: 'sie hatte nur leibliche Augen empfangen um die Schönheit des Körpers zu sehen, nicht geistige, die des Herzens' (1,5: 249–50). Deborah is not alone in failing to perceive inner beauty: Abdias, too, sees only her physical attributes ('er [sah] auch nichts, als ihre große Schönheit', 1,5: 250). In contrast, his daughter Ditha, though physically blind, does possess the 'right' way to see, incapable as she is of being misled by the spectacle of his outward deformity: 'denn was die Außenwelt für ihre Augen war, das war er für ihr Herz – ja er war ihr noch mehr, als die Außenwelt; denn sie glaubte immer, er sei es, der ihr diese ganze äußere Welt gegeben habe' (1,5: 328). Here as in 'Brigitta', we are shown man apparently achieving a perspective whereby he can see the truth that is moral beauty.

Both 'Brigitta' and 'Abdias' treat the theme of a true moral perspective in the context of human relationships. This, though, is only one aspect of a much broader philosophical issue, namely the whole problematic relationship between man and the world around him. How are we to inter-

⁶ Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (trans.), *Brigitta and Other Tales*, London 1994, p. 14.

pret this relationship? How can we be sure that we have the 'right' perspective? How are we to fathom the meaning of the universe? How are we to answer the eternal question 'warum nun dieses' (1,5: 239)? – a question that Kafka's 'Landvermesser' will repeat almost verbatim in *Das Schloß*: 'Warum dies alles? Warum dies alles?'⁷ Precisely these concerns are thematised in the exordium of 'Abdias', when Stifter has the narrator ponder on the fact that, quite out of the blue, some individuals suffer a deluge of extreme misfortune, whilst others become the target of equally extreme good fortune:

Es gibt Menschen, auf welche eine solche Reihe Ungemach aus heiterm Himmel fällt, daß sie endlich da stehen und das hagelnde Gewitter über sich ergehen lassen: so wie es auch andere gibt, die das Glück mit solchem ausgesuchten Eigensinne heimsucht, daß es scheint, als kehrten sich in einem gegebenen Falle die Naturgesetze um, damit es nur zu ihrem Heile ausschlage. (1,5: 237)

This process is beyond human understanding: the laws of nature bestow 'Segen' one day, 'das Entsetzliche' the next, and we can only stand bemused and suppose that some supreme but invisible entity is responsible: 'uns ist, als lange ein unsichtbarer Arm aus der Wolke, und thue vor unsern Augen das Unbegreifliche' (*ibid.*). Throughout human history, men have sought to comprehend the incomprehensible by making essentially the same supposition, namely that there is a metaphysical or godly design behind the apparently random visitations of Fortune and Misfortune. To the ancients this was grim Fate, 'Fatum, furchtbar letzter starrer Grund des Geschehenden' (1,5: 237–8); to the moderns, somewhat more benignly, it is 'Schicksal, also ein von einer höhern Macht Gesendetes, das wir empfangen sollen' (1,5: 238). Through his narrator, however, Stifter proceeds to offer a radically different explanation: he posits that there is no such thing as 'Fate', no such thing as 'Schicksal', but instead an infinite concatenation of Cause and Effect.⁸ The explanation is presented in conspicuously pretty and benign terms: the concatenation is a 'heitre Blumenkette' that man's Reason is capable of tracing right through to the implicitly divine hand that holds and controls it:

Aber eigentlich mag es weder ein Fatum geben, als letzte Unvernunft des Seins, noch auch wird das Einzelne auf uns gesendet; sondern eine heitre Blumenkette hängt durch die Unendlichkeit des Alls und sendet ihren Schimmer in die Herzen – die Kette der Ursachen und Wirkungen – und

⁷ Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß*, ed. Brod, [Frankfurt a.M.] 1964, p. 381.

⁸ Neugebauer offers an alternative explanation for Stifter's dismissal of 'Fatum' and 'Schicksal', but he overlooks crucial aspects of the texts when he claims: 'Wenn er [Stifter] sagt, es gebe eigentlich weder Fatum noch Schicksal, dann spricht er vom Standpunkt des aufgeklärten Vernunftmenschen aus, dem solche geschichtlichen Phänomene zweifelhaft zu werden beginnen' (Klaus Neugebauer, *Selbstentwurf und Verhängnis. Ein Beitrag zu Adalbert Stifters Verständnis von Schicksal und Geschichte*, Tübingen 1982, p. 24).

in das Haupt des Menschen ward die schönste dieser Blumen geworfen, die Vernunft, das Auge der Seele, die Kette daran anzuknüpfen, und an ihr Blume um Blume, Glied um Glied hinab zu zählen bis zuletzt zu jener Hand, in der das Ende ruht. (*ibid.*)

Two things are particularly striking about this seemingly comforting and confident vision as the narrator goes on to elaborate it. One is that, although the human mind is said to be blessed with the ability to trace the chain of causes and effects to its very ends, this will be achieved only at some unimaginably remote point in the future: the 'flower-chain' stretches through all infinity ('durch die Unendlichkeit des Alls'), it is 'unermesslich' in the number of its links, and it is so immense that in over a thousand years we have managed to perceive nothing but a few individual petals ('Wohl zählt nun das menschliche Geschlecht schon aus einem Jahrtausende in das andere, aber von der großen Kette der Blumen sind nur erst einzelne Blätter aufgedeckt', *ibid.*); for now and for any kind of foreseeable future, we are left with 'Lücken', the ætiology of events remains 'ein heiliges Räthsel' (*ibid.*). It is perhaps surprising that more critics have not noticed that, beyond its garb of cheerfulness, the vision here is chillingly prefigurative of his Austro-Hungarian successor Franz Kafka's 'Eine kaiserliche Botschaft'.⁹ The second and far more chilling point, however, is the outcome that Stifter posits. Mankind, he assures us, will ultimately ('dereinstens') understand the entire chain of causes and effects: 'dann wird für uns kein Zufall mehr erscheinen, sondern *Folgen*, kein Unglück mehr, sondern *nur Verschulden*; denn die Lücken, die jetzt sind, erzeugen das Unerwartete, und der *Mißbrauch* das Unglückselige' (1,5: 238; my emphasis). Decked out though it is in flower-language, the vision is grim indeed: all apparent human 'catastrophes' are in truth caused by wrongful human actions; all 'coincidences' are in fact consequences; seeming misfortunes ('Unglück') are the result of human 'Verschulden'. Begemann argues that the notion of 'Verschulden' is little more than a void-filler, a convenient explanation for chance events.¹⁰ But it seems to me that Stifter offers us a ferocious perspective here: if a little boy drowns or a Bedouin is struck by lightning (the two examples used in the 'Abdias' exordium), they are not the victims of random Fate or chance, but the victims of their own or others' 'Mißbrauch' or 'Verschulden'.

Let us look at the first point in more detail. Stifter has an essentially scientific view that posits a specific concatenation of cause and effect

⁹ Van Ingen also finds this passage teasing, but he ultimately offers no real interpretation, tending instead to paraphrase Stifter's own views (Ferdinand van Ingen, 'Band und Kette. Zu einer Denkfigur bei Stifter', in Laufhütte and Möseneder (eds.), *Adalbert Stifter: Dichter und Maler, Denkmalpfleger und Schulmann. Neue Zugänge zu seinem Werk*, Tübingen 1996, p. 2).

¹⁰ 'Man könnte vielleicht sagen, diese Hypothese fülle eine Lücke, die die Idee einer menschenfremden Ordnung läßt, nämlich die menschlichen Katastrophen zu erklären' (Christian Begemann, *Die Welt der Zeichen. Stifter-Lektüren*, Stuttgart/Weimar 1995, p. 195).

behind every apparently random, apparently inexplicable 'spasm' of fortune or misfortune. The crucial thing about this 'Kette', however, is that it is as yet humanly unknowable. Even in the 'Vorrede', in which he posits the particular perspective which enables man to see why things happen, Stifter admits that throughout the course of history there has been only 'eine immerwährende Umwandlung der Ansichten über dieses Große' (2,2: 11). Even here, then, we find doubts lurking within the idea that it is possible to maintain one absolute perspective. The passage concedes that man has never yet been able to secure a clear, definitive, void-bridging 'Überblick' – and this fundamental insecurity is conveyed by much of his fiction. This is particularly true of 'Turmalin'. In the introductory paragraph of this sombre tale, it is made clear that the 'Rentherr' is to be taken as an example of the sad consequences of irrationality:

Es ist darin wie in einem traurigen Briefe zu entnehmen, wie weit der Mensch kömmt, wenn er das Licht seiner Vernunft trübt, die Dinge nicht mehr versteht, von dem innern Geseze, das ihn unabwendbar zu dem Rechten führt, läßt, sich unbedingt der Innigkeit seiner Freuden und Schmerzen hingibt, den Halt verliert, und in Zustände geräth, die wir uns kaum zu enträthseln wissen. (2,2: 135)

This strange character spends his time wheeling himself around in his 'Rollstuhl', trying thereby to find the right perspective from which to view the pictures of men's heads on his walls. Significantly, though, what he obtains is only a constantly shifting viewpoint, as the narrator indicates when speaking of the various ladders 'von deren Stufen aus man verschiedene Standpunkte gewinnen konnte' (2,2: 136). *Der Nachsommer* treats the issue in a similar manner. Heinrich's father, for example, has an easel which he moves around in order to see his paintings in the best light: 'Der Vater hatte sich eine Staffelei aus braunem Holze machen lassen, und diese stand in dem Zimmer, damit man bald das eine bald das andere Bild darauf stellen und es genau in dem rechten Lichte betrachten konnte' (NS 11). Again, he aims to achieve the 'right' perspective, but this very aim suggests that there may in fact be other ways of looking at phenomena, albeit 'wrong' ways revealing only a small part of the 'greater whole', the 'Größeres' postulated in the 'Vorrede'. This is most conspicuously so in 'Turmalin', where the daughter of the 'Rentherr' gains a severely limited perspective on the outside world from the ladder in her cellar: '[ich] stieg [...] auf die Leiter, und schaute durch die Drahtlöcher des Fensters hinaus. Da sah ich die Säume von Frauenkleidern vorbeigehen, sah die Stiefel von Männern, sah schöne Spizen von Röken oder die vier Füße eines Hundes' (2,2: 174). Heinrich Drendorf, meanwhile, realises that one perceives different aspects of an object from different vantage-points:

Ich sah mich noch einmal um, da ich zwischen den Feldern hinabging, und sah das weiße Haus im Sonnenscheine stehen, wie ich es schon öfter hatte

stehen gesehen, ich konnte noch den Rosenschimmer unterscheiden, und glaubte, noch das Singen der zahlreichen Vögel im Garten vernehmen zu können.

Hierauf wendete ich mich wieder um, und ging abwärts, bis ich zu der Hecke und der Einfriedigung der Felder kam, bei der ich vorgestern von der Straße abgebogen hatte. Ich konnte mich nicht enthalten, noch einmal umzusehen. Das Haus stand jetzt nur mehr weiß da, wie ich es öfter bei meinen Wanderungen gesehen hatte. (NS 154)

Stifter, then, foregrounds the question of partial perspectives – and one strong implication of this is the one we have already seen: that man is for the present and for the foreseeable future capable of making out only a tiny part of the infinite ‘Kette der Ursachen und Wirkungen’. However, he goes still further than this. As well as having only partial perspectives on any reality, so Stifter suggests, we fill the remaining gaps in our perception by ‘seeing’ what we imagine or invent, rather than what is actually there – hence the notions of ‘Fatum’ and ‘Schicksal’ invented by the ancients and the moderns. Stifter’s texts suggest a fascination beyond measure for the process whereby we *think* we see, but are in truth merely speculating. Heinrich Drendorf is one such speculator: he stumbles across the ‘Rosenhaus’ whilst seeking shelter from an impending storm, and is quite unconvinced when Risach tells him that the storm will not actually break out (which, in fact, it doesn’t). The surveyor in ‘Kalkstein’ is an even clearer case in point. He is quite oblivious of the storm which is brewing, and even contradicts the priest’s (correct) forecast (2,2: 73–4); yet it is he who boasts of his skills as a professional observer and measurer of natural phenomena (cf. *ibid.*). Such misinterpretation of a situation is one of Stifter’s recurrent themes; in fact, it could be said to govern much of the action of the texts. In ‘Die Mappe’, for instance, Augustinus espies Margarita walking with her cousin and, without asking for an explanation, bombards her with accusations of infidelity. He is, of course, wrong. Blinded by the overwhelming force of his own passion for her, he misreads the purely platonic love between the cousins; and this gross misinterpretation of reality offends his beloved and leads to their separation. Although their problems turn out to be transitory, they lead us to doubt that man’s perception of a situation can ever be anything other than distorted. The same misgivings even lie within the palisade of Risach’s idyllic Rosenhaus in *Der Nachsommer*. In the chapter ‘Der Rückblick’, Stifter returns to the theme of misreading a situation, and the consequences which he records here are yet more far-reaching. When Risach and Mathilde meet again, many years after separating, Risach suggests that her inadequate perspective was to blame for her refusal to believe that he genuinely loved her: ‘Die Erklärung liegt darin, daß du nicht zu sehen vermochtest, was zu sehen war’ (NS 677–8). She misread his anguished acquiescence in her parents’ wishes, taking it to mean that their ‘Band der Liebe’ (NS 666) meant nothing to him. Yet even Risach himself has not been safe from the perils of a similarly inappropriate or inadequate perspective: the reason he sub-

mitted to her parents at all is because he wrongly believed that she would be unhappy if he were to disobey them.

Although both 'Die Mappe' and *Der Nachsommer* are dominated by the characters' failure to perceive the truth of their respective circumstances, the problems arising from their misconceptions seem ultimately to be resolved. Margarita accepts Augustinus's apology and his marriage proposal,¹¹ and they live happily ever after. Admittedly, Risach and Mathilde do not marry, but we are nevertheless led to believe that their neighbourly love and respect is in a sense richer and more constant than even a formal union might have been (and, of course, they marry by proxy, as it were, through Heinrich and Natalie). 'Abdias', however, emphasises that the consequences of such misinterpretation can be altogether disastrous; indeed, the protagonist is in many ways an embodiment of Kafka's pronouncement: 'Ein Mißverständnis ist es; und wir gehen daran zugrunde'.¹² The story charts a spectacular succession of events which are largely precipitated by the protagonist's total inability to read the truth of the situations in which he finds himself, as Pettersson shrewdly points out.¹³ Abdias's first error is to interpret the cloud which he sees rising from his desert city as a sign of impending rain:

[er] sah [...] eine schwache blaue Dunstschichte über der Geisterstadt stehen, gleichsam einen brütenden Wolkenschleier, wie sie oft ihr Phantom auf die Wüste werfen – allein er achtete nicht darauf, da auch der andere Himmel sich milchig zu beziehen anfang, und die heiße Sonne wie ein rothes trübes Auge oben stand, was in diesen Gegenden immer das Herannahen der Regenzeit bedeutet. (1,5: 254)

However, as he draws closer, he realises that he has gravely misread the signs and that the devastated city has been laid waste yet again (surely there is a kind of dark, laconic humour here): 'Aber da er endlich zu den wohlbekannten Trümmern gelangte [...] sah er, daß man die zerstörte Stadt noch einmal zerstört hatte' (*ibid.*). This misreading in itself may not be particularly disastrous. However, it is typical of the character's perspective – and it is soon followed by another misinterpretation, this time one which has fatal consequences. We are given a long description of the way in which Abdias cares for his sick wife: he assumes that she is cold, so covers her with a blanket; her drooping eyelids lead him to believe that she is tired; he imagines, moreover, that some soup will help her to sleep and thus to regain her strength. However, the grim truth – that she was silently bleeding to death – becomes evident to her husband only when

¹¹ Admittedly, the *Letzte Mappe* does not end in marriage, as Stifter died before he could finish this, the final version of the story. None the less, the existing text points to it being very likely that Augustinus's and Margarita's union would again have been the culmination of all the events.

¹² Franz Kafka, 'Ein altes Blatt', in Franz Kafka, *Erzählungen*, ed. Brod, [Frankfurt a.M.] 1965, p. 158.

¹³ Torsten Pettersson, "Eine Welt aus Sehen und Blindheit". Consciousness and World in Stifter's *Abdias*, *GRM*, 40 (1990), 50.

he returns from haggling with his neighbours: 'Aber sie hatte einer Pflege nicht mehr noth; denn da er außer Hause war, hatte sie nicht geschlummert, sondern sie war gestorben' (1,5: 267). He did not see. Moreover, Deborah's is not the only fatality resulting from Abdias's inability to read the signs: his dog, Asu, falls prey to a similar misconception. Whilst his master is riding through the forest, the dog displays all the symptoms of the rabies epidemic which has been sweeping through the area. Abdias draws the reasonable conclusion that the unfortunate hound is afflicted, and shoots him – only to realise that Asu was in fact trying to lead him back to the place where he had left his money-belt.¹⁴ The true complexity of this issue is emphasised by a comparison between the 'Journalfassung' and the 'Buchfassung'. The earlier version clearly indicates that Abdias is at fault for failing to look properly (the narrator explicitly comments on 'die Verblendung des Mannes', 1,2: 141). The fact that Stifter excised this comment whilst revising the story, however, points to deep ambivalence in this regard. On the one hand, Abdias may be foolishly, culpably blinkered. But on the other hand the true nature of reality simply is not evident; mankind has, we will remember, discovered 'erst einzelne Blätter' of the 'Kette der Ursachen und Wirkungen'. This same problem is emphasised by Ditha's death; and the narrator again focuses on Abdias's inappropriate perspective at the scene's climax. As he looks at the sky, Abdias decides that they will not reach home before the rain begins, so takes her to a shelter of wheat-sheaves for protection – which, given another set of circumstances, may be exactly the right thing to do (indeed, this is precisely how the Brown Girl saves the others' lives in 'Kazensilber', 2,2: 262 ff.). However, the rain never arrives. There is a sole flash of lightning and, in a final and ironic misapprehension, Abdias believes that he can see the 'Schimmer' which Ditha normally exhibits during storms (1,5: 340). But she is dead. Could Abdias have prevented it? Stifter gives us no answer.

Evidently, the theme of what man can and cannot see is central to Stifter's prose; it now remains for us to consider its significance. The introductory paragraphs of 'Abdias' offered us useful pointers, but so, too, do the opening lines of 'Brigitta'. Here, the narrator tells us at the outset that some aspects of human existence are impossible to fathom. The truth is there, but it is apprehensible to man only as an 'immeasurable abyss', albeit a 'cheerful' one (like the '*heitre* Blumenkette'):

Es gibt oft Dinge und Beziehungen in dem menschlichen Leben, die uns nicht sogleich klar sind, und deren Grund wir nicht in Schnelligkeit hervor zu ziehen vermögen [...] Die Seelenkunde hat manches beleuchtet und erklärt, aber vieles ist ihr dunkel und in großer Entfernung geblieben. Wir glauben daher, daß es nicht zu viel ist, wenn wir sagen, es sei für uns noch

¹⁴ That the preoccupation with blindness is obsessive is suggested by details such as Abdias obtaining his dog when it is 'noch blind' (1,5: 315): it is surely no accident that Stifter chooses to stress the puppy's blindness.

ein heiterer unermesslicher Abgrund, in dem Gott und die Geister wandeln.
(1,5: 411)

There are immense gaps in man's knowledge, yet this does not apparently throw into question the faith that there is a meaningful order; on the contrary, the gaps are defined as essentially temporary ones that will be filled in due time (albeit a near infinitude of time) to reveal the whole splendid truth now hidden in the abyss. But at the prevailing stage in human history, the characters are unable to see the truth of an object or situation because they are blinded by their passions or by a 'wisdom' that is ignorance. This predicament is expressed particularly intensely in 'Die Narrenburg', at the point where Jodok realises that Chelion has broken his moral code of fidelity. When confronted, she accuses him of having a pathologically warped perspective, crying: 'siehe, dein Auge, dein gutes Auge ist so krank, es ist so krank. – Du wirst mich tödten, Jodock [*sic*]' (1,4: 422). As she sees it, her sexual encounter with her husband's brother is insignificant, as she loves only Jodok; but he, enraged and heartbroken, sees her death as the only possible outcome. What this emphasises is the way in which we all have our own picture of the world and its values, as its truth remains unfathomable. This is beautifully expressed as early as 1840 in 'Feldblumen', where Albrecht muses:

es gibt aber Leute, die aus den wenigen Farbenkörnern, die dem Andern entspringen, nur Fratzen bilden – und diese bedaure ich – sie sagen freilich, sie kennen die Welt, aber es ist nicht wahr, sie bekennen nur wider Willen ihr kleines Innere, und haben noch dazu eine Zerrwelt. – – Vor dem Hohlspiegel unsrer Sinne hängt nur das Luftbild einer Welt, die wahre hat Gott allein. (1,4: 61)

Stifter, moreover, does not merely apply this vision of the 'Luftbild' to the pitiable few just cited, but to *all of us*. Irmischer aptly singles out this passage, arguing that 'der Spiegel [ist] das treffende Bild für das Weltverhältnis des Subjektivisten, der nicht die Wirklichkeit wahrnimmt, sondern statt ihrer sich eine "Zerrwelt" vorspiegelt'.¹⁵ For Irmischer, 'Wirklichkeit' can be perceived only when man renounces all his subjective claims – but how *can* we perceive 'die wahre Welt' if only God possesses it? If *all* humans can see only a 'Luftbild', a 'Spiegelbild', a mirage? It is telling indeed that Stifter uses the 'mirror' image at this point: does the mirror reflect the 'truth', or the interpretation which we wish upon it? Is there a substantive reality, or are we left only with images which we invent ourselves? Stifter professes confidence that 'dereinstens' man may well comprehend all the myriad cause-and-effect relationships behind events, 'das Geschehen'. But what matters in effect is *now* – and what we have now is scant knowledge and huge 'Lücken', and hence also 'Mißbrauch'. For the present and for

¹⁵ Hans Dietrich Irmischer, *Adalbert Stifter. Wirklichkeitserfahrung und gegenständliche Darstellung*, Munich 1971, p. 56.

any kind of foreseeable future, the world remains 'das Unbegreifliche', 'ein heiliges Räthsel', even beyond anything we can imagine ('über den Kreis unserer Vorstellungen hinaus', *GW* VI: 579). And not only have we not yet fulfilled the possibility of perceiving the order of the world but – in a classic example of Stifterian absurdism *avant la lettre* – if we *can* ever do so, it will be when mankind has ceased to exist: 'wenn der letzte Mensch gestorben ist, wenn die Summe der Menschheit abgeschlossen ist' (*GW* VI: 395). In the meantime this kind of knowledge is no more than the remotest of remote possibilities:

Wenn dann einer sagt, warum denn die Kette so groß ist, daß wir in Jahrtausenden erst einige Blätter aufgedeckt haben, die da duften, so antworten wir: So unermesslich ist der Vorrath darum, damit ein jedes der kommenden Geschlechter etwas finden könne, – das kleine Aufgefundne ist schon ein großer herrlicher Reichthum, und immer größer immer herrlicher wird der Reichthum, je mehr da kommen, welche leben und enthüllen – und was noch erst die Woge aller Zukunft birgt, davon können wir wohl kaum das Tausendstel des Tausendstels ahnen. – (1,5: 238–9)

Beneath the prettifications, the deceptively jolly surface, these 'Abdias' lines are scarcely less grim than Kafka's story with its picture of the poor individual merely dreaming of the message that in truth will never reach him. Equally proto-Kafkaesque are Heinrich's musings in *Der Nachsommer*: 'Wer wird diese Geschichte einmal klar vor Augen haben? Wird eine solche Zeit kommen [...]?' (*NS* 291). This unceasing mania to answer unanswerable questions occupies Stifter from the trauma in his childhood right until his death:

Ist es so? Ist es nicht so? Auch das wissen wir wieder nicht. 'Nun,' wird einer sagen, 'wozu die müßigen Fragen, wozu das müßige Gerede, das man nicht einmal überall versteht, und dem vielleicht gar niemals eine Lösung wird und sehr wahrscheinlich auch gar nicht not tut? Wozu das?'

Der Mann hat recht, ich werde die Lösungen dieser Fragen nie finden, und tue die Fragen doch immer wieder [...] und werde sie wieder tun, und mit mir werden sie diejenigen tun, die ähnliche Wege wandeln (*GW* VI: 579)

As already mentioned, there are two basic problems at the heart of 'Abdias'. One is that epistemological labyrinth which opens up ever more as man tries to cope with a maze of 'Ursachen und Wirkungen' that remains almost entirely hidden and conjectural, visible if at all only in random fragments. If we now turn to the second point, we will see that what is so terrifying about this very modern, science-related postulate of a logical chain of causes and effects is that it underwrites the ancient fear that, by some relentless but unfathomable cause-and-effect process, *we* – and not 'God' or 'the gods' or 'Fate' or 'ein unsichtbarer Arm' – are fully and wholly responsible for the disasters (and blessings) that so inexplicably befall us. As Stifter explicitly states:

Kein Weltgeist, kein Dämon regiert die Welt: *Was je Gutes oder Böses über die Menschen gekommen ist, haben die Menschen gemacht.* Gott hat ihnen den freien Willen und die Vernunft gegeben und hat ihr Schicksal in ihre Hand gelegt. (GW VI: 392; Stifter's emphasis)

– this, we must remember, was written by a man whose adopted daughter ran away and committed suicide. 'Die Mappe' also clearly illustrates the extent to which we bring disaster upon ourselves. The 'Buchfassung' is particularly grim in this respect. As in 'Abdias', humans have imagined that there is some design behind apparently inexplicable events: here, some ordering principle is supposed to have decreed that 'misfortune' should descend upon a certain individual ('so sagen wir, das sei ein Unglück'). In truth, however, such events are ultimately the result of wrongful human action:

Man sagt, daß der Wagen der Welt auf goldenen Rädern einhergeht. Wenn dadurch Menschen zerdrückt werden, so sagen wir, das sei ein Unglück; aber Gott schaut gelassen zu, er bleibt in seinem Mantel gehüllt und hebt deinen Leib nicht weg, weil du es zuletzt selbst bist, der ihn hingelegt hat; denn er zeigte dir vom Anfange her die Räder, und du achtetest sie nicht. (1,5: 32)

The *Letzte Mappe* is less grim on the surface, but the thrust of the passage is the same none the less: all that happens to us is our own fault (and in this context, it is significant that 'God' is no longer mentioned; instead, Stifter refers to an all-encompassing and not necessarily religious 'Allheit' and 'Herrlichkeit'):

Und wenn du deinem Herzen wehe getan hast, daß es zucket und vergehen will, oder daß es sich ermannt und größer wird, so kümmert sich die Allheit nicht darum, und drängt ihrem Ziele zu, das die Herrlichkeit ist. *Du aber hättest es vermeiden können, oder kannst es ändern, und die Änderung wird dir vergolten; denn es entsteht nun das Außerordentliche daraus.* (MSB 203; my emphasis)

Misfortune (like fortune) descends upon us as 'das Unerwartete' and 'das Unglückselige', just as it did on the ancients who saw/interpreted it as 'Fatum' or on the moderns who see/interpret it as 'Schicksal'. But Stifter firmly, perhaps even masochistically, suspects that fortune/misfortune is not visited upon us by 'the Fates' or by 'God(s)', but is incurred by us ourselves through our having neither zero knowledge nor perfect knowledge, but dangerously partial knowledge, which entails not only lacunae ('Lücken') but also misapplication, not to say abuse, of the little we *do* know. It *may* be the case that the terrible catastrophe that descends upon Clarissa and Ronald and all their retinues in 'Der Hochwald' is a visitation of fate ('Verhängniß', 1,4: 314); more probably – so Stifter direly believes and fears – it is the outcome of their own 'Verblendung' (blindness or

'bedazzledness') (*ibid.*), their own 'Verschulden' (to quote 'Abdias') and perhaps others' too.¹⁶ The concepts of 'Fatum', 'Schicksal', 'Verhängnis' do occur in Stifter's work, but almost invariably as a kind of traditional coinage which the narrators and other characters fall back on in their attempts to explain the inexplicable. What chiefly animates Stifter's vision, however, is the belief (or fear) that human beings actively and personally generate their own salvations, their own hells – as the *Letzte Mappe* suggests: 'Du aber hättest es vermeiden können'. In 'Kalkstein' the protagonist's 'tiger' briefly and dangerously escapes, but is then successfully if arduously kennelled and leashed by its 'owner',¹⁷ whereas the 'Rentherr', already existentially unfocussed before his wife's adultery, loses all sense of 'Maß' and drags himself and his innocent daughter down into a literally subterranean zone. What rescues Stifter from facile moralising is that his characters so often appear to be exercising their moral choices whilst dazzled or blindfolded in the midst of an epistemological and ontological labyrinth. Already teasingly implicit in Stifter's work is that ominous invisibility of everything that might matter which constitutes the departure-point of *Das Schloß*:

Es war spätabends, als K. ankam. Das Dorf lag in tiefem Schnee. Vom Schloßberg war nichts zu sehen, Nebel und Finsternis umgaben ihn, auch nicht der schwächste Lichtschein deutete das große Schloß an. Lange stand K. auf der Holzbrücke, die von der Landstraße zum Dorf führte, und blickte in die scheinbare Leere empor.¹⁸

To take this further: Stifter is part of a specifically German phenomenon that goes back at least as far as Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*: an unbearable sense of guilt, besmirchment and wrongdoing, and a concomitant anguished fixation on the question of who or what is responsible. These obsessions haunt the work of Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Büchner, Hebbel; they lie at the heart of both Naturalism and Expressionism; they reach their terrible apotheosis in the Nazis' maniacal attempt to achieve purification through annihilation. In this respect, there seems no doubt that Stifter's work is indeed Kafka's *avant la lettre*; Stifter is so to speak Kafka in a different key – apparently sunnier, but in truth no less menacing. This notion of 'Verschulden', a sense of unappeasable guilt and spiritual rottenness, is perhaps one reason why disease features so strongly in Stifter's fiction – and in this respect, it is particularly telling that the plague in 'Granit' is compared to a 'Strafgericht' (2,2: 37). In 'Abdias', the protag-

¹⁶ Few critics see the ambivalence in the text; the most notable example is Reddick, who asserts: 'To ignore the antinomy of *Verblendung/Verhängniß* is to betray a fundamental blindness to the rich and dark ambiguities of the text' (John Reddick, 'Mystification, Perspectivism and Symbolism in *Der Hochwald*', in Lachinger, Stillmark and Swales (eds), *Adalbert Stifter heute*, Linz 1985, p. 70).

¹⁷ See John Reddick, 'Tiger und Tugend in Stifter's *Kalkstein*: Eine Polemik', *ZfdPh*, 95 (1976), 235–55.

¹⁸ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, p. 5.

onist's scarred face does indeed serve on a textual level to demonstrate Deborah's blindness to his inner beauty; but on a subtextual level it becomes symbolic: not least in his own eyes it is an outward manifestation of his inner repulsiveness, indeed of the repulsiveness of humanity in general. 'Die Mappe' most notably, perhaps, has disease as its central theme; particularly proto-Kafkaesque is the scene in which the wounded boy is brought to the doctor. His wound is initially diagnosed as 'eine kleine Wunde' (MSB 248), but the doctor is horrified when he starts to excise the boy's cancer-like growths ('Afterbildungen') and has to cut ever more deeply to get to 'pure' flesh ('reine Gebilde'):

Ich entfernte mit dem scharfen Messer die Afterbildungen. Das Messer wurde aber hiebei immer weiter und weiter geführt, daß es mich fast selber schauerte, und daß ich dachte, ob ich denn weiter gehen dürfe. Aber es mußte sein, ich empfahl meine Seele Gott, und tat es. Ich war ganz allein, und hatte niemanden, der mir helfen konnte. Der Kranke hielt sich ruhig, und gab keinen Laut von sich. Endlich war ich fertig, und es waren nur reine Gebilde sichtbar. Aber es war eine Fläche bloß gelegt, so groß, wie ich mir vorher nicht gedacht hatte, und an einer Stelle war mir, als sähe ich unter dem Häutchen die Lunge wallen. (MSB 250)

Augustinus is in essentially the same position as Kafka's 'Landarzt', who tells his boy-patient: 'Ich habe deine große Wunde aufgefunden; an dieser Blume in deiner Seite gehst du zugrunde'.¹⁹ Kafka's characters too, like Stifter's, are on this grim view doomed by their own poisonous affliction. This is nowhere more poignantly or clearly expressed than by the scene in *Witiko* where the protagonist goes to visit one of his wounded men:

Witiko ging zu dem Manne in das hölzerne Haus der Verwundeten, und sprach zu ihm: 'Sebastian, sie haben mir gesagt, daß du bekümmert bist, aber deine Wunde heilt schon, und du wirst sehr bald wie früher unter uns sein.'
'Sie heilt,' antwortete Sebastian, 'aber innerlich ist Alles anders'. (5,3: 61)

The shared vision is again emphasised by the final sentiment of 'Ein Landarzt': 'es ist niemals gutzumachen',²⁰ for Stifter fears exactly the same thing. Equally proto-Kafkaesque is Stifter's obsession with guilt: there seems to be little essential difference between Stifter's pronouncement that 'Wir sind [...] die Gründer unseres Glückes oder die Gründer unseres Elendes' (GWVI: 393), and that terrible dictum in Kafka's 'In der Strafkolonie': 'Der Grundsatz, nach dem ich entscheide, ist: Die Schuld ist immer zweifellos'.²¹

¹⁹ Kafka, *Erzählungen*, p. 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

In many respects, Stifter is essentially in the same bind that *all* his great (German) predecessors were in. Following the confident expectations engendered by the Enlightenment, figures such as Hölderlin, Kleist, Büchner, Schiller, Hoffmann, Tieck and Novalis all supposed and/or hoped that Utopia might or would be achievable in the future (or in some 'fourth dimension' of the present, such as Hoffmann's 'Atlantis', Novalis's mountain, Tieck's elfin community). But what most of these authors actually trace out is the agonising *dystopia* that meanwhile prevails. And what makes Stifter particularly fascinating is that he is permanently in two minds as to who or what is at fault: human beings for their misperceptions, their 'Einseitigkeit', their tendency to indulge in 'Mißbrauch' – or Existence for being an 'unermeßlicher Abgrund', and for not accommodating the likes of Ronald. As Kleist's Sylvester puts it:

Gott der Gerechtigkeit!
 Sprich deutlich mit dem Menschen, daß er's weiß
 Auch, was er soll!²²

This is what Stifter, like Kafka, incessantly, thrillingly, even frighteningly explores beneath the bland and often smug veneer of 'Maß', 'Sittlichkeit', 'das sanfte Gesez'. And what makes him far more disturbing than Kafka is precisely the absolute disjuncture between the unruffled surface and the volcanic stirrings and ructions underneath.

²² Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke*, Munich 1968, p. 310.